Film Video TV.

In this essay I will explore the work of three artists; the film-maker Guy Sherwin, video-maker David Larcher, and David Hall, who has used both media to make public interventions into the TV experience.

In recent years there have been arguments, more or less interesting, about the respective merits of video and film. For writers like Peter Wollen the relevance of these debates has already been eclipsed by the widespread presence of hybrid forms -videos shot on film, films cut on tape- a tendency he notes in his introduction to the Arrows of Desire show held at the ICA in 1992 (1). At the same time though, Wollen has protested loudly at plans by the BFI to distribute on video films that were hitherto available as 16mm prints. Wollen's stance epitomises the state of the debate: on the one hand film, video and digital are all current moving image media, all equally viable and in some respects interchangeable. On the other hand it is important to respect the integrity of a work's original medium: there are still significant differences between these media in terms of how they are experienced. Top quality video projection (with added digital grain and flicker !) may soon appear indistinguishable from the16mm equivalent. On the other hand a gallery full of projectors running film loops could not be more different from a multi-monitor video installation. Film projectors in galleries inevitably draw attention to themselves. The best work made for this format plays on the contrast between the sculptural/mechanical presence of the projector, the filmstrip, and the projected image itself. Video projectors are relatively self-effacing machines, whose noiseless operation facilitates the direction of the viewer's attention to the image. (2)

The dramatic differences in costs and working practices at different stages in the production process have effected the way the different media are approached. Guy Sherwin has made an explicit commitment to film, arguing for its strong ontological links to the profilmic. The cheapness and mutability of video has allowed David Larcher to assemble large-scale, impovisatory works that would be considered extravagant, not to say impossible, had they been created on film. David Hall has stated that his work is not media specific, but that he has used available moving image media to mount a sustained investigation into the ideologies and phenomena of broadcast TV (3). Like Larcher, his earlier works were made on film, the later ones on tape.

In this essay I will look at the way the foregoing considerations have effected the respective artists' aesthetic formation.

In 1971, David Hall made "Seven TV Pieces" for Scottish TV. These, his first works for broadcast television, are exemplars of what "Television Interventions", as they came to be known, can be. Although a number of such interventions have subsequently been made by various artists, the Seven TV Pieces have not been surpassed, except by Hall himself in "This is a television Receiver" (1975) and "Stooky Bill TV" (1990). The Pieces were shot on film, partly because union problems prevented the use of videotape, but in some ways this was appropriate, since a lot of TV in those days was either shot on film or took the form of live broadcast.(4)

In the opening work we see a time-lapsed scene of a TV cabinet burning in a landscape. Periodically, the screen goes white and a voice calls out: "interruption". There is a play here on the idea of the landscape as a formerly romantic retreat, now sullied by commercial exploitation: a suggestion that TV is everywhere, omnivorous and insatiable in its quest for subject matter. At the same time there is the implication that a burning TV makes better television than most of the output to which we are subjected. The work also sets out the iconoclastic tone of those to follow.

In the second, a shot of the sky is vertically bisected by the edge of a steel-framed window and its handle. Clouds drift through the frame. This is followed by a high angle view of open countryside with fast-moving cloud shadows, then a similar angle on a quadrangle with a wind-blown tree and a rectangular shadow on the grass cast by buildings behind the camera. Thus the work sets out a number of framing implications. In the first shot it is as if the real window frame is intrusive, spoiling the view. Yet the TV frame (TV Set), which of course we do not really notice, is the real culprit here, since it cuts out what we may not see and forces us to see what "it" wants us to see. The window frame also stresses the picture plane, seeming to connect the top and bottom of the TV. In the shot of open country we enjoy an illusory freedom, before the final view of the quadrangle. Here the shots jump through time so that the cast shadow from the buildings behind changes position and finally disappears. The presence of shadow combined with the absence of its cause reminds us again of the fundamentally manipulative nature of most moving-image production, but especially of TV. Why especially TV ? Perhaps because the cinema experience trades heavily on off-screen space. There we can project imaginatively into the adjacent darkness (5) in a way that is precluded in the TV experience where the box, which is always visible, functions to contain and inwardly direct the gaze. Designers have tried to make the set less visible by replacing varnished wood with darker, less reflective materials, but in any case TVs are invariably watched in un-darkened rooms.

The idea of the TV as a container is neatly explored in "Tap", the third and probably most well-known of the seven pieces. Unseen hands place a tap inside a glass tank, framed so that the tank's edges coincide with the sides of the TV. The tap is turned on, filling the space with water until it itself is submerged. The tank continues to fill until the meniscus -the surface line of the water- rises out of view. The tap is withdrawn and turned off, leaving that most forbidden of things, a blank, silent screen. After a pause of several seconds the plug is pulled and the tank empties, now with the meniscus cutting across the screen at a 45° angle. Beyond the reference to the box as glass-fronted container, the piece serves to demonstrate how framing is crucial in determining how we understand an image, and hence how meaning is created, not just by what framing includes, but also in the sense of the editorial function that it performs. This leads to a wider reading of the work as a critique of the largely invisible editorial practices of programme makers and indeed the TV institutions. Dziga Vertov, in the 1920s, held that all stages of film production were editorial, but TV, with its impression of live, unmediated presence, can appear to bypass that truth. By making the framing of an object coincide not just with the shape and size of the TV screen, but also with the physical properties of the set, Hall foregrounds the constructedness of these processes. The concealed reorientation of the camera before the plug is pulled adds to this. The meniscus no longer appears as such, but looks more like a waving line cutting through the void. Its disorientation causes ours: we read it before as a meniscus, not because we could see the water under it, but because of its horizontality and its coincidence with the the gushing of the tap. Now, through the act of re-framing, and in the absence of these associated cues, we no longer see it in the same way at all. The effect is reminiscent of the end of Bruce Bailley's short film "All my Life" which ends with a slow tilt up into the sky across a telephone wire. Once the shot clears the ground, it is the wire which appears to move, not the camera. Strangely too, the wire seems to divide the screen into two slightly different shades of blue.

The fourth piece is a time-lapse of a number of people watching TV -wheat threshing, a western, folk singers- in a large room. After an abrupt pull-out at the beginning, there is a gradual zoom in to the TV set. The work wryly demonstrates that while watching TV may be engrossing, watching other people watch TV is a lot less so. This leads to the old, but none the less true conclusion that watching TV is antisocial, unless it is done purposefully and communally (6). The screen within the screen re-emphasises the paucity of scale and scope that is in the nature of the medium. This is simultaneously conveyed in the fact that the framing reproduces similar conditions to those under which the piece itself would have been seen when broadcast. There is also a play on diegetic/non

diegetic sound, since it is difficult to tell if the increasingly strident movie soundtrack comes from the TV, from another part of the room, or has been dubbed-on.

In the fifth we pan from black across a TV-shaped opening through which can be glimpsed an Edinburgh street, shot from a fixed position. This shot structure is repeated ten times, each time with different vehicles and pedestrians in the frame. The sound track is in the form of a loop, so that the relationship between sound and picture shifts with each repeat, but all are plausibly synchronous.The work contradicts the normal state of affairs in which a camera pans across a scene, offering a seemingly open and unmediated panorama. Here the refilming camera pans across the scene, but framed within the frame of the TV set. Instead of panoramic plenitude, we get only a frustratingly limited view. The panning highlights how even the most open-seeming view is actually very restricted, partial, and centripetal.

In the sixth, three camera operators perform a live filming event at a busy town-centre road junction. The ultimate target of their cameras is a wooden TV cabinet with doors on the front (the same one that burns in "Interruption" ?). A woman's voice calls out the shots' durations at five second intervals while the camera operators race to set-up the next shot. The shots are made in a chain so that each time we see a camera in one shot we see that camera's point of view in the next. Finally the doors of the TV cabinet are opened and in a zoom-in we see Hall himself filming through from the back of the empty cabinet, framed by its screen-shaped opening. Again, the richness of the film-work and the expansive complexity of the location contrast with the diminished final view seen through the constrictive rectangle of the opening in the cabinet. The presence of Hall's camera pointing directly back at us reminds us that every shot on TV is somebody's point of view, and not some disembodied omniscient perspective.

The last of the seven works presents us, in a single, unbroken shot, with the constituents of a television programme, but not the programme itself. A man wearing headphones sits, quite still and silent at a table, with his back to us -a familiar TV scenario reversed. Behind the table is a plain backdrop. This and the man are lit by two lamps and there is a Bolex cine-camera on the desk in front of him. After about one minute of stasis, another man enters the scene, in time lapse. He replaces the camera with a pile of straw, then reverses these actions, passing between the man and the camera filming him as he does so. Finally the seated man -Hall himself- stands up and removes the headphones, simultaneously revealing that they are not attached to anything. He then picks up the camera and walks out of frame. Thus a theme of negation and uncertainty runs through the

work: there is no sound for us and none, we eventually discover, for him. He never speaks and we don't see his face until the moment he leaves. The backdrop behind the desk is blank, rendering the lighting semi-redundant, and the only movement is the timelapsed section. Even here the second man is perceived to be not in motion, but in a series of static positions. This timelapsed section retrospectively renders the first part ambiguous, since there is no way of telling if that too was in timelapse, or in real-time.

If "Interruption" is literally iconoclastic in its physical destruction of that most familiar emblem of TV, the set itself, this last section adopts an attitude of quiet resistance to the paraphernalia of the TV studio, and by association, its institutions, since it is in such studios that programmes are produced and presented. Instead of designer desks, effusive anchormen, sparkling graphics and "up" musical stings, we have in Hall's alternative an austere, silent space, a pine table and a mute, inanimate figure who has turned his back on the viewer. His headphones, normally a source of sound, here serve to isolate him from auditory stimuli. The moving man breaks what was certainly then a TV studio taboo by walking between the camera and its subject, disrupting the spatial stability by which the studio offers a transparent point of view for the viewer. The seated man may be seen as a technician, who probably should be behind the camera, not in front of it. The TV set on which all this would have been seen is the only normal part of the experience, which must have seemed very strange, not to say baffling, in1971.

After the Seven TV Pieces Hall made a group of films with Tony Sinden which took an analytical approach to questions such as the picture plane (This Surface, 1973), to depth, foreshortening and framing (Edge, 1973), acting (The Actor, 1972-3) and the projection event ("Between", 1973). Between is one of the most media-specific of Hall's works. A cameraman walks backwards and forwards along the cone of light thrown by a film projector, capturing his shadow as he walks towards the screen, and the light coming from the projector as he returns. At every turn we see a copy of the previous section, then a copy of the copy and so on, until the image has broken down into high-contrast grain patterns.

This technique was used again in what is Hall's most notorious work: "This is a Television Receiver", which was broadcast by BBC2 in 1975. The then well-known newsreader Richard Baker reads a didactic text describing the physical features of a typical TV set. He goes on to explain that what looks like a man is not actually a man but the image of a man, and what sounds like a man's voice is in fact "vibrations on a cone" . The two played together create the impression of a man

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talking, "but it is not a man".At the completion of Baker's speech we see a copy of it, made by re-shooting the original from the TV screen. This is followed by a copy of the copy and so on for three repeats.

Describing the work in this manner makes it seem almost absurdly banal and literal, a parody, perhaps, of some of the more heavy-handed structural film of the period. But within the context of broadcast TV the work is already subversive in a number of ways. Although they often become celebrities, newsreaders never draw attention to themselves, much less their function, in the way Richard Baker does here. TV personalities almost never discuss TV in a manner that calls into question its very nature and raison d'être: such debates, on programmes like Points of View, are usually over the content, costumes or performances in a programme, or concern allegations of bias or imbalance within a programme or the institution as a whole. The unannounced insertion of an event like "This is a Television Receiver" throws into relief the character of most TV programming, hopefully giving the viewer pause for thought.

By the time we reach the final repeat the image and sound have deteriorated dramatically. The grossly distorted face appears now as a smear of coloured lines, which pulsate and flow around the hard edges of the screen. Landscape-like spaces can be read into what has become a mesmerising, ethereal image.The pleasure thus derived is in itself subversive, since it substitutes an anti-TV aesthetic of "useless" pleasure for the dull instrumentalism of most output. Furthermore one can contemplate, in its unfolding, the widening gap between what one "knows" one is watching and what is actually unfolding before the eyes: at a certain point one is obliged to recognise that the "image of a man" can really no longer be so described, even though it is logically derived from that original image. The virtual space initially occupied by the talking head has been displaced by an abstract surface, whose rippling immateriality emphasises the constraining boxiness of the TV set.

The process of making a copy of the copy etc. (7) uses a visible, material process to expose the nature of the video image, magnifying the stream of electronic pulses, RGB gun-firings and brief phosphor-glowings that create the illusion of an image. The noise in the (analogue) system which causes the deterioration from generation to generation increasingly becomes the subject of the work. This too is part of its subversiveness: the idea that an unwanted by-product of data transfer might displace the carefully engineered products of broadcast television to give the viewer something just as interesting, if not more so, to watch.

This approach, by which unwanted, intrusive or negative phenomena are positively embraced is reprised (digitally) by David Larcher in his tape Videovøid (1993) some of whose imagery is conjured from tape "drop out". "Videovøid" springs out of a negative paradox, tape drop-out being the trace (presence) of an absence, in this case the absence of magnetic coating from the tape's base material, resulting in the horizontal white lines familiar to viewers of rented videos.

Larcher has long been interested in the trace, a phenomenon that can be distinguished from the indexical sign by its immateriality. A footprint stands as evidence of a substantial event with physical consequences: the foot can be reconstructed as a plaster cast, for example. The trace, by contrast, exists only fleetingly, as a record of an event such as the passing of a bird, that might leave no more evidence than a momentary disturbance in the movement of the air. Some such phenomena, or epiphenomena, will only be caught, if at all, as a moving image.

Before he began working in video, Larcher made very long films -Mare's Tail (1969, 2½ hours), "Monkey's Birthday", (1975, 6 hours)- which are notable for the extensive, laborious reworking that took place on the camera footage using an optical printer. Clearly video, with its flexibility and ease of use in post-production is a far more suitable medium for someone like Larcher, who made immediate and effective use of it in "EETC." in 1988.

EETC. is a transitional, hybrid work that was shot on a mixture of film and tape. Post-production began on film, with optical printing at the London Film-makers' Co-op, and was completed on tape: "off off off lined at London Video Arts". Larcher's earlier films were assembled from accumulated quantities of footage gathered whilst travelling with his family in their Mercedes lorry around various parts of the world. EETC continues this trend of diary/home-movie making, except that now the footage is continuously reworked, re-examined according to the unifying idea of the "trace". The recurring image of a flock of birds flying in an E-shaped formation is eventually accompanied by the words spoken on the soundtrack by the French painter Talcoat: "a flight is also nothing but a trace. A flight of birds...you see the flight...you no longer see the bird. When is the bird, when is the flight, when is the trace ?"

After a protracted "title sequence" EETC opens in a manner that looks "backwards" to film even as it simultaneously introduces a live matting and luma-key "performance". The camera points at a portable cinema screen set up in an open-air situation. Larcher enters the frame to put on a hand-clap sync-mark, a common practice amongst documentary film-makers when it is inconvenient to

use a clapper-board. At about the same time a rectangular matte is superimposed on the screen, in such a way that when Larcher walks into shot he sometimes appears within the matted area, and sometimes without. There follows a series of variations on this set-up, during which the cinema screen is sprayed black. At one point Larcher removes a square of paper from the sprayed screen, creating a white square within the black one. This white square is then sprayed as well. The blackening of the screen renders it useless for projecting onto (except metaphorically), but perfect for luma-keying.

This sequence establishes a number of things. First, we are posited as an audience, about to see a projection (fiction) on a screen which is bordered by the (real) world (which also has its own off-screen audience who are heard but not seen). But this distinction between fictive and real is broken-down, as soon as it is established, by the matting of new background images in place of the opening ones. The constant swopping around of foreground and background breaks down the initially naturalistic space, replacing it with collaged images whose spatial relationships are unfixed or contradictory. The images contained within one or other of the rectangular mattes periodically bleed through into adjacent rectangles. When this happens the spatial recession implied by the array of frames within frames is undermined.

Semantic relationships are also created between, for example, grain reticulation seen in close-up, (the micro-structure of the image) and its macro effect (the background landscape) and between grain and flower petals (both organic phenomena).

In both technological terms this sequence is the most interesting in the whole work. The manual creation of what are usually electronic procedures; sync marks, mattes, luma-key backgrounds, implies neither an anachronistic distrust of impersonal new technologies, nor a sentimental attachment to the craft ethos of film. Rather it should be seen as a way of taking control of those video processes which come pre-packaged and which are not yet fine-grained or adaptable enough that they don't impart a prefabricated, straight from the box look to the work. Larcher's actions serve to demystify these processes, which are commonly used in video and TV production, but which are either concealed or are, by their electronic nature, invisible.

At the end of this sequence edge fogging intrudes from the left hand side of the screen, adding yet another layer to the process, reminding the viewer that for all the elaborate and quite concrete-seeming on-screen activity of hand-clapping and spray painting, this is still in the end only a flimsy

image born out of a highly refined controlling and channelling of light: light is both creator and destroyer of the image. As Talcoat says: "the sky is everywhere"
At the end of E Etc. the screen within a screen template remains, but we have left the hybrid, organic world behind and arrived at a wholly electronic space filled with skewed video colours and slow-motion scan lines.

Throughout the work analogies are drawn between the Trace, film-making and cooking as processes. We see film of Larcher hand-processing film in a Morse tank, while on the soundtrack, a voice describes the way that gelatin, the medium containing the silver halide crystals, is produced. We also see film cans being opened and closed and 16mm film being hung out to dry in a garden. We hear the "music" of film rolls flapping round on a Steenbeck editing table, and in a scene where logs are thrown from one spot to another, the raw sound of the logs clonking against each other is sampled and "cooked" into a set of musical phrases. This process precisely prefigures the major processes of Ich Tank (discussed below) whereby naturalistic sources are transformed into highly synthetic sequences. The multi dimensional spatialities of Ich Tank are also prefigured in EETC, except here it is time that is so treated. When the 16mm film is hung out to dry in the garden, we see an image in the present of an event from the past. The drying film constitutes a future to that image of the past in that it will be seen -printed and projected, perhaps incorporated into EETC- at some future date. Near the end of EETC, we see a screen within a screen within a screen of Larcher watching himself watching himself knocking a hole in a wall, except that in the innermost screen -the hole knocking- the film is running backwards. Thus a void is being filled with a sledge hammer, and the time of the innermost screen is running backwards towards that of the outer ones.

As EETC progresses the pace increases: photographs, movie footage and mattes are churned into an electronic flux of grain, colour, distortion and vestigial images. The representations of processes seen earlier in the work are themselves processed and incorporated into ever more complex collages. The difficulty of describing the work in conventional terms -there are no shots or scenes in the usual sense- is a function of its state of flux. Our language is based around a division of the world into objects which are located in a determinate time and space. "EETC." breaks this structure down, questioning its adequacy to describe phenomena which are by their nature ongoing, mutable, evolving. This is a process eminently suited to video. Unlike film, video camera-footage can be effortlessly re-used, so that any event can be endlessly reworked, opening-up the idea of an inexhaustible reality. And the video image itself exists only as a dot traced horizontally, line by

line, down the screen, fast enough so that the retina can retain the sum of the information as an image.Therefore the image does not exist in a determinate moment of time but is always a partial image that is being continuously updated.

The constantly evolving, unpredictable processes of EETC are given a verbal expression near the end of the work where we hear again the voice of Talcoat:

"(Frans Hals) tried to do exactly what he saw but couldn't conceive of...and that is the great thing...no longer to conceive of things...to limit oneself to one's perceptions...but in such a way it implies the 'never seen' ". The "never seen" is precisely the promise that video, as opposed to film, can deliver. Film's strength, or its weakness in this context, is its ties to the real. Digital media hold out the possibility of quite new and
unimaginable images, synthetic images, in the same way that the birth of electronic music in the 1950s offered the prospect of completely new kinds of sound-world.

The ambition to create the "never seen" is taken much further in Larcher's most recent work "Ich Tank" (1999). Where E Etc was organic, funky and anthropocentric, Ich Tank is crystalline, hi tech and other worldly, despite the periodic presence of fish, birds and Larcher himself. The work opens with a slow-motion view through the bottom of a goldfish bowl which Larcher peers into and manipulates. This shot is distinguished from the rest of the work by its distortions and motion being manually created in a kind of bio-feedback performance for camera. Eventually the image changes abruptly to a scene on a boat at sea. This shot is "tiled" and these tiles are then reassembled into rectangular tunnel-like structures down which we travel. This sets the tone for the rest of the tape.

No sooner does a naturalistic image appear than it is replicated and repositioned to become a piece in a geometric construction. This construction may itself then form an element in a yet more complex construction. The work reaches a high point at the moment at which a 3D "object", formed out of a shot of water, traces an upward spiral, leaving a continuous wake. The spiral flattens into a rectangle and a new spiral forms around the flattened one. This whole then tips through 90° to form the frame for an image of a bird tapping on a window.

The layering process -screens within screens- initiated in EETC are taken to the multidimensional nth degree in Ich Tank. Images are the raw material out of which fractal-like multi-dimensional structures are compounded. Larcher goes about as far as possible in creating an artificial world of evolving, abstract kinetic shapes. Although abstracted from nature, the bits of reality from which

these forms were derived survive only as texture or microscopic movements which animate the surfaces of the forms. Yet they gain much of their efficacy from their being occasionally intercut with shots of birds or fish, which, after the giddy complexity of the synthesised sequences, are startling in their concreteness.

The work is performative in two ways. Firstly there is Larcher's presence, manipulating the goldfish bowl at the beginning then later, naked, submerged in a large glass tank. Secondly the construction of the work is a kind of digital editing performance, in that it continuously evolves, with new elements being added in, and new processes being applied, to create something akin to a large-scale improvised musical performance.

If Larcher's recent work demonstrates the power of digital editing to facilitate the total, bottom-up restructuring of a given image, Guy Sherwin's films demonstrate just as distinctively the importance of film for its indexical ties to the real. In a programme note to a screening of his films at the Lux Centre in London Sherwin wrote:

"My feeling is that whatever advantages digital technology might have over film, its ontological link to the objective image-source is weaker than in film. In other words, digital imagery always appears synthetic in comparison to film, even if the image depicted has more detail.
I believe that my black and white, silent, grainy films have a stronger sense of fidelity or connectedness to the reality "out there" than their high-definition digital counterpart - and that film is still the medium with the strongest link to its referent." (8)

It is important that Sherwin's argument rests not on the "superior" picture quality of film but on the fundamental differences between the way film and video images are formed.(9) These differences may be summarised as follows: film's image, like photography with which it is identical in this respect, is formed directly by light falling on the film, whereas video images (or, strictly speaking, signals, since they are at any one moment almost entirely incomplete (see above)), are electronically reconstituted from a stream of voltages.

In a recent untitled film from the "Short Film Series" (B & W, silent, 3mins, 1998, series begun 1975), a single, three-minute shot of a tree-lined river is subjected to a simple procedure at the printing stage whereby the trees and their reflection in the river swop places. This is achieved by printing the film the right way up, then printing it again onto the same roll of print-stock, upside

down. This means that the upside down superimposition also runs backwards. A consequence of this is that the film has a double palindrome or "mirror fugue" structure. The resulting work asks us to reflect on how much an object can change before it becomes a different thing: at what point on a sliding scale does the change-over occur ? Where, in other words, are the grey areas in our taxonomy of the world, and what do those areas tell us about that taxonomy's limitations ?

The film is experimental in the sense that a number of effects are created which could not easily have been anticipated. The ripples in the water appear to move in a downward sweep, but at the mid-point of the film, where there is 50/50 trees/reflection in both "halves" of the picture, this movement appears as a continuous flow from the top of the screen down through the frame, not in contrary motion from the middle as one might expect. A Coot which passes backwards through the frame towards the end of the film appears the right way up, even though one understands that it is really the reflection that is the right way up.

It is important to the meaning of the film that the procedure by which it is made is a material one, the result of setting-off a visible procedure which is allowed to run its programmed, mechanical course. The same effect could be achieved using video/non-linear editing, but this would involve a rendering process in which the two shots are mixed together through a process of electronic reconstitution. Such a process, however, would break the causal chain by which the work was produced and thereby go against its raison d'etre. The work's impact comes from the dramatic gap between means; fixed, mechanical, predictable, and the visible results; unpredictable images, shifting meanings and perceptions which conflict with understanding.

"Flight" (B & W, sound, 4mins,1998) is a four-minute work made from a tiny fragment of film of pigeons, semi-silhouetted in trees, shot with a long lens. The imagery has been slowed-down and sometimes stopped, using an optical printer to rework the original fragment. The effect of this is that a bird, frozen in the act of taking off from a branch, disappears. This is nothing to do with camouflage, but is a function of the way a frozen blur of a bird effectively becomes part of the surrounding foliage: what appears are alterations to the foliage, not a frozen bird against a frozen background. As movement is returned it is still unclear whether that is the bird's flapping wings or the wind in the trees. Thus we are invited to consider how the visual field may be full of such disappearances and ambiguities, spurious phenomena to which we are generally blind because our world is held together by an intuitive sense of the continuity and completeness of vision.

As before, it is important for the efficacy of the work that the problematic to which the film gives rise is generated from re-ordered, as opposed to manipulated frames: the integrity of the original imagery is clearly intact. If the work had been made in video and edited digitally, it is possible that the questions raised by the film version would not arise, because the viewer can assume they are witnessing sleights of hand attributable to digital trickery. (This relates to what is behind the underwhelming quality of so much special FX work in recent feature films.) (10)

Like the above two works, "Night Train" (B & W, optical sound, 4mins,1979) may be seen as continuing the Vertovian tradition of employing film to reveal phenomena not normally visible to the naked eye. Night Train was shot from a moving train at night, using time exposures of half a second per frame. The camera records passing lights as traces, so the nearer the objects to the train, the longer the trace. This results from the familiar travel experience whereby we appear to pass nearer objects faster than distant ones. This here translates into a black screen with abstract horizontal white lines, distant light sources making short feint lines, near ones long and bright lines. The judder of the train also effects the quality of the trace, imparting a zigzag which makes it look even more like an ECG scan. The lines draw themselves onto the celluloid, or rather the train draws itself across the light sources, making lines in the same way that a glacier acquires striations from the rocks it passes. Thus one can think of the film shooting itself, in the sense that it is the product of a set-up/procedure which is allowed to run its course unimpeded.

Because of the extreme brevity of the camera original, the negative is copied ten times over onto the same strip of print film, but each time the print stock is shifted forward by one frame, so that every frame is stretched to last just under half a second. This also means that every set of stretched frames overlaps its neighbour, both physically and temporally, so that one sees several traces building up on the screen, and these are used to generate the sound-track by extending the image into the optical sound area at the edge of the film. The continuous flow pauses once or twice when the train stops at a station and a naturalistic image abruptly forms. The striking contrast between these two kinds of image forces us to rethink our experience of night travel. We conceive of the distant lights and the railway stations as roughly the same kinds of thing, yet the visual trace of these presents us with images so distinct as to seem almost mutually exclusive beyond the common denominator of light.

There is a precise technical sense in which this work could not have been made on video, that is in regard to time-exposure: while it is possible to increase the shutter speed of a video camera, it

cannot be decreased to below 1/25th of a second. But such technical distinctions between video and film cannot by themselves provide the basis for arguing for a medium-specific use of film, video and TV. Part of the motivation for writing this essay was that as a film-maker I feel inevitably under siege. I like working with film, have done so for twenty five years, and would like to continue to do so, for the old fashioned reasons to do with the fact that, like a painter, one develops a practice within the specifics of one's chosen medium. However, because of the growth of new moving image media this desire to continue with film demands some reasoning/ justification along the lines of medium specificity which can all too easily lead down the cul de sac of essentialism. How can one argue for film, as opposed to video, without seeming like an essentialist anachrophile ? (11)

Perhaps I can only point to the difference in my experience of these different media. The difference in the strength of media specificity varies considerably between artists' work, but here are some comparisons. Guy Sherwin has stressed the importance of film for his work, but sometimes a film may be less film specific, yet informed in a significant way by a knowledge of the contours of film production and a training in its demanding disciplines. In a number of his films, notably "Downside Up" (1985, 16mm 17mins, colour) and A Short History of the Wheel (1992, 16mm, 1min, colour) an awareness of the cost of film-stock and the limitations at the editing stage have stimulated Tony Hill to develop and extend the possibilities of the shooting process by the invention of ingenious camera mountings which facilitate an economic shooting ratio but also, more importantly, allow us to see the World in novel ways. Hill's facility with engineering devices, indeed his whole approach must surely come out of his background in architecture and sculpture. In terms of technological requirements and, to a lesser extent, looks, much of his work could have been made on video. However his background in film arguably led to the development of aesthetic solutions which might not have occurred to a video artist for whom the editing suite is where the innovations take place.

One further example of a film which usefully highlights distinctions between the media is Rob Gawthrop's "Distancing" (1979, 16mm, 15mins, colour). The camera points out, from a fixed position, at a rain-spattered window, a head, a plant, the sea and the horizon. Gawthrop continuously pulls focus and aperture so that the picture-plane breaks down and the objects dissolve and reform in an ever-changing flux, "bringing into question the very act and accuracy of cinematic description" (12).

The effectiveness of this work depends very much on the image and the grain of the film being physically identical, in a way in which video images somehow are not. With film the image reforms and shifts, frame by frame, with every shift of the grain structure, so that it is fundamentally unstable. The beguiling mobility of the film image has a lot to do with this mobility of grain.

With video there is frame to frame stability, whence, partly, the quality of unmediated presence - nowness- typical of the medium. But this stability is achieved at the cost of an apparent mismatch between the micro-structure of the image and the fixed array of RGB guns used to generate it. Film grain seems to hold out the promise of more detail at a greater level of magnification in a way that video does not. With the latter one reaches a bedrock of the three pure colours generated from a more or less visible grid, beyond which nothing visible (meaningful ?) exists. This should not be taken to imply that there is significance somehow beyond the grain in film, or at a greater degree of magnification. But because the spectator's eye cannot keep up with the grain's movement, there is a constant sense of things ungrasped within the image, things slipping by, even when there is very little movement in the profilmic.

Texture is not necessarily to do with the presence of grain, but is also a product of the resolving power of a given medium.

Video recording is biased to the green and blue parts of the spectrum, the parts to which humans are most sensitive. This means that reddish images, such as faces, are less well recorded and hence less well textured. This lack of texture means a lack of differentiation within the image, which manifests as weaker three dimensional modelling and hence flatter-looking imagery. The importance of texture in the creation of convincing three-dimensional images is evidenced in the ubiquitous and often excessive use of texture mapping in 3D computer modelling.

Video's tonal range too, is only a fraction of film's and the consequent lack of contrast within an image contributes to its lack of depth and dynamism. (13). One has only to think of strong chiaroscuro painting to appreciate this. These remarks, however, should not necessarily be seen as value laden: flat paintings can be just as exciting as ones which exhibit depth, and video, with its own potentialities, can offer experiences as rich as film's.

The works discussed here are all effective advocates for the media with which they were made because all of them have expanded the aesthetic language of those media in exciting and distinctive ways. The artists are old fashioned "adepts" in that their work is the result of ideas developed through a sustained engagement with a particular medium or, in Hall's case, with a set of

institutional norms. This marks them out from many artists today who entrust the fabrication of their work to others, or whose use of film, video and TV is transitory or occasional. The consequent lack of awareness of the specificity and the history of the medium being used in such cases frequently leads to the creation of work which is inappropriate, naive or retrograde.

1. Peter Wollen: catalogue essay, "Arrows of Desire", ICA London 1992, pages 6-16.

2.Anthony McCall's "Line Describing a Cone" (1973, 30minutes) and Dryden Goodwin's "1998 frames" (1998, indefinite) both make effective use of the contrast between the film image and the technology generating it. McCall's is a fixed duration gallery (or cinema space) work, incorporating the projector, the beam of light (enhanced with smoke) and a slowly evolving image. The image, the gradual "drawing" of a white circle on a black background, simultaneously appears as a growing arc of light in the beam. When the circle is complete the arc has become a palpable cone into which the spectator can move his head. Goodwin's film is a loop of 1998 frames, each one having a different image of a car on it. The film is "driven" through the projector, the cars are driven under the bridge from which they were filmed. The film-strip moves through the projector, but the images of the cars are still images: non-sequential single frames.

The slight up and down movement of the film image -caused by each successive frame being inaccurately thrown onto the place of its predecessor- grain movement, the rattle of the projector and the visibility of its beam all contribute to the medium's imposing presence. By contrast, Bill Viola's installation The Passing would not work on film. The hushed ambience within which the image of the submerged man floats holographically in space is very much the product of video technology used in the most self-effacing possible way: noiseless, concealed projector, dim beam, stable image etc. Because the image is so dim, the relative contrast between it and the darkness of the room within which it is presented is slight. This helps to draw attention away from the image's source, contributing to the sense of it being detached and immaterial, like an apparition. (Many of James Turrel's light installations similarly efface their technology by avoiding any strong or obviously directional light sources which would thereby draw attention to themselves.)

3. Interview with Steve Partridge in Transcript, Duncan of Jordanston College of Art,Dundee, 1999, vol. 3, issue 3, page 40.

4. Ibid. page 34.

5. Dolby Stereo, by concretising off-screen space through the placement of speakers which emit off-screen sound, has diminished this pleasure.

6. In her Book of Cookery and Household Management, Mrs Beaton gives guidelines for hosting a TV party. As well as catering suggestions, she gives tips on seating and lighting and on the desirability of allowing time to discuss the programmes ! Mrs. Beaton's Cookery and Household Management, Ward Lock Ltd., 11th Edition, 1971, page108.

7. The process of copying the copy is found in a number of art and sound works from around this time, including Steve Reich's "Come Out" (1966), Alvin Lucier's "I am sitting in a Room" (1970) and Art and Language's "Xerox Book" (1969 ?).

8 Guy Sherwin: "Chronology and Some Reasoning", programme notes to screening at the Lux Centre, London, 30th January, 1998.

9. For an appraisal of the relative quality of film and video see "Film Vs Video" by Thomas G Wallis, a technical director at Kodak, in "Film Waves" no 8, Summer 1999, page 28, pub. Obraz Productions Ltd, London..

10. For a discussion of the disappointments engendered by FX-laden movies, see Jonathon Romney: "The Return of the Shadow", The Guardian G2, 22nd Spetember, 1999, page 16. Romney praises the horror film "Cat People" (1942, Jacques Tourneur) for its subtle understatedness and castigates Jan de Bont for replacing shadowy, suggestive mise en scène with computer generated monstrosities in his crass 1999 remake of the original 1963 version of "The Haunting" by Robert Wise.

11. At the time of writing, the facilities upon which film-makers depend are beginning to contract. The Lux is to dispose of its film processing machine and at least one London laboratory no longer makes 16mm answer prints, although large quantities of negative continue to be developed. Telecine has replaced the answer print since most work nowadays is destined for TV or video. The

decline in commercial demand for 16mm prints therefore may eventually have a direct effect on the activities of film-makers. Artists working with commercial media in a rapidly changing environment are in a precarious position given that their chosen medium may only be available for as long as there is a commercial demand for it, unless facilities houses make a special effort to continue to provide services which in themselves may not be cost effective, or can cross-subsidise these services like Hendersons, the black and white-only lab in Norwood. Hendersons provide an excellent service from 16mm neg development through to show-prints, but their bread and butter is in archival printing and in the printing of 35mm optical soundtracks for use in the production of DVD transfers of old movies.

12. Rob Gawthrop, London Film-makers' Co-op catalogue, 1993, page 48.

13. Thomas G Wallis, op cit.