Narrative Exploration in EXPANDED CINEMA

Interview of William Raban by Duncan White

London, February 2008

WR: There's a term you keep using 'the cinematic' – this needs defining, as it's a useful term. It seems to accord with my own definition of the cinematic – that it is essentially an immersive experience. I like this link to commercial practice – what's important is that you keep a clear distinction between mainstream practice to do with early widescreen techniques Cinerama and Poly-vision. These forms were using three screens side by side. But to me that's not Expanded Cinema. It can't be.

DW: No. They were trying to create a seamlessness rather than create a relationship between the screens.

WR: That's right. Here - I see Gance as part of avant-garde *and* mainstream practice – I wouldn't make that distinction.

We talked about French Structuralists at the co-op in the 70s – the connection's there if you care to make it – but it's a minefield.

For me I'm much more interested in showing my EC pieces in a cinema than in the gallery. I think they become more subversive about the whole cinematic apparatus; about the institution of cinema being an essentially conservative institution.

DW: This is one of the problems I'm coming up against. Whether a definition of EC incorporates gallery installation. In many ways the gallery is an easier space to deal with multi-screen work compared with the cinema.

WR: I personally prefer to show my multi-screen pieces in a cinema. It's an argument I've had with Webber and Le Grice. I agree that it draws on a history of the spectacle, the auditorium and the architecture of presentation.

Just as conventional cinemas carry the whole institutional/organisational apparatus with them so of course does the art gallery and it can't be removed from that. It's not an innocent space.

DW: And such an economic space.

WR: Yes. That's right.

What else? 'Broad definitions of narrative.' Certainly in the 70s when we were defining anti-narrative one of the things that occurred to me was considering narrative in the sense of diegesis - as meaning the unfolding of events in time. A lot of the work that was made in the early 70s at the Film Coop – at one level – does conform to certain narrative expectations because it's to do with the flow of time within a certain space or duration.

DW: Much more to do with audience expectations.

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WR: The Reflexive, when talking about the referential and the non-referential in structural film. I prefer to use the term reflexive cinema rather than structural film.

Anthony McCall is essential for your key contributors. He does construct a cinematic experience within the gallery. Creates a cinematic space in a gallery setting. Marylyn Halford would be a good person to speak to. Particularly for the way she incorporated live performance in her work – live projection performance? Talk to Mark Webber.

Media specificity (the 'trustworthiness' of the medium):

WR: Have you come across Jonathon Walley? – 'paracinema' is his way of describing expanded cinema. I disagree with him – a lot of what he says about media-specificity as irrelevant to contemporary practice seems highly contentious to me.

DW: Why is that?

WR: One talks of structural film, but I've never been persuaded that one could talk about structural video in a similar way. I have difficulty of conceiving video work as being in any way like structural film for all sorts of reasons.

DW: Is it to do with the materiality of the medium?

WR: Yes. And also the way in which one can trust the medium. The way in which one can trust the film of what one sees on the screen as being evidence of what happened in front of the camera. Although I accept completely that now the boundaries between video or digital art and film have become very blurred and indistinct – most feature films now are made using digital intermediates – when we were making films in the 1970s there was an absolute difference between working with film and video. The image you saw in the screen had to come from the camera. If you did a special effect using optical printing or re-filming the image it became immediately evident to the audience because of quality shifts. What had happened to the image. But now special effects have become invisible. So now everyone has to think differently maybe it does change the terms of reference. I've always thought video was much more of a mediated process.

DW: So video doesn't have the indexical charge?

WR: For me. In some ways people will see this as incredibly unfashionable – and maybe they're right and it's time to rethink these assumptions. I talk about it in that paper – this old fashioned view that the camera is a reliable witness to events unfolding in front of the camera. David has it on file.

DW: I'm interested in what you call the trustworthiness of film. We often talk about the camera that lies and that sense of certainty within the medium that has always been up for grabs. So you think it's even less reliable now with digital and video?

WR: And I think 16mm had a special place which 35mm doesn't. I would defy anyone to look at a 1960s feature film that has optical printing within it – are you familiar with optical printing?

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DW: Vaguely.

WR: There are two kinds of printing. One is contact printing where the negative's put face to face with a positive to make a print from the negative, which is an inevitable part of the process. Optical printing is used usually when you want to do a special effect. The best way to think of it is in terms of stills photography where you have an enlarger. An enlarger enables you to change the scale of a negative; to print a small negative onto a large piece of paper. Well the optical printer is the same – where you can take a section of your filmed image and change its size – its time relationship so you can slow an image down or speed an image up, you can do a freeze frame – more commonly there were matting techniques so you could change the background of your shot – these were all a form of image manipulation that takes place in post-production on the optical printer... Now if you do that on 16mm the audience is immediately aware that there's a change in contrast there's a change in the look of the film. And you think ah that's a special effect, that's been done in the optical printer.

DW: We know we're being tricked.

WR: Exactly you know you're being tricked. On 35mm because the negative is so much larger it's much harder to see the differences. But now there's hardly any work done on optical printers it's done on computers using the film equivalent of [Adobe] Photoshop – it becomes invisible.

DW: So it's the invisibility you're concerned with.

WR: Yes or removing traces of the fact that it's been tampered with in post-production. It's something that bothered us a lot in the 1970s; I'm not sure it's a current idea anymore. You know, the idea that the camera never lies is seen as an absurd proposition.

DW: So your sense of trust in the film comes from the idea that you can tell when the film is lying not that it never lies.

WR: Yes and I think that's a particularly endearing quality of 16mm. It's got to the stage where it's near-obsolete. It's not a projection format. The only way you can show it in a cinema is by transferring it to digital or blowing it up to 35mm film. So it's used as a blow up format.

Projection as production.

DW: But that relationship between production and projection is crucial to you isn't it?

WR: I think it was to a lot of us in the 1970s. Especially at the London [Filmmaker's] Co-Op – trying to collapse the difference between the time of making and the time of showing to an audience. And that led to a lot of the event-based works a lot of us were doing such as *2 Minutes 45 Seconds*.

DW: Yes I wonder if you could talk a bit about the making of *2'45"*. How many times you have shown it etc.

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WR: I'll try. It's always very difficult talking about things in retrospect because you can fantasize and fabricate. The first time I performed it was at Gallery House in London in 1973 – although I've come across some evidence that I first did it in November 1972.

DW: What inspired it? Did it come out of this problem of projection and the site of production?

WR: There was a genuine sense of cooperative-working with other filmmakers – people like Malcolm Le Grice, Gill Eatherley, Annabel Nicolson, Marilyn Halford – we didn't call it Expanded Cinema but it was the idea that you could introduce an element of performance into the film event. Just the idea of a "film event". Projection might be mediated either by a performance or the use of multiple screens. Malcolm was doing a lot of writing – he had written a piece called Real Time/Space published in Art and Artists (Dec 1972). A lot f the ideas at the time were trying to find ways of incorporating the time of production into the time of projection. Creating a closed circuit almost in the process, bringing production into the projection.

Reflexive Cinema.

DW: Were you trying to incorporate the audience within that sense of production?

WR: Yes exactly. If you don't mind I'll use the term 'Reflexive Cinema'. For which I have a definition that you may or may not find useful. (1.) Rather than concealing the means of production, the means of production is revealed. In the image that you show – there should be enough information to tell the audience how what they are seeing was made. It's revealing, rather than concealing, the process of production. (2.) The other thing that's crucial is that the audience isn't merely passive. The film work should make some demand on the spectator's active engagement in the production of meaning. (3) And then in anthropological terms – there's a nice article by Jay Ruby on the use of film in anthropology. There has always been this debate in anthropology about the best way of recording people in front of the camera. And it was long contended that you shouldn't manipulate the camera once it was started because it would take something away from the document/record of what was going on in front of the camera. Well this was very close to a lot of the arguments what were being made in the 70s – less to do with the Co-Op [London Filmmaker's Co-Op] and more to do with political or community type filmmaking where a lot of unbearable films were made. The rule was that the camera would be set up on the tripod and would not be touched once the shot had been started – so very long takes. That was the perceived wisdom, until this article by Jay Ruby. He argues that reflexivity is an essential part of the process. He's almost making the claim that the hand-held camera, the intervention by the filmmaker behind the camera is part of the scientific process. It's not something that makes the objectivity or the recording less valuable or less scientific. He comes to the point that reflexivity understood in those terms is an essential part of the scientific recording process. Which I think is very liberating. So you could take that and the other two elements of reflexive cinema and I think you've got something very interesting running across those three categories.

DW: So in terms of reflexive you mean the subject being filmed is aware of being filmed. Because as soon as you put a camera in front of somebody, they will behave in a way that they wouldn't if the camera wasn't there. Traditionally you would conceal the fact

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that somebody is being watched by, for instance, using the long shot and moving the camera out of the scene it is recording. Is reflexivity the subject's involvement with the camera recording them?

WR: Less that, I think, than enabling the person controlling the camera to run free with it. Reflexivity means something subtlety different in anthropology, linguistics or psychological. But I'm interested in using it as a way of talking about structural film. It's less alienating than structural film.

DW: So reflexive more than Expanded cinema?

WR: Well UK Expanded Cinema came out of structural film. There was a time in the 1970s when it was much easier to get shows if you said you would include an expanded work. They were seen as less heavy going.

DW: Hence Expanded Cinema as 'the popular front of structural film'?

WR: It seems to me that Expanded Cinema was one manifestation of structural film. It was to do with this idea that the projectors were part of the space of the audience. Traditionally the projectors were shut away in the projection booth – the projectionist was made invisible. So it was another way of declaring the means of image production.

***Take Measure* The Auditorium.**

WR: *Take Measure* is far better when it is shown in a regular cinema rather than a gallery. It involved me pulling the film off the feed reel, out of the window of the projection booth – usually there wasn't a window so I would have to organise several helpers and they would guide the film out through the doors into the back of the auditorium, over the heads of the audience until it stretches to the screen. And I would announce the title with the lights out. As soon as I say the title – I'm standing there with a pair of scissors – the projector gets switched on, I cut the film and I just say 'Take Measure.' I go off. What the audience sees is this footage counter with film going through it at 24 frames per second the same speed the projector is running and it's literally counting the feet of the throw between the screen and the projector at the back of the auditorium. So the film ends at the point where the film runs through the projector and comes to a blank screen – that's the end of the piece – so it's physically measuring the space of the cinema.

DW: So this comes back to why you prefer the auditorium.

WR: Well, it's obvious – it's more subversive. In the gallery it's weak – stretching film out in a space to a white wall that's being used as a temporary screen. It becomes a comment on cinema when it's shown in an auditorium.

DW: It goes back to what you say in here about visiting cinemas as a boy and feeling as if they're bigger inside than they are outside.

They're unfathomable spaces. I think that's less true now. Modern cinemas are clean-cut spaces – but if you went to an old Odeon. It's very hard to put physical dimensions on them.

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DW: How then does it relate to theatrical space? Was Brecht an influence? I like this idea of theatricalising the spectacle?

WR: I think there was something of that – we were talking about Brecht's distanciation devices in the 1970s. How there was a run on from the 1930s. It was an influence as were other things such as John Cage. I wanted *2 Minutes 45 Seconds* to refer to his piece *4 minutes 33 seconds* where a pianist sits at the piano for 4 minutes thirty three seconds but doesn't play – so if a plane goes overhead or if a door slammed in the background it became a part of the performance.

DW: Again it's about expectation. Could you describe *2'45"*?

2 Minutes 45 Seconds

WR: Ideally it would be performed at a festival. I think the third or fourth time I did it was at the second Avant-Garde Festival at the NFT [National Film Theatre] and at the ICA [Institute of Contemporary Arts] festival in 1973. I would have maybe four or five successive evenings where I could show the work. The first time I showed it it's an empty projector switched on. I go to the front. There's a microphone on the stage that is recording directly to a camera at the back of the audience. The camera is filled with 100 feet of black and white negative. I announce the title of the piece and the time/date/place of the screening. The camera's filming the audience watching the blank screen. The camera's recording the response and the sounds of the audience. I'd process that piece of film and hang it up to dry. So that the next day, instead of a blank screen I laced that piece of film in the projector and run it and it would play the image of the black and white negative on the screen.

DW: Why were you using a negative?

WR: Because two negatives make a positive. I'll show you, it's a very good question. (see drawing.)

So if you imagine: on day two, this is a white microphone, which is actually black – everything's black – my figure comes on. And I'm framing it like this – deliberately trying to get the heads of the audience in the shot. So after I've seen myself go off this screen, I'd go on again and announce the title of the film and the place. But on day

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three what you would see was this inner screen that on day 2 was negative is now positive. But every other generation it goes back to being a negative. It was about day 6 or 7 that it really starts to get interesting. I would run it as editions. Each addition might incorporate a number of spaces – but I preferred to do it at a festival in one place – it was purer because otherwise there were too many things changing. I did it over a period of seven years between 1973 and 1980. At least a dozen complete editions.

DW: What was the feedback like from the audience?

WR: It only once got violent. That was in Bristol at the Festival of Independent British Cinema and somebody got very cross and cried out: 'Who's paying for this shit?' and people were throwing their coats up in the air. Which of course, on re-projection, when the next audience sees that in negative it becomes very funny. And then it becomes almost inaudible once it's buried in all the distortion.

DW: Yes what happens to the soundtrack?

WR: Well it's very interesting because it was recorded on a special newsreel camera that records sound directly in-sync. The sound was being recorded on the magnetic strip down the side of the film – so the projector would replay the sound as it was filmed. You would get this build up of noise.

DW: How have you kept them – do you ever show the editions?

WR: Well I always thought the film was meaningless unless it was being re-filmed. So I've always resisted showing old versions as documentation. I would dearly love to do it again. However because the technology I used is no longer current it's difficult. If someone came up with the resources to do it I would. I hate developing my own film. I don't like the smell of fixative. I'd quite like to get other people to do it. And I'd just direct the making of it?

Authorial Control.

DW: Well this raises another Expanded Cinema question: the role of the artist as a presence at the moment of projection – how important is it that it's you?

WR: Well it was so liberating when Mark Webber did it for Shoot Shoot Shoot. I used to tease him and say: "Good luck Mark". But he did it. And what was great about it was that he got projectionists in and trained them up to show the work – which freed us up enormously. It took the burden of responsibility away from us.

DW: So that authorial control isn't important?

WR: It can be given over. As long as the instructions are clear. Otherwise it dies with the artist. But maybe that's fine. Maybe the piece has had its day. Maybe it shouldn't exist beyond that moment.

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The ephemeral.

DW: The ephemerality is important then. It raises the relationship between cinema and reproduction. If you look at performance theory you find a politics of performance that is against an economy of reproduction – a performance happens once and that's where it gets its meaning from – and if it is reproduced the meaning shifts somehow.

WR: You mean reproduced in the sense that one could place a video camera at a special Expanded Cinema screening and record the events for posterity?

DW: Partly – I think there is a certain resistance to documentation. But it's more the idea that if you do a performance in one place at one time then that is a specific piece of work. Even if you do the same work in a different context – because it is all about context (that's what EC takes from performance art to a certain extent - this concern with the contextual moment) – that because that contextual moment has changed (the work may have not changed) but because the context itself has changed it's a different piece of work. So is the ephemeral important to the meaning of the work for you do you think?

WR: It's a very interesting question. In trying to be honest – I don't think we were that aware of it at the time – it's something we've come to in hindsight. So I might be able to joke with Malcolm [Le Grice] – 'Do you remember that time we did this show? Or I've never seen Berlin Horse look as good as that time you showed it at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam for example – I mean I'm just using that as an example.

DW: Yes – and you might have made it up – it could be a fictional construct.

WR: Well absolutely – sometimes a piece would work or it wouldn't work and there was no way of knowing. A lot of it was to do with very chance things happening in the projection or the kind of loss of sync you get between two projectors – because I've done two-screen films like *River Yar* [1972] for example or *Thames Barrier* [1977] where it's essential that the two projectors are in sync. There are other multi-screen films like *Angles of Incidence* [1973] or *Surface Tension* [1976] where they benefit from a bit of drift. Depending on the synchronisation or a-synchronisation you may have a good performance or a better performance. It's like good wine – 1965 was a good year.

DW: So it is still about performance.

WR: Yes.

Gallery vs Cinema.

WR: This is something one has to think about. I mean a lot has been said about the cinema being an inherently reactionary institution which of course it is but so are art galleries. And I think people are quite naïve in the way they tend to say they prefer to show their work in a gallery because it's not encumbered by all that heavy dominance that's attached to the cinematic institution – that somehow film becomes liberated by bringing it into the gallery. I mean I like cinemas because they're set up to show films. I like to see films in that context.

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DW: So your move to the gallery – did you see it more as an expedient move- like Le Grice?

WR: That's right – it was a matter of expediency. It's actually easier to start out in an empty space. To plan putting the projector in that space – usually on tables piled up so you can mount a bank of projectors. It's more controllable. You have the audience in the same space as the projectors. But also – when you're talking about it now – one has to reflect on the context of the time in which this was happening. Because there was a much larger number of public rather than private galleries. You could count on one hand the number of artists working with film through commercial galleries.

DW: But film wasn't seen as a commercial medium because there wasn't anything to sell?

WR: No that's not true – even at that time – I could tell you one or two of the people who were working in that way – one was David Dye, we studied together at St Martins, he was picked up very early and had an influential show at the ICA. I'm sure he was taken up by a gallery and Richard Cork did a big review of his show for the Evening Standard. So there was always a distinction between the gallery artists. I would put David Dye in that category or some of the Americans like John Baldessari.

DW: Or Vito Acconci?

WR: Exactly. Even, Taka Iimura. Jan Divets in Holland. A number of people like that working through galleries. But it's always seemed a nonsense to me that somebody choosing to work with a medium, that by its very essence is limitlessly reproducible, and wanting to sell it in small limited editions – seems to be a contradiction there.

DW: And yet expanded works are not limitlessly reproducible because you had to be there.

WR: That's right.

DW: So there is that sort of play – if you're performing in the gallery you're playing with people's expectations – if you enter the gallery you're entering an economic arrangement?

WR: Sorry what do you mean, an economic arrangement?

DW: Well you're bringing work into the gallery, which is then there to be sold.

WR: Well in a commercial gallery yes, but we weren't working in commercial galleries. They were more like public galleries – spaces like the Hayward and the ICA – abroad as well.

DW: I suppose the gallery culture has changed.

WR: That's right. That's what you have to understand. The gallery space has changed. The context was different.

DW: Yes you have talked about the gallery as being a 'neutral space'.

WR: Did I? Did I say it with tongue in cheek?

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DW: Maybe. [White reads from his notes]:
"On this economic question Raban has made the point that Coop filmmakers moved into the gallery as a 'neutral space' within which they were able to experiment with the projector as part of the 'live' performance – artist's were not restricted by conventions of the auditorium (fixed seating etc). Raban is clear however that while using gallery spaces filmmakers were not entering the economic arrangement of the commercial gallery system – i.e. they were not selling art additions but hosting screenings, being hired to give lectures and staging performances in line with a more cinematic than fine art context?" (see his intro to *Castle 1* at Shoot Shoot Shoot 2002)

WR: I like that distinction between the cinematic and fine art contexts; it's very contentious but I'd be interested in defending it.

DW: It's interesting this historical moment in gallery culture then where you have public gallery spaces – which I perhaps haven't appreciated – that are more geared up to this type of experiment.

WR: Yes exactly.

DW: And is that what you mean by a 'neutral space'?

WR: Yes I mean I think with the current gallery situation it's very hard to make any experimental art.

DW: Well – again coming back to this economic arrangement – you can't help feeling that unless an artist is producing a commodity how is that gallery going to make any money out of you?

WR: Exactly. Whereas there wasn't that whole commodification of the art object at that period – or for very few people [the 1970s? – even in a post Warhol world?]

DW: But then reading early histories of video art, even in the mid-sixties in the States – take for instance the Castelli Gallery in NY first showing Bruce Nauman's tapes – the gallery wouldn't promote the work as 'video' but as work by established artists who make video. For artists video was a way of moving away from the commodifictaion of the art object – because there is no object – there is only a tape, which is reproducible. And yet it seems the gallery culture has shifted in order to incorporate this anti-commodity art.

WR: But that's why I'm so down on commercial galleries – they can be seen as being totally against experimentation. Because of the expectation that you are producing a commodity. If you're an artists picked up by a gallery making a certain kind of art that they can sell – whatever medium it's in – it creates its own demand and there's an expectation that I will go on working in this way. It becomes like the production of any other kind of goods. There is no incentive to go out sideways and make something of a different kind. We were working wildly in the early 1970s. We could be making very different types of film work from month to month almost. And I know that there has been a lot of discomfort from art historians writing about this period because that's what they're confronted with. They like to think that William Raban was a landscape

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filmmaker and he should carry on making landscape films thank you very much because they can sell that idea – that is also commodifictaion of the art object as idea. The fact was I did make a few landscape films but I don't hold that term dear or meaningful in any sense. Just as I was doing Expanded Cinema works and other things as well – there's not for me a contradiction in wanting to pursue disparate or seemingly disconnected avenues at the same time – a lot of us were doing that. You can see it in Malcolm's [Le Grice] work. He made very different kinds of work within a short space of time and even went off in contradictory directions. We all did. Because it was trying to grapple with ideas – the ideas were more important than any notion of selling your work or keeping it obediently within a fine art context.

DW: Did you come out of painting like Le Grice?

WR: Yes I studied painting at art school. In fact Malcolm taught me in my final year at St Martins. There were three of us Annobele Nicholson and Gill Eatherley and myself – oh and Tony Hill and David Dye of course – and Phil Drummond. It's not fair I think to put Tony into quite the same category as David.

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