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INDEPENDENT CINEMA DOCUMENTATION

File No 1

P E T E R     G I D A L

## INTRODUCTION

by Paul Willemen

Over the last three years, the British Film Institute's Film Availability Services Department has been actively engaged in promoting and supporting independent cinema. Of course, it could be argued that this constitutes merely a somewhat belated recognition by part of a national organisation of its responsibilities regarding all sectors of cinematic culture rather than exclusively to forms of cinema practiced by the dominant sectors of the industry and its representatives. But this would be a misconstruction of the nature of the policy commitment involved.

Broadly speaking, this policy is premised on a number of realisations. Firstly, within a historical perspective, independent cinema or more accurately oppositional cinema has always been far more than a marginal phenomenon. Traditionally independent film practices have been located on the interface between Hollywood cinema (in its broadest sense, encompassing the product of its competitors) and other political and cultural practices which exist both alongside and within the dominant regime of cinema, such as the 'fine' arts, philosophical and political movements, etcetera. As such, in exploring its margins and constituent parts independent cinema has contributed greatly to our understanding of cinema as a specific signifying practice in general, inextricably bound up with certain forms of social and economic organisation. And although films in themselves cannot actually produce an understanding of anything as the 'text' is a construct that emerges only in particular readings, the system of differences they can mark off against dominant cinema helps to open up the space within which a critical understanding of cinema can emerge. Moreover, the way particular independent films differ from dominant cinema itself suggests varying lines of approach and emphases regarding the construction of a critical film culture. Consequently, paying attention to independent cinema is to refuse to take any aspect of cinema as an unproblematic given, simply 'there' to be consumed, experienced or 'appreciated' for its own sake.

Secondly, following on from this, by directing attention to independent cinema as a priority area, FAS can begin to raise questions about the reasons why a very limited and strictly speaking marginal use of the potential of cinema (that is to say, a particular, narrowly defined form of dramatic narrative) has come to be equated with cinema as a whole, relegating all that differs from this norm to the ghettos of 'experiment'. To question such a power relationship inevitably leads to the basic issues at stake in any project devoted to the promotion of notions of cinema. Mainly because the examination of the power relations between different forms of cinema cannot avoid questions about the institutionalisation of cinema, about the forces that shape cinematic culture and about how the prevailing situation might be changed in one way or another.

Again, this is not to suggest that independent films in and by themselves can bring about any changes, merely that they help create the conditions for those issues to be addressed more directly and more productively. For these reasons, any organisation involved in a project to develop, that is to say, to change film culture, and which takes this project at all seriously, must give a high priority to activities bearing on independent film practices, less for what those independent films are as objects than for the opportunities they present to engage with cinema itself.

Thirdly, over the last ten years or so, oppositional — independent cinema has come to constitute virtually the only active force in indigenous film culture; the rest being dedicated to the maintenance of the consumerist attitudes which dominant cinema requires to survive on its present scale. In this respect, the developments in education and the theory of cinema which have fundamentally challenged consumerism and the forms of film journalism that go with it, must be seen as closely allied to the emergence of oppositional cinema. Not only historically — in that they appeared more or less simultaneously — but in their general thrust and function within film culture. A fact acknowledged by theorists-critics as well as filmmakers, although the relation between these two overlapping sectors is not always clearly realised by the participants. This link, explicitly formulated in the platform document that constituted the basis of the formation of the Independent Film Makers Association, is one more reason why special attention should be paid to this sector by national institutions such as the BFI.

Finally because of its structural place vis à vis dominant cinema, oppositional-independent cinema, by definition, cannot compete for the same audience created by and for the very cinema it opposes. Nor can it rely on the support systems of that dominant cinema, such as their publicity machines, reviewers, most magazines, established distribution and exhibition organisations, etc to support its endeavours. On the contrary, all that can be expected from those sectors, is, understandably, neglect, indifference or active opposition. In the same way that the Hollywood model of cinema dominates the market place, so do consumerist attitudes govern what is said or written about cinema (see for instance the role of reviews and most magazines as offering consumer guidance or fuelling cinephilia). Therefore, in the face of this massively dominant and stultifying pressure to maintain and propagate a most restricted definition of cinema, an organisation such as FAS necessarily must find itself defending and supporting independent film practices while prioritising the issues such practices raise. Not with the aim of raising independent cinema to the status of Art Cinema (and thus fit for consumption), nor even to increase its economic viability, important as this may be. But because it offers, at present, the type of cinematic practice best suited for work towards a qualitative change of film culture, from a consumerist to a critical one.

Such then are the main considerations why FAS decided to embark on a more systematic and sustained effort to contextualise and document areas of independent cinema. This file on the work of Peter Gidal is intended as the first one in what we hope will be a long series. The fact that the first file is on Gidal's work should not be regarded as particularly significant. The retrospective of Gidal's films at the London Film Makers Coop at the end of the year seemed to provide the right opportunity and incentive to begin concretising our plans. It does not imply that more attention should be paid to Gidal's work than to that of many other film makers. Nor should it be seen as an endorsement of Gidal's work. Indeed, the file does not reproduce any of Gidal's writing nor does it pretend to cover all aspects of the films or of the issues that can be raised in connection with them. The contents of the file are a somewhat uneasy mixture of reviews, blurbs, extended essays and analyses. This selection is largely dictated by availability of material and by the multiplicity of the contexts within which the films are likely to circulate. Perhaps the most glaring absence in this documentation is an extended critique of Gidal's work, particularly of the film work, together with the strategies and politics it implies. That is to say, a direct demonstration of what Stephen Heath identified as 'an absence at many points in his writing of historical and dialectical thinking'. Such a critique would have to trace the relationship between that absence and the effectivity and productivity of the films in terms of the strategies they propose (represent) and the issues they fail to stress. However, fortunately, films cannot dictate how they shall be read and discussed. This will depend on the critical — ideological discourses any given film will encounter and interact with at the actual screening. In that respect, as is attested by the essays included in this file, Gidal's films appear to be able, at present, to allow for a discussion of fundamental issues at stake in cinema as an institution. Something that cannot always be said of his writing.

In conclusion, it must be pointed out that most of the material included in this documentation file, intended to accompany screenings of the films, has been taken from magazines, books and catalogues. Only Malcolm LeGrice's introductory notes were written especially for this compilation.

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## OME INTRODUCTORY THOUGHTS ON GIDAL'S FILMS AND THEORY

Malcolm Le Grice

Like a large proportion of experimental film-makers, Peter Gidal came to film from the background of modern painting and is of the generation which was influenced by, but sought ways out of, Abstract Expressionism. Also, like a number of film-makers, he played a title jazz. Though he had no serious ambitions in this direction, at some time more critical attention might well be given to the significant influence which the ethics and aesthetics of jazz improvisation have had in the attention to process in art.

His first film ROOM 1967 (which I knew as ROOM (DOUBLE TAKE)), was followed in the next two years by half a dozen films produced simultaneously with a number of written works published: articles in *Cinemantics* (1970); five essays on films by Snow, Moskowitz, Limura, Warhol and myself in *Ark* (also in 1970) and a book on Warhol (published by Studio Vista in 1971). This pattern of film production and publication of critical/theoretical writing continues.

I first encountered his work through a screening of ROOM 1967 at the Arts Laboratory, Drury Lane in '68. Though I was critical of the film's denouement — the image of a reclining man, 'stoned' and nodding from a hubble-bubble — I was particularly impressed by the slow camera movement over the unspectacular surfaces and objects of a room and even more so by the extreme device of an absolute repeat of the whole film. At that period in London, with so little work in experimental and independent film, it was particularly important to discover another film-maker whose sensibility was sufficiently close to my own to help reinforce the more radical (and consequently least acceptable) aspects of my own work. At that time, except for some art students making tentative experiments with film, Gidal, and when I saw their work in '69, Birgit and Wilhelm Stein, were the only film-makers whose work I felt close to aesthetically (and ideologically).

Since then, my work and Gidal's has frequently been bracketed together, most recently under the term Structural/Materialist (a Gidal formulation) — the bracketing being applied equally to the films and theoretical writing. This double harness has caused us both some problems, obscuring the differences between our work; nonetheless, with the level that the public critical debate has reached, I would rather have my position confused with his than with any other film-maker. Which is to say, as the lines are drawn to date, in spite of our differences, there are considerable areas of agreement between us. In the strict sense, we have never developed a joint position nor presented any co-operative manifesto, but we have had many long conversations over the last decade which have influenced the development of our positions considerably.

It would be impossible to trace the path of those discussions, the facts of which have become incorporated in our work, but it is important to develop some of the thoughts which have passed between us recently that I am writing this introduction. As Gidal pointed out when he asked me if I would do it, I have never written on his work at any length (nor he on mine for that matter) — though we have been publicists for each other. I could not let this pre-ambles pass without pointing out that if the fact of film-makers writing on each others' films seems a little incestuous — before cries of nepotism — if some of the critics in this country had spent a little more time on the current British film culture we could have spent more of our time on film and theory and less on publicity, reviewing and polemics.

Our most general area of collaboration, which I will not dwell on, is concerned with the development of the working context for experimental film. We have both been deeply committed to establishing conditions for production, presentation and distribution of independent film in a pattern radically different from that of the dominant film industry. Gidal, like myself and a number of other avant-garde film-makers, has put a considerable amount of time to these issues through entirely practical and frequently mundane tasks mainly within the London Film-makers' Co-operative, but also within the Independent Film-makers Association and on committees of the British Film Institute.

Our most general area of agreement has been a deep hostility to the way in which international capitalist corporations have controlled the development of film culture and the effect this has had on the predominant assumptions about film structure. This hostility has been expressed variously as an opposition to narrative, illusionism, identification, catharsis and so on. As the dialogue between Gidal and myself has become more sophisticated, some of the approaches to these oppositions have differed in detail, but the underlying insistence to compromise with the forms and mechanisms of dominant cinema remains common. If my own recent films have identified themselves overtly to the problems of narration, identification and cinematic illusion, it is because I have encountered them (perhaps as a consequence of the direction of my work.

Gidal has maintained a more distinctly oppositional stance, certainly at the level of theory frequently expressed in the prefix "anti-" (anti-narrative, anti-illusion), and whilst his films would seem to maintain this opposition into their construction, they are more problematic in this territory than the diametric rhetoric would suggest. On the other hand, his major theoretical work, the "Theory and Definition of Structural/Materialist Film" and its extensive footnotes, traces many of the difficulties and complexities this oppositional enterprise encounters.

To deal with Gidal, it is necessary to consider both his work as a film-maker and a theorist. He has referred to Althusser to support the independence of the two practices and he has further pointed out how historically there have regularly been discrepancies between artists' work and their theorisations and rationalisations. Whatever the independence, one from the other (and it is clear that they are distinguishable discourses) in Gidal's case they should be related to each other. Not only does the theory seem to address some of the films' problems quite accurately, but he has particularly encouraged through the form of presentation of his work, that the achievement of the films, as it were, be tested against those aims defined in the theory.

If we were concerned with a general review of Gidal's work, then like with any other artist, his early films would be seen to contain many of the initial issues which become more clearly re-worked later. However, without dismissing his earlier work, it is possible to encounter the most pertinent problems which he raises through reference to a few more recent films and his major theoretical text "Theory and Definition of Structural/Materialist Film" (*Studio International*, Nov 1975). Any one of BEDROOM (1971), ROOM FILM 1973, FILM PRINT (1974), or SILENT PARTNER (1977), can be studied and related to his major theoretical article, and whilst they are all different works in detail, their concerns are remarkably consistent.

In my book *Abstract Film and Beyond*, I said of Gidal and ROOM FILM 1973:

Gidal's major contribution comes in his concentration on issues of structuring directly related to the act of perceiving through the camera and the projection of the film. His work in this area represents a complex dialectic between subjective existential response on the one hand and a reflexive structural concept on the other. His work is procedural in the sense of establishing specific limitations to his action, like length of film in the camera, the space in which he will work (repeatedly a single room), and the objects which will occupy the space.

His work does not deny his own response to light, surface or the identity of the object, but it contextualises this subjectivity within the recognisable limits of the process. In fact his handling of the camera, framing, focus and zoom are clearly apparent, indicating his moment-to-moment response to the visual field. However, he is not aiming to reconstruct his own motives for the viewer, but to alert them to their reflexive attention in relationship to the 'events' which occur before them on the screen. Such systematic devices which Gidal has used, as in ROOM FILM 1973 where 100-foot continuous takes are broken down into equal five-second units and each one shown twice, maintaining their original sequence, are concerned with acts of perception, and its various stages of recognition and conception. In it the perceptual stages are deliberately prolonged — an indistinct region of light on the screen will become more definitely a surface, though not clearly the surface of an object. Then it may take on an edge, but the scale has to be guessed at, being gradually confirmed, denied or neither by the film's subsequent progress. Then it may, or may not become recognisable as a book, or a shelf, only for the camera to move on to another region — every stage being drawn out by the nearly indecipherable double view of each segment. Experiences which in our every-day perception are over in an unconscious flash, in Gidal's films become extended processes for conscious attention and structuring.

In discussion with Gidal on the above passage (some of which took place before publication), his main objections revolved around the implications of personal subjectivity, both of the film-maker and spectator. Two or three small changes which I made to the text before publication in response to this objection involved some change of emphasis in this respect. For example, "His work does not deny his own response to light, surface, or the identity of the object, but it contextualises this subjectivity within the recognisable limits of the process", in my original manuscript read "His work does not deny subjectivity or his own particular response to light, surface or the identity of the object, but it contextualises this subjectivity within the recognisable limits of his process". (Italics show the deleted or changed words.) Gidal would have had it read: "His work does not deny his response to light, surface or object, but it contextualises this within the recognisable limits of the process", and I suspect that even in the form which he would have liked, the implication of the personal subjectivity of the film-maker was still too strong. To understand why Gidal resisted this implication and why I both understood his resistance but determined to maintain it within a modified tone it is necessary to look at the historical context out of which this concern for the 'enunciating source' derives.

As an industrial, corporate system of production, dominant cinema runs directly counter to the radical individual subjective integrity (in its sense of integrated rather than simplistically honest) which underlies the major art movements of the century — impressionism, cubism, surrealism and abstraction in painting; existentialism in literature; serialism, music-concrete and improvisational jazz in music. In conventional cinema, individual responsibility for a work is made impossible by the scale of the corporate production whose modes of finance, systems of production and distribution are determined to serve the social purposes of the corporate producer (private or state). In this context the auteur theory was a desperate critical invention to seek out a form of cinematic integrity which could relate film to the critical modes of the other, individually produced, art forms. This theory, applied to commercial cinema, only served to obscure the lack of radical integrity permissible within cinema. On the other hand, a more pragmatic response to a related motivation (largely made possible by the spread of 16mm facilities during World War II) was the eventual emergence of a cinematic form which could be based on individual production. Though the roots for this form exist in a limited pre-history in the 35mm era, and though the European contribution to this post-war culture (particularly in Austria) is continually played down, its emergence was largely in the USA. That this was so can be directly related to the decimation of European economies by the war whilst the American economy flourished in the role of major producer of the goods needed in Europe for the conduct of the war and subsequent re-building. Whatever the economic causes, the concept of personal cinema is now directly bound up with the concept of 'New American Cinema' most adequately characterised by the critical writing of P. Adams Sitney. Simplistically the options of cinematic enunciation might be characterised as on one hand the falsely 'neutral', 'omniscient' enunciation of dominant cinema (which poses personality through names of directors, producers and stars, but which is 'falsely' neutral not because of their lack of 'personal' integrity but because its enunciation is that of the hidden cultural ideology expressed through the agents of the corporate production) and on the other the personal enunciation of the individual film artist. The first option is relatively easy to reject theoretically even if its effects on film practice and structure are difficult to eradicate. However, the problems implicit in the second option and particularly the forms which this has taken on through the New American Cinema practice are more difficult to articulate.

Before these problems can be engaged it must be pointed out that through the development of a history of 'personal film art' — an actual body of practice which looks and functions differently from the commercial cinema — it is now possible to transpose critical problems from the other fields of modern art to film. And conversely any problems which occur through the concept of individual subjective enunciation in personal cinema apply equally to any other art practice. What must be further pointed out is that this historical body of film work and its equivalents in the other arts form the concrete basis of discourse within which we produce film-works. Our options (and the critical interpretation of our choices/creations) are determined by this film historical discourse.

Gidal's theory, if less demonstrably his film work, is the best focus we have for the consequences of a refusal of both options of enunciation. Here we begin to encounter some confusion which the rhetoric, or polemics of negation brings about. It serves Gidal's purpose (and is in many cases correct) to stress the latent narrativity and identifieriness which continues to reside in the cinema whose history is posed as the alternative to dominant cinema. In other words whilst he shows up the limits of radicality of New American Cinema in its assumed non-narrativeness by highlighting its recuperations — that remains the cinema whose history forms the major constraint for Gidal's filmic articulation. This is not to say that Brecht in particular does not constitute a major influence for Gidal's practice or that Godard was not a significant point of reference but the actual filmic articulation which emerges from Warhol or Brakhage is already more Brechtian even if unrecognised as such than the expressly Brechtian aim of Godard or Straub-Huillet becomes when translated to film. In effect, though expressed differently, Gidal's critique of this latent narrativity in NAC (NAC is not confined as a body of work to the USA, but is also produced in England, Germany etc.) is similar to my own: through the rejection of depicted stories, acted out between the characters, the 'person' of personal cinema has become the first-person singular, as it is in the, by now, classic existentialist novel. But, whilst no characters or narrative action may be depicted, if the co-ordinating factor of a film's structure is the subjectivity of the film-maker, even without overt diarist or autobiographical intention, the film veers towards the narrative interpretation where the film-maker (unseen) replaces the chief protagonist of a more conventional narrative film. The American critical tendency, by stressing the film-maker as text, through a continuation of the mythology of romantic individualism (fundamental to the American hero) has helped to re-inforce this 'veering' even where (in another critical framework) other, radical aspects may have been definable within works. We have then a radical change of form in the rejection of 'omniscient' enunciation towards the subjective and existential enunciation of personal cinema but a reversion to narrative identification through the route of film-maker as individual, heroic central text of the work. This veering is not simply an issue in the interpretation of a particular film, but through subsequent production, the 'interpretation' becomes inscribed in the forms and devices of work which follows

unless it is dislodged. A hand held camera, for example, comes to be interpreted as representing the film-makers subjective vision and as the culture develops, this inscription of meaning for hand held camera movement becomes pre-determined — becomes part of 'the language' — and refined in subsequent films within those terms.

Gidal not only vehemently rejects narrative as it is understood in conventional cinema, he rejects a broad 'narrativity' as it comes to re-appear in 'experimental' film variously through: the replacement of story diegesis by coherent (mechanistic) 'structure', the illusion of documentary transparency (particularly under the guise of representing the process of a film's making and most centrally, through any form of anthropomorphic, individualist identification with the film-maker.

This fundamental opposition to identification with the film-maker raises difficulties in general concerning the non-identification of self, either of the film-maker/self or the spectator/self. In footnote 12 to "Theory and Definition . . ." Gidal says: "This psychological centering of the self must be nullified in order to be able to set up a concept of dialectically posited distanced self". It has particular difficulties in the location of 'responsibility' for the source of enunciation. This in turn reflects a general political difficulty as the location of an extreme individual 'integrity' of formulation frequently represents the only form of opposition to the encultured ideology, at the very least in our culture individual integrity seems invariably to be the initiating source of such opposition. In this sense, Gidal's sought for 'anonymity' for the film-maker should clearly not be interpreted as a revision from individual responsibility to the loss of self in the 'corporate'. What is deducible from the theory is a general 'aim', involving transformation in the assumption of psycho-social relation with film as an agency in this transformation. In this project, "Theory and Definition of Structural/Materialist Film" functions as a lure (or goad) and it is in this functioning that its discourse intersects with that of film-making (its intersection with film criticism might be different). That Gidal posits a desire for a relatively defined form of anonymity (footnote 2 cautions . . . but a superficial anonymity brought into false existence through such things as 'coldness' — heavy atmospheric intervention — functions precisely as the opposite of its supposed intention."), does not, of itself assist directly in discovering the form which such a desired quality would need to take up in a film. That Gidal recognises this difficulty of transposition from theory to practice is indicated through the following sentences of the same footnote: "Anonymity must in fact be created through transformation dialectically posited into the filmic event itself. That is anonymity must be the result, at the specific instance; it too must be produced rather than illustrated or obliquely 'given' in a poetical sense."

This footnote is used to clarify the following notion in the text: "The content thus serves as a function upon which, time and time again the film-maker works to bring forth the filmic event." This theoretical notion applied to painting might be illustrated by the way in which Jasper Johns works on and into the image/form of a target to the point that an 'event' of painting is brought forth or traced in the resultant object. The process of ROOM FILM 1973 may be interpreted in a similar way where certain choices as to the filming space, the lighting, the length and type of film material to be used might be seen as analogous to the target, and where the film-maker's looking-at/working-on through the manipulations of the camera and subsequent working-on through the structuring of the material — in this film the five second repeating segmentation and a sequence of optically stretched image — brings forth what is specific to that filmic event.

This concept suggests that the anonymity of the film-maker is achieved primarily through establishing the autonomy of the produced work — albeit a work which does not efface the traces of its worked-on-ness and is a work of process. Wherever Gidal's theory moves away from negation (the definition of what should be opposed) and ventures to indicate that which might be affirmed he tends towards what might be described as belonging to filmic presence — " . . . materialist flatness, grain, light movement . . . ", (or, the presence of time's passage, "duration", which is too complex an issue to be dealt with here).

Gidal proposes this "materialist flatness, grain, light movement" as a dialectic polarity with the "supposed real reality that is represented". This realization of an 'autonomy' for the meaning structure of image construction in pictorial art, through the mainstream of twentieth century art, is well established in the practice of painting and sculpture (as its equivalent already was in music). This realization is not simply a question of the interpretation of the 'meaning' of a work of art, but an understanding that the practice of its production is a question of 'literacy' in the terms of the medium in question. So that, what might be described as spontaneous practice, i.e. work directly in the medium, seemingly un-pre-determined by an 'idea' (which normally means some form of verbal, literary construct), might be better described as a discourse within the 'language' of the medium itself. In this sense, the concept of 'language' is to be thought of as a continuing discourse through the modification of the historical pre-conceptions within which a work is produced. These pre-conceptions bear on subject, iconography, formal relations, or strategies of production alike. So that 'language' is not to be thought of as fixed set of rules, nor even a 'string' of quasi-linguistic icons when applied to the temporal constructions of cinema.

All this is to say that Gidal's involvement in film is from the ethos of twentieth century art characterized by some of the tenets of Abstract Expressionism, but in particular those which stress the autonomy of structures to a medium, an aim of 'direct' mediation through the terms of that medium (not its pre-conception through terms belonging to another practice nor its subsequent interpretation through critical methods of other practices), and the historical development of a 'literacy' of that medium.

However, when such conceptions are applied in film they encounter many complications not the least of which is the massive edifice of commercial cinema. The pre-dominant assumptions of cinema are anti-thetical to the most radical and productive concepts which have informed the development of modern art.

There is certainly an echo in this concept of the quite fundamental historical step in modern painting and sculpture whereby the pictorial illusion was counteracted through attention to physical properties of the medium itself. In the history of avant-garde film, the opposition to narrative, illusion and identificatory content has largely been through an attempt to determine works outwards from the materials and mechanisms special to the medium. Though this development has taken place much later in film than in the other arts (which I have described in terms of general historical retardation in *Abstract Film and Beyond*), as an aesthetic fact it is less of a problem than its adequate theorisation. Gidal and I have frequently been criticised in our attempts to relate the attention to film's material substances and processes to 'materialism'. For example Peter Wollen saw it as seeking an ontology based on an essence of cinema, taken up again by Anne Cottringer in her criticism of "Theory and Definition . . ." and extended to a critique, via Derrida of the concept of presence (as physical presence) which she understands is fundamental to Gidal's formulation. She quotes Derrida: "To question the secondary and provisional character of the sign, to oppose it to a 'primordial' difference, would thus have the following consequences: 1) Difference can no longer be understood according to the concept of 'sign' which had been taken to mean the representation of a presence and has been constituted in a system (of thought or language) determined on the basis of and in view of presence. 2) In this way we question the authority of presence or its simple symmetrical contrary, absence or lack".

What must be pointed out, with reference to Gidal's theory and more evidently his films, is that the notion of filmic (physical) presence is seen by him as dialectical. Whilst his argument seems at times to move towards the unproblematic physical 'reality' of the filmic materials as 'present' at least as the pole of a dialectic which counteracts the apparent (illusory) presence of the filmed objects, he is clearly opposed the kind of seeming complete autonomy of the physical film object which abstraction might be thought to offer. Like Cottringer, I have had problems with Gidal's tendency to use the term 'dialectic' where it might be interpreted as 'diametric' and was partly in response to this concept of presence in his theory (and as a critique of Metz where similar confusions occur) that I wrote in a paper prepared for the March 1979 Milwaukee Conference on Film Language: "In a film which, for example, draws attention to the screen surface, the projector beam, the intermittent mechanism whatever 'material' aspect might be chosen, is it correct to assume that the signifier is present? At the moment that the signifier functions as a signifier, whatever the medium, it becomes transparent. Attention to the signifier in its material sense (as the signifying substance) does not escape the process of standing for that which it is not. It is incapable of standing for itself in any more than representation of some aspect of its properties. Films which may be described as working on the signifier counteract transparency more by making aspects of the signifying process evident (tracing the path of shifts and transformations between signifying substance and signification) than by asserting the unproblematic presence of the signifier . . . The signifier is neither unproblematically present as substance, nor absent as signification".

Though Gidal may talk of "materialist flatness, grain, light movement", in a film like ROOM 1967 a grasp or utilisation of their presence is just as problematic for the spectator as a grasp of the photo-cinematographically represented objects which they seem to become dissolve in and out of.

It would be right to be critical if either the theory or the films invoked that an oscillation between the unproblematic illusion of the presence of objects and the unquestionable reality of the essence of the filmic materials constituted a dialectic. We must be aware that attention to certain problems in the theory does not obscure that the films are made in relationship to the options in a certain film history. When Gidal, like any other film-maker makes choices in the production of a work he does so within the constraints that historical discourse and the strategies which he can adopt as a film-maker are highly determined by what has already been filmically articulated. The choice, for example, to hand hold the camera rather than place it on a tripod will tend to orientate the resulting images towards certain meanings — these meanings will derive from previous work by the film-maker and other film-makers within the culture. They are not escapable, they can only be transformed in the practice through detailed shifts demanding other interpretations.

It is tempting to say that Gidal has developed a language or vocabulary of camera movement. This would be misleading but would hint at the sophistication of his sensibility (worked for over a decade in a number of films) to the nuances of interpretation and meaning which have formed themselves around certain manoeuvres and devices. If, for example, a camera moves in a particular way close to a body of object as in Takahiko Jimura's AI (LOVE) of 1966 this

enables certain implications of tactility to be inscribed into the filmic, visual aesthetic — the camera becomes not just hand held but is in a sense 'hand/touch' held. Or Warhol's sudden zoom into Marie Menken in CHELSEA GIRLS, followed immediately by a slow drift away from the detail it so eagerly seemed to seek out inscribes the complexity of a desire to see more closely followed by an almost immediate disenchantment either with what is revealed or with the motive which led to the earlier impulse — or at least, if the meaning is to be considered at all in such a verbal equivalent it might be expressed in this way (although any real grasp of its meaning can only become available through familiarity with the filmic, camera movement discourse in its own terms).

Gidal's camera movements, particularly in BEDROOM (1971), ROOM FILM 1973, CONDITION OF ILLUSION (1975), and FOURTH WALL (1978), however much he would want it otherwise (or however much he would like it played down critically) are at one level predicated on the sensual lure and the visual pleasure which he derives from the objects looked at (already an aware sublimation of a sexual object onto another object even before the film is shot). The camera slowly moves over the beautifully patterned bedspread (or rug, which Gidal chooses because he already finds it visually pleasurable), and even where it encounters objects with no intrinsic implications of beauty, their separation (framing) from their visual and more important, utility, contexts transforms them into 'to-be-looked-at-objects'. This is one level of the inscriptions of desire in the objects, their images and in the camera's movements. But, at the same time as Gidal is lured by the objects he sees, by the images they form in the view-finder, by the movement of the image in the frame he also resists this lure — refuses to give greater attention to an object which for some reason appeals more, perhaps refusing to indicate a response (the slight refusal may even be inscribed in a momentary hesitation on, then acceleration from, the object), or moves away purposefully, or lets the camera seemingly drift down and away. Both the lure and his resistance are inscribed minutely in the camera movement and thereby recorded as a trace in the photo-sensitivity of the film. This set of moment to moment decisions and the sensibilities on which they are based are made even more complex by a learned prediction about their likely effect (their probable transformation or re-ordering) when they are projected and confronted by a spectator. In this consideration for the image, as it is to be in its utilisation by the spectator, might be found some of the reasons for the various resistances inscribed with the visual lure, into the image. "Why," Gidal might be asking of himself through the movement of the camera "should the spectator of this film be un-resisting subject to the exercise of my visual pleasures and sublimations?" He is not only resisting his own lure (resisting in a way which transforms rather than negates or ignores) but he also inscribes the possibility of resistance of the spectator. In this way, in a sense, as film-maker, he becomes the spectator's representative — linking his attractions, attachments and resistances to theirs.

This inscription, not only of Gidal's resistance to (distanciation from) the lure of the sensual, sublimated visual object but also of the spectator's possibility of similar resistance is not just a parallel resistance to the sensual object(s) photographed in the image, it is an attempted inscription of the spectator's possibility of resistance to the identification with the pleasure of the film-maker in that object or even an identification with the film-maker's act of resistance. In Gidal's films, the first level of resistance, that of the film-maker to the lure of the object, is chiefly inscribed through the action of the camera in its 'looking-at' the space — variously through: motion; distance; focal length's effect on perspective; zoom or focus. The second level, the attempt to distanciate the spectator from identification with the enunciator, is chiefly inscribed through devices like: repetition; graining out or darkening out of the image in printing; or disruptions in the flow of images and motion. It is particularly in the devices of the second level of distanciation — the effects on the screen of "material flatness, grain, light movement" — where Gidal, in an attempt to produce a condition for the spectator of response to the film, rather than identification with the film-maker, that he has recourse to those features 'intrinsic' to film. In his attempt to reduce ('eliminate' his rhetoric would tend to demand) identification with the film-maker, he attempts to stress the film act itself. The film work presented as a film work is an attempt to permit the spectator to utilise, appropriate, transform the film unencumbered by the ego of the film-maker — its terms are public rather than private — a public discourse. However, the terms of this discourse, the attempted definition of properties as if intrinsic to the film (even if criticisable as a tendency towards "an ontology based on an essence of cinema"), are a condition of a particular stage within the history of a cinema transformation — again, not primarily in the arena of theory, but in the films themselves.

Two uncertainties must be expressed at this point. The first asks: Is Gidal's attempt to produce an autonomy for the film work to be interpreted entirely within the concept of effacement of the film-maker as personal ego-centre of the film's construct, or does it seek a more absolute autonomy as object and experience from all other objects and experience — is it to some extent predicated on a definably modernist artistic endeavour of direct phenomenalist response to the art object?

The second asks, as an extension of the first: If the attempt to produce a degree of autonomy for the film work through its operation in the discourse of film as film, is to be considered as historically dialectic, either in the film-making or film-viewing discourse, does this not both undermine its autonomy as object (even process-object) and, tend to reinstate as problematic the ego of the film-maker as enunciator, as producer within the dialectic?

My inclination of course is to assume that the second question is more appropriate to Gidal's work, but the doubt adds weight to Cottringer's critique of Gidal's concept of presence as metaphysical. Even momentarily a belief that 'at least' the physical presence of the film object countering the illusion of presence of the depicted objects, but at the same time substituting for the sense of loss in their disappearance from the screen, would tend to locate the film in a secure ideal position outside of history and outside the materialist contingencies of production.

My own, and I suspect Gidal's unwillingness to abandon the theoretical issues concerning filmic materiality and more important, the film constructions to which they relate, is that in the current condition of cinema they represent the only counteraction to transparent belief in the presence of the depicted scene in terms other than literary devices being transposed to film. For example attempted verbal deconstruction of the image in Godard's LETTER TO JANE apart from its own ideological entrapment of simply replacing one secure but dubious reading for another, fails to engage the photocinematic image on the level of the photocinematic. The literary/verbal cinematic component itself being *unproblematised* as authoritative enunciation, as signification, as recording, as auditory 'substance' — in other words, if unproblematic in its terms as a cinematic component — is capable of making little more than a gestural problematisation of the cinematic component of image. A verbal re-interpretation of an image is only a partial aid to the transformation of the image as *image* (though a thorough critique of image signification of course has a function in the developing discourse of cinema).

Gidal's adherence to a concept of 'the cinematic', rather than being interpreted as purist, or idealist should be seen as a recognition that the primary arena in which the condition of filmic discourse must be changed is that of the cinematic image itself. He is concerned with the transformation in the meaning of the cinematic image through the transformation of the image not through the surface of its interpretation. The area of meaning of the image on which Gidal primarily works concerns the function of that image in the support and structure of the ego. His films are a dialectical enterprise, resisting, counteracting and transforming the cinematic image (a flow of image in duration) and transforming simultaneously the functioning of that image in the structure of the ego. The work, as I have shown, is made doubly complex in this respect through Gidal's representation to himself, in the production of the work, of the condition of the relationship between the spectator's ego and his own as film-maker. In this way, not only is the source of enunciation made an issue in the work, but so is its structures of coherence and most important the status of the film-maker's discourse in relationship to that of the film's spectator.

That Gidal establishes devices for a distancing of the spectator from the work, veering towards an aesthetic autonomy for the work and its durational period of encounter, does not eliminate that the work traces the film-maker's transformational processes. The film-making discourse is unavoidably privileged in status (in power and effect within the cinematic discourse as a whole) over the film-viewing discourse. However much the spectator is placed by the work in a position of appropriation rather than consumption the terms of this encounter are inevitably the traces of another (more economically privileged) encounter, that of the film-maker's discourse.

Whilst the predominant conditions of the current critical discourse tend to produce forms which personalise and subjectivise enunciation (or worse, revert to the false neutrality of unspecified enunciation of commercial cinema), I should beware of stressing any conservative aspect of Gidal's work against its more radical aspiration (albeit so often formulated as a negation almost to the extent of classic nihilism). But it can only lead to a confusion if the aspirational rhetoric — anti-narrative, anti-illusion, anti-identification, anti-anthropomorphism, or, the "... psychological centering of the self... nullified... to set up" the "dialectically posited distanced self" — was thought to be simply accomplished by the films. These theoretical aspirations are components in a complex definition of aim which guides aspects (and only aspects) of Gidal's film-making, wherein they become transformed to more detailed, particular effects. In many respects though, the films are about that which they oppose — illusion, psychological centering and even narrative. But they are also about that opposition, its difficulties and obstacles in the culture, embodied in both film-maker and spectator, and they are in filmic terms about the definition and transformation of those difficulties to new forms, states and definitions of the problem.

The term "materialist" in the Marxist film "used to characterize the development of work in avant-garde independent film-making" has to be understood in simple reference to the physical production of images, sounds, "Materialist" suggests process, a transformation effected on the properties of film in the relation to the learning situation. It is that by the point of "structuralist" fundamental operation, the experience of film. Any film is the fact of a production (Gidal, 1968) or Welles's Tower use of "structuralist/materialist" presentation of a film's process. "The material construction of film" are displayed reflexively into the part of a narrative stable subject-centered image important to presentation of process is an attention to temporality (time is "film's primary dimension") and duration ("how long something lasts"). It is usual in this connection to begin by adverting the position of the possible one-to-one relationship between shooting time and reading time, equivalence between the duration of the event recorded and the duration of the film representation of that event-

# REPETITION TIME

by  
Stephen Heath

## Notes around

# "Structural/Materialist Films"

The term "materialist" in the expression "structural/materialist film," used to characterize a certain development of work in avant-garde independent filmmaking,<sup>1</sup> has to be understood away from any simple reference to the physical materiality of film. "Materialist" stresses process, a film in its process of production of images, sounds, times, meanings, the transformations effected on the basis of the specific properties of film in the relation of a viewing and listening situation. It is that situation which is, finally, the point of "structural/materialist film," its fundamental operation, the *experience* of film, and the *experience of film*.

Any film is the fact of a process, whether it be *Hall* (Gidal, 1968) or Welles's *Touch of Evil*. The practice of "structural/materialist film" is defined in the *presentation* of a film's process, "the presentation of the material construction of film"; process, construction are displayed reflexively, not displaced uniformly into the pattern of a narrative, bound up for the stable subject-centered image.

Important to presentation of process is an attention to temporality (time is "film's primary dimension") and duration ("how long something lasts"). It is usual in this connection to begin by adducing the exposition of the possible one-to-one relationship between shooting time and reading time, equivalence between the duration of the event recorded and the duration of the film representation of that event--a

film such as *Couch* (Warhol, 1964) providing a stock example, with its takes the length of single rolls of film that are then joined together in sequence, this giving "a 'shallow' time which permits a credible relationship between the time of interior action and the physical experience of the film as a material presentation . . . Warhol's most significant innovation." That quotation is from *Le Grice*, for whom durational equivalence often seems to be something of a primary ethic of filmmaking, in the light of which Snow's *Wavelength* (1967), for instance, can be found seriously wanting: "One-to-one relationship between the projection duration and the shooting duration is lost through breaks in the shooting not made clear in the form of the film. By utilizing a contrived continuity to parallel the implied time of its narrative, the film is in some ways a retrograde step in cinematic form." Durational equivalence, however, is itself a turning back in cinema's history (accepting for a moment the idea of a progressive development), right back to the practice of the films screened by Lumière in the Grand Café; which is to say that it is not necessarily the realization of the physical experience of the film as a material presentation: on the contrary, it can function perfectly well, as with the historical reception of the Lumière films, as a foundation of the supreme illusion of the real, the actual "before one's eyes," the vision of "nature caught in the act" (the excited comment of one of the first spectators). So that, in fact, much more is at stake in "structural/materialist film," in the films themselves: *Le Grice*'s own *White Field Duration* (1973), for example, aims to establish the length of projection time as a material experience by exposing the viewer to a white screen; Snow's *One Second in Montreal* (1969), a film which *Le Grice* praises and which holds still images for increasing and decreasing periods of time, patterns durational experience of the film for the viewer.



Any film works with time and duration. Indeed, narrative cinema classically depends on the systematic exploitation of a multiplicity of times: the time of the narrative action but equally the time of the elaboration of the narrative, which brings into play a whole number of figures, rhymes, movements that cut across the film in differing rhythms, shifting the spectator in their relations. Simply, the exploitation is systematic, in final time with the elaborated narrative, the achievement of that (so the film "goes quickly"); the multiplicity is constantly tied down to the narrative which gives purpose and direction to the film, is its principle of homogeneity. Nor is narrative the only mode of binding time. Consider Bruce Baillie's *All My Life* (1966): the single shot three-minute pan-sky, green, flowers--traces a duration which is held in time with the song on the soundtrack, the song closing camera movement, color, screen duration into the unity of its time and significance. The contrary practice of "structural/materialist film" is to break given terms of unity, to explore the heterogeneity of film in process. Snow's *Standard Time* (1967), for instance, cites one reference (one standard) for time on the soundtrack, a morning radio broadcast; another on the image-track, an extremely elliptical human presence which conventionally serves as the center for the elision of the process of film production, and then works over an eight-minute duration of film with an unbound series of pans and tilts that ceaselessly pose the question of viewing time.

The disunity, the disjunction, of "structural/materialist film" is, exactly, the spectator. What is intended, what the practice addresses, is not a spectator as unified subject, timed by a narrative action, making the relations the film makes to be made, coming in the pleasure of the mastery of those relations, of the positioned view they offer, but a spectator, a spectating activity, at the limit of any fixed subjectivity, materially inconstant, dispersed in process, beyond the accommodation of reality and pleasure principles. "Boredom" is a word which is sometimes assumed by the filmmakers with regard to their films, the boredom which is the loss of the imaginary unity of the subject-ego and the very grain of drive against that coherent fiction, the boredom which Barthes sees close to *jouissance* ("it is *jouissance* seen from the shores of pleasure"<sup>2</sup>).

A specific strategy for the tension of duration set up by "structural/materialist film" is that of repetition, at its simplest in the use of "loops." Gidal's work, for instance, has made particular and complex use of repetition: *Hall* with its pattern of long-to-medium-to-close shot movements from the view of the hall into the various objects seen at the far end, then repeated over again; *Room Film 1973* (1973) with its five-second units each shown twice in succession; *Condition of Illusion* (1975) with its repetition of the camera's mobile angling focusing course over the surfaces of a room.

In Freud, repetition can go two ways, comes round with both a "positive" and a "negative" inflection. The compulsion to repeat is a way of remembering, resistant, symptomatic, difficult, that the analysis needs to shift towards a different engagement of the patient to its meaning, rendering the repetition "useful." Thinking outside the analytic situation, Freud also ascribes to repetition a pleasure of remembering

which he illustrates interestingly by reference to rhymed poetry, the coherence of a formal organization that maps out paths of recognition, of the known. Repetition is in function with the binding-*Bindung*--that Freud describes as co-extensive with the unity of the ego, the maintenance of relatively constant forms within which the free flow of energy is channelled and so contained. As against all of which, or more precisely going along with all of which, repetition is also and increasingly recognized by Freud as the very type of the resistance characteristic of the unconscious, a compulsion that can be rendered useful but that is first and foremost a threat to ego coherence, as the very essence of drive, tending beyond the pleasure principle to absolute discharge, to the total dispersal of unity: Lacan talks of "the more radical diversity constituted by repetition in itself."

The economy of repetition in classic narrative cinema is an economy of maintenance, towards a definite unity of the spectator as subject: systems of repetition are tightly established, but on the line of a narrative action that holds the repetitions as a term of its coherence and advances with them, across them, its sense of difference, of change, of the new. The practice of "structural/materialist film" is another economy: the spectator is confronted with a repetition that is "in itself," not subsumed by a narrative and its coherence, that is literal, not caught up in the rhymes that habitually serve to figure out the narrative film. The spectator is produced by the film as subject in process, in the process of demonstration of the film, with the repetition an intensification of that process, the production of a certain freedom or randomness of energy, of no one memory: in *Condition of Illusion*, the return of an impossible openness of the film as object of desire, flashes of memories, this statuette, this rapid zoom in and out, this white surface, this pulling of focus, a network in which the vision of the I, the ego, is no longer confirmed as the master view. Literal repetition is the radical new that *jouissance* demands; Lacan again: "Everything which varies, modulates in repetition, is only an alienation of its meaning."<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps paradoxically at first consideration, the strategy of repetition in "structural/materialist film" breaks identification. In *Condition of Illusion*, which involves the instability of possibilities of recognition (speed of camera movement, use of focus, proximity, angle, etc., leaving only a few objects or places in the room identifiable according to the norms of photographic reproduction), the repetition suggests a possibility of "catching up," "making sure," "verifying," which in fact remains unexploitable, ineffective (one never sees "more"), resistant in the very literalness of the repetition (no variation, modulation, no "new angle"). In *Hall*, something of the reverse procedure arrives, via the repetition at something of the same kind of break: extremely stable, normally reproduced objects are given clear from the beginning, the editing, moreover, reducing the distance from which they are seen, cutting in to show and to detail them, repetition then undercutting their simple identification; the second time around, the bowl of fruit cannot be seen as a bowl of fruit, but must be seen as an image in a film process, detached from any unproblematic illusion of presence, as a production in the film, a mark of the presence of that

Discussion of identification in film, of course, is not habitually concerned with this identifying of (objects, what is shown), but rather with identifying into (the film's narrative movement), identifying with (the characters of the narrative, "the people in the film"). "Structural/materialist film" works counter to these appropriations, by the elimination of narrative action and agents (*Condition of Illusion*), by their extreme marginalization as a kind of legibly illegible disjunct (Gidal's *Silent Partner*, 1977, with its fragments of noise of conversation, glimpse of legs, person whistling on the soundtrack, very title), by their derisively obvious quotation (as sometimes in Snow's films, *Wavelength* or *Back and Forth*, 1968-69), by their strictly measured delimitation for the demonstration of the film process (the picnic in Le Grice's four-screen *After Manet*, 1975, or the repeated phone ringing incident in *Blackbird Descending*, 1977; picnic and incident given as functions in transformation, notions such as "record" and "actuality" displaced from the reproduction of life to the production of film reality). The spectator is to be held at a distance, but at the distance of the presentation of material construction, is to be held to that.

Identification is the hold of the image, from the initial assumption of significance, identifying of, to its ultimate confirmation by narrative order, identifying into and with. Certain films refuse the very image itself or reduce it to the very limits of its physical supports—light and screen in *White Field Duration*—but in general "structural/materialist films" are engaged with images, assume the fact of their production, often attempt to move in the time of that production—an effect of *Condition of Illusion* where camera focus and pace seem frequently to be hesitating just on the boundary of stability and recognition. Which is to say that they begin at least, like any other type of film, from the primary identification that Metz sees as constitutive in the cinematic apparatus itself: "the spectator identifies with him/herself, with him/herself as a pure act of perception (as wakefulness, alertness): as condition of possibility of the perceived and hence as a kind of transcendental subject . . . as he/she identifies with him/herself as look, the spectator can do no other than identify with the camera too, which has looked before at what is now being looked at . . ." They begin from, but end against the solicitation of the unity of the look that the apparatus offers for exploitation (is developed to exploit): the all-perceiving subject free in the instrumentality of the camera that serves to relay and reproduce at every moment the power of that central vision. "Structural/materialist film" has no place for the look, ceaselessly displaced, outphased, a problem of seeing; it is anti-voyeuristic.

What is thus at stake is a practice towards "a deliberate exterior reflexiveness of the audience": "the viewer is forming an equal and possibly more or less opposite 'film' in her/his head, constantly anticipating, correcting, re-correcting—constantly intervening in the arena of confrontation with the given reality, i.e. the isolated chosen area of each film's work, of each film's production."

If the figure of memory is metaphor (one signifier for another which, absent, repressed, is consequently retained nevertheless in a certain effect of signification), then the project of "structural/materialist film" is non-metaphorical, a film must not substitute for its process (and reproduce the spectator in the image of that substitution); must not substitute narrative, the predominant metaphor in cinema, onto the order of which the process of filmic production is transferred (the Greek *metaphora* means transference), this narrativization containing the heterogeneous elements and fixing a memory of the film, making it coherently

available as a sure progress of meaning. Without narrative, the memory of a film fails. Simple test: after a viewing of *Condition of Illusion*, the account given will be extremely "subjective" (particular traces of desiring relation: liking-remembering this or that moment, wanting it in the repetition) or extremely "objective" (towards a description of the film's construction, its use of repetition, camera mobility, and so on), the two, exactly at their extreme, joining up with one another: what is missing is the habitual common ground, the narrative metaphor or transference or model of the film, its memory for the spectator placed as its subject, bound and centered on its terms of meaning. Or rather, the spectator as subject-ego (the ego is the place of the imaginary identifications of the subject), the maintained illusion of coherence (derived in film from the maintained coherence of the illusion); but the subject is always more than the ego, the "more" that "structural/materialist film" seeks to open out in its demonstration of process: the subject-circulation in the symbolic with its chains of signifying elements, unity overturned in the other memory of repetition.

"There can be no radical narrative film." This basic tenet of "structural/materialist film" (narrative is the culminating order of illusionism, identification, subject unity, etc.) is at the same time a continual point of debate and doubt. Le Grice can find himself "not convinced that illusion and narrative are excluded as elements of the 'structural/materialist' problematic": Gidal even can talk of "the narrative of a black laborer building a window frame and pane" in his *C/O/N/S/T/R/U/C/T* (1974, a film that depends on multiple superimposition of almost identical images). The difficulty is the very term "narrative" which tends to be used with an absolute imprecision: what is the historical force of the statement that there can be no radical narrative film? Arguments the other way, however, are often equally imprecise, themselves avoiding effective historical questions and appealing to a kind of inevitable-presence-of-narrative schema, narrative as inescapable in film construction.

Take *Condition of Illusion*: no agents of action are given in the film; agency is with the camera, its movement over and focusing of the room's surfaces, which agency itself is tensed into (taken up in the tension and the time of) the structural functioning of the film's duration with its pattern of repetition. It is sometimes said that the film is the narrative of the progress around the room, a notion that transfers the identification of surfaces and objects in a temporal succession to the agency of the camera as narrating source, as narrator, the seen film thus held together as the narrative product of that agency-narrator. What is interesting here is to grasp the extent to which narration is in our imaginary of film as important as, and in fact, more important than, narrative: film that imaginary has it (supported by the conventional systems of address in narrative cinema), must be representation for, in order, directed towards something for someone (narrative as the common ground of film and spectator). Thus with *Condition of Illusion*, the power of the response against the film to find an order of narration, a direction: "against the film," since what such a response has to ignore, impossible in the experience of the film, is once again, the repetition, the disturbing return of the signifier across the signs of any narration (where "a sign represents something for someone," "a signifier represents a subject for another signifier"<sup>6</sup>).

## AFTERWORD

By Stephen Heath

(The following article appeared in SCREEN Vol 20 n 2 as an afterword to Peter Gidal's essay *The Anti-Narrative*).

The argument is for truly materialist practice which is one of the presentation ie demystification of the material construction of film, a dialectically constituted "presentation", of film representation, film image, film moment, film meaning in temporalness, etcetera.<sup>1</sup>

That argument has been made by Gidal in films and writings over a number of years and has received a certain amount of discussion in *Screen* in articles by Brewster, Dusinberre, Eaton and Rees: the first reviewing the *Structural Film Anthology* edited by Gidal to accompany a National Film Theatre retrospective in 1976, the second concerned with problems of subjectivity in the development of Gidal's work, the third and fourth with the context of that work and its specific strategies.<sup>2</sup> The publication now of this piece by Gidal himself, 'The Anti-Narrative', written in 1976 and revised in 1978, is not simply a continuation of that discussion – and not at all a discontinuation of the elements of criticism produced by those previous articles – but also the possibility of a more direct access to and thus a more direct engagement with a position, strongly held and articulated, that has had its importance in contemporary debate around questions of strategy in independent film-making practice and that cuts across many concerns that have been and are central to the work of *Screen*. This 'afterword' is no more than a series of brief remarks, 'further footnotes' in connection with one or two points arising.<sup>3</sup>

There is for Gidal a radical impossibility: *the history of cinema*. The fundamental criticism made of everyone from the Berwick Street Collective to Akerman, Oshima to LeGrice (even LeGrice), is that their films are part of that history, return its representation, that they are in that cinema, repeat its implications. Strategies of deconstruction are merely a further turn of involvement: deconstruction repeats – gives currency once more to and looks into – the terms, the images it seeks to displace, is a continuing and reactionary reproduction of cinema. And cinema is not available here for another – alternative – history. It is inconceivable that Gidal could write a book such as LeGrice's *Abstract Film and Beyond*, the different, hidden, outside-the-industry, independent history. Not just because of the theoretical and political refusal of any grounding in ideas of art and developing artistic experimentation, but also because of the difficulty of 'independence' and 'history': there is always in Gidal's writing the tension of an acute actuality, the pressure of – for – a break now, exactly the constantly current impossibility.

It is this that Gidal qualifies as his 'ultraleftism' ('so-called ultraleftism') and that gives his habitual mode of assertion from a position occupied as being, occupied to be, the extreme – almost all films are to be described as 'reactionary', if not 'facistic' – and his habitual adjudicatory isolation – radical feminists alone are possible allies, though even then 'problematically'. The way may be 'distrust concerning every form of enthusiasm' but that, as

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The problem of all this can be grasped in the idea of a production of meaninglessness: 'the attempt at meaninglessness . . . the nongiveness of meaning'. Gidal's formulations are difficult here and confusing in that difficulty and then themselves confused, several possible positions (and there is a defensive edginess that emerges in the need felt to disclaim positions which are clearly recognised as perhaps implied - 'none of the above to imply autonomy to (a) discourse'). The terms of the making of meaninglessness for which Gidal argues are not so far from those of deconstruction - 'the emptying of meaning', 'the undermining of meaning' - and the effective distinction of the two would depend on a far more developed account of the operation of this 'making' than Gidal gives. In the absence of which account, meaninglessness is both entangled with deconstruction and, which defines it as being different from deconstruction according to Gidal's argument, with the reiterated attack on representation and, ideally, reproduction, 'that battle against reproduction': 'a defensive resistance against the reproduction of meaning; that latter which is the reproduction of dominant ideological meaning, the representation.' Though Gidal would not accept this, it appears in the difficulty and confusion that one position implied would involve something like the notion of an abstraction of the given as the production of a work outside meaning and hence the ideological: 'the undermining of determinate meaning, the latter being as always and necessarily ideologically produced and arbitrary'. What exactly would an indeterminate or non-determinate meaning be? (Does 'determinate' here mean simply a particular meaning? The elision of the question of specific historical meanings into a question of meaning in general is part of the difficulty). What exactly would be at stake in a non-arbitrary meaning? (In what sense, moreover, is a determinate and ideologically produced meaning arbitrary? In one crucial sense at least, it is quite the reverse that has to be stressed; historical materialism indeed is the science of the non-arbitrariness of the given, including meaning(s)). And this is to leave aside that '*film-as-projected*, as anti-illusionist' and the 'making of meaninglessness' are not one and the same thing or necessary concomitants with the latter the condition of the former (for Gidal 'meaning' and 'illusion' seem to function synonymously in a totally un-Brechtian manner) and that, precisely, Gidal's films are in meaning, crossed by meanings - those of the history of cinema they inevitably and critically engage included - and productive of meanings, not least the complex meaning of their, of that engagement.

In a way, the confusion is exactly a result of what Gidal calls his ultraleftism and which might better be seen as an absence at many points in his writings of historical and dialectical thinking. The critique of deconstruction<sup>6</sup> is right but no justification for a monolithic argument against all and every work engaging contemporary terms of representation and their production. Since a film is never in itself simply radical, it is right and necessary to locate and critique the elements of its construction in ideological reproduction but this is again no justification for a monolithic argument in which all films become indiscriminately and uniformly 'reactionary' and which avoids any consideration of the historical reality of the contradictions a film may represent and decisively produce (as does *Riddles of the Sphinx*, which is its real difficulty and its political use value, the latter itself with contradictory effects to be grasped at each stage of the continuing history of the film's situation).<sup>7</sup>

Gidal himself often seems to recognise, can quickly become a generally disorganised and individual pessimism, a strictly contemplative performance.<sup>4</sup>

As far as the theory and the film-making practice are concerned, the consequences of this position are, in fact, complex, contradictory. If the history of cinema is radically impossible, two courses seem open: either the end of cinema as the straight refusal to make films and so repeat its terms or the end of cinema in films, a work in, on, through film, the 'truly materialist practice' as Gidal defines it. Such a practice, which is the course decided by Gidal, is then necessarily the fully reflexive knowledge of the history of cinema that at any moment a film – a materialist film – must hold and present, 'a dialectically constituted "presentation", of film representation, film image, film moment, film meaning in temporality, etcetera'. The film must be the event of that material presentation ('the historical moment is the film moment each moment'), the only way to end the implications of cinema, the place-image, identification, narrative-sign, illusion – of the spectator there.

Two remarks immediately in this context. First, it has to be noted that this presentation of film representation works in practice across a division or duality of strategies as with regard to signifier and signified (these terms with the idea of separation, one against the other, as used by Gidal): on the one hand, presentation of elements in and through the film; on the other, elimination of elements from the presentation – for example, images of human figures, with the stress in the theoretical statements on the elimination of images of women (human figures do occur in films by Gidal, sometimes quite centrally as in the 1970 *Takes* with its use of an erotic image of a woman in its film account of cinema-voyeurism, but there is a whole run of his films, including most notably *Room Film 1973*, *Condition of Illusion* and *Silent Partner*, and in respect of which the theoretical writing seems particularly to have been developed, where the absence is more or less complete – more in *Room Film 1973* and *Condition of Illusion*, less in *Silent Partner* which introduces shots of legs). Second, the relation between the theoretical – theoretical-polemical – writing and the films should not be taken for granted: the films are different from the writing, the theory, that accompanies them and that difference is not – contrary to one or two of Gidal's own comments – their failing but their advance; this is not because of some notion of 'the artist' being automatically, romantically in advance of 'the theorist' but because, simply, the effects and constructions of the films cannot be flattened into the reductive position of the theory which, indeed, at many points they challenge in the very monotony – the undialectical nature – of its usual argument.

'There is no film which *subverts* the real . . . that which is, the material real, is only subvertable by another material real, not by any material image of a material real.'<sup>5</sup> The same emphasis is made and extended in 'The Anti-Narrative': contemporary social formations cannot be adequately given through cinema; there is no dialectical portrayal, operation upon and through in cinema in relation to social practice of the extra-cinematic. In part, this is a position against certain idealist conceptions of the political importance and effectivity of cinema and film: film is important but unimportant, and a political practice – a political study for that matter – of cinema is so only in posing constantly, and against itself, the terms of that recognition (the movement and perspective and action of that 'but'). In part too, however, it is the argument against 'work on the signified (and "work on the signifier")' for a specific practice of film, of film specifically, where 'specific' – 'specifically' involves, as the very condition of 'an unrecuperated avant-garde', film kept out of meaning and representation, free from all illusions – 'the process is the film'.

1 Peter Gidal, 'Further Footnotes', unpublished paper delivered at the London Film-makers Co-op, February 1976.

2 Ben Brewster, 'Structural Film Anthology', *Screen* Winter 1976/7, v17 n4, pp 117-120; Deke Dusinberre, 'Consistent Oxymoron - Peter Gidal's Rhetorical Strategy', *Screen* Summer 1977, v18 n2, pp 79-88; Al Rees, 'Conditions of Illusionism', *Screen* Autumn 1977, v18 n3, pp 41-54; Mick Eaton, 'The Avant-garde and Narrative', *Screen* Summer 1978, v19 n2, pp 129-134. A context for these articles, and to which a number of them explicitly refer, was provided by Peter Wollen's "'Ontology" and "Materialism" in Film', *Screen* Spring 1976, v17 n1, pp7-23.

3 These remarks also follow on from the discussion in an article to which Gidal here refers: Stephen Heath, 'Repetition-time: Notes around "Structural/Materialist" Film', *Wide Angle* v2 n3, 1978, pp 4-11.

4 Thinking of surrealism and the political situation of the avant-garde, Benjamin talked of the need to *organise* pessimism: 'To organise pessimism means nothing other than to expel moral metaphor from politics and to discover in political action a sphere reserved one hundred per cent for images. This image sphere, however, can no longer be measured out by contemplation. If it is the double task of the revolutionary intelligentsia to overthrow the intellectual predominance of the bourgeoisie and to make contact with the proletarian masses, the intelligentsia has failed almost entirely in the second part of this task because it can no longer be performed contemplatively . . . In reality it is far less a matter of making the artist of bourgeois origin into a master of "proletarian art" than of deploying him, even at the expense of his artistic activity, at important points in this sphere of imagery.' Walter Benjamin, 'Surrealism', *Reflections*, New York 1979, p 191. Gidal's writing runs across ideas in this passage which in turn has questions for that writing and its various formulations. The problem of the deployment of the artist, even at the expense of his or her artistic activity, against the unity-illusion of an assumed progressive relation (Benjamin's 'metaphor') and towards a critically produced knowledge in the contradictions of the reality of representation and its institutions (Benjamin's 'sphere of imagery') is the problem of, together, Gidal's theory, his films, his practice and situation as an artist.

5 Peter Gidal, 'Technology and Ideology in/through/and Avant-Garde Film: An Instance', in Teresa de Lauretis and Stephen Heath eds, *The Cinematic Apparatus* (in press).

6 Ironically but symptomatically critique of 'deconstruction in *Screen* has on occasion involved simultaneous and explicit critique of Gidal's theoretical account of 'structural/materialist film': 'Deconstruction is quickly the impasse of a formal device, an aesthetic of transgression when the need is an activity of transformation, and a politically consequent materialism in film is not to be expressed as veering contact past internal content in order to proceed with "film as film" . . . 'Narrative Space', *Screen* Autumn 1976, v17 n3, p 108 (for the 'proceeding-with-"film-as-film"' formulation, see Peter Gidal, 'Theory and Definition of Structural/Materialist Film', *Structural Film Anthology*, London 1976, p 2).

7 As context for this description of *Riddles of the Sphinx*, see 'Difference', *Screen* Autumn 1978, v19 n3, especially pp 73-74, 76, 98-99.

8 'Further Footnotes', op cit.

9 Peter Gidal, 'Talk at Millennium', *Millennium Film Journal* v1 n2, 1978, p 20.

10 'Technology and Ideology in/through/and Avant-Garde Film: An Instance', op cit.

These few remarks have been made simply as an initial response to the writing and arguments of Gidal's theory of which 'The Anti-Narrative' is an extended example. None of the points made cannot be found in 'The Anti-Narrative' itself. Part of what remains over from them there is the kind of difficulty and confusion here mentioned; part again, however, is a complex development of the problems and contradictions of these points in theory and in practice, a development which these present remarks have largely curtailed and which is the final use of Gidal's paper here in *Screen*.

Evidently, the work of *Screen* differs sharply with Gidal as to the possibility and the value of 'production of meaningfulness': there is a necessary – and inevitable – struggle in representation and the relations of representing of men and women as subjects given in those relations, which struggle is what is easily 'forgotten', theoretically avoided, by the notion of minimalising potency of signification in order to allow for attention to the film's process as such, 'its' construction. To say that 'we must get "back" to work on the signifier and process of production, the inscribed oneness of diegesis with process (relations) of its production' is not only still a problem of representation – *inscribed oneness* – but is equally, and precisely in its belief in a simply filmic solution of that problem – *work on the signifier* – an elision of the real process of a film in a way that does not support the assertion of 'the obviously *political* of such a work'. 'Representation of meaning *means*: repressing the coming into being of meaning';<sup>8</sup> as against which, as something of its dialectical relocation, would have to be added, however, in order to grasp what is then at stake, that 'film as film' means repressing the fact of the social existence and heterogeneity of film: film is not film – has any materialist account ever proceeded by tautology? – but, always and every time, a specific social production, which real process of a film includes the conditions of its construction and presence (the audience, for example, and despite Gidal's 'somehow the audience mustn't be mentioned'), never reducible to 'inscribed oneness' or 'work on the signifier'. It is *thus*, moreover, and without in any way falling into some indulgent idealism of its effectivity, that film is a site of social practice and intervention, that something is to be done and – constantly, contradictorily – to be gained there, in and against its institution, its cinema. Gidal's films after all, are about *that*.

'I vehemently want to aim the camera at something and work through with it on representation.'<sup>9</sup> In fact, of course, Gidal's work is in representation. The argument against representation – perfectly idealist as such, the question is not one of 'arguing against representation' but of transforming specific institutions and practices, specific terms and relations of representation – is accompanied by an argument for, effectively, a more complex engagement with representation. What is important for this latter argument is a critique – the practical critique made by the films (sometimes described by Gidal as 'the distance between knowledge and perception') – of existing holds of identity and identification, of their whole contract of seduction, of this cinema of reproduction. (Elsewhere, 'reproduction' tends to become another generally abstract term, taken up in the battle 'against reproduction in any form' which is not helped by a quotation from Maynard Smith's *The Evolution of Sex* that does not, contrary to what is claimed, say anything about not-reproducing and so support that as 'a viable theoretical position'). Gidal's films use materials of reproduction, reproduce, are the site of relations of representation, represent; the work is in the transformation they realise, the new situation they reproduce: 'setting up a contradictory representation: holding and not holding a series of reproductions into (the) terms of (a) representation.'<sup>10</sup>

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Consistent Oxymoron: Peter Gidal's Theoretical Strategy

Deke Dusinberre

Here are two uneasy paragraphs which, as I've pondered them, have impressed themselves upon me quite vividly as a 'green' passage against a 'red' passage. Consider first the 'green':

'Suppressed in Anglo/Saxon structural and structural/materialist films is any attempt at theory. Advanced (mainly French) theory (not necessarily directly concerning film) is either not capable of dealing with film or else posits retrograde, illusionist, post-Bazinian manifestations of such. With the (at best) nearly total demise (flourishing) of New American Cinema mainly through its resurgent romanticism, or (at worst) its continued operation as pseudo-narrative investigations, there remain the few English (one Canadian, one Austrian) structural/materialist film-makers, lamentably largely existing without the beginnings even of a theoretical/historical approach.'

Next the 'red':

'... A more important issue centres on whether or not the objects viewed are intensified, ironically, through the very denial of any complacent recognition of them. ... Gidal's seemingly banal images would thus function pointedly and specifically; would, in fact, situate the film in connection with the acknowledged influence (on Gidal) of the work of Beckett, in which banalised action ironically intensifies the personal drama. An elaboration of this type of analysis of Room Film 1973 would probably posit a specific subject (Gidal) performing a phenomenological reduction on the objects in the real world.'

I awarded the paragraphs their colours solely on the basis of my own rather strict education in English Composition as a youth; weekly compositions were first farmed out to 'lay readers' who zealously pointed to lapses in grammar and syntax with their green-inked pens, and subsequently were corrected 'for content' by the teacher's own sacred red pen. And so the following week I would be confronted with my literary efforts gaily and thoroughly decorated in green and red.

If there is a clearer way to reinforce the distinction between 'form' and 'content' I have yet to encounter it. As an artifice, it has not necessarily stood me in good stead.

Yet the first passage - from Peter Gidal's 'Theory and Definition of Structural/Materialist Film'<sup>1</sup> - I would tend to dismiss as hopelessly green, sure that when 'properly' rewritten as a single coherent sentence its content would be neither significant nor profound enough to merit the expenditure of much red ink. The second passage - my own<sup>2</sup> - remains red because the attempt to account for a certain quality in Gidal's work via Beckett is clearly important, but the tentativeness and incompleteness of that attempt render the entire paragraph inadequate.



That colour-consciousness precluded the ability to make an important comparison. It is the intensely 'subjective' quality of Gidal's work - in both film and theory - which has confounded me; the attempt to understand this subjective quality in films of a fundamentally formal nature (a subjective quality exemplified by a hand-held, restlessly roving camera technique) led to a comparison with the dramatic work of Beckett (a comparison informed by an awareness of Gidal's background in theatre and psychology and his enthusiasm for Beckett) which yielded an unsatisfactory analysis of the subjective perception of objects within a highly limited field (eg a room). But a bit of calculated colour-blindness coupled with a re-reading of Beckett's 'subjectivity' yields a much more pertinent comparison, at once casting Gidal's theoretical work in a much more sympathetic light and elucidating the function of the subject in Gidal's films.

It is important to consider briefly the way Beckett's novels (which, it might be argued, form the substance of his literary achievement - as opposed to the more familiar plays) have not only intensified the role of the first-person narrator as the sole speaking subject but have simultaneously extended the strategies of contradiction and hyperbole at every level of construction, effectively undermining what would otherwise appear as simple - and relentlessly pessimistic - solipsism. On the broadest level, a major shift can easily be traced through the early novels - *More Pricks Than Kicks*, *Murphy*, *Watt* - in which the speaking subject develops from an omniscient narrator to a fully participating witness, up to the magnificent mature trilogy - *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, *The Unnamable* - in which each speaking subject limits his discourse to an internalised monologue. But those monologues incorporate contradictions which interrogate the very act of relating, of speaking as a unified subject. Thus *Molloy* is organised as two long monologues, ostensibly by discrete characters (Molloy and Moran), although as the latter monologue progresses the convergence of the two is suggested on several planes (did Molloy and Moran meet? are they perhaps identical? does the latter monologue historically precede the former?) and each monologue offers an increasingly fragmented and disintegrated notion of speaking subject which is unquestionably tantamount to the fragmentation of the authorial voice of Beckett.

Molloy begins: 'I am in my mother's room. It's I who live there now. I don't know how I got there. Perhaps in an ambulance, certainly a vehicle of some kind. I was helped. I'd never have got there alone.' The repetition and substitution (note how the implicit 'here' of the first sentence is replaced by the contradictory 'there') create a sense of ambivalence and distance on the part of the speaking subject which is reiterated twenty pages later: 'Not to want to say, not to know what you want to say, not to be able to say what you think you want to say, and never stop saying, or hardly ever, that is the thing to keep in mind, even in the heat of composition.' And again, another twenty pages on:

'Yes, the words I heard, and heard distinctly, having quite a sensitive ear, were heard a first time, then a second, and often even a third, as pure sounds, free of all meaning, and this is probably one of the reasons why conversation was unspeakably painful to me. And the words I uttered myself, and which must nearly always have gone with an effort of the intelligence, were often to me as the buzzing of an insect.'

The subversion of the unified authorial voice is simple and explicit in the latter monologue (Moran's) in which the closing sentences ('It was not midnight. It was not raining.') challenge the authority of the opening sentences ('It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows.'). Both voices are authorial, neither authoritative.

Beckett further exposed the fabric of his fiction – indeed, of all writing – by stressing repetition and contradiction more insistently. Number III of the *Texts for Nothing* commences: 'Leave, I was going to say leave all that. What matter who's speaking, someone said what matter who's speaking. There's going to be a departure. I'll be there, I won't miss it, it won't be me, I'll be here, I'll say I'm far from here, it won't be me, I won't say anything, there's going to be a story, someone's going to try and tell a story.' Or, more starkly, *The Unnamable*: 'Where now? Who now? When now? Unquestioning. I, say I. Unbelieving. Questions, hypotheses, call them that. Keep going, going on, call that going, call that on.' The carefully balanced syntax of repetition and contradiction effectively increases the stress on the speaking subject until that subjectivity ironically disintegrates. There is no single, unified, speaking subject – not even an ultimate authorial voice – there is only the fragmentary composite of subjective voices.

The implications of Beckett's dissolution of the unified subject have not been lost on Gidal. In an article published in 1974 (the point at which, in my opinion, his film work reached a level of maturity) in *Studio International*, he quotes Beckett on precisely this point: 'At the end of my work, there's nothing but dust. In *L'Innommable* there's complete disintegration. No "I", no "have", no "being". No nominative, no accusative, no verb. There's no way to go on.' Beckett, of course, is being characteristically ironic, simultaneously describing the final dissolution predicated by his writing and contradicting that description in so far as he does go on, must go on, even if there is no way, and actually concludes *L'Innommable* with the assertion, '... I'll go on.' In the same article Gidal describes the monologue as a 'structural device' defined by repetition: 'Such continuance of the word flow is defined as a monologue; obsessive verbal repetition by constantly re-attempting to define reality "repeats" itself. . . . Obsessive repetition is not an image of mental claustrophobia, it is it.' It is now clear that the disintegration of the unified subject through contradiction, repetition, hyperstress, is precisely what Gidal learned from Beckett. Especially, Gidal has adopted that trope of contradiction – the oxymoron – as his emblem.

In Gidal's own prose we begin to get a sense of how he utilises these tactics. The 'Theory and Definition of Structural/Materialist Film' as a whole reads as a series of more or less disjointed monologues with headings such as 'Devices', 'Dialectic', 'Reading Duration' etc. Though occasionally cross-referenced, there does not seem to be a precise sense of linear order; the conclusion that they may be read in any order is reinforced by the absurdly long and digressive footnotes – monologues in themselves – which can only be digested if they are read continuously as the final section of the essay and not as interjections in the main text. In short, the overall impression is not one of linear argument, but one of fragmented comment. That comment is further fragmented by an oxymoronic vocabulary and contradictory phrase structure. Turning again to the passage cited at the outset, we can see how words and phrases turn on themselves. An extremely literal reading of the passage – green pen at the ready – with the express purpose of determining a single, linear argument provides an admittedly absurd précis, an absurdity which disrupts the assumed unity of the authorial voice. We begin the passage with the expectation of discovering a suppressed film theory or two, but then learn that 'advanced' theory does not directly concern film or else 'posits retrograde, illusionist, post-Bazinian manifestations of such.' We shudder in anticipation of a description of *reactionary* theory, but are left with the conclusion that advanced film-makers are 'lamentably largely existing without the beginning even' of advanced

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theory. Meanwhile, we have detoured past two literal oxymoronic constructions, one asserting that the 'flourishing' New American Cinema is in 'total demise' and the other (most delightful of all) affirming that the only English structural/materialist film-makers (there are two) are Canadian and Austrian respectively (which reassures us that they are distinct from the 'Anglo/Saxon structural' film-makers).

Deliberately, Gidal places his prose beyond the reach of any green pen known to humankind. Which is not to say that a less picayune reading won't convey a general gist which, in this instance, might be stated thus: 'As to the theoretical practice of film theory, nothing at all seems to have been even begun.' Which of course is precisely how Gidal himself reiterates the initial passage two sentences later, playing on his own constant beginnings and re-beginnings which seem not to 'have even been begun'. Reiteration/repetition is a ploy which Gidal consistently uses to push the reader back off a complacent acceptance of the words themselves. Hence 'Jacques Derrida has clearly clarified what in fact is at stake in a work, in the procedure of constituting a work.' Not only is there the obviously ironic stress on 'clearly clarified' (Derridal Gidal!!) but also the calculated redundancy of 'procedure' and 'constituting': verbs, participles, nouns of 'coming into being' play an important role in any Gidal text. One can practically feel the following sentence being dragged into being, in spurts and starts:

'To begin with, radical art, an art of radical form, deals with the manipulation of materials made conscious, and with the inexpressible, the unsayable, ie, not with content, as it is understood as distinguishable and primary, positing a transparent technique.'<sup>5</sup> By the end of the sentence, the reader has lost a sense of the clause/phrase relationships - they all seem more or less independent. That Gidal perceives practice and theory as inextricably related is evident in that in theoretical writing - as well as film practice - he eschews a 'transparent technique' to the extent of adopting an almost opaque style.

Almost. Attempts have been made to clarify it by rationalising the grammar and vocabulary. This is most striking in the version of 'Theory and Definition of Structural/Materialist Film' which appeared in the BFI's *Structural Film Anthology* some six months after the original text appeared in *Studio International*. An earnest editor at the BFI struggled to tighten up the text. Compare this edited paragraph with our original passage:

'Anglo/American Structural and Structural/Materialist film has so far failed to attract any attempt at theory. Advanced - mainly French - theory (not necessarily concerning film directly) is either not capable of dealing with film or posits retrograde illusionist, post-Bazinian manifestations of film. With the (at best) nearly total demise of New American Cinema, mainly through its resurgent romanticism or (worst) its continued operation as pseudo-narrative investigations, there remain the few English (plus one Canadian and one Austrian) Structural/Materialist film-makers, who are working to a great extent without the beginnings of a theoretical/historical approach.'<sup>6</sup>

The very tightness of this version closes the gaps and foreshortens the distance created by Gidal's self-conscious use of language. Here there is no ambiguity, no *frisson* of contradiction and repetition, no humour; and very little work is required to 'make sense' of the passage. It is an impoverished version precisely in so far as it now 'makes sense', thereby relieving the reader of the responsibility of 'making sense'.

The assumption that the text should not only make sense but should articulate a unified position is one that led Anne Cottringer to critique Gidal's theoretical position.<sup>7</sup> Her frustration is almost tangible, as she opens and concludes her piece with the observation that 'riddling the article is an eclectic, contradictory terminology creating confusions which permeate the piece'. But she bravely counters many of his assertions and comparative analyses – notably Gidal's notorious conflation of 'materiality' with 'materialism' – and her criticism would be seen to be essentially correct if there were a unified position being articulated. But there is no univocal position, Gidal simply doesn't permit one to exist. It follows then that his various quotations – from Brecht, Derrida, Althusser, Foucault, etc – operate not just as pretentious name-dropping nor as theoretical substantiation (Cottringer expends much energy attempting to determine whether or not Gidal has correctly conveyed and utilised the meaning of the authors he quotes) but rather reinforces the collage effect of the various monologues and offers different voices which (usually) formulate ideas in a similarly complex and tortuous manner. Thus, after quoting William Rubin quoting Frank Stella, Gidal admits, 'I quote the above with the full awareness that the statements broaden the parameters and raise as many confusions as they attempt to close up, yet in relation to the problematical, humanistic, ideology of process, Stella was more aware than most. And this his painting at its best is also clear on' [sic].<sup>8</sup> Cottringer glimpsed the way out of this prosaic morass when she noted that the 'radical political aspiration of the avant-garde is the possibility that it offers of a different articulation of the subject.'<sup>9</sup> She was alluding to film; if we stretch the allusion to include writing, the 'problems' of Gidal's theory dissolve along with the dissolution of the unified speaking subject.

That this insight is not immediately apparent is the result of several factors. First, the strategy Gidal shares with Beckett – an attack on the complacent acquisition of meaning by collapsing an apparently unified speaking subject into the fragmented voice of contradiction – has become a recognisable and assimilable fictive device over the last quarter of a century. However, to apply the same strategy to theoretical writing – where the speaking subject is still assumed to be coherent, unified, and identical with a real and specific author – currently strikes us as outrageous. At the same time, it is impossible adequately to trace Gidal's fragmentation of the speaking subject on the basis of his prose alone; his writing has been sporadic, and a line of development – from the straightforward *Andy Warhol* (1971), the rather conventional (if discursive) 'Film as Materialist Consumer Product' (1970)<sup>10</sup> and 'Film as Film' (1972),<sup>11</sup> through the desultory programme notes of the ensuing years up to his analysis of Beckett (1974) and the first formulation of the 'Theory and Definition . . .' – does not clearly emerge. Thus when we are confronted with oxymoronic axioms in the current text – eg: 'Any represented content exists beneath the structure (or above it)' and: 'In fact, the real content is the form, form become content' – there is no immediate context in which to place the contradictions. Finally, although his work shares much with that of Beckett, it is impossible to claim for Gidal's writing the resonance and complexity and irony of Beckett's masterful prose.

It is imperative, then, to seek this dissolution of the speaking subject in Gidal's film-making, a consistent activity since 1967. For Gidal is primarily a film-maker (and only secondarily a theoretician) and therefore first confronts and works through issues practically, and only then theoretically. So it is hardly surprising that Gidal's theoretical prose style presents problems similar to the 'formalist dilemma' broached by his mature films, in which radical formal strategies render the processes of representation so arbitrary that they run the risk of lapsing into meaningless tautology.<sup>12</sup> Since this formalist dilemma ultimately implies a shift in the location of the responsibility for meaning-making and since it has engaged – at one point or another – all of the modernist arts, it might be useful here to extend the notion of subject to describe both the 'artistic subject' (the 'maker' – writer, film-maker, painter, etc) and the

'aesthetic subject' (the 'perceiver'); this makes clearer the idea of a general shift of meaning-making responsibility along an axis of subjects intersected by the art object. In a specifically cinematic context, this means that the history of the avant-garde can be seen as a continual reassessment of the location and responsibility of meaning-making subjects. Most pertinently, the films of Stan Brakhage in the late 1950s set themselves against the industrial anonymity of Hollywood in their intense emphasis on personal vision and the privileged gesture of the artistic subject which resulted in the epiphany of that subject, the complete identification of film-maker with the camera and/or images yielded by manipulation of that camera. Warhol's subsequent attack on that stance — through the simple but devastating technique of turning on the camera and walking away — effectively evacuated any sense of artistic subject (abandoning intentionality in terms of an author, a film-maker, or even camera-operator) and emphasised the absolute arbitrariness of perspective offered by the film frame as mechanical compositional device. The immense influence Warhol's work initially had on Gidal cannot be overstated. But the order of dilemma posed by Warhol's films (those up to *Chelsea Girls*, 1967) was, of course, immediately clear: the complete abdication of the artistic subject left no room for further work. This, then, formed the basis of Gidal's own project, a project which would take several years to manifest itself: to re-inscribe a new artistic voice into his films while escaping the cinematic solipsism exemplified by the films of Brakhage (just as Beckett had to escape the solipsism implicit in an intensified authorial voice). The eventual formulation of a new and fragmented artistic subject is represented in the mature aesthetic of Gidal as evidenced in *Room Film* 1973 and subsequent films. But Gidal's struggle to realise this project is perhaps most clear in the transitional films of 1969-72.

These early films illustrate Gidal's attempts to formulate a complex notion of subject through a shifting relationship between an image and its presentation. *Clouds* (1969, 10 mins), for example, follows Warhol in its minimal and repetitive image in which framing plays a key role (an aeroplane makes fugitive appearances at various edges of a frame otherwise composed of almost invisibly white clouds); but, significantly, Gidal photographed it with a hand-held camera which underscores the act of film and the presence of the film-maker, though the banality of the image and the arbitrary repetitiveness (an indiscernible loop) and the arbitrary framing tend to frustrate expectations of intentionality on the part of the artistic subject.

In *Portrait (Subject - Object)* (1970, 10 mins), Gidal attempted to assert the presence of the artistic subject in a different fashion. Again, one detects Warhol's shadow in the starkly composed black and white image of a rather passive, bored woman who remains impassive to the camera's stare (cf Warhol's *13 Most Beautiful Women*). But here Gidal abandons the rigid stare of Warhol and mobilises the camera in a way which evokes the lyric mode of Brakhage, with the significant exception that in *Portrait (Subject - Object)* the gesture and movement are not privileged or pregnant with significance, but merely offer shifting perspectives on the image with apparently random motivation.

The greyness of *Portrait* attained an ascetic rigour in *Takes* (1971, 5 mins) as Gidal repeatedly rephotographed an image off the screen at an increasingly acute angle, thus warping the shifting perspective on the 'same' image. The image itself is extremely important — that of a woman taking off her bra — since it directly invokes the voyeuristic relationship of viewer to image and also to Gidal as mediator of that image (due to his rejection of a conventionally complacent voyeuristic mediation and his adoption of a fragmented, reconstructed stance). Here Gidal makes explicit the polar opposites which give a certain tension to all his work: the seductive involvement of a voyeuristic relationship to the image as against the alienation resulting from a rigorous formal intervention.

Peter Gidal  
Steve Dworkin

8 mm Film Notes on 16 mm (1971, 40 mins) represents an ambitious attempt to arrive at a formal solution which would permit more extended work on this issue. Its length incorporates an aggressive duration in addition to repetition, implying an endlessness which demands a reorientation of concentration and rejects linear signification. The various types of 'home movie' footage (from banal to erotic) again anticipate a shift in the spectator's approach to the image, but these images are subordinated to the dominating tactic of yanking the footage through a 16 mm printer at a speed rendering most of it illegible. Hence the audience is forced to grasp at the images and ultimately to grasp at meaning. But by inserting oneself into that system of meaning-making on such a profound level, the aesthetic subject must accept the fragmentation and disintegration of the artistic subject; recognising this, Gidal could consolidate his efforts and produce a body of films which reinscribe the artistic subject into a complex space which constantly challenges the position of that subject.

This schematic description of a few of the films of this period is not an adequate analysis of the work, but it does begin to clarify the role of the artistic subject in the more recent and familiar Gidal films such as *Condition of Illusion*, *C/O/N/S/T/R/U/C/T*; and *Filmprint*, and rescues them from alternate allegations of self-indulgent solipsism or mechanical vacuity; more relevant to this discussion, however, it also offers us a way to rewrite our 'red' paragraph. In less disciplined moments we might be tempted to consider Gidal's formulation of a fragmented artistic subject whose location must be inferred by the aesthetic subject in the tradition of Hebraic theology which describes G-d as that which cannot be named but merely alluded to, a G-d not manifest but potential (in the messiah, and in the devout), and consider it also in the light of Derrida's similar invocation of differance as apparent only in the traces of what is *not* signified; but we content ourselves with the obvious and inescapable conclusion that *Room Film 1973* does not 'posit a specific subject performing a phenomenological reduction' but that its tactics of repetition and contradiction and illegibility posit a non-specific and fragmented artistic subject entering the complex social practice of image-making on film in a way which urgently engages the aesthetic subject in the process of meaning-making. That Gidal succeeds in this through a Beckettian strategy of simultaneously intensifying and contradicting a unified subjectivity to the point of disintegration could only become clear through an analysis which recognises that Gidal regards neither the 'voice' of the theoretician nor the 'eye' of the film-maker as a privileged or transcendent subject, but insists on their inscription - on all levels - as operative factors in theoretical and cinematic discourse.

1. As originally published in *Studio International*, Nov/Dec 1975, p 193.
2. 'The Ascetic Task', *Structural Film Anthology* (Gidal ed), London 1976, p 113.
3. Quoted by Gidal in 'Beckett and Others and Art: A System', *Studio International*, November 1974, p 187, from Duckworth: *Samuel Beckett: En Attendant Godot*, London 1966.
4. Gidal: art cit, p 186.
5. *ibid*, p 183.
6. *Structural Film Anthology*, op cit, p 13. Though this anthology was edited by Gidal, his own introduction was edited at the BFI by Jonathan Rosenbaum.
7. Cottringer: 'On Peter Gidal's Theory and Definition of Structural/Materialist Film', *Afterimage* n 6, Summer 1976, pp 86-95.
8. 'Theory and Definition' etc, *Studio International*, Nov/Dec 1975 (cit), p 195.
9. Cöttringer, art cit, p 94.
10. *Cinemantics*, n 1, January 1970 and n 3, July 1970.
11. *Art and Artists*, December 1972, pp 12-14.
12. For a fuller discussion of the 'formalist dilemma', see 'The Ascetic Task', cit.

Peter Gidal  
Steve Dwoskin

Taking a position and wandering out from that position is the inherent relationship between you and space. The position can be any position; in a room; in the street; in the cinema; in the air. It is from that position which gives you a relationship to other things. Change the position, you change the relationship. You sit in a room, you look around; you stare at a door knob; you scrutinize the books on the shelf; your eyes dash across the space and rest on a picture on the wall. Maybe someone is in the room. Look again. Yes — it's all there and you are there. Maybe someone else has been there. It is, by the awareness of other things, that you know. It is this perception that Peter Gidal gives to his films and gives to you. He gives a precision of vision and an awareness of position. Sometimes through a sense of sculptural space; sometimes by presenting objects for you to relate to. You become the position too. In ROOM the room is the environment and the space. The points of reference give the position. Similarly in HALL Peter Gidal films as a visual navigator, localizing the whereabouts and the position. In his CLOUDS one is hit with a wall of infinity. Through the position of looking is anchored to earth, the freedom of the eyes drifts in the hundreds of miles of space, which deflects back to our position. Sometimes a plane flies by. In NECK (10 min. of half hour) a twofold relationship occurs. A double space like a mental superimposition. It is the slow and sensual undulation of a female neck and shoulders. In TEN FILM PIECES or in HEADS, the objects (objects themselves or people) form a direct relationship between you and them. No longer is it space opening up. Rather, it becomes inverse space; it closes up as a direct confrontation between you and it. In TEN FILM PIECES it is ten object situation (girl bathing, text of book, television, etc.). HEADS are the faces of famous and not so famous people; that is the confrontation. Even greater is the confrontation with the girl in LOOP. Here it slips into a relationship not only with her but the opposite, negative, her; repeated. At all times, though, with Peter Gidal's films, you always find yourself in a positive position. Repeat.

From: 'Independent Film', No. 1, 1970

## BEDROOM R. Hammond

BEDROOM is a non atomistic non positivist film composition, simply — a subtle decantation, a correspondence of human (Gidal) operations with those of object operators, a harmony, then, between this particular operator — Gidal being as body and mind (movie camera) — and innumerable operators in the room — physical objects at their several levels. Wholeness being inherent in Peter's film work it would be absurd to reduce to elements in an attempt to explain its systems, rhythms, operations, so although relying not on any narrative, genetic formation but rather a non temporal mathematical or logical one — (notion of the group: return to the starting point, via the inverse process, goal or terminus attainable by alternate routes, in short BEDROOM is governed by an internal logic, is a self regulating structure) — bedroom's systems unfold in time, therefore they are not entirely reversible and so they need (audience) interaction of anticipation and correction (feedback) and in order to comprehend its operations a special effort of reflective abstraction — a thought process which does not derive properties from THINGS but rather from our way of acting on THINGS, the operations we perform on them, perhaps rather, from the various fundamental ways of co-ordinating such acts — uniting, ordering, placing in one to one correspondence.

From these two demands it's obvious that BEDROOM calls for a very special response (relationship) with the audience, and to an audience conditioned by manipulative movie fantasies, I can well see the dominant response to be anger, frustration, boredom.

I think BEDROOM is comprised of three key ideas; the idea of wholeness (the most important), the idea transformation, and the idea of self-regulation.

Wholeness — Peter recognises as fundamental the contrasts between structures and aggregate, the former being whole, the latter composites formed by elements that are independent of the complexes into which they enter. To insist on this distinction is not to deny that BEDROOM has elements, but the elements of BEDROOM are subordinated to laws that the structure qua whole or system is defined. Moreover, the laws governing BEDROOM's composition are not reducible to cumulative elements: they confer on the whole as such, over all properties distinct from the proper ties of its elements.

Transformations — the character of BEDROOM depends on its laws of composition, these laws must of their very nature be structuring, it is the constant duality, or bipolarity, of always being simultaneously structured and structuring that accounts for the success of the notion of law or rule employed by Peter.

BEDROOM is a difficult film, it seeks a one to one relationship with every member of the audience and very special demands of that audience but if a person is prepared to meet those demands (synchronisation) what emerges is a vibrant, subtle and beautiful film and certainly along with some of Le Grice's early shorts (TALLA and BLIND WHITE DURATION) the most important movie to emerge from British independents — please persist with BEDROOM.

1971

From: London Film Makers Co-op programme note

1. As originally published in Studio International, Nov/Dec 1972, p. 193.
2. 'The Ascetic Task', Structural Film Anthology (Gidal ed), London 1970, p. 113.
3. Quoted by Gidal in 'Becket and Others and Art: A System', Studio International, November 1974, p. 187, from 'Duckworth: Samuel Becket: En attendant Godot, London 1966.
4. Gidal, art. cit. p. 186.
5. Ibid. p. 183.
6. Structural Film Anthology, op. cit. p. 13. Though this anthology was edited by Gidal, his own introduction was edited at the BFI by Jonathan Rosenbaum.
7. Cottinger, 'On Peter Gidal's Theory and Definition of Structural Materialist Film', 'Aesthesis' n. 6, Summer 1976, pp. 86-92.
8. 'Theory and Definition', etc. Studio International, Nov/Dec 1972 (cit.) p. 192.
9. Cottinger, art. cit. p. 94.
10. Cinematique n. 1, January 1970 and n. 3, July 1970.
11. Art and Artists, December 1972, pp. 12-14.
12. For a fuller discussion of the formalist dilemma, see 'The Ascetic Task', cit.

## THE FILM IMAGE AS MIRROR IMAGE

Lucy Fischer

Two films by Peter Gidal, being presented at the Film Forum, offer us a coherent vision of Gidal's concerns as filmmaker, theorist and teacher, as well as illuminating the preoccupation of the structural film tradition out of which they emerge.

ROOM FILM 1973 is essentially a study of light. It begins with an image of a circular glow in the center of the screen from which a variety of coloured hues seem to radiate. We later realize that this is actually a shot of a light bulb and the halo of rays which surround it. The rest of the film proceeds with an examination of a room and the way that light illuminates the objects within it. The film is rendered in extreme underexposure so that we are aware of the difficulties of seeing and the manner in which light functions as a prerequisite for vision. One of the last images in the film is that of a light bulb reflected in a mirror. Lodged in the corner of the mirror frame is a photograph.

Somehow this image seems to stand as a bridge to Gidal's later film, FILM PRINT (1974), a work that deals not so much with the notion of light as the facilitator of vision, but rather with light as the author of the photographic image. Although the film shares the concerns of ROOM FILM 1973, the manner in which it develops, extends and rearticulates them makes it a richer and more complex work.

Rather than dealing directly with an examination of a room, FILM PRINT deals more obliquely with the exploration of the photographic image of a room. Although the film is primarily concerned with this distinction, it opens with a joke on our perceptual inability to comprehend it. When the film begins, we assume that the camera is exploring various objects within a room. A distancing zoom, however, soon reveals to us that it is really only moving over the surface of a photograph of a room. What has been posited illusionistically as three-dimensional space is, in fact, only two-dimensional.

But perhaps the adjective "only" is inappropriate. For FILM PRINT develops into a virtual ode to the creative possibilities of the photographic image, and a catalog of the ways in which it can abstract and transform reality.

Gidal, for example, uses the photographic image to render things in extreme close-up. Through this disorienting strategy, objects are removed from their normal context and perceived instead in terms of patterns and designs. In many ways Gidal is a sensualist and takes enormous delight in using film to experience the texture of things. Thus he may concentrate on the weave of curtains, the pile of wool blankets or the sculptural quality of crumpled sheets.

The inversion and reversal of the photographic image can also accomplish a constructive disorientation. And throughout the film, objects are seen upside down or at oblique angles, a mode of presentation which allows us to see them in terms of geometric composition. A certain game is implied in this technique as well; for the viewer is continually engaged in an intellectual process of determining exactly what it is that he is viewing on the screen.

What complicates this process is that FILM PRINT is essentially a study in re-photography. Thus there are at all times two levels of photographic images to be considered: that of the still photograph, and that of the motion picture through which it is being presented. In this emphasis on multiple layers of photography, FILM PRINT is reminiscent of works like NOSTALGIA by Hollis Frampton and TOM, TOM, THE PIPER'S SON by Ken Jacobs.

But FILM PRINT, like ROOM FILM 1973, is also a study of light, and the final image of the latter film (a mirror reflecting a light bulb) is echoed in the culminating shot of FILM PRINT. In that image Gidal shows us a piece of photographic printing paper tacked on a wall; on the paper are scribbled the credits for the film (including the brand of photographic paper). A light bulb which hangs in front of the paper and throws light onto its surface then dims until the frame is dark.

In this witty, self-reflexive fade-out the photographic paper is seen to be a more sophisticated version of ROOM FILM's mirror. Throughout FILM PRINT we have noticed that the written words which appear in book titles, posters and even Gidal's signature are shown in mirror-like reverse. Now the metaphor is made complete. For the film paper that we see in the final shot is a surface which, like a mirror, reflects light but uses it to create a permanent, and more artistically exploitable image.

From: 'Soho Weekly News', 16.1.1975

## FILM IS . . . (Extract)

Steve Dwoskin

In his ROOMS (1967) Gidal explores a room as a total object, with the camera travelling round the room in one direction. Through an in and out of focus zoom lens he moves into and out of objects — books, door-knob, posters — until he arrives at a figure smoking a hookah. The camera stops while we watch him inhale, relax and inhale again. This

whole action is repeated a second time, exactly as it appeared the first time. (Gidal calls it 'double take') This use of repetition heightens our perception of the image in that it eliminates everything external to the film. At the same time the in and out of focus zoom increases the visual experience by allowing us to see an object by means of the contrast between blur and sharpness. In Gidal's HALL (1969) a similar situation is created, except that here the object is a hall entranceway. Instead of a sideways camera movement our relationship to the object is achieved by a visual movement into and out of various focal planes. With these films the feeling develops as a mediative search, is therefore more psychological experience than physical experience.

Peter Gidal's film TAKES (1970) (not to be confused with another film of the same title made by the Heins), is structures on the cinematograph process of 'takes' — the taking and retaking of the same action until the right 'take' is achieved.

TAKES is a eurythmic film whose movements are highly homogeneous. Its primary image is a filmed image, the action consisting of a camera panning round a room, passing a girl standing by a bed who takes off her bra and walks out of the frame. This happens while the camera maintains its sideways movement. This action is then repeated, but as a refilmed, slightly out of focus series of images. The sideways movements, though repeats, differ in length. It is rather as if one were to take a sentence or a phrase and repeat it, but each time taking out a word or two from the beginning or end and then putting them back again. The film is not only refilmed out of focus, but the shape of the original film frame appears within the new frame. What we see is a film within a film. This exaggerates the grain of the film and increases the feeling that we are really looking at something through something. But most of all the whole film occurs in a circumscribing action, a slow world rotating onto itself but each turn slightly different and with renewed intensity.

Gidal believes in using objects, transposed on to film, as catalysts for perceptual reactions, for emotional involvement. To do this he tries to establish a position by means of what he calls 'precise vision'. In order to achieve this visual precision he uses the camera for an intense scrutiny of objects (people become objects). In this sense the film creates a very formal structural impression because it is almost always dictating a specific position or movement. It establishes a space that puts you in the position of looking at a piece of sculpture.

Gidal's film NECK (1969) (both a 10-minute and a half-hour version exist) is not so formally constructed (though it is structural). It looks at an object (a girl's neck) from a fixed point of view. The neck merely twists from left to right, otherwise everything else seems frozen. At least it seems frozen until you keep watching. After a while your vision fragments and explores the image. The film grain becomes a sandstorm for a while, or else merges with the image of flesh, producing a feeling of sensuality. The experience becomes a personal exploration of new territory.

One of the most euphoric films I have seen is Gidal's CLOUDS (1969), which looks at the sky over London. Grey and formless, the cloud shapes hardly discernible, it creates a strange and euphoric sensation because the image is really a grey light giving a sense of space through a void. It is related to Kasimir Malevich's paintings in which he made the jump from negative to positive by placing a black square on a white background, thereby recognising the void. Every once in a while in CLOUDS a jet aeroplane appears: sometimes jumping along the lower edge of the frame, sometimes jumping up into the centre; sometimes resting on the frame edge; but always flying by. The aeroplane's appearances punctuate the space, giving the grey void a strong presence (like a dot in a white space). Space exists here on a two-dimensional plane and time exists in a continuum of light. The aeroplane's appearances along and within portions of the frame constantly state its area. The feeling is of a drifting day-dream, the intensive and mesmerizing soundtrack helping to create the mood. The aeroplane is like a kid's bit of joy.

CLOUDS has an intensive soundtrack, which is used to force the viewer into one image. Like Michael Snow or the Heins, Gidal uses sound in a very pointed and direct way, to enclose the physical space and thus enforce a relationship between it and the image. It also produces a physical response that works in accordance with the imagery. In this way the overall presence of the object (the film) is increased and the totality of Gidal's experience is guaranteed without any other external points of reference.

Yet sound can also be used in what seems to be a diametrically opposite way — the creation of silence. In Gidal's BEDROOM (1971), for example, only one single sound, a pip, occurs somewhere near the middle of the film, accentuating the silence that accompanies the rest of the film. BEDROOM is a yellow/reddish colour film made in one 30-minute take. It consists of a floating, circular, in-and-out search round a bedroom; a freely moving line; a look for look's sake. Gidal claims that BEDROOM is 'the most inclusive of my most involved [film] preoccupation: zooming, panning, focusing to constantly redefine reality and the process of seeing/filming . . . He further explains that 'the films are conceptualized before shooting, to a very detailed degree. They are also shot with a large degree of openness to momentary impulse and change-happening. It's a matter of my response (partially spontaneous, each time again) to the camera (machine) . . . and film and lens and light and space and my hands and my eyes . . . The films may be reconceptualized after shooting, sometimes they are, sometimes they're not.'

Extract from FILM IS . . . , Peter Owen, London 1975



# focus on 16 mm

Gordon Gow

THE FACES GAZE OUT of the screen at you, one after another. Each of them remains serene, looking, seldom blinking, occasionally breaking out into a smile, but usually maintaining a mildly serious calm. Every successive face is framed in almost identical fashion: a composition that goes laterally from one cheekbone to the other, and vertically from the eyebrows to the lower lip. Foreheads and chins are out of view, but air is visible only sometimes. The film runs on for 35 minutes, during which time we are confronted by 31 faces. Some of them are famous—or maybe all of them are, and it just happens that I am only conscious of having seen some before in photographs or movies or sitting in the Royal Opera House where people used to say 'That's so-and-so'. But identifying them seems to be of less consequence than reaching a kind of remote rapport with them, each in turn, dignified as they are through this 10:1 magnification into which they stare so steadily. The film is called *Heads*. It was made by Peter Gidal, who wrote the book *Warhol, Films and Paintings*, and who has no less than thirteen films of his own in the London Filmmakers Co-operative. His experimental-structuralist work is also in the New York Co-op, the New York Film Co-op, and with Gimpel Films of NY and Progressive Art Productions of Munich and Zurich. In writing about his structuralist work, Gidal points out that 'of greatest importance is the 1:1 relationship between filmmaker and film-product, and the setting up of such a relationship between viewer and the film itself, as experience'. And from the four of his films that I have seen, *Heads* is the one that is nearest to providing an experience related to orthodox cinema. Not that the relationship is close. It is simply that the ultra close-up shots, sustained in time, do have an affinity with many a close-up view of a star in any ordinary commercial feature. But since nothing happens in the usual way, and there is no narrative or plot or anything beyond the direct confrontation, the experience is unlike a visit to a gallery where one stands and stares at a portrait—but for as long nor as short a period as one chooses, because the duration of each shot is determined by Gidal. Moreover, since the facial areas on view are not intimate, there is a certain element of communion (if scarcely communication) between image and spectator, provided the spectator is prepared to lend himself to it. I cannot say that I found this easy. When I saw *Heads* in NFT2, I was not only member of the audience to hold the programme notes to the nearest part of light and glance repeatedly from the screen to the printed page, deliberately identifying each person from the list of names provided, a process which inevitably broke the communion-effort

assunder as time went on. I wondered if those of us who adopted this 'Who-is-it?' policy were getting the utmost experience from the occasion—but I think it is as good a way of looking at *Heads* as any other, although several repeat viewings might yield further degrees of experience.

Gidal intends us to be aware, as we cannot help but be, of the film-structure involved. He seeks to eradicate illusion, to which we are so compliant when confronted by close-ups in the course of a feature film. Upon the faces of *Heads*, Gidal imposes no more glamour than the people themselves might happen to possess—and, since the 31 who come into partial and magnified view are of highly varied physiognomy, individual responses to them are bound to be disparate. Their reality is another matter. The arbitrary framing is not conducive to a realistic portrait: in life, one would notice the foreheads and chins that are missing here, for example. But, by making us constantly aware of the framing and the set-up, Gidal arrives at his intended 'demystification'.

Naturally, from the eyes especially, and often from the nostrils and mouths, the faces will provide their own degrees of movement, sometimes quite minute. At the most extreme, a long gaze at an immobile and somewhat dour-seeming face is suddenly transformed by a fulsome grin. Even then, the experience can be both 'concrete/physical' or 'abstract/expressionist' as Gidal specifies. What he is doing—and it is a most important thing to do—is enforcing our consciousness of the medium and its mechanics. I am reminded of the cautionary words that my professor of psychology used to utter about cinema, pointing out that the selected and juxtaposed images could be equivalent to brain-washing or, at the very least, could make us lazy-minded. If Gidal can write 'I select therefore I am', he must presumably be implying that we (the spectators) are entitled to do the same, even as we watch his chosen images which are so deliberately 'demystified'.

When abstraction takes over, as it does, one is occupied by patterns and shadows upon the skin, or by the glint of some undefined reflection in David Hockney's big round spectacles—by shapes, within the given frame. Yet this does not detract from the continued knowledge that one is watching film: 'concrete and abstract reality are one, as shape'—and this is even more evident in *Hall* and *Focus* and *Bedroom*, all but one of which are devoid of humans and devoted to inanimate objects explored by the camera, with sound that is used in a manipulatory way, but so as to create an awareness of the filmic manipulation'.

*Hall* manages, in its ten minutes, to put our perception to a rather strenuous test. Gidal will hold a static shot for quite a

long time, and then make very quick cuts to objects seen at closer range. There is just a hallway and a room partially visible beyond, pictures (one of Godard) on a wall, fruit on a table, and so forth. The commonplace is rendered almost monotonous as we become increasingly familiar with it from a fixed and sustained viewpoint, and then we are disorientated by the closer cuts and also by the sudden prolonged ringing of an alarm. But even at the point of abrupt disorientation we remain conscious of the manipulation applied. And when an unspecified thing goes crawling up a wall, there is not the subjective response that we would grant to good hallucinatory effects in fictional cinema, but instead the salutary knowledge that technology is being applied to build an experience.

*Focus* is but seven minutes in splendidly defined monochrome, slowing zooming in on a cool and somewhat affluent room where we can take our time about observing the geometry while noting the visual manipulation at the same time: in other words, while Gidal focuses where he chooses, there is still an area of choice from which we are able to select what we like, until the end when a girl's face materialises out of a haze, becoming very clear and then misting again and then clarifying once more; several times. Gidal says that the girl 'goes in and out of focus four times, but obviously four is a random number only justifiable in terms of one's own personal feeling about movement in space and time'.

The only film of the four to be shot in colour is *Bedroom*, which puts me in mind of Warhol, because here Gidal has performed the impressive feat of making a single take that lasts for half an hour. It is an essay in observation, all done in the one room where the bed is unmade and things are just a bit untidy but, through manipulations of focus, beauty can be conjured up. There is a point when you might suppose that every smallest detail of the bedroom had been drawn to your attention already—and, suddenly, the frame is suffused in dreamy pink, mysterious and intriguing until the picture is clarified and the radiance proves to be nothing more unusual than a lightshade hanging from the ceiling. Amid the things and stuff, there is also a big red candle with a strong yellow flame, upon which the camera dwells as if, in the humdrum trappings of everyday, it had discovered a token of grace.

For a lot of us, I should think, it would be more beneficial to see these films on separate occasions, instead of trying to assimilate a bunch of them at one sitting. They require patience, because they go against our conditioned grain. They are not what we usually subscribe to as cinema, demanding as they do an extreme degree of observation and perception: 'an awareness which can create a freedom in spite of the (authoritarian) film-structure.' So says Gidal. And, since a greater appreciation of film can obviously be attained if one remains ever alert to the presence of that authoritarian structure, these difficult works are consequential. Their wider significance, as warning signs in our media-ridden age, should not be underestimated either. We need to observe clearly, and to comprehend the means by which our observations are frequently controlled.

## FILMPRINT

by Annette Kuhn

Structural film may be defined as an articulation of formal strategies which address the process of film making and reading reflexively, that is by constantly displaying within the films themselves those material and semiotic processes, so that the reflexive project becomes in effect the topic of the films. Such a reflexivity moreover always contains an implicit reference to film construction and meaning production in 'dominant' cinema — which effaces, or recuperates, those processes — though any such reference is as often constituted by an absence or denial as by an exegesis of a 'dominant' film language. It is this distinction between a reflexivity of denial and a reflexivity of exegesis which marks the difference between the work of Peter Gidal and that of other film makers whose work is considered under the term 'structural'. An exegetical concern may be understood in the Formalist sense as a 'foregrounding of the device' — in the case of film a concern to examine the representational qualities of cinema by inscribing representation within the film itself as 'content' precisely in order to render it problematic by commenting in cinematic terms on the modes of construction and processes of signification at work in the text. In that sense, an exegetical project is arguably a structuralist one in that it is directed to the analysis of meaning systems through deconstruction and reconstruction such that 'the artist, the analyst, recreates the course taken by meaning, he (sic) need not designate it' (R. Barthes, 'The Structuralist Activity'). Gidal's films, on the other hand, constantly move to suppress content, so that — always as a practice oppositional to the celebration of content through the representation of profilmic space as in 'dominant' cinema — its suppression (or banalisation) provides one of the primary structuring absences of his films. This treatment or suppression of content must inform also the articulation of 'process': Gidal's concern lies exactly in deconstructing the signification process by refusing, rather than foregrounding, it.

FILM PRINT constitutes an instance of this strategy. Although on one level this particular film may legitimately be read as a demonstration of and reflection upon the construction and operation of cinematic signification through an inscription of the materiality of both the process of production of meaning and that of the construction of the film itself, such a reading on its own can by no means provide a full account of FILM PRINT: its structure is neither as open nor its discourse as academic as such a reading would suggest. Rather, it may be seen as Borgesian in posing itself as a puzzle, a/the solution to which is constantly displaced or denied by means of a series of ironies, the principal one founded in the notion of a moving picture of a series of still images. The opposition between movement and stasis is realised in the relentless return to photographs as objects of representation and the constant and apparently random movement of the camera over these objects. The possibility of contemplation offered by photographs is recouped and even radically undercut in FILM PRINT by the continually moving moving picture. At those moments in the film when meaning does seem about to emerge — when the camera zooms back to offer a larger and more unified perspective — the solution to the riddle of the profilmic space is immediately displaced by the denial of such a space implied in the revelation that the filmed image is not 'reality' reproduced, but rather another image reproduced. This posing of a puzzle and refusal of a solution provides a recurring structure for the film, and a repeated denial of the spectator's efforts to impose meaning.

The repeated denial of meaning in this as in other films by Gidal is effectively an assertion of meaninglessness, a project of radical asceticised deconstruction. Such a deconstruction is brought about by a virtually complete refusal of cinematic codes: not only the codes of 'dominant' cinema, but also those which the structural film has set up for itself. In FILM PRINT the (illusory) three-dimensional space of 'dominant' cinema is referred to only in the moment of its displacement by the flat perspective of what is represented — the still photos. The constant zooming, precisely because in this instance it cannot alter the perspective of the filmed image, serves to emphasise the very lack of depth in that image. The suppression of meaning production as a cinematic process is a structuring feature of the film in its constant movement into and out of focus, and in the graininess and undifferentiated colour of the image, each of which constitutes a reference to the material character of the image-producing technology — here, film stock and the optics of the camera lens. This is associated with a refusal of the illusion of a homogeneous filmic space, not only in the sense already suggested, but also by the collapsing of on-screen/off-screen space evident in the movement between the edges of the filmed image — cotérminous with the screen — and the edges of the photographs, so that the space of the film is subject to a process of repeated redefinition. The repetitions, the radical refusal of meaning, the unfixed nature of the space articulated by the film, all serve to operate against the kind of closure associated with a definable and homogeneous film space.

27.7.79

Adapted from Hayward Gallery Programme Note, February 1977.

## Movie No 1 John Du Cane

Another of the films that concerns itself with film procedure is Peter Gidal's MOVIE NO 1. Here the experience of procedure is contained within a more intellectually didactic context. A comprehensive verbal explanation accompanies the filmic demonstration of the concept that 'light and speed are synchronous on film'. He illustrates this clearly by using two images that explore different aspects of the fact: in the first, the speed of the camera-motor increases and decreases the light and speed of an image containing human movement — namely, a hand pressing a light switch on and off: in the second, the internal movement is transferred to a jerky movement of the camera as it frames a black and white still photograph. A valid dialectic is established between the aural, verbal information being received and its visual correlate. The aural explanation tends to reduce perceptual attention of the visual stimulus — an awareness of this shifts the balance back in favor of the visual experience — this resonant dynamic activates the viewer to a form of consciousness that is simultaneously analytic and experimental.

From: 'A Survey of the Avant Garde in Britain (Vol 1.3)' October 2/15, 1972, Gallery House, London.

## On Gidal Birgit Hein

The works of Peter Gidal belong to the structuralist direction, as do Michael Snow's. In ROOM, TAKES, HALL and BEDROOM he allows the camera only a fenced-in area, piecemeal. He draws out singularities, lets the gaze hold on objects and constantly repeats the same camera movements. This permits the possibilities of the discrepancies between one's own seeing and seeing with the camera to become distinct, and this in turn allows for a completely different experience of the surroundings.

From: 'Film Im Underground', Frankfurt, 1971

## Heads Werner Klies

Nervous, serious faces become monstrous through the unnatural enclosure of the filmframe. Through viewing this film we experience the horrific deformations which the filmframe creates.

'Suddeutsche Zeitung', February 1971

## 8mm FILM NOTES ON 16mm Roger Hammond

a film by peter gidal is always welcome but the new one is doubly so for while fulfilling all the demands we've come to expect from a gidal film (his logic, sustained composition) it is also somewhat of an admission; well '8mm film notes' is simply a transposing of a complex perceptual unit (8mm film lengths) into another (16mm) while preserving all the perceptual qualities that accrue to them as configurations, keeping shape invariant under the transformation of dimensions, so that the group of displacements (8mm) becomes a subgroup of the shape-group (16mm). gidal rigidly structures wholes and parts of the shape-group using a sort of affine geometry really almost construction by negation, because by systematic negation of one after another of its attributes he constructs its complementary structure (here the repeats are almost heuristic).

peter mentions in his notes on the film in the co-op catalogue that it was his intention to attempt a total demystification of 8mm, well i'm not sure, but certainly one important demystification has been realised and that is of gidal's own correspondence with the 8mm object operation — his home movie doodlings found coy sex; a neuralgia rather than a theme, persistent and monotonous, a nervous structure, enriched with a necessary incrustation of notes, seemingly a confident and essential statement of reality.

i'd hate this film to be taken as merely a simplistic, reductionist attempt at annexing the notion of 8mm. it is not, gidal is a filmmaker whose consideration is to the WHOLE, whose carefully placed transformations decants a subtle solidly structured 'arrestation' of the 8mm film ...

'LFMC Programme Note', 1971

# 8mm FILM NOTES ON 16mm

For forty minutes Peter Gidal from Great Britain bored us with the method of producing the 8 millimeter format on 16 millimeter exposures. The public was served a 16 millimeter filmstrip, on which the 8mm film (mainly) flickers. Most of the time there's only vaguely an image of a woman, barely recognizable, who is apparently dressing and undressing. It's about the total disillusioning of the narrow gauge. As the public's wish to turn off this weakmindedness was not met, there occurred in the foyer of the cinema an involuntary intermission, temporarily.

From: 'On the Mannheim Film Festival', Kolner Stadtanzeiger, 6/7 March 1971

## FOCUS ON 16mm

By Gordon Gow

### From FILMS AND FILMING, no 215.

THERE WAS A THUNDERSTORM on the afternoon I saw Peter Gidal's *Upside-Down Feature*; and it came rumbling loud and clear through the cinema wall because Gidal does not like to put much sound with his images and in this case has confined himself to six minutes of whistling-wind cacophony within an eighty-minute film. Since his whole idea is to make us aware of what is being done to us as we watch and/or listen, it was for a while there like a process of selection between the medium itself and nature in violent mood. So much the better for the flexing of our mental and emotional capacities. The medium took priority, of course.

It is just a year since I drew attention in these pages to several of Gidal's structuralist films, (*Heads, Hall, Focus and Bedroom*). The new work, although it came to fruition in 1972, began as a concept as far back as 1967. It is, as Gidal puts it, an 'attempt . . . to force a dialectic . . . bending time and space . . . working against and with the given image'—and from this we can each make our own efforts to clarify what we see, since art is not the sole province of the artist but is only working if the viewer participates to some extent. Most of the film presents us with images that are upside-down or back-to-front, and spasmodically in negative: hence the secondary title of the work, *Upside-Down Backward Negative Out-take Feature, Mainly*.

We might, for example, be situated with the camera inside a moving car, seeing out through the windscreen with varying degrees of clarity. The effect of disorientation at first is due to the way Gidal presents this elementary material. He re-shot some of it while it was being projected at two frames a second; but eventually, by showing it at regular speed but nevertheless upside-down, he 'initiates the process of clarification' on our behalf. More

immediately indentifiable is a clockface that fills the screen but is shown in reverse, as if seen in a mirror, with a big second hand that is going round the wrong way: 'negating time by twisting it backwards.'

More complex is a long sequence in which words are flashed upon the screen, one at a time, over upside-down panning and zooming images of houses and cars. Naturally the instinct prompts us to read the words if we can. 'Time' and 'Death' are two which impinge, even upside-down and at eight frames a piece, a speed that changes to twenty-four frames per word when the entire process is repeated. After this the words are flashed on three more times, now the right way up, beginning with eight frames per word, and changing to sixteen, and then twenty-four. They are taken from a piece on Proust, written by Samuel Beckett. This gradually clarifying presentation forces upon the spectator an uncommon patience. Either you give up and ignore the words, or you try with steady concentration to read even while they are upside-down. It is not so much an assault upon the senses and the cerebral functions as an exercise in patience, since at last the entire passage is made plain: clarified. Gidal wants the spectator to figure out, and to analyse the experience to which he is submitting.

Easier-going are the 'still life' effects of a plant and a typewriter seen upside-down, held there for long enough to be identifiable, and the up-and-down but upside-down panning along the nude body of a girl seen in negative, who puts on and removes a brassiere many times over. Sepia and red tints applied to her hair (pubic and otherwise) glow whitely from the deeper shades. One could hardly call the passage erotic, though; but the aim of clarification is achieved more quickly here than anywhere else in *Upside-Down Feature*.

FILM PRINT constitutes an instance of this strategy. Although on one level this particular film may legitimately be used as a demonstration of and reflection on the structuralist process, both the process of production and the final result, such as a film, are a full account of FILM PRINT in its own right. It may be seen as a structuralist work in which a constantly changing image, the principal one for a series of still images. This series is related in the relevant representation and the construction of the camera over these objects offered by photographs is repeated in the film when the camera zooms back and forth. The solution is a perspective — the solution is immediately displaced by the revelation that the film is not a still image reproduction but a solution provides a report of a detail of the spectrum. The reported detail of the spectrum is effectively an assertion of Gidal's effectively deconstructed, a virtually complete about by a virtually complete of 'dominant' cinematic film has set up for itself. In FILM PRINT the 'dominant' space of 'dominant' moment of its displacement is repeated — the still photograph in this instance it is not a picture in the sense of a photograph. The suppression of the image. The suppression of the image is a structuring feature of the out of focus, and in the construction of the image, each of which constitutes the image production. The effect of the camera lens. The limitation of a homogeneous space suggested, but also by the already suggested, but also by the space evident in the movement image — continuous with the space — so that the space of the repeated redaction. The repeated meaning the unified nature of the image to operate against the kind of defined and homogeneous film.

## 'Upside Down Feature' Malcolm Le Grice

Peter Gidal's latest film **UPSIDE DOWN FEATURE** explores the problem of simultaneous function in two distinct language forms, which draws attention to the fallacy of assuming that communication occurs during the process of sympathetic involvement common to the technique of the commercial movie. It does this by keeping before the viewer what is being communicated and how; rarely, if ever, allowing him (sic) a 'standard' representation or reference to reality.

From: 'After-Image', No 4, 1972

## UPSIDE DOWN FEATURE — extracts from a talk with Peter Gidal by John Du Cane

Peter Gidal's 'Upside Down Feature' is one of the most important films to have been made in this country. It makes a complex and original foray into the nature of film, and, by extension, confronts its audience with a thorough reappraisal of its ways of dealing with film. I found the film exhilarating, but it's unfortunately necessary to add a rider that if you're unused to this type of film, expecting anything remotely similar to what the Big Boys from Wardour St dish you up, then you're in for a major piece of culture-shock, which could mean anger, frustration and resentment.

'I didn't want to set up a hierarchical event, where the meaning is complete in any sense. I don't believe in dominating the viewer; but I do expect him to work as hard as I work. I want the viewer to have his own dialectic. I don't want him to just put together my jigsaw puzzle. An 'Art' film means that you spend ten hours putting together the artist's jigsaw puzzle and a non-art film means you get it right away. Either way you're being dominated, either way there's the artist with his jigsaw puzzle. I'm interested in the viewer not working out my meanings, but in doing a process, the way I'm doing a process, which may mean that the film I have and the film the viewer has are almost equal, but opposite. Which dialectic is strongest, whether it be time moving in a circular way against words which are flashed, or the authority of the word versus the image, doesn't matter. But the fact of a dialectic happening is important . . . a constant dialectic rather than a received statement, or interpretation. Art as interpretation has no value whatsoever.

'People have difficulty with my work because of their narrative sensibility. Narrative is a stricture. It has come to be the only way people can identify with their own emotions — through an alienated process of identification with an art work. It makes them cry, it makes them laugh . . . presumably they're not crying and laughing in their own lives so they get it out of 'art'. But for me, that's not what is important, certainly not in film. People have been taught that passivity gives them a pleasure. They're being dominated, being walked over. The most brutal, elitist and condescending film maker is not some esoteric, over-difficult experimental film maker but someone like Ken Russell or Alfred Hitchcock. They're fascists accepted by the fascist mentality of the passive viewer, the hysterical, catatonic viewer, sitting in his seat in total silence, fear and paranoia and thinking that it's pleasure — when the real pleasure actually comes out of the work you do yourself, the dialectics you do, the decisions you do. But people have been taught that those kind of decisions aren't 'entertaining'. Slaves are their own worst enemies.

The first section of the film presents a negation of normal expectations about film's content. The sequence of a girl walking down a street, placed at the beginning of a film immediately raises a host of questions about that girl: who does she represent, where is she going, what's going to happen to her and so on. Attention is focused on what is being represented rather than on how that representation is being produced. We think of the girl, we make associations about her, she reminds us of this and that. We don't think very much beyond this. Gidal reverses the sequence, turns it upside down, puts it into negative (black and white) and overlays a soft wash of colour. That original content subsides and gives way to an appreciation/analysis of the film's physics. The initial reorientation process that results from attempting to reverse the sequence and to identify 'what is happening' gives way to a study of the lines of force, of motion as it is initiated by camera movement and of image-tactility as it is emphasised by the bas-relief quality of colour on black and white negative.

There follows a five minute section of darkness and the introduction of sound. Film is potentially and normally a combination of light and sound. We expect and want both in our experience of film. The loss of image and the expectation of its return distract initially from close attention to the sound itself, a complex piece composed with two transistor radios. We see no film and yet we know that we are still experiencing film. The previous, silent, visual sequence is remembered in the context of a self-sufficient, after-the-event soundtrack. There is a continual shift in attention: to the sound in itself, to the sound as it affects the dark space, to the shape of the previous sequence, to a consideration of the duration of the present darkness as something that paradoxically reduces attention to the sound as much as it allows increased concentration on it. In distinction to normal cinema, where sound is a complement to the film, the sound acts as an interruption in and separation of the film.

The next part utilises reprojection to reanalyse a sequence of traffic shot through a cab window. The original camera stare, interrupted by spontaneous grasping zoom shots at a particular car, is 'broken into' by a curious, searching, hesitant exploration of segments of the image. First and second generation camera movements, motor/film speeds and types of represented motion are put in dynamic tension. Relations of tension are established, for instance, between forward movement of camera (zoom), forward movement of represented image (the forward traffic flow) and the forward movement of the film in time, all of which movements are subject to reversal and change in speed and direction. This ten minute reanalysis is followed by the whole three minute original sequence upside-down, from which the minute of analysed material had been taken.

Titles suddenly appear: 'A Film by Peter Gidal', jiggling slightly, with the frame bar introducing itself into the image, emphasising the jerky movement of the single frames through the projector. The information presented by the titles takes on a film-meaning which is distinct from its verbal meaning. This sort of semiotic polarity creates a type of dialectic that is the hallmark of Gidal's film making. The relation between two different reading-procedures is reintroduced in a later sequence where a clock is seen for seven and a half seconds, but with the image inverted. The repetitions are punctuated with equal periods of white, whose duration appears to change as a result of changes in the analysis of the clock-image.

A stream of words flash onto the screen, upside down, in reverse and too fast to read. Gradually, while other imagery continues, the words are 'normalised' until eventually we have the whole passage (a brilliant quote from Beckett on Proust on Time) appearing the right way round and at a readable speed. Before we reach the end of this development the words undergo numerous transformations, as the verbal meaning begins to take its many shapes through the abstract clusterings. As the passage's meaning becomes relatively easy to decipher the imagery becomes correspondingly more distracting, breaking into a series of giddy and very beautiful upside down pans round a landscape. When the passage is at its slowest, the camera is busy panning up and down a naked girl putting on/taking off her bra. The words end and their accumulated semantic resonance adds an extraordinarily powerful dimension of thought and feeling to what is a highly sensual and beautiful event. A still image of a Man Ray/Duchamp photograph that is actually of dust on a coffee-grinder but could easily be an aerial view landscape has a thin green line painted on it. It wavers and turns to blue again, emphasising that the apparently motionless image is actually a series of discontinuous events. The line carries on into a final twenty-five second loop of a girl going through a series of facial movements from laughter to silence. The second type of 'movement illusion' in cinema is affirmed in relation to the flat material painted line.

From: 'Time Out', 1-7 December 1972.

## The Ascetic Task: Peter Gidal's *Room Film* 1973

Deke Dusinberre

Not many of the fifty-two minutes of Gidal's *Room Film* 1973 must pass before one becomes aware of a dilemma posed by the film. The film begins with an indistinct light, a light tinged blue-green. The focus sharpens, and out of that indistinct light one recognises rumpled bed-sheets. An unsteady camera hovers briefly, then moves on to examine the base of a lamp and other not quite identifiable objects in varying degrees of close-up in what one assumes to be the room of the title. The camera movement is erratic, might almost be said to be aggravating; one gets a sense of repetition, of constant movement, but of little direction or development. The objects remain hard to identify, and sometimes the screen offers no coherent image at all. The inability to grasp those images is the result of several techniques: the extreme close-up of many shots, the instability of the images (due to the instability of the camera), the poor illumination and the loss of the edges of the frame (both due to manipulation in the printing process), the graininess of the images, the ubiquitous green tinge, and, ultimately, the loss of a sense of gravity (due to the combined effects of extreme close-up and shakiness). The inability to grasp those images also becomes the basis of the aesthetic issues raised by the film.

The film is almost relentless in its denial of tangible images (that is, images which are easily identifiable and spatially locatable). It appears, instead, as periods of green and grey punctuated by instances of light – light not only as the camera studies the ceiling light (at about 8 minutes into the film) and a lamp on the mantel (at 44 minutes), but also light from the projector during the flare-outs at (roughly) 200-foot intervals throughout the film. The camera constantly moves around the room not so much, one feels, by moving through space, as by moving across surfaces. The feeling of surface is evoked throughout: surface of object, of film, of screen. The sense of surface remains primary even in the one section of the film which counters the constant motion of most of the film; a short sequence of the film was printed so that a single image (frame) is held still for several seconds, then jumps to another image which is similarly held. (This short sequence is thus stretched into one of the six 200-foot sections of the film.) The overall impression is one of stasis. Significantly, the images (of a desk and paraphernalia) become only a little more coherent in this section despite the extended look at each object and in spite of the fact that up to this point the fundamental technique for assuring the insubstantiality of the images had been the erratic motion and erratic focus of the film. But in the static sequence the extreme graininess, the loss of the edge of the frame, and the tinting (orange, rather than blue-green, in this section), all tend to emphasize the surface of the screen. So that even though the images gain a measure of recognizability, they gain no substantiality.

The play of surface and of substance becomes crucial to the film. For it is not merely a film about light and the absence of light (the white-out ending arrives after several extended periods of blackness) but about how insubstantial light can evoke substantiality. Roughly halfway through the film the image of a potted plant is seen, in a close-up concentrating on the leaves. The image is recognizable and, as such, bears some (illusory) substance. But as extreme close-up alternates with one less close, the viewer loses the ability to discriminate between the plant and the shadow it casts on the wall behind it; the shadow has as much visual substance as the image of the object itself: This ploy is amplified when, toward the end of the film, the plant is seen again in close-up, with its shadow again playing an important visual role. This time, the camera zooms out into a rare medium shot to reveal a mirror. The object and the shadow of that object and the reflection of both are situated on the same level of image-substantiality within the film. Thus *Room Film* 1973 attempts to exploit the representational proclivities of cinematography while continually denying representation by exposing the illusion on which that representation rests.

As described above, then, the film deals with the issue of cinematic representation on a rather literal level; despite its concern with light as a primary element in that representation, *Room Film* 1973 is not comfortably receptive to an analysis which presents it as a neo-platonic consideration of

the nature of light. That critical tactic, in fact, would be typical of the American critical practice which has accompanied the North American structural films. Those films are open to analyses which involve an analogic principle, a principle which assumes that the structure of the film serves not only to elaborate the cinematic system of representation, but also serves as an analogue for other systems of meaning. Thus crucial structural films are seen as, say, an analogue for the rejuvenation of vision (*Tom Tom the Piper's Son*) or as an analogue for a gnostic epistemology (*Zorns Lemma*) or as a metaphor for the intentionality of consciousness (*Wavelength*). It would seem, too, that the larger tradition of American avant-garde film-making has exploited such analogic techniques – primarily that of the metaphor, in which the formal concerns of film-making are conflated with another perceptual or epistemological or philosophical problem. But what has made structural films eminently receptive to this tradition is that their dominant shape or structure automatically suggests modes of organisation and meaning other than purely filmic ones.

This analogic strategy has enabled North American structural films to neatly supersede the dilemma posed by *Room Film 1973*. That dilemma concerns the formalist aspect of modernism ('formalist' is being used here in a casual, non-pejorative context to refer to films which privilege the formal concerns of the medium over any content; historically, the filmic avant-garde has been generally formalist, but it has become a specific concern since the ascendance of the structural film). Formalism strives to render visible those formal postulates which are used 'transparently' by the dominant practice of the medium. Obviously, the formal devices of dominant cinema are not always completely transparent – hence 'stylization' – but a stylized form is ultimately subordinated to the demands of the dominant practice. The formalist project is to challenge the coherent system of formal practices which subtend the dominant practice and thereby challenge the organisation of meaning and, ultimately, the entire system of signification established by the dominant practice. It does this by separating the formal postulates from their conventional context and revealing the way in which they operate, the way in which they determine representation. The putative rationale for this activity is not merely to regenerate a variety of representational forms, but to challenge the very ideology which founds its representation of reality on that system of signification.

The dilemma which eventually arises with a rigorous formalist practice is that by making the processes of representation progressively arbitrary (so that those processes become, as it were, underdetermined rather than overdetermined) it runs the risk of lapsing into meaninglessness. For any system of meaning-making demands a differentiation – if not hierarchicisation – of signifiers, so that when formalism assaults that system without suggesting an alternative system, it approaches a state of entropy and becomes – in terms of communication theory – 'meaningless'. When Paul Sharits writes that such a state of 'meaningless syntax' would be welcome,\* it would seem to indicate a shared attitude with the axiom that the process of perceiving has supplanted content. Both these propositions are suggestive; but both could easily limit film to an aesthetic tautology: a film is a film. It may or may not be a strip of celluloid with or without images which may or may not be put in a projector which may or may not be turned on, etc., etc. But to yield any insight into those processes of perception which determine cinematic presentation and representation, the formalist film must suggest another order of signification in addition to the one, 'film is'. The dilemma, therefore, is that the formalist film must remain fundamentally reflexive, consistently challenging not only the dominant representational practice, but also its own practice as that very representation is presented, and it must represent itself in a way which is continually 'meaningful'.

North American structural films thus engage in the formalist project and simultaneously assure another level of meaning through the analogic approach. But recent English structural film-making is involved in an asceticising strategy which makes the formalist dilemma more urgent. That is,

\*Sharits, 'Words Per Page,' *Afterimage*, no. 4 (Autumn 1972)

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it denies the analogic tactic and attempts to literalize the levels of meaning available to analysis of the films. The 'ascetic structural' films tend to minimize both content and analogic comparison by effacing – without completely abandoning – the representational image. They are also fundamentally 'shapeless'; the end of the film cannot be predicted, there is no 'goal' achieved, and there is no overall shape which could be metaphorically exploited to engage other issues.

This trend, which has increasingly informed Gidal's mature work (notably *Clouds* [1969], *Bedroom* [1971], *Upside Down Feature* [1967–72], and *Film Print* [1974]) reached its own maturation with *Room Film 1973*. It has already been seen how the film continually effaces the representational image. The images become tactile without really becoming sensual. Colour, for instance, is de-emphasized by the uniformity of the tinting (in the later *Film Print*, colour is almost eliminated through the technique of using colour stock to film black and white photographs).

Nor does *Room Film 1973* have a proper beginning or end, or title or credits; *Upside Down Feature* signalled this shapelessness by having the title/credit placed rather arbitrarily in the body of the film rather than at the beginning or end. Duration becomes a crucial issue in Gidal's films; by eliminating any overall shape which could provide reference points, the viewer is thrust back at each moment onto the film. The emphasis on duration has given rise, in other English films, to a valuing of 'real' time – that is, of maintaining a 1:1 relationship between shooting time and projection time in an effort to eliminate any possibility of an 'illusionist' representation of time. What is interesting about *Room Film 1973* is the way it has literalized viewing experience without demanding a 1:1 correspondence. Gidal's specific 'structural' tactic is to cut the film into two-foot lengths (five seconds long, at 16 fps), with splice bars clearly visible as a rhythmic device. Each five-second sequence is repeated once, so that the progression is two steps forward, one back: after the first shot, A, comes A' then B, then B' then C, C' then D... (The timelessness of potentially infinite repetition was presaged, again in *Upside Down Feature*, in a sequence which showed the second-hand of a clock sweep over the same six seconds innumerable times.) This progression, however, is visually indistinct, and requires several viewings before it becomes apparent. This is due, again, to the erratic camera movement which masks the precise repetition while suggesting a great repetitiveness as a whole.

Despite the other tactics in the film which contribute to its visual impact – graininess, tinting, under-illumination, loss of edge of frame, etc. – it is the camera-work which remains most central in determining that impact. (Similar camera-work will become even more important in *Film Print* as the other tactics used in *Room Film 1973* become less important.) The camera in *Room Film 1973* not only contributes to the incoherence of the imagery, but also to the incoherence of space. It never constructs a discrete space; that it was shot in one room remains an assumption on the part of the viewer. This is in contrast to the earlier *Bedroom*, in which the wider shots and steadier camera presented a discrete space which was easily identifiable as a single room. *Room Film 1973* undermines the establishment of a unity of space just as it undermines (in editing) the unity of time, yet it struggles to maintain the literalness of the recording and viewing experience.

The erratic and often unfocused use of the camera effectively yields a camera uninterested (or, at least, disinterested) in the objects it scans. The camera movement is not mechanical, as is the editing procedure, but appears almost random or arbitrary. So that the film privileges the very process of configuration of the image on the part of the recording apparatus and on the part of the viewer; by making the perception of an image on the screen difficult and by rendering those images banal and almost 'meaningless', the film rigorously reduces the semantic element and forces the spectator back onto her/his own capacities for meaning-making.

But this very shift in the responsibility for meaning-making allows an alternate analysis of the role of the omnipresent camera in the film. This would suggest that the hand-held quality of the camera elicits an anthropomorphized analysis, that the camera operates as subjective eye rather than objective lens.

Thus the camera could be said to perform the function of 'looking' in fascination rather than of 'seeing' in disinterest. This question devolves on the spectator granting either an intentionality or an arbitrariness to the camera movement, but a more important issue centres on whether or not the objects viewed are intensified, ironically, through the very denial of any complacent recognition of them. The objects are not as neutral as might first appear; Gidal has concentrated much of his image-making on spaces and objects of personal interest to him. The preciousness of those objects may be understated but it is never completely absent; in *Room Film 1973* the objects are mainly indistinct as opposed to *Bedroom* where they are quite distinct - but a few recognizable personal possessions emerge (such as the rather esoteric *Beautiful Book* by Jack Smith). Simon Field has pointed out to me that Gidal's seemingly banal images would thus function pointedly and specifically; would, in fact, situate the film in connection with the acknowledged influence (on Gidal) of the work of Beckett, in which banalized action ironically intensifies the personal drama. An elaboration of this type of analysis of *Room Film 1973* would probably posit a specific subject (Gidal) performing a phenomenological reduction on the objects in the real world.

As already noted, I remain unconvinced that *Room Film 1973* can sustain an analysis like that, an analysis, ultimately, of the analogic order. The camera movement, it has been argued, indicates an arbitrariness rather than intentionality. What is interesting is that the question remains unresolved. *Room Film 1973* has reformulated the initial dilemma into another order of dilemma: when does the continual effacement of content - to reach the literal level demanded of a confrontation with the formalist dilemma - force an analysis in which the observation of that absence of content constitutes a presence by virtue of the history of representation which prefigures it? It must be concluded that the dilemma, of course, remains unresolvable; *Room Film 1973*, striving toward a new level of didacticism, has performed the service of bringing that into focus.

September 1975

From **STRUCTURAL FILM ANTHOLOGY**, by P.Gidal (Ed.),  
London 1976.

Gidal's 2 Silent Films Explore Light, Shapes

Lawrence van Gelder

Two silent films, characterised by intellectual and visual repetitive-ness form the program that opened yesterday at the Film Forum.

"Film Print" and "Room Film 1973" are works by Peter Gidal, an avant-garde American film maker. The former, an exploration of perception, consists of motion pictures of still photographs. The camera moves in to examine the contents of rooms, nosing jerkily into light, texture and objects, producing flattened images twice removed from reality before it pulls back to reveal that it is taking pictures of a picture. Once is a surprise; twice is amusing; but 40 minutes' worth becomes a descent into abysmal tedium.

Mainly by comparison, "Room Film 1973", which is in color, is an improvement. It is a murky, granular journey around a room broken by occasional incursions of light. At its infrequent best, it suggests a voyage through a vast, dark universe where objects loom as features of uncharted planets.

From: New York Times, 17.1.1975



## SILENT PARTNER

Ian Christie

There is a certain drama inherent in Peter Gidal's new film, although this is scarcely to be found 'on' screen, nor indeed will it be apparent to audiences who are not prepared to engage with Gidal's polemical position on independent film. To feel its force, one needs to know that he has waged a long and often hyperbolic campaign against the dominance of narrative cinema—characterised as "manipulatory, mystificatory, repressive"—with its twin mechanisms of illusion and identification working together to hold the spectator prisoner. Against this hegemony (which includes the varieties of avant-garde narrative as much as those of 'Hollywood-Mosfilm'), Gidal asserts the need to take a radical view of the essence of film; to see it as an ensemble of materials and processes, and representation as the record of those processes at work. The cultural institution of representation, the industries and ideologies that reproduce themselves and a consistent world-view, pose a constant threat to the 'materialism' that Gidal supports. His aim, as expressed in the manifesto "Theory and Definition of Structural/Materialist Film", has been to "minimise the content in its overpowering, imagistically seductive sense, in an attempt to get through this miasmatic area of 'experience' and proceed with film as film". This he has done with a rare degree of single-mindedness since the late Sixties, the films interlocking with a series of writings in defence of the area he tries to keep open, not only for himself but for other 'structural' film-makers in Britain. To put it (melo)dramatically, *Silent Partner* is a narrative. But it is a narrative without plot, identifiable characters or space/time co-ordinates. In effect, it turns the spectator loose in a problematic textual system which includes both narrative and non-narrative clues; the puzzle cannot be resolved because its terms are systematically ambiguous. The actual filmic material relates closely to that used by Gidal in previous films: hand-held shooting in domestic interiors, with tight framing, frequent zooms and re-focusing, aspires to a kind of 'pre-predicative' flux, in which full representation is held in abeyance. However, this material is now fragmented by the regular interruption of black leader, so that it appears as a series of discrete segments which are not, in any syntactic sense, shots—single takes clearly extend across more than one segment. Thus even the implication of spatial coherence present in Gidal's *Condition of Illusion* and *Room Film 1973* is here frustrated. But against this fragmentation, he introduces for the first time a 'diegetic' soundtrack. In fact, the track is void for much of the film, but twice near the beginning it erupts into animated conversation which, nevertheless, remains just outside the limit of resolution. Then throughout the final ten minutes there is a continuous passage of desultory whistling and further indistinguishable speech. The result is an ambiguous non-specific fiction, toward which the spectator is drawn but with which he is simultaneously prevented from identifying. Whereas in previous films the film-maker was the phantom protagonist, the abstracted consciousness to which they referred, the diegetic traces of *Silent Partner*, the tension between a fragmented image and a unifying sound, create an intriguing arena for the spectator. Gidal's game is a sophisticated and in some ways an idiosyncratic one—his systematic use of black leader can be seen as both an exploration and a *reductio ad absurdum* of that recurrent motif of the British avant-garde. Yet the rewards it offers are considerable and *Silent Partner*, for all its bearing on the issue of 'narrative', marks a turn away from the didactic in Gidal's work. Its origin was foreshadowed in the 1975 manifesto: "A study is urgently needed on the theme of narrative versus non-narrative form and on the inadequacy of the mechanistic deconstruction approach which ends up illustrating rather than being...". *Silent Partner* very definitely is.

Monthly Film Bulletin, May 1978.

## SILENT PARTNER

Al Roes

### Views

Structuralist/materialist film, the site of Peter Gidal's work, stresses the processes by which images are produced; their duration and signification as effect of the specificity of film, and produced in the moment of viewing by spectators thus rendered as subjects. Film is reflexive, and reflexivity cuts two ways: film is reflexive in identity ('an ensemble of materials and processes through which is inscribed in representation the record of those processes at work' — Ian Christie in the *Monthly Film Bulletin*, May 1978); and the spectator is reflexive within and for that identity.

Identification in the normal cinematic sense is disrupted by Gidal's discursive strategies in film-making, so that again it is possible to speak of a double-chain; the *film as process* (defined by those strategies of absence, extension, repetition, withholding of image, of the legible . . .) works with the *spectator in process*. The narrative of action is rejected, or displayed as a set of impossible fragments (hints of human activity in *Silent Partner*).

*Silent Partner*, specifically. Rooms, as in other films by Gidal (*Bedroom*, *Room Film 1973*, *Condition of Illusion*), but as a series of spaces, disconnected, a homology with the space of the film..

Silent partner (part-ner; 'a part', placed somewhere: 'apart', displaced, outside, included in difference).

Silent partner (as addresser, in and out of screen space, as addressee, invisible interlocutor, as one and other speaking).

Gidal's films are best located in terms of their strategies rather than (inadequately) described, forcing an inappropriate linearity and a linguistic gloss. Some of the strategies in *Silent Partner* will be familiar to viewers of his other work. They include these inter-connecting sets:

— Hovering camera, random in each particular action and shake, less random in its recording of certain objects, certain spaces (his films hesitate between structure and the arbitrary, refusing both' — John Ellis in *Film Notes* to screenings at the London Film-Makers' Co-op), yielding moments of stability/mobility/apparent movement.

— The camera lens zooms, focusses, defocusses; dislocating and reconstituting notions of depth, size, colour, hardness. There is also a relation to the occasional variation of exposure (of light in, the aperture opened up) and its effect on the image.

— A play is produced of surface and of depth; of walls, flat/textured; of doors and cornices, plain/decorative; of fabrics, coloured/patterned; of transparent and reflective objects. These sets of contrasts are transected by other axes; hard/soft, planar/shaped, of colour and light. . . .

- The questioning of legibility; literally, in the appearance of books whose titles cannot be read because the camera zooms or moves at the moment of reading. The only legible words in the film, whose space is often composed of these books, are those in the clear

graphic print of the title (the film has no such signalled end, only blackness and leader).

- The play at frame edge/full screen. At first, we see fragmented objects that appear to pulsate, to slip at the edge and the top and the bottom of the screen - throughout the film, the possibility that the siting of objects at screen edge yields another set of illegibilities (realised in the example of a fragment of a photographed face, set among books, which is broken by the screen and by the limit of the film frame).

- The use of black leader, and the question of whether the black spaces act as *gaps* (covering elisions, absences, shots that have been taken out) or as *inserts* (the black breaking a complete shot, a single take that crosses the segmentation of the interrupting black space). Gidal writes of 'inserts/substitutions', holding both as possible. There is also the use of a reversed strategy. Many films within structural/materialist cinema, including Gidal's own, have retained the flare-ends or leader at the ends of separate rolls, the length of those rolls often determining - as a given - the duration of the film. One function of the use of black in *Silent Partner* is to mask those roll changes, to deny the strategy of literal duration at play within certain aspects of a structural/materialist cinema. So, late in the film, the black leader marks a pause in duration as well as in space, when what appears to be a jerky pan (in fact, a tracking shot that intricately intercuts its own path past a window, walls, doors and other objects) is spaced out by unequal lengths of black.

- At this use of leader we can also locate the articulation of two other central strategies; uses of light/dark, presence/absence. Take the long section of dark surfaces, gleams of dull objects, ending with a shot of an evening sky and houses before returning to the interior; one concern in the film is with the *source* of light, the opposition of artificially lit patches and the acceptance of unlit, refracted spaces for the camera. *Silent Partner* includes those spaces, engaged also in the flashes of red, blue, white, without the use of rhythmic punctuation. In the film's darkest section, blackness of leader is intercut with the physical palpable darkness of the space in the rooms. As in the blackness of Ad Reinhardt's paintings (the unevenness of the paint within the frame, matt, dully reflective) the problem is of light and its absence: does black leader have depth, does space have *that* kind of depth to it? Surface resurfaced, in an iconic parable. Intercut with the darkness forced by an 'unlit' room, the zones of black leader become a negative space, signifiatory gaps that mark a form of difference, in difference.

- A late shot recovers an earlier theme in Gidal's work, an echo of *Room Film 1973*; a plant, shadows, a window, light. A clear image, distinct, iconic but structured in the layers of representation that Gidal's films address, excavate.

- Gidal's repeated use of domestic space. Identifiable objects - possessions, personalised; books, fabrics, brushes, bags, kitchen objects, tables, some items marked as 'feminine' - partly Gidal's suppression or banalisation of content, another image reproduced, seen too in his project of redefining the film space of the 'personal' photograph (*Filmprint, Copenhagen/1930*). Partly an intensification of the subject, its ironic disintegration and dissolution forcing its contradictions to fragment both text and artist-subject (present everywhere and nowhere - Beckett, Warhol, Duchamp). Partly that interest in voyeurism (*Portrait, Takes*) and its representation (re-photography, camera-editing, manipulation, printing) so that we as spectators 'grasp at the images, grasp at meaning' (Deke Dusinberre *Screen v18 n2*). This too is a disintegration of the artistic subject. If there is parody in the film it is not against 'other' uses of pans, of black leader, of sound and its fragmentation, but at the expense of the assumption that we 'know' persons by seeing the objects they have, the objects spaced in their space, their traces ('I can't feel you any more, I can't even touch the books you've read'). This strategy is connected to a refusal of the ordering of space, the 'first rule' of fictional/documentary cinema, its apprehensible constructing feature. The film is not a parody of narrative, but an un-narrative, unfolding, unwinding, positioning, respacing, just as the soundtrack - especially the bursts of multi-vocal gobbledygook - works literally/ironically as difference, rendered senseless, given another space.

In Gidal's words, his work is constructed within a 'materialism that is severely implicated in the contradictory stances that attempt to situate themselves through *conflict*, between the material support of the film as physicality foregrounded, presented, through duration, etc (ie, grain, light/dark, focus, frame, camera position, movement/stillness, etc) and the fixing of whatever representation it is that is *filmed*'. Conflict is there in the film which is *in movement* for the subject.

To return to the title: the phrase 'silent partner' is, in the work of the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, locked into a series of terms - counterpart/partner/the Other/alter ego/ dummy (*le mort*, the dead hand in bridge) - which embrace structures of transference between analyst and analysand, the ordering of imaginary identity, the role of silence - nil return - in producing the divided subject, history of and in the family.

The relation between Lacanian theory, title and film needs to be rescued, recovered by viewers, possibly with a memory of the qualities of irony, hyperbole and provocation which run through the writings of both Gidal and Lacan. One suggestion: the central role of absence and presence in their work (the silent partner, both present and distant, is dominant in its withdrawal — like Lacan in the film, it is an absent signifier). Thus the 'silent neutrality of the analyst (his role as dummy) enables the subject to project onto him the image of the significant other to whom the subject is addressing his *parole vide* (ie the subject's imaginary discourse, "empty words")" (Anthony Wilden, *The Language of the Self*, Johns Hopkins Press 1968).

Gidal's film is partly an interrogation of that capture and its structures. Silent partners: the spectator is one for the film-maker, the film-maker for the spectator. The text contains its silent partners — body fragments, distorted voices, an invisible whistler (who only whistles on image — black leader erases sound as well as picture), absent owners of things. These partners in the text bring minimal information, but are awaited nonetheless, the presence of their sound and image having indicated their expected return, an awaited plenitude and coherence that is never achieved (viz Beckett's silent partners, Godot . . .). The dummy — unknown spectator — silent — misguided voyeur — the spectator in silence — receiving cryptic messages —

From CATALOGUE-BRITISH FILM INSTITUTE PRODUCTIONS, 1977-1978.

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TWO NEW FILMS BY PETER GIDAL: SILENT PARTNER, KOPENHAGEN/1930

Peter Gidal's films have tackled directly the tension that (arguably) underlies all cinema: the tension between the material processes of film and cinema on the one hand, and on the other the processes of signification whose basis they are. Dominant narrative cinema tends to repress the materiality of film, and to direct the processes of signification towards one aim: the representation of a reality that is considered to be "outside" and anterior to the processes of the film. But the repressed materiality constantly returns: in the limited visibility that is granted to the processes of signification under the heading of "style"; by the visibility of the demands of focus, of grain, of colour process; through the very experience of spectacle itself (witness the aggressive way in which The Spy Who Loved Me asserts itself as film, as constructed event, as "cinema-like-it-used-to-be"). Yet this return of the repressed side of the filmic process in dominant cinema has to be seen in perspective: the return is still marginal, there is never any evidence of a temptation for it to flood the screen. It is witness to the processes by which the narrative constructs itself; the narrative construction of a world and its problems remains the purpose of this cinema.

Things are rather different for the avant-garde. Peter Gidal's work has always sought to reverse the process of dominant cinema: instead of repressing the materiality of film, this becomes the very subject-matter of the work. Gidal's work represses those processes of signification that, in dominant cinema, work to produce the world of the fiction and the ordering of the narrative. Objects and event feature only residually: they are either banal (a room, in Room (Double-Take), 1967; Hall, 1968; Bedroom, 1971; Room Film 1973, 1973) or a return to a meditation on the cinematic process itself (e.g. voyeuristic shots of a girl undressing, in Takes (1970), Upside Down Feature (1967-1972)). Even then, the unproblematic inscription of these objects and events is prevented: focus, grain, camera movement, exposure, all vociferously demand attention. Yet in some way the demands of these repressed processes of signification ceaselessly reassert themselves: all the fascination of succeeding to capture movement, of inducing a mechanism to fulfill the demands of our imagination - all this fascination refuses to lie quiet. Gidal knows all too well one way that it reasserts itself, through the creation of rhythm, of pattern and structure. Hence the way that his films hesitate between structure and the arbitrary, refusing both. Silent Partner is another sophistication of this procedure, permitting elements of parody. Kopenhagen/1930 on the other hand, engages the problem of the tension between the materiality of film and ideological signifying processes in a completely different way. It admits to (and revels in) the seduction of content.

Silent Partner immediately sets up a structural pattern: of a shot segmented by the insertion of black leader. It then transgresses this pattern through its totally arbitrary movement of the camera,

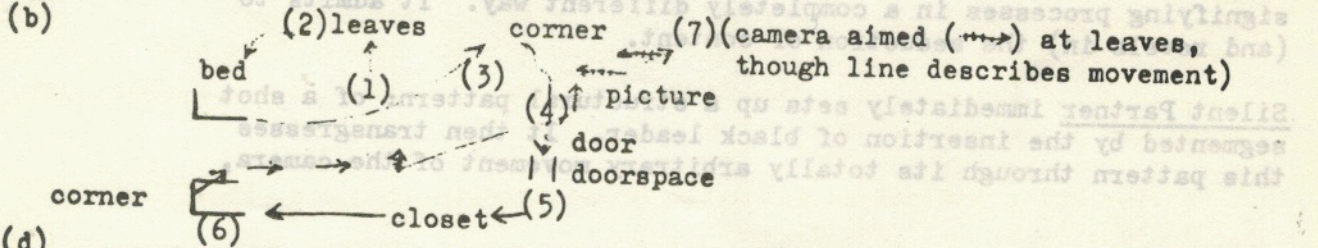
wandering over objects, walls etc. in a room. As no rhythm of camera (a) movement can be deduced, it is never certain whether the "gaps" in the image cover elisions of certain material, or whether they are inserted to interrupt a "continuous" image. One thing is certain: they do disguise the points at which rolls of film are changed. Other arbitrariness occurs: the occasional variation of exposure, the frequent alteration of focus to shy away from the unproblematic production of objects out of the continuum of light on the screen. Some objects do assert themselves, gaining a warmth and pictorial quality that yields a certain sensuality from the processes of focus and the yellow/red emphasis of the colour process. Yet this exists at the limit of the film's concerns rather than its centre: it is impossible to gain any overall spatial orientation within the rooms that the filming took place in. You can't tell where you are, where objects are in relation to each other. This control and ordering of space is an absolute pre-requisite for any form of narrative cinema. Silent Partner for the most part refuses it.

It becomes apparent - by way of glimpses through open doors - that the film is/was being made in several rooms. The last sequence, (marked as such by the introduction of sound in a systematic, sustained way where we have had only sporadic bursts of incoherent conversation before) - attempts a 360-degree pan (b) around the bedroom, beginning and ending on a window. An indifferent whistler provides baroque background music. Of course, given the overall shooting and editing style, the attempt is a hilarious failure. The movements of the hand-held camera and the inter-leaving of black leader both parodying (d), perhaps, the steadying camera and real-time continuity of Mulvey and Wollen's Riddles of the Sphinx for which 360 degree pans were a central (narrative) feature.

Kopenhagen/1930 presents a different attitude to the seductions of content, to the signifying processes that are repressed in the rigorous procedures of the structural/materialist film. Its material is "images by George Gidal, Copenhagen 1930": photographs, their grounding and their signification. For the most part, the attitude is one of "reverence" for the material, which, after all, has immense

Filmmaker's footnotes:-

(a) ...one step more complex: neither totally mechanically insertion of black leader (6 shorter inserts/substitutions) nor 'totally arbitrary' camera movement (wheelchair track along walls; or "walls" (i.e. also around table-edge, etc.).



(d) ...anachronistic would be a parodying of Riddles, which came 9 years after my Room (Double-Take); all my other films, not to mention Warhol, Godard, Snow, preceded...

familial resonances for Gidal, as it was produced by an uncle who died soon afterwards. Yet such authorial ruminations yield little of substance about the film. It is a notable departure from Gidal's previous work using still photographs (e.g. *Film Print*, 1974) because it seems content to offer the images with little or no commentary on their materiality as images: most are shot with a steady (tripod/rostrum) camera, respecting the framing of the original, with a great regard for sequence, pace, and (amazingly) narration. There are frequent hints of what the film could have been: the first shot is a hand-held examination of the grain and frame of a photo; an intertitle appears, first in George Gidal's German script, then in translation, with no relation to the surrounding images; some prints are the originals from the album, now beginning to degenerate; the album itself is shown at certain points, with its copious comments, its careful numbering and sequencing<sup>(e)</sup> of separate shots of the same events. All these are clues for the possible different films of the material, stressing its materiality as photographs, the constructed context through which they become meaningful, etc.

Although these "clues" are interspersed throughout the film (and therefore could be interpreted as always "pulling back" attention from the photos to their materiality), the power of the photos, their sequencing (e.g. the street-stalls,<sup>(f)</sup> with its rhythm of establishing shot, detailed shots) over-rides any such consideration with the questions that they inevitably raise: what the images mean, what those people are doing. The constitution of the images, the concern of structural/materialist film, passes as an almost unnoticed event.

Yet I would argue that this concern with materiality returns when the film is viewed within certain institutional contexts, and the Co-op is one of these. The film (the textual processes of signification) may not seem to emphasize such concerns in itself; but it is always seen in "context" of cinema (defined as an institutional production of meaning). Rather than "context" such a situation is the "co-text": producing certain forms of meaning, neglecting/repressing others; the specific institution becomes, in this sense, a part of the film. Thus the tension in this film, between movement and stillness between the passing of time and the freezing of time, emerges as one of its overriding concerns. The very sequencing recalls narrative film; the lack of movement of the photos refuses the flow of narrativization. Then again, there is an emphasis on images whose meaning ("reason") is obscure, like the crowd with hats over their faces; and there is the constant emphasis on shots of people looking (frequently the camera "watches"

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Filmmaker's footnotes:-

- (e) ...the numbering serves mainly an un-sequencing (e.g. 34, 35, 6, 7, 42, 42, 3, 4, 5, 7, 6, etc...)
- (f) ...the street-stalls section is the only example of this

them, stubbornly refusing to look at what they consider important), and of people taking photographs. These return certain audiences in certain contexts (contexts set up by publicity, expectations, attunement to the concerns of that context, programme notes like this) to the concerns of the materiality of the filmic process: to concerns of duration, movement, voyeurism.

In another context, of course, Kopenhagen/1930 will seem like a photographic essay, the re-animation of extremely beautiful images; with certain, delicate, interruptions that remind one that everything that can be said is not being (and probably cannot) be said. Gidal's first art film, the remarks will continue.

All of this talk of contexts does not deny that a certain difference is noticeable in this film: it begins to tackle questions of the signification processes which structural/materialist film refused: the fact that film is a form of material process which produces ideological meanings, which has the power to speak of social process through its own processes. The context in which this reading of Kopenhagen/1930 could take place is also developing: it is a context framed by certain questions which the film does not yet ask, even when seen in that particular context: questions of the attitudes (the ideologies) at play within the photographs. This cinema neither foregrounds (as structural/materialist cinema) nor denies (as dominant cinema) the concerns of the material specificity of film as signification. Perhaps Gidal's film begins to break through the artificial separation that has taken place between those forms of film-making that seek to undermine/challenge/deconstruct/go against the grain of/hesitate/etcetera dominant cinema.

John Ellis, October, 1977

Filmmaker's Postscript:-

To Silent Partner

- absence/presence (onscreen/off-screen)
- soundsources & synchronicity
- gender
- rememoration/reduplication/repetition
- beginning/end
- 'extradiegetic'
- non-oneness (no-oneness) within/without
- documentary/fictive
- from meaning to use
- process/in-process/how it is (s/he)
- inculcated arrestation attempts, by
- definition unsuccessful: the signifier
- remains: unnaturalized, meaningless,
- unauthored, anonymous, arbitrary,
- in combat, specific, historical,
- in operation, in process, precise.

## FILMOGRAPHY

1967 ROOM(DOUBLE TAKE), 10 mins  
 1968 KEY 10 mins  
 1968 LOOP 10 mins  
 1968-69 HALL 10 mins  
 1969 CLOUDS 10 mins  
 1969 HEADS 35 mins  
 1970 TAKES 5 mins  
 1970 SECRET 25 mins  
 1970 PORTRAIT(SUBJECT/OBJECT) 10 mins  
 1971 8mm Film Notes on 16mm 40 mins  
 1971 FOCUS 7 mins  
 1971 BEDROOM 30 mins  
 1972 MOVIE No 1 5 mins  
 1972 UPSIDE DOWN FEATURE(1967-72) 76 mins  
 1972 MOVIE No 2 5 mins  
 1973 ROOM FILM 1973 55 mins  
 1973 PHOTO/GRAPH/FILM 5 mins  
 1974 FILM PRINT 40 mins  
 1974 C/O/N/S/T/R/U/C/T 35 mins  
 1975 CONDITION OF ILLUSION 303 mins  
 1977 COPENHAGEN/1930 40 mins  
 1977 SILENT PARTNER 35 mins  
 1978 FOURTH WALL 40 mins  
 1978 EPILOGUE 8 mins  
 1978 UNTITLED 8 mins