"Discourse" versus "Medium". Interview with Malcolm Le Grice
(by François Bovier and Adeena Mey)

D: You were actively involved in the film cooperative movement in the sixties. Could you describe your relationships to the London Film Coop, founded in 1966, and how it interacted with your own practice of expanded cinema?

MLG : Your simple question is not really so simple.

I had started making films just before the London Film Makers Cooperative (LFMC) was formed. I began making films as one part of my movement from painting into other art media – including electronic technology and computers. When I made my earliest 8mm films in 1965 I did not know about the Underground cinema in the USA nor the New York Co-op. At that time I also did not know of the early avant-garde cinema – I only started to research that after making my first films.

The origins of an experimental film scene in London in the late 1960's were also complicated. My first and main contact was not with the LFMC but with the first Arts Laboratory in Drury Lane, London set up by Jim Haynes, and where an old artist friend, David Curtis, had started a basement cinema. From 1967 I showed my work there and quickly, helped by Curtis's programme, learned about the American and European experimental cinema. At the same time a group of people who wanted to be film-makers began the LFMC. But at that time it was only a distribution organization, showing occasionally at Better Books, a radical bookshop run by Bob Cobbing.

At the Arts Lab, responding to a situation where there were almost no experimental film-makers working in London – partly because of the cost of making 16mm films - Curtis and I developed the idea of establishing a film-makers workshop. I started to put this into practice by making home-made film printing and developing equipment. Though this worked for me and I made almost all my earliest 16mm films on it, it was too fragile and temperamental for other film-makers to use.

During 1968 it became clear to a number of people that it was crazy to have two organizations for experimental film in London when there were so few film makers – so we set up a series of meetings where Simon Hartog from the LFMC and myself from the Arts Lab were asked to make a plan for merging the Co-op and Arts Lab film area. Hartog and I then made a plan and constitution for a new LFMC that would have a workshop and cinema as well as distribution.

Through a contact made by Curtis at the Arts Lab, we were given £3,000 by an American art enthusiast, Victor Herbert, and I bought some used but very good professional film laboratory equipment. The workshop was mainly based on a 16mm Debrie 'step' contact printer that we installed at the second Arts Lab incarnation. Though this Debrie was not strictly an 'optical' printer, it allowed all sorts of inventive 'mis-use' – printing loops, pulling film through the gate by hand, re-colouring with filters or making multiple exposures. This led me and others to explore a range of methods for transforming the film image. The workshop, together with a cinema in the same building, meant the LFMC really took off and became the main centre in London for experimental film screening and production.

So what about my own work and expanded cinema?

My expanded cinema direction really started at the first Arts Lab cinema in Drury Lane in '67 and '68. Curtis had designed the space with a very wide screen – a plain large white wall -, a floor with no seats, but a carpet on soft foam and two 16mm projectors. I started to make double projection films partly because the space and two projectors were available there. A little later, the LFMC workshop meant we could produce films very cheaply using black and white Orwo film brought in from East Germany – made at the old Agfa factory under the communists long before the re-unification. This film material had a characteristic high contrast – an old newsreel quality that suited the political environment of London in the politically active period of 1968. The egalitarian core and lack of censorship of the film-coop movement that started with the NY coop also appealed to my ideological

position. The London coop quickly developed not just as a centre of experimental film making but also a very active centre of debate about film, culture and its relationship to politics and ideology. In particular I was frequently in discussion with Peter Gidal, who established a definition of Structural Materialist Film – some of these were public debates and we both published theoretical and critical essays.

So – the coop was a major influence on the development of my practice as a film-maker. It provided a very active, energetic intellectual context as well as facilities for production, and in each new temporary building – moving frequently into low rent but short life buildings – the projection space was suitable for experimental forms of projection, shadow and other forms of performance, live music and improvisation.

If the co-op was a major influence, it would be wrong to see it as the only influence. As is well known, London in the 60's was a hot bed of artistic and 'life-style' experiments coupled with politics and protest. There was an eager audience for the 'underground' and new forms of art and art fusions. In this environment I was not only involved with film but also experimenting with early, primitive video and particularly seriously with computers. I made various performances including a 3D shadow play and continued my link with experimental music and sound through occasional light and sound performance with the experimental music group AMM.

Tracing specific influences in such a multi faceted environment and historical period is not an easy task.

D: In a sense, it is this idea of a "multi-faceted environment" that offers an entry into your work with film, early video, performance, shadow plays and experimental sound. We would thus like to ask you how "expanded cinema", the political atmosphere of the time and forms of "intermedia" work interacted with each other? Also, how this set of relationships can be found in your own early experiments with the moving image and sound?

MLG: It is very important to understand that in the late 1960's many artists were breaking away from the constraints of a single traditional medium – Painting, Sculpture, Music for example. They were experimenting with other media and also with combining media. I now like to talk of this as combining 'artistic discourses' rather than media – particularly as almost everything in art production and art viewing is now mediated or re-mediated through a digital process – so what is significant is the combination of historical contexts of 'language' rather than the physicality of the 'medium'.

As a painter and a student at the Slade School in London in 1964 I also became dissatisfied with the limits of painting and started to make work where the painting was only a surface linking to the reality in front of it – with flexible physical attachments and objects hanging in front from clips that could be changed and with microphones and flashing lights – the paintings became time works where the meaning happened subsequent to the work rather than through interpretation of the artist's intention. So – it was more concerned with a philosophy about the spectator, presence and ethics than about representation, expression and aesthetics. Shifts in medium were not in themselves my main motivation - though Film became the main focus when I started to treat it as a live-performance and not a retrospective narrative. As so little work had been done historically using film in this way a big field of experiment opened up for me, and with the added advantage that it allowed me to combine my earlier involvement with improvised music with my visual (painterly) engagement.

During my period as an art student from about 1959 to 1964 I had also become 'politicised' but in a very particular way. In that period Britain was a very closed and hierarchical society – a condition that sadly seems to be rapidly returning now. The aristocracy and wealthy establishment working through public schools and closed Universities seriously inhibited social mobility and meritocracy. Reaction to this came at a number of levels. Changes in dress and life style hit a peak in the late 60's side by side with the rise in a youth culture of rock music – these were revolutionary if only at the symbolic surface. More fundamental was the rise in left-wing politics pressing for working class equality that was intellectually Marxist but at the grass roots led to increasingly militant workers union activity. This itself

was fuelled by the rift with an often incompetent managerial class who had achieved their positions through class contact rather than merit.

I had come into this from a curious provincial sub-working class background. Mine was a family without wealth or education but who were able to live from their wits and energy sometimes near legal borderlines. However they went frequently, and took me, to the theatre and played music. So when later I found myself in the context of the London melting pot of the 'swinging sixties', I shared a radicalized political position with a desire for artistic expression. But – and it is a major 'but' – these two aspects were never linked directly. I certainly never led my artistic production by any didactic political idea. The two things ran in parallel – an anti establishment politics and a radically experimental approach to art. If they came together it was in the development of an art theory gradually clarifying a spectator-based concept applied mainly in film. This theoretical development was strongly connected to the ideas being developed at the time by Peter Gidal that he called 'Structural Materialism'. Again I should stress that when I made and showed work I did this from improvised 'instinct' within the discourse of the visual, rhythmic, durational, colour, time image. The works were never led by theory. If they linked to the theory it was through a common psycho-philosophical-ethical sub-structure that is the complex core of artistic practice. My theory and that of Gidal were never a manifesto – they were not belief systems.

I always argued that any political stance that I took should be realized through work on the artistic *context* rather than artistic *content*. This was the basis of the work I did with the London Film Co-op, in Art Education and on various committees of the British Film Institute and the Arts Council. Here I was motivated by an attempt to shift awareness but also the economic basis of radical art production.

So what of 'Expanded Cinema'. Curiously I don't think we talked about the work as 'Expanded Cinema" until after the Youngblood book was published in 1970. From my recollection I talked about Multi-projection, Performance and after 1973 with the Gallery House show, Installation. In my work a large proportion of my early films were for a comparative two or three screen projections – not randomized multi-media – but, like 'Castle 2' (1968), were tightly edited and synchronized focussed on the spectator experience of making their own sense from a 'present' duration. The performances related to film were mainly shadow plays like 'Horror Film 1' (1971), tape/slide/film improvisations like 'Wharf' (1968), moving projector works like 'Matrix' (1973) or reading works like 'Pre-Production' (1973). But there were other non-film performances at the time. I did a series of live Video performances at the two week 'Drama in a Wide Media Environment' show at the London Arts Lab in August 1968, one including an improvised 'happening' with news-feed from the Czechoslovakia Russian intervention. The performances also included audio and light elements in performances by AMM at 26 Kingly Street and a computer generate 'Typo Drama' at Event One of the Computer Arts Society in 1969. My installations began with multi-screen loops – mostly abstract colour fields - with audiotape like 'Gross Fog' and 'Josephs Coat' in 1973.

Returning to the idea of 'discourse' rather than 'medium'. Yes, my work explored cross-media in the physical sense, film-material, the screen as a picture surface, the re-construction of the image through printing treatments, some (primitive) electronic technology in feeding sound to control lights, computers to generate text or film-image ('Your Lips' 1969/71). But even within this material concept, the definition of what constituted the 'medium' went beyond the established boundaries of 'medium'. Here, electricity is treated as both medium and content, generated in a socio-political context, enabling the light bulb itself in 'Castle 1' (1966). Here an actual flashing light is both an interruption in front of the screen and also represented in the film, and by implication draws attention to the projector light as integral to the medium. This work, drawing attention to the audience space before the screen also extends the concept of medium to the space and time of the projection itself – a kind of temporal sculpture. So, these extensions of the physical understanding of medium are also extensions in the discourses between media and the social forms creating the context for artistic experience – and technology is no longer the carrier of meaning but part of the language itself.

If there is a central consistency in this (which of course there may not be), it is the change of focus from the condition of the artist as the 'maker of meaning' to the spectator as the 'constructor of meaning'. This is an ethical shift that is achieved (if it is achieved) by the aesthetic means of the work. It implies that the artistic experience is not one of retrospective interpretation – interpretation of the

meaning put into the work by the artist – but of subsequence, the effect of the experience as it enters the life of the spectator.

Though I may have had political intentions in my work of this early period, few of the works attempted to engage these directly. 'Castle 1' and 'Castle 2' emerged from a loose, psychological, political interpretation influenced by Kafka (thus the Castle reference). Perhaps the most directly 'political' work was 'Reign of the Vampire or How to Screw the CIA?' (1970), that used heavily treated military images. However, I was already aware that the representational aspect of 'political' content was ineffectual in the social discourse of politics (thus the question mark in the title). Its effective context was the symbolic discourse of art and, in an attempt to square my political motivation with my more intuitive, subjective artistic work, I began to talk of the 'Politics of Perception'. My interest shifted more clearly to the conceptual behaviour of the spectator. And this attitude broadly remains – not taking up political issues but attempting to make works that require the spectator to think in a different way outside dominant ideologies refusing fixity of meaning or systems of belief.

D: The notion of "Politics of Perception" seems really relevant to address your work in multi-projections, which can be articulated with the distinction between "discourse" and "medium". How would you differentiate the audio-visual environment that you create from the more spectacular and commercial attraction such as the Expo 67 in Montreal (with the Eames) or the Expo 70 in Osaka? Going back, for instance, to your shadow-play performance "Horror Film 1", in which projection, body, screen, sound and the audience interact, could you elaborate on the idea of anti-illusionism, as developed by Gidal, and the phenomenological perception of such a "dismantled" cinema?

MLG: Again these are not easy questions to answer – and even when I do, I am not sure that I will get it right. I will elaborate a little more on why I use the term 'discourse' now rather than 'medium'. Until the early 1980's creating a focus on the medium as physical material and material processes of the medium was a way of resisting cinematic illusion and stressing a 'problematic' presence. Some aspects of this physicality of the medium survived into videotape, but increasingly the electronic and then digital condition of image capture, manipulation and presentation replaced this simple physicality. In the digital, the fundamental transactions of the 'medium' have no form of physicality that can be appreciated by our senses. These transactions are electronic switchings of polarity taking place at atomic scale and the speed of light. The elements that might be thought to make up the 'medium' are invisible, have no direct relationship to their source (as image or sound) in the world nor to the way in which they may be translated back to our senses. There is no longer a medium – certainly no intrinsic or stable medium that itself determines the boundaries of any practice. Therefore when we produce a work, we need to choose the context of convention in which that work will function. We select the framework of its discourse. Here my understanding of discourse is as a set of expectations of meaning (a framework of 'language') against which a work resists, modulates or confirms those expectations. This is a dynamic concept of 'language' – language is not a fixed system of signifiers and syntax but an arena in which new thoughts relate themselves to existing concepts. The fundamental basis of this process is shifting the 'habit' of interpretation held by the spectator, but also by the maker. This condition of discourse and expectation was of course also present in works that focussed on medium, but with the digital it is unavoidable. Maintaining an anti-illusionist position without the artistic strategy of focus on physicality has given me a long running new artistic problem. How do we re-situate the audience (including myself), resisting illusion with ultra high definition image and high fidelity sound? I am not sure, but I think my use of screen comparison in multi-screen video creates a condition of moment to moment choice – what to look at and how to relate it – for the audience (spectator).

On the question of spectacle, I must admit that artistically I seek a strong and immersive experience. I envy and possibly seek to emulate the condition of music in my use of the moving image. This involves a structure of the viewing/listening experience that begins with un-interpreted sensation and through the use of conscious and unconscious memory processes builds larger and larger units of time experience and conception – a musical model. However, I am not sure how this squares with the theoretical (and political) attempt to put the spectator rather than the maker at the centre of the artistic meaning. This re-introduces the whole question of whether the artists should be the theorist of their own work and whether their theory is a post-rationalization of their 'intuitive' practice. It is this question that has always made me insist that work should be led by practice and not by theory.

I don't think I can comment on Expo 67 in Montreal or the Expo 70 in Osaka. My awareness of each of these is only from second hand reports. My instinct suggests that the multi-screen spectacle in these grand events had very little to do with my own interest in multi-projection.

Though I have always generally agreed with Peter Gidal, you should go to him directly if you want to discuss his theory. I will only make a brief comment on the notion of "dismantled" cinema. I think there may be some confusion in this concept and what in the 1980's was discussed as cinema de-construction. Both Gidal and I resisted this direct focus on de-construction, as if there was an established language of cinema that could be de-constructed. I did not see my 'excavation' of the film-medium as a de-construction but as a creative construction from intrinsic properties. Of course in the light of digital systems and the explosion of viewing and delivery formats (like YouTube), I would now, question if it is valuable to think in terms of 'intrinsic' properties of a medium. I still hold to the idea that it is only a constructive/creative practice working through an active public discourse that resists the dominance of academic theory.