

## **Reflections on my practice and Media Specificity**

Reviewing my work since I began to make films, I think it has gone through a number of phases.

I have often described the earliest phase of my work with film as primitive. I was well informed about mainstream cinema and the European 'art' cinema of Truffaut, Godard, Fellini or Bergman. But when I started making film I had already rejected either of these forms of cinema as a model - I sought a form that matched my understanding and experience of contemporary 'radical' art. My concepts came instead mainly from painting and what was known then as free-form jazz. I described my early work as primitive because I had no technical knowledge of film but more importantly at the time, I was uninformed about the early experimental films of Leger, Ruttmann, Richter etc. the American Underground of Brakhage, Warhol or Jack Smith films or their equivalent in Europe - Kren, Kubelka or for example my immediate contemporaries B&W Hein. This period lasted a short while as experimental film from abroad began to be seen in London and I also actively researched and sought out early avant-garde work.

The second phase emerged after I had built printing and processing equipment and later - with the help particularly of Fred Drummond - installed the first properly functioning filmmakers workshop using ex-laboratory equipment. The opportunities offered by this equipment led me to explore the possibilities of film-printing, film image transformation and structures based often on loops and repeated sequences. Also a major part of this second phase was experiment with multi-projection, installation and live performance with film. The two aspects of this phase of work raised different questions, but each was characterized by an exploration of the medium, its context of presentation and the encounter for the spectator.

The next phase began with a return to performance represented within the film - *After Lumiere* and *After Manet* - and proceeded to the three feature length single screen films that explored a minimal form of narrative. During this period I explored issues of the language of film, its semiology, the notion of its grammar and tense formation, identification with represented characters and with camera viewpoint.

The current phase, which began around 1984, took up again some of the issues of my earlier films but through video and the digital rather than film.

### **Media Transitions - Film, Video and Digital Systems**

My early work with film, concentrating particularly on the properties of film as medium, its materials and mechanical processes, has often been interpreted as giving some special priority to the intrinsic qualities of film - an essentialist attitude consistent with some aspects of modernism. Though much of my early theoretical work clearly stressed the medium and materials, I have never promoted the idea of 'pure film' or the clear delineation of film from other media. My earliest involvement with film, ran parallel to an interest in a wide range of media, including, even in the late 1960's, video and computers. It also involved: performances that stressed presence; cross media explorations; and from the start, a concern with the role and experience of the spectator. In one sense it had a modernist base, an awareness of those factors that were specific to a medium, but it also always challenged the limits of the medium, stretching these to a breaking point, as in *White Field Duration*, or the conceptual performance *Pre-production* which involved only live readings and a blank white screen.

As in *Yes No Maybe Maybenot* and *Berlin Horse*, this early period was particularly characterized by an involvement in image transformation exploring the potential of film-printing and developing. It was also characterized by the development of temporal structures based on repetition and the film loop and by a concern with the role and conceptual experience of the spectator. This was explored in a number of ways but specifically through multi-projection with anything from two to six projectors, film-loop installations, projection performances where the projectors are moved during the performance and shadow performances. My work of this period also explored minimal concepts of cinema with a focus on the screen - often blank - a focus on the film base (normally called celluloid but in fact acetate) and its aberrations of scratch and dirt particles and on re-filming from the screen. A example of this is the six-screen film and performance, *After Leonardo*, which explores image deterioration beginning with a close-up detail, black and white reproduction of the crazed paint surface of the *Mona Lisa*. This deterioration - the trace of time on an object - is treated as a parallel for aberrations and loss in the filmed representation.

During the same period I published theoretical concepts about duration and the ways in which experience of present duration for the spectator might relate to represented times and spaces, for example *Real time/space* (Art and Artists December 1972, Pages 39-43). The theory and my practice led me to a reexamination of representation, exploring the process of cine-photography in the context of the indexical signifier and focussing on the notions of document and evidence.

The first works that pursued this direction were *After Lumiere - l'arroseur arrosé*, (1974) and *After Manet - le dejuener sur l'herb*, made with four cameras and shown on four screens. I then made three feature length films that explored aspects of narrative form and structure, *Blackbird Descending*, *Emily and Finnegans Chin*, later shown on Channel Four. In particular these films focussed on the experience and construction of tense in cinematic language, the constraint of viewpoint and its 'fusion' with the spectator's psychological identification with represented screen characters. This was accompanied by a number of theoretical essays examining issues of semiology with reference to the work of Christian Metz but specifically discussing this in the context of experimental rather than conventional mainstream cinema, for example, *Problematizing the Spectator Placement in Film* (Undercut no 1, March 1981, Pages 13-18 and in *Cinema and Language*, American Film Institute Monograph Series Vol 1, 1983, Pages 50-62 published conference papers of March 1979 Milwaukee)

This series of large scale and partly narrative films left me with a creative crisis and a sense that my earlier films, largely made outside narrative form, continued to represent a more 'radical' and challenging artistic framework. This conclusion coincided with the availability of the first high quality, small format video - Video8 - and with fast, flexible, programmable home computers with good facilities for image and sound. I began a number of short and exploratory works simultaneously using the new Video8 format and the computer. In the early 1980's a number of low cost computers with visual potential became available. This started with the very primitive Sinclair Spectrum for which I wrote abstract image and sound programmes often in the most fundamental machine code form, for example creating the sound pitches by modulating the electronic signal frequency of the loudspeaker. The Sinclair was followed by the Amiga, and the computer that I chose to work with, the Atari. Though by present standards the Atari was slow and with very little memory, the image processor allowed programmes to be written that could modulate the image at rates beyond 1/25th

second - the standard rate for film and video. At the same time the Atari had a direct output and input for MIDI (Musical Instrument Digital Interface) that allowed programmes to be written controlling music synthesizers. These synthesizers, widely used by musicians and composers, opened up a vast range of sound quality manipulation. I had largely abandoned my early involvement with computers after completing the very short film *Your Lips* in 1970. At that time even the largest computers available to industry, the military and university research establishments, had very little visual potential. They were difficult to programme and were largely inaccessible to artists. The Atari offered a level of sophistication of image and sound that matched my expectations of film or video. I made a number of computer works based on programmes I wrote to control the image and sound output simultaneously. First shown in 1984, projected directly from the computer, I continue to present two of these, *Arbitrary Logic* and *Digital Still Life*. These were later incorporated as sections in a long TV work, *Sketches for a Sensual Philosophy*. These two computer pieces continued directions opened up in my early films. *Arbitrary Logic* explored nonfigurative colour fields changing in time in a similar way to the installation and performance film *Matrix* that used coloured film loops accompanied by taped electronic sound. *Digital Still Life* explored the transformation of image colour and tonal distribution extending the work that originated for me with *Berlin Horse*. When I made *Berlin Horse*, I was unaware that this form of exploration had begun much earlier with Len Lye and is particularly evident in two of his films from the late 1930's, *Trade Tattoo* and *Rainbow Dance*.

Whilst my computer pieces of this period continued themes and ideas from my earlier work they also opened up new possibilities and, through the theoretical work I did attempting to define fundamentals of computer or digital art, have led me to a major review of the concepts of medium, medium specificity and underlying assumptions of modernism. From this I think I have been able to define some of the creative opportunities and artistic issues opened up by the computer and more generally by digital systems.

The first of these was an expansion of the range of image transformation. Transforming the image in film relies on its mechanical and chemical processes. They are largely based on shifts between negative and positive or re-colouring fields through mattes made from monochrome versions of the image. Digital processes allow - indeed, require - a more fundamental level of image abstraction to the digital code underlying the characteristics of each pixel. Any of those characteristics that determine colour, brightness and position can be selected for manipulation depending on the depth of programming undertaken. The effects normally incorporated into commercial software packages, tend to mimic film and video, but, in fact, digital manipulations are not constrained by cinematic processes and potentially extend the range available. However, as with film, the more important issues remain not the technical extension of a range of effects but the way these are used to create artistic meaning and experience.

The second major opportunity offered by the computer was the exploration of certain synaesthetic and rhythmic relationships between image and sound. By basing the work on a programme, the sound and image control could be integrated. For example, in *Arbitrary Logic* certain pitches were attached to certain colours and were modified simultaneously. This linking of colour and sound has very early origins that even precede the Light Organ experiments of Bainbridge Bishop and Wallace Rimmington of the 1880's and 1890's. Visual music has also been a recurring concept from the earliest period of abstract cinema and the synaesthetic relationship between colour and sound forms a major part of Kandinsky's theories. As it happens, I came to a conclusion that there was no intrinsic psychological link

between a particular colour and a particular pitch - consequently the term 'arbitrary' in the title - but the construction of relationships between sound and colour *within* the abstract 'language' of a work remains valid.

The other features that emerge from the digital work - programmability and interactivity - are more fundamental and more challenging for our preconceptions of artistic practice. Creating a work from a programme has particular consequences. The first of these is that implicit or unconscious artistic processes need to be made explicit through the programme. In other words, in *Digital Still Life* for example, the programme is written and rewritten so that it 'makes the decisions' and produces the work. Of course it was my artistic desires and preconceptions that determined what kind of work, what kind of decisions the programme would make and so the programme modeled at least a part of my own 'sensitivity'. And - the process of rewriting the programme was 'organic' and subjective - if the output did not satisfy my judgment I would rewrite sections of the programme. But - when written, the programme generated the work and small changes to values (variables) introduced to the programme would produce slightly different outcomes.

So in one sense these programmes, as all computer programmes, are *general models* that can produce a variety of particular results. The way digital processes undermine the concept of the single definitive work of art is a challenge to our artistic preconceptions.

The other major new opportunity made possible by computers and digital systems is that of interactivity. Though *Arbitrary Logic* is now shown in video tape form it began as an interactive work. The programme was written so that the progress of the work can be changed by interaction through the mouse. This interaction brings about immediate changes to the visual and musical output and to how it continues to develop in time. Despite a misleading mythology that interactivity brings the spectator 'democratically' into to a work's creation, interactivity does have consequences for our understanding of the exclusivity of authorship - again a general challenge to our preconceptions about art.

Though in my practice I have not pursued this aspect of interactivity the inevitable separation of content from structure that it implies has formed part of my work with video. *Chronos Fragmented*, a long work initially produced for television, brought together the two strands of my practice - video and computer - that have occupied me since the early 1980's. In truth, whilst most of my theoretical work in this period has been concerned with understanding the artistic consequences of digital systems, my practice has been dominated by video.

It was not an ideological but a practical or psychological decision to give up film as a medium in favour of video. However it has made a significant change to my practice. As a filmmaker I had rarely used the camera. Like others I had made occasional standard 8mm 'home-movies' but even in *Little Dog for Roger*, based on resurrected 9.5mm shot by my father, the images of family have been distanced from any nostalgic function by the formal structure of the film.

Since I began shooting video, a little under twenty years ago, I have amassed well over one hundred hours of tape. In the twenty year period as a filmmaker before then, including the home-movies, I doubt if I had shot more than ten hours of film. Little of my work using film was concerned with events before the camera. Working with video I still tend to differentiate images that remain of private interest from those that may become incorporated in to art works. However, this differentiation is blurred and may change as a personal image take its

place in another metaphoric or symbolic context. This shift is unpredictable and is certainly not evident to me at the moment of shooting. Almost all the video work I have made - some thirty titles of varying lengths - have been the result of finding potential in sequences shot initially without any notion of their artistic use. In film I initially had a similar response to the found footage images that formed a library I plundered for particular expressive purposes, as in *Castle I*, *Castle Two*, or *Reign of the Vampire* and much of my earliest work. Using images that I had shot and carried some psychological and material connection to my own particular passage through life represented a major change. I have tried to analyze aspects of this process in my description of what I have called rather too grandly 'The Chronos Project'.

I shoot video as and when I feel like it. No doubt my experience as an artist makes this act with the camera more than randomly spontaneous. I am sure I make continuous, if unthought, decisions about subject, frame, pace or camera movement, and I am aware that these decisions include what I might choose *not* to shoot which becomes, by implication, part of *content by absence*.

Having shot the video it has normally 'rested' for some time on the shelf. I may half recall an image, I may look at tapes and from time to time I catalogue them noting particular images. During this time the sequences seem to lose some of their association with the initial event they recorded and become separated images - almost raw material that may have been shot by someone else.

In describing this process of shooting, collecting storing and reviewing the material I have resisted calling it simply a video diary. It is a diary in one sense; though unmethodical, its chronology is recoverable as the shot sequences remain in date order and the tapes are numbered chronologically. However, little of the motivation for shooting the material is to do with preserving the moment recorded. For Jonas Mekas, the diary is a record - a form of 'nostalgic' access to the places, times and people he has filmed. My images only begin to interest me when they break with their origin and become 'latent', take on a mystery as something where the meaning has become unknown to me and is not contained within what I might recall of the moment of recording. The sequences become fragments. The term 'fragment' - as in *Chronos Fragmented*. implies a view of the world and its experience where the connections are fluid, shift and reform. Used as an analogy, the video sequences are thought of as fragments of *memory*. In a material sense they are documents, not memory, and they only document what is specifically visible or audible from the record. No inferences about the reality at the time of shooting can strictly be made beyond what is in the picture frame or time frame of the sequence. This returns to an interpretation of the representational limit of the cinematic image understood as an indexical signifier where meanings and connotation are isolated by the time and image frame.

In making a work - where I have selected sequences and have brought them together in a montage or superimposition with another sequence - I have recognized a clear desire to lose the personal and idiosyncratic meanings. Here I have taken up some of the language of mythology, for example in the titles *Chronos Fragmented* or *Even a Cyclops Pays the Ferryman*. I see this reference as 'poetic' rather than reflecting any system of belief. It frees-up allegorical connection and helps shift the specific image into the realm of archetype, and metaphor. These 'metaphors' however do not have any fixed and delineated meaning either for me as the maker or for the spectator. Their meaning remains *latent* and open to continuous review, in the way the dream works on the symbol, in the sense understood by

psychoanalysis. In works like *Even a Cyclops Pays the Ferryman*, I have continued the exploration of repetition - sequences repeated but superimposed or montaged in different relationships with other sequences. I have also continued to develop the 'language' of image transformation helping to separate a sequence from its initial connotations. However, something of a trace of this connotation remains. The sequences retain some signification that they have originated outside their allegorical 'purpose' so their duality draws attention to a process of transformation.

Within this project I have made a connection with my theoretical understanding of the digital, in this case drawing parallels between non-linearity or Random Access Memory and human memory or dream. Whilst working on *Chronos Fragmented*, treating the sequences as a database, I also wrote simple computer programmes to find, sort and assemble sequences according to 'subjective' characteristics selected from the database. This use of computers was different in character from my previous work in image synthesis or transformation. It functioned as a practical aid to recalling and grouping sequences from, at that time, some sixty hours of material.

Using a computer programme was only a part, and probably a minor part, of the process of making *Chronos Fragmented* as, in the final stages of montage, I modified and frequently rejected decisions made by the programme. However, it helped me to bring forward certain concepts related to non-linearity and interactivity, that changed aspects of my video structure particularly as work developed after *Chronos Fragmented*. In particular, repetitions within the linear work came to 'stand' for non-linear flexibility between sequences. As well as the particular variations explored in the works, the form implied that this process of working and reworking the source material could be continued. The separation between sequences and their various combinations implied by the video form I adopted also implied that any combination selected had a provisional rather than a definitive quality and meaning. This implicit provisionality is in turn symbolic of the engagement of the spectator in making and remaking the meaning of the work - a symbolic interactivity.

During the same period I have also made a number of other video works using material from the 'diary'. In two series of videos, under the collective titles of *Sketches for a Sensual Philosophy* and *Trials and Tribulations*, instead of weaving a wide range of sequences into a large episodic or allegorical form, I have responded to qualities in certain short sequences. From this I have made works that might be only a minute or so in length, like *Seeing the Future*, *For the Benefit of Mr K*, or *Warsaw Window*. I think of these, and more recent works like *Traveling with Mark*, and the installation video *Unforgettable*, as video poems or songs that are self-contained. Though different in form, like the larger work, I think they are consistent with the notion of fragment and disconnection.

There have also been some recent works, particularly *Joseph's New Coat*, that have no representational source images but have been generated from colour fields and from various digital and analogue treatments of these fields. I would find it difficult to argue any direct connection between this nonfigurative, abstract or synthetic work and the symbolic exploration of fragmentary documents. However, both strands have more in common with temporal structures that relate better to music than to narrative. At the same time both strands seem to encompass dramaturgy if not narrative. I understand dramaturgy, which is not the exclusive domain of narrative and has always been part of music, as characterized by the crucial importance of *sequence*. In other words, the order of unfolding - of revelation - is crucial to the understanding and experience of the work. The sequence in which the spectator

interacts with the work, going from a stage of 'present' sensation through short or rhythmic memory to deliberate conceptualization is special to time-based work. I have become aware of a consistent desire in almost all my work to make use of and enjoy a cinematic dramaturgy. It has led me increasingly to use the term cinema, rather than film. I use 'cinema' not to imply the culture of mainstream cinema but to distinguish between cinema as a discourse - a 'language of time' - and film as a specific medium or technology. In this respect film, video or digital forms may all be treated as cinematic.

### **Media Specificity**

Increasingly as I worked with video and computers and as I grappled with theoretical ideas about digital systems, it became impossible to sustain the notion of a cinematic practice that was based specifically in the material conditions of the medium. Firstly much of film technology, belonging to the nineteenth century machine age of wheels and cogs, has itself been increasingly eroded by incursion of electronics and digital control systems. It has been even more evident in the shorter history of video that specificities of one period, like the sculptural properties of the box-like monitor, have very quickly ceased to be seen as intrinsic to the medium. In the realm of the digital, the stability of a particular historical condition of the technology has been even shorter lived. But in the digital, the difficulties of defining it as a medium based on material properties are fundamental not just a matter of a developing technology.

At its base, the digital has no tactile form, it is merely transient pulses of minute electrical voltages working at a pace and at a scale beyond any human perception. It also has no fixed form of input or output. It is already hybrid beyond an predictable stability in its forms of interface with human perception. It can mimic or incorporate a wide range of media forms and absorb a range of discourses or language structures. I have attempted, theoretically, to define some characteristics of, so called, digital media, and, as long as I have been concerned with operations, or the behavior of digital systems, this has been productive. But it remains difficult to link any theory of the digital to any based strictly on the notion that the language or practice of a medium grows out of intrinsic material properties. The boundaries of all art media have been challenged throughout the later part of the twentieth century, and with the predominance of the digital any notion of medium becomes a matter of choice and selection, not given a-priori.

In one respect the notion of medium specificity can survive the digital. Whatever technology is used in recording, storing, restructuring or presenting sequential images and sound, there must be some interface with human perception - the eye, ear or other sense. This interface is both material, a perceptual encounter, and cultural, part of a discourse. Here the notion of specificity remains valid. In any encounter, the form of experience for the spectator depends on the output medium used in the final stage of a work. Certain artistic concepts can only be realized in certain forms of output medium. In my own work, I have always been fascinated by scale and immersive experiences of sound and image. And as part of this, with creating an encounter for the spectator incorporating a sense of presence and immanent surprise and drama. Though I was interested in video, until this could be projected with a visual power that matched film, I was not motivated by the medium. The notion of medium specificity therefore hinges on the choice of medium to suit the desired artistic experience - it is not an *intrinsic* constraint. At the same time, whatever combination of media, the form of this interface with the spectator also happens in a context of expectation. This is a condition of discourse and history not strictly bounded by medium. It results from the cultural as well as

physical conditions in which a work is accessed and 'measures' the difference between a work and assumptions about form, content and 'language' accompanying that context.

### **Some consistencies**

In my own work I recognize a consistent desire for a large scale, spectacular encounter with the work and this links the abstract work based on colour and sound with the work based in representation and symbolic structure. There also remains a strong and general rejection of narrative as the main basis of cinematic practice in favour of what I might now describe as a quasi-musical form or a form of non-linear, allegorical, symbolic, 'multi-narrative'. An interest in the specific features of film as a medium, the acetate base, scratches and filmic processes, is no longer an active issue for me. I see this as having been the basis of a crucial and urgent encounter at a particular historical point. However, awareness of the material aspects of the physical and perceptual encounter with a work - the *reality* of its experience whatever its medium, remains crucial to any cinematic form I might explore both in terms of image and sound.

Certain devices have also survived transition from film to video and digital forms, for example, use and reuse of the same source sequences has become part of my current concern with shifting structures of meaning and memory. Visual transformation of the image also survives. At least in part I see this as a way of counteracting the initial connotation of images and allowing them to have *latency* or *multiplicity* in their relationship to other images.

I have become increasingly aware that any work I make could be otherwise and could continue to be redeveloped in different versions. There is some consistency in this resistance to a 'definitive' form with the concepts I developed around digital systems - but think it has a more philosophical or psychological base linking ethics and aesthetics in the experience of work for the spectator. I continue to make cinematic works without any expectation or demand that they follow a consistent path.

Malcolm Le Grice, August 2003

<sup>1</sup> Le Grice, Malcolm. "The Chronos Project" published in Media Scape 3 Zagreb June 1995, Vertigo no5 1966 re-printed in "Experimental Cinema in the Digital Age", BFI Publications, London 2001