‘1970s British Experimental Film: Images in Shadows And Light’
by Patti Gaal-Holmes

Abstract
This article draws on the comprehensive historical account outlined in the author’s recent publication on 1970s British experimental filmmaking which challenges the problematic ‘return to image’ thesis evident in most historical accounts of the decade, arguing that image-rich, expressive, personal and representational films were in evidence *throughout* the decade. The article includes examples of the ‘return to image’ thesis, demonstrating how this has problematically perpetuated the flawed account of the decade. It also outlines the countercultural, psychoanalytic and mystical influences on filmmaking and on American critic, P. Adams Sitney’s taxonomical distinctions – ‘psychodramatic trance’, ‘lyrical’, ‘mythopoeia’, and ‘diary’ – which provide illuminating characteristics useful for examining some of the personal, expressive forms of 1970s British filmmaking. It gives an understanding of how experimental filmmaking grew from a small handful of films and filmmakers, at the start of the decade, to a veritable ‘explosion’ of filmmaking by the end of the 1970s.

Keywords
1970s, experimental film, history, counterculture, psychoanalysis, mysticism, London Filmmaker’s Co-op, P. Adams Sitney

The 1970s is a contested decade in British experimental filmmaking, shadowed by the belief that structural and material experimentation dominated the field. In a recent publication I go to some lengths to dispel this myth by re-evaluating the decade and forming a kind of historical reclamation by revealing the complexity, richness and diversity in 1970s experimental filmmaking. *A History of 1970s Experimental Filmmaking: Britain’s Decade of Diversity* goes into detail outlining the organisational and institutional frameworks as well as theoretical, socio-political and aesthetic determinants informing filmmaking, with the intention being to integrate films having received inadequate recognition alongside those that stand as accepted texts. While filmmakers like Derek Jarman, Steve Dwoskin, Margaret Tait and Jeff Keen have been recognised as significant 1970s filmmakers, my belief is that they (alongside others like David Larcher and Peter Whitehead) have maintained a position which has to some extent side-lined them from the established histories of the decade.

Any new history needs to recognise the vagaries of historical analysis and the

decisions made when a historical moment is selected, contextualised within particular frameworks and used to narrate the past. While the study of history is a long established discipline, more recent approaches raised in the late 1960s by historical theorists like E. H. Carr, Hayden White and in the 1990s by Keith Jenkins, provide useful considerations about the positioned nature of the historian. These approaches have informed an understanding of the vagaries of historical analysis in determining the impossibility of truly objective accounts of history. Jenkins' assertion that a single, 'true' history is unfeasible – 'the same object of enquiry can be read differently by different discursive practices … whilst, internal to each, there are different interpretive readings over time and space' – identified analyses of the same period as being dependent on choices of critical framework, subjective interpretation and methodological process (Jenkins 2003: 7). Despite arguments for the reliability of sources as evidence, Jenkins also noted that the writing of history was never an impartial task – an unpositioned history – no matter how objectively a historian attended to the sources or intended the analysis to be:

> The empiricist claim – that one can detect bias and expunge it by attending scrupulously to 'what the sources' say – is undercut by the fact that sources are mute. It is historians who articulate whatever the 'sources say', for do not many historians all going (honestly and scrupulously in their own ways) to the same sources, still come away with different accounts; do not historians all have their own many narratives to tell? (Jenkins 2003: 46).

In writing this history – and challenging established interpretations of the decade – there is, therefore, an understanding that this chosen narrative underpins certain choices made, ideological positions held and simply a desire to make certain 'mute sources speak' more distinctively, particularly those that appeared marginalised in established historical accounts. In this respect it is not deemed as *the* definitive history but one which should be read alongside existing accounts of the decade. My initial training as a Fine Artist and insights as an artist/filmmaker also informed the research and writing. Working with film in an artisanal manner – shooting, hand-processing, editing, printing, projecting – has brought a hoped for depth of understanding evident in the analyses and appreciation of the challenges, frustrations and exhilarations experienced by the filmmaker in taking an idea from

conception to projection.

The films themselves were initially taken as the key primary sources and as starting points to determine the diversity in filmmaking. Textual analyses, however, also required considerations of socio-political and production contexts and screening conditions. For the latter a reading of a film could differ significantly if it was screened within a specific programme of films, as an installation piece or as a live 'expanded cinema' event. Assessing film content included analysing what was represented in-frame relating to technicalities like camera work, lighting, framing and composition, with recognition of the processes of production also being essential for understanding the film texts. The films discussed in this history are primarily single-authored films, made on small or no budgets, with filmmakers often coming from the 'art world' or art schools as opposed to trained within the cinema industry – although filmmakers often operated in opposition to mainstream cinema.

The decision to focus principally on experimental film in my historical assessment is in no way due to a lack of appreciation for the video medium or more socio-politically orientated filmmaking from the decade. Video histories have been covered in diverse moving image accounts (A.L. Rees, David Curtis, Jackie Hatfield, etc) and in histories focused on video only (Catherine Elwes, Chris Meigh-Andrews and the REWIND project). The broader landscape of alternatives to mainstream, commercial filmmaking are now also being uncovered to build a bigger framework encompassing the diversity of 1970s activity. It is my belief that *all* these moving image histories: film, video, socio-political, community, counter cinema, etc., should be read alongside each other to give a more extensive understanding of the decade's production, particularly as these form a significant seedbed informing contemporary moving image practices which have risen to prevalence in recent decades.

The problematic 'return to image' thesis

It is my belief that the 'culprit', argued against at some length in the book, responsible for numerous biased historical accounts is the myth that a '*return* to image' occurred at the *end* of the 1970s when in fact 'image' existed *throughout* the decade. 'Image' never disappeared and thus made no return. The 'return to image' thesis (as this is what it has amounted to with its continued perpetuation)

problematically argued that more representational and image-rich forms of filmmaking returned at the end of the 1970s and identified forms of filmmaking, including various terms like 'autobiographical', 'personal' filmmaking, 'narrative', 'celebratory cinema', 'visionary cinema', 'cinema of excess', and 'poetic' filmmaking (Rees 1999: 78). 'Autobiographical' and 'personal filmmaking' are more self-explanatory, while 'narrative' referred to films taking more linear narrative formats and the 'film poem' was described by P. Adams Sitney as being made by filmmakers, who 'like poets, produce their work without financial reward, often making great sacrifices to do so' and also refers to more poetic filmic forms, rather than abstract, minimalist texts (Sitney 2003: xii). In likening the relationship of the 'film poem' to the commercial narrative cinema Sitney saw it as similar to that of poetry to fiction.

Setting out the problematic 'return to image' thesis entailed identifying numerous written texts in order to understand the extent of the argument's perpetuation. A number of examples are cited here to contextualise the ensuing discussions but before doing so a brief moment of consideration on the word 'image' will be useful as film *is*, arguably, always about 'image', whether the image revealed is the grain of the film, a colour field or recognisable figurative imagery. Exceptions to this notion of 'image' could be conceptual or performative works where no actual film exists – as in Anthony McCall's *Long Film for Ambient Light* (1975), Annabal Nicolson's *Matches*, (1975) or Tony Hill's *Point Source* (1973) – but the works explicitly refer to the filmed image in their conceptualisation and exhibition. Admittedly 'image' is a problematically complex term here, but in the context of its 'return' it relates to more expressive, personal and potentially symbolic or metaphoric use of image possibly also serving a narrative purpose. In the accounts identifying this problematic 'return' more representational forms of visual excess were often identified as being a surplus of imagery (sometimes arrived at through formal or technological procedures) and content which might include multiple exposures, the use of popular culture imagery, the prevalence of the human figure or an excessive use of colour. Or these films were simply personal films expressing individual responses to the world with images being recognisably figurative rather than abstract.

In the early 1980s film historian, A.L. Rees' described what he perceived to be changes in experimental filmmaking evident by the end of the 1970s. In his essay 'Re-viewing the Avant-Garde' (1983) he noted that '[s]ome of the *bêtes noires* of avant-garde theory in previous years – including narrative and autobiography – have been reworked in a number of excellent films made in a less 'formalist' mode than those of the earlier 70s' (Rees 1983: 288). Although Rees' criticism did not preclude their existence during the 1970s, he indicated that a renewed change of direction had occurred, and in his related review of Will Milne's *Same* (1981) he suggested the film was 'evidence of a revival of interest in the codes of editing and composition, of a need to extend and re-think film language which followed a period of minimalist paring down of the image by experimental filmmakers' (Rees 1983: 286). It should, however, be pointed out that not all experimental filmmakers went through this period of 'minimalist paring down of the image' and that the '*bête noires* of avant-garde theory ... narrative and autobiography' were in evidence throughout 1970s films Rees 1983: 288). Anne Rees-Mogg's *Real-Time* (1971-74), Margaret Tait's *Place of Work* (1976) (reviewed in the same journal issue) and B. S. Johnson's *Fat Man on the Beach* (1973) are a few examples which could hardly be described as minimalist. And David Larcher's *Monkey's Birthday* (1975) was anything but pared down with its multi-layered imagery, montage-style and hand-worked frames.

In a later example film critic, Michael O'Pray's unambiguously titled essay 'The Elusive Sign: From Asceticism to Aestheticism' (1987), he discusses Larcher's 'classic "underground" films', as 'unequalled in their rich visionary quality' (O'Pray 1987: 8). O'Pray, however, only mentions *Mare's Tail* (1969) and not *Monkey's Birthday* (1975), and it is worth noting that while Larcher only produced two films in the decade they amount to over six hours of footage. In his essay O'Pray possibly initiated the consolidation of the 'return to image' thesis, which has since been propagated to fulfil the problematic myth. He identified the 'return to image as an avant-garde component' by taking a retrospective view of ten years of film and video production:

> That the past decade has seen a return to such kinds of cinema – surrealist, documentarist, poetic, and experimental narrative – should not be surprising, it is precisely the recovery of traits in avant-garde film history that have been allowed

> to slip out of sight for some time, and that have not been the root of influence. (O'Pray 1987: 10)

Some interesting discrepancies are also evident in O'Pray's review as he acknowledges filmmakers working within experimental traditions which he suggests have slipped out of sight for some time. He mentions Jarman's 'Super 8 "home movies" which he had been working on since 1970' (O'Pray 1987: 8). The 'avant-garde's two oldest practitioners', Jeff Keen and Margaret Tait, are described by O'Pray as respectively 'a surrealist' and 'a poetic documentarist' (O'Pray 1987: 10). Despite the fact that these filmmakers collectively produced a significant amount of films throughout the 1970s and while O'Pray clearly demonstrated recognition of Larcher, Keen, Tait and Jarmans's work, he was still insistent that a 'return to image' occurred at the end of the decade. He did, however, make a thought-provoking comment, identifying that 'perhaps the return to the image as an avant-garde component had never been that far away', possibly suggesting an awareness of these contrived temporal distinctions (O'Pray 1987: 8).

In an account written twenty-five years later, O'Pray continued to identify the alleged shift of focus at the end of the 1970s, with filmmakers 'returning' to different types of production – as if in defiance of their elders – to embrace the world of myth, dream, symbolism, sexuality or the subconscious:

> More broadly, it may be argued that there was a shift from asceticism to aestheticism. In an Oedipal reaction, the young film-makers embraced what had been anathema to their elders – subject matter. The 1980s in Britain can be seen as a rejection of modernism in its more rationalist formalist forms, and a return to the repressed tradition of modernism – one which embraced the oneiric (Ron Rice, Cocteau), the symbolist (Deren) and the documentary (Vertov, Jennings) ... Decadence, with its emphasis on the body, opened up a sexual politics evaded by rationalistic machine-based early modernism. The New Romantics can be seen as a later example of this trait. Among the various strands of the 1980s there was a common return to subject matter outside film's own material and ontological concerns (O'Pray 2003: 107).

While Jarman's extensive output of 1970s films had certainly influenced 'New Romantic' filmmakers like John Maybury and Cerith Wyn Evans – which O'Pray acknowledges – Jarman was without doubt not informed by formal, structural or theoretical filmmaking and was shortlisted for the Turner Prize in 1986 'in

recognition', as Curtis noted, 'of the outstanding visual quality of his films' (Curtis 2007: 289). By the time O'Pray wrote this critique (in 2003) a collection of Jarman's Super-8 films had been edited into the compilation video *Glitterbug,* which included footage from *Studio Bankside* (1972), *Sloane Square* (1974-76*)* and *Ulla's Fete* (1976), indicating that austerity and asceticism were certainly not the only order of the day (Glitterbug: Basilisk Production: 1994). The original video cover described the films as 'a stimulating, joyous and evocative self portrait of Jarman the artist and his milieu, showing times of fun and pleasure with friends, together with moments of high camp in the early 70s and frivolity on the sets of his films' (Glitterbug: Basilisk Production: 1994). While O'Pray was a firm supporter of Jarman's work, acknowledging that he 'had been making Super-8 films throughout the 1970s in a style which was visually rich and sensuous and often used constructed and highly theatrical tableaux' his statement, signalling the shift from asceticism to aestheticism at the end of the decade, does not appear to adequately take this into account (O'Pray 1996: 18).

Interestingly, in a more recent account O'Pray maintained that [i]n many ways, Jarman had always, notwithstanding the 'constructed' cinema of *In the Shadow of the Sun* 1972-81, been a documentarist, filming his friends, social events and his milieu' (O'Pray 2011: 66). Surely, however, calling Jarman a 'documentarist' stretches the term somewhat as one might even go so far as to call the structural/materialist filmmaker, Peter Gidal a documentarist because he filmed clouds, aeroplanes, rooms and a hallway. An important issue that must also be pointed out, and which O'Pray identified in his discussion of Jarman's filmography, is the marginal position that the 8mm/Super 8 format held, leading to its being easily dismissed in historical accounts. 'Many Super 8 films', O'Pray observed, 'have a rather ill-defined status, and have not been included if they are not in some form of distribution**,** even if they have been shown in the past' (O'Pray 1985: 16). This point importantly emphasises how historical constructions are therefore also shaped by what is deemed 'acceptable' as a reputable text, warranting historical inclusion or fitting into certain positioned accounts of a given period.

In a final example relating to the alleged 'return' (the book provides further details) I want to consider film historian, Julia Knight's analysis, as she identified

some interesting points in her critique of the continued dominance of the 1970s structuralist position laid out in the *Undercut* journals (1980-1990). Although Knight recognised that this was not particularly remarkable as the publication came out of the LFMC and focused on its own history, she indicated that it was also problematically taken 'as an important reference point – a starting point even – and subsequent developments are repeatedly mapped out in relation to it' (Knight 2003: 17). Knight identified this 'neat linear history of British avant-garde film' as follows:

- The British structuralist movement grew out of the 1960s US structural film, but developed a distinctive identity to counter the US hegemony.
- Peter Gidal coins the term structural-materialism for the direction taken by British filmmakers during the 1960s and early 1970s.
- The strict 'formalism' of structuralist filmmaking is not totally abandoned but a 'representational' element is reintegrated, as exemplified by the 'landscape films' of the 1970s. In contrast to Gidal's assertion that 'the real content is the form', according to Deke Dusinberre, 'not only does shape determine content, but content determines shape'.
- The early 1980s sees a return to narrative, representation and visual pleasure as a reaction to the strict formalism of earlier practices (Knight 2003: 18).

Knight supported her account of the problematic perpetuation of this 'return' with recollections from filmmaker, Barbara Meter. Writing in 1990, Meter's account provides some interesting points relating to the alleged influence of structural and formal filmmaking and the apparent 'return to image' at the end of the 1970s:

> [L]ooking again at the British avant-garde after 15 years it is as if I have plunged into an orgy of romantic images, grainy colours, decadent and dark moods and personal evocations. What a reaction against the asceticism of the formal and structural film which reigned at the time I was around. A predictable reaction of course – and one which is *highly indebted to just that formal movement.* I think that *all of British experimental film pays a tribute to the structural movement* (even when being vehemently the opposite, like the work of Cerith Wyn Evans, Derek Jarman, Anna Thew, etc) (Knight 2003: 19). (Knight's emphasis)

As Knight also highlighted it was rather a large claim, on Meter's part, to state that *all* British work was informed by structural filmmaking. Jarman, for one, noted that he found 'all English filmmaking with the exception of social documentaries and David Larcher excruciating', and could hardly be considered highly indebted to the

formal or structural movement by paying tribute or challenging it in his filmmaking (Jarman 1975). While Jarman was aware of the structural movement his interests lay elsewhere, rather than in creatively critiquing it, as Peter Greenaway did in his short film *Vertical Features Remake* (1978), creating a kind 'mocking documentary' informed by the 'great concern amongst English filmmakers for notions of structuralism' (Greenaway 2003).

Knight recognised the importance of the British structuralist work, yet felt that it occupied 'a very privileged position in the history of moving-image work' (Knight 2003: 19). In her opinion this rather one-sided history insufficiently accounted for video work, particularly as 'artists' engagement with video started to happen at around the same time' (Knight 2003: 19). More problematically, however, I would argue that the prioritisation of structural and formal experimentation as exemplary of the decade's production perpetuated this notion of an alleged 'return to image' at the end of the decade, thereby relegating other forms of filmmaking to the margins. Existing understandings of this history therefore compromise the richness and diversity in experimentation. These few examples give an indication of the predicament related to the 'return to image' thesis, its continued perpetuation and how it has continued to maintain a problematically positioned account of the decade, failing to do justice to the diversity in filmmaking which actually took place.

Socio-political and countercultural contexts

Having more generally laid out some of the contexts for discussion here, a focus on an aspect of 1970s filmmaking which I believe proved particularly problematic for some of the theoretically or formally inclined 1970s filmmakers, critics and historians will follow. These are films informed by the counterculture, by psychoanalysis, poetry, mysticism, the occult and those taking the form of film 'diaries'. It will, however, be necessary to briefly consider the socio-political contexts surrounding filmmaking as these importantly clarify that the rich diversity in 1970s British experimental filmmaking did not occur in a self-informed vacuum.

Understandings of the broader international historical contexts influencing filmmaking include countercultural developments emerging in 1950s America, the turn to theory in international film/art and intellectual circles in the 1970s, and the

formation of co-operatives and workshops in Britain providing centres for art- and filmmaking. In the first of these it is evident that American countercultural influences arose in response to increased 1950s capitalist growth, anti-communist McCarthyism, the Korean and Vietnam Wars and campaigns for racial and gender equality. In Britain these would take different, and somewhat more militant forms, with Marxist and socialist positions challenging the increasing influence of American cultural and capitalist imperialism. The loss of Empire, with the impact of decolonisation rendering Britain as the small island it was rather than the imperial power it had been when ruling over a quarter of the world, also resulted in a crisis of identity for the nation. This was further increased by the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), with Jeff Nuttall in his illuminating book *Bomb Culture* (1968) identifying that the atom bomb – and specifically the attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki – acted as defining moments in the turn against seemingly 'progressive' Western developments relating to modernity (Nuttall 1968: 19).

Alongside 1960s socio-political protests was also a trans-Atlantic flow of information relating to diverse scientific, theoretical, literary, anthropological and religious/mystical texts. Significant countercultural influences, dating as far back as the 1880s, came out of scientific research into aspects of the human psyche like the unconscious mind and dreams in order to understand neuroses and psychoses. Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theories and Carl Jung's analytical psychology proved particularly ground-breaking in the early years of the twentieth century, with alternative approaches to psychiatric and psychological scientific research also taken by philosophers and medical professionals in the early 1900s investigating individual and cosmic consciousness. A number of decades later Aldous Huxley's influential countercultural text *The Doors of Perception* (1961) (informed by his earlier research into Eastern mysticism, primitive ritual and folklore) focused on his research into the unconscious mind and states of psychosis induced by taking mescaline. Huxley's findings, considered a fundamental breakthrough in understanding the reservoir of untapped vision and inspiration held within the unconscious, informed further research into psychotropic drugs and in particular inspired the Harvard psychologist Timothy Leary's research into the effects of psilocybin and lysergic acid (LSD) (Stevens 1993: 1979). Leary, convinced of the therapeutic effects of LSD in

consciousness expansion, became an ardent campaigner for its widespread use and (naïvely) hoped for an international transformation of consciousness. His adage, 'tune in, turn on and drop out' – first delivered at a press conference in 1966 – has since become inexorably linked with countercultural attitudes.

In Britain the media concept of the 'Swinging Sixties' was presented as a harmonised idea of hip and cool bohemia. The filmmaker and activist, Peter Whitehead, however, maintained that it was invented by *Time* magazine, obscuring the burgeoning counter-revolutionary activity and true sentiments of the decade. In his film *Tonite Let's All Make Love in London* (1967), named after a poem by the American Beat poet Allen Ginsberg, Whitehead presented a dark version of a city at war with itself and a more politicised account of events:

> With *Tonite* I was trying to examine the mythology that everybody in London was having fun. Ginsberg's poem, which is very much about the theft of British culture by American cultural and capitalistic imperialism, is actually, very dark. For me the 1960s was the Aldermaston march, the war in Vietnam and the Dialectics of Liberation. The only miracle about those years is that it was a moment of extreme change that managed to get through without savage violence (Cronin 2007: 23).

Whitehead's hostile interpretation of 1960s London was not unique, as attempts were taken to avert American imperialism through more hard-line socio-political Marxist ideologies. A radical rethinking of socialism by the New Left, challenging American imperialism, resulted in socialist and Marxist theories informing many aspects of social and cultural investigation, wielding a significant influence in some independent filmmaking circles.

While anti-American sentiments were prevalent in Britain, American countercultural activity was welcomed with a number of seminal countercultural events taking place in London in the 1960s. These included the 'International Poetry Incarnation' (June 1965), presided over by Ginsberg, at the Victoria and Albert Hall and documented in Peter Whitehead's experimental film, *Wholly Communion* (1965). Other events included the all-night launch of the countercultural magazine *International Times* (*I.T.,* 1966), with films screened by the newly-formed LFMC. The search for expanded consciousness, the opening up of perception or an inner connection to the self or god through drugs, mysticism or the occult all became a key

part of the counterculture environment, with Nuttall describing the 1960s countercultural milieu in London was as follows:

> The acid culture, chanting its slogans of "Turn on, tune in, drop out" and "Do your own thing", spread throughout the western [sic] world at a brisk rate. Throughout 1967 the spread was marked by the appearance of scores of psychedelic newspapers, mixed-media pop clubs, big bright unreadable posters and "head shops" dealing in badges, beads, prayer wheels, joss sticks and all the paraphernalia of pop-buddhism (Nuttall 1970: 197).

While the 1960s countercultural ethos formed the bedrock for many 1970s experimental filmmaking developments, aspects of radical countercultural opposition were, by the end of the 1960s, also taken into more theoretical and academic forms as Duncan Reekie observed:

> The New Left gathered around the development of the journal *New Left Review* (1959), the campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) and the London New Left Club in Soho ... The central thematic of the New Left was that socialism had to be radically reconceived if it was to challenge the new forms of post-war corporate and consumer capitalism and that this reconception had to be based on the development of a rigorous intellectual investigation into contemporary society (Reekie 2007: 137).

The theorisation and intellectualisation of oppositional approaches (to the condition of Western society and the increasing American imperialism) undoubtedly informed many aspects of 1970s society and culture.

Where the arts were concerned Stuart Sillars also identified the 1970s as being, 'the years when visual art almost deconstructed itself into theories, ideologies and concepts' (Sillars 1993: 259). And John A. Walker observed artists' ideological intentions in the 1970s as having 'three objectives: first to change art, second, to use that new art to change society, and third, to challenge and transform their relations of production and artworld institutions' (Walker 2002: 3). Fluid parameters between disciplines saw many 1970s experimental filmmakers programming events, writing about their own and each other's work and theorising/philosophising about film or art, thereby ensuring that work was produced, shown, debated and recorded for posterity. An openness to experimentation, unfettered by the historical constraints of more traditional disciplines, brought a richness and diversity to the field. These

informed aspects of 1970s experimental filmmaking which included theoretical and socio-political contexts related to Marxism, feminism, psychoanalysis, structuralism and semiotics. For artist/filmmakers emerging from the art school context – notably conceptual artists and those affiliated with the LFMC – theories relating to modernism in the arts and the privileging of 'form over content' would prove important. But not all experimental filmmakers were preoccupied with these concerns and while more fluid parameters in the arts existed, filmmaking was often also approached with a total openness to experimentation, as the filmmaker Stephen Dwoskin outlined:

> For the artist even more than for 'professional' film-makers, film meant fluidity, movement, space juxtaposed, illusion, parody, reality, fantasy, twenty-four paintings a second, subtlety, exaggeration, boredom and repetition; it was drawing, photographic scrutiny, scratching, colour, tone, mathematical relationships and patterns. It was all, part or one of these things for each of the individual artists who stepped into film (Dwoskin 1975: 50).

Where the LFMC was concerned (and this history is already well documented) it is important to note that access to processing and printing facilities and a generally supportive setting created a productive environment for experimentation. Certainly this was not without its challenges – financial, organisational and personal – but the existence of these facilities, and a co-operative working environment, was instrumental in shaping a significant, distinctive amount of 1970s British experimentation. To return to the beginnings of the LFMC, however, a reminder by Le Grice provides the contexts and motivations surrounding its formation:

> The concepts for the Co-op drew variously for their formation and sustenance on a range of diverse influences as wide as that of the hippy movement, Marx, Marcuse, and May '68. It drew heavily on the precedent of the New York Film-makers Co-operative, but, through the merger with the Arts Laboratory group took on a much wider set of objectives. Though it was not fully appreciated at the time, even by those of us most involved, as well as having more ambitious aims, it always had a more strongly developed set of social and political objectives than had motivated the New York Co-op (Mazière 1986: 26).

Although Le Grice and Gidal to a large extent dominated 1970s theoretical developments at the Co-op there was also no one homogenous 'house-style' and instead an extensive range of films emerged through an environment conducive to

experimentation, revealing the broad range of approaches with film form, materiality and structure, as Rees identified:

> [T]he camera's iconic image, single or double, was not in itself the central concern of the early Co-op which … took film-making further into live events, the handmade film print, procedural systems and expanded cinema (or 'making films with projectors') to question the given definition of film as a representation rather than, as the Co-op saw it, an investigation of its identity as a performance in which viewers as well as makers were engaged. Such films seek film equivalents for light and motion. They aim to renew perception by using the whole register of film language, underlining its normally invisible aspects – frame, surface, print stock – and its 'mistakes' (flare, slippage, double-exposure) (Rees 1999: 81).

While some accounts of the Co-op's filmmaking, highlighting work informed by structural or material theoretical positions, may suggest that an earnestness of approach dominated film content, humour and play were also central to experimentation as a number of examples demonstrate. Jenny Okun's *Still Life* (1976) – a dynamic film informed by the historic 'still live' genre – enigmatically brings to life the in-frame recording of the painting process. The short film reveals a progressive change in palette as a tableau of fruits and vegetables is portrayed in negative colour film stock as Okun elucidates:

> [The film] attempts to reinstate some sort of representation of reality by painting the fruit in front of the camera its negative colours: but the burnt-out shadows and black highlights consistently prevent any illusionistic interpretation of the space within the frame while also asserting the processes involved (Spenser 1977: 4).

Okun's hands, frequently visible as the painting process takes place, create an idiosyncratic rendering of these edible objects with direct references to the still life genre and the act of painting. *Still Life* also comments on film materiality as Okun chose to screen the film as a negative print, rather than the more conventional positive film print.

Both negative and positive film are evident in Marilyn Halford's *Footsteps* (1974), where child's play is resorted to as Halford uses the structure of a game to shape the film. Halford plays the game of 'footsteps' with the camera creeping up on her from behind. The first half is silent, with images in negative of Halford standing in front of a high brick wall with her back to the viewer. She periodically turns around

quickly, attempting to catch out her 'playmate' (the camera), as the camera moves ever closer, capturing face and upper body in animated action before swinging back across trees and grass to take its position to creep up on Halford once again. The second half of the film is a near-repetition of the first half, although it is complemented by a light-hearted piano score and consists of positive film footage image. In Ian Breakwell's *Nine Jokes* (1971) humour is likewise central to the film as he mocked the seriousness of conceptual art in nine short film sketches with titles like 'The Art World Erupts' showing a close-up shot of Breakwell squeezing spots on his nose. In 'Yes/No' a man and a woman alternate in revealing one of the written words of the title hidden in mouth, ears or nostrils. While a significant amount of formal experimentation (modernist 'film as film') did take place at the Co-op, approaches were certainly not dictated by ruling decrees and also included inventive and playful experimentation. This is also clearly evident in the filmmaker Annabel Nicolson's recollection gathered together in her essay 'The Early Years of the Film Co-op' which reveals the openness to experimentation in both filmmaking and film screening during the 1970s (Nicolson 2004).

P. Adams Sitney and British films informed by the counterculture, psychoanalysis, mysticism and those taking the form of film 'diaries'

While a diversity of experimentation took place at the LFMC a significant number of British films were also informed by the countercultural, psychoanalytic and mystical influences outlined above. These are explored in my book using P. Adam's Sitney's critical taxonomical distinctions – 'psychodramatic trance', 'lyrical', 'mythopoeia', and 'diary' – outlined in his seminal *Visionary Film: The American Avant-garde* (1974). While this is not to suggest that British films should be read according to Sitney's distinctions these provide illuminating characteristics which are useful for examining some of the personal, expressive forms of 1970s British filmmaking.

Sitney's 'psycho-dramatic trance' was used to describe American films holding aspects of psychoanalysis, transcendental states of dream, hallucination or imaginary states-of-being in dramatic tension. Sitney's examples included films by Maya Deren and Kenneth Anger's *Fireworks* (1947), where a fast-paced editing style

was used to depict the trance state, revealing a disorientated sense of time and geography. Sitney outlined these films as dealing with 'visionary experience':

> Its protagonists are somnambulists, priests, initiates of rituals, and the possessed, whose stylized movements the camera, with its slow and fast motions, can re-create so aptly. The protagonist wanders through a potent environment toward a climactic scene of self-realization. The stages of his progress are often marked by what he sees along his path rather than what he does. The landscapes, both natural and architectural, through which he passes are usually chosen with naïve aesthetic considerations, and they often intensify the texture of the film to the point of emphasizing a specific point of symbolism (Sitney 1979: 21).

In Kenneth Anger's *Invocation of My Demon Brother* (1969) and Jeff Keen's *Rayday Film* (1976) the filmmakers take the lead as co-ordinators of events, but Anger more resolutely presides over the scene as a Magus, initiating and overseeing the occult ritual unfolding on the screen. Keen's leading role as executor of events is less authoritative than Anger's as he is represented as an inadvertent Mickey Mouse-masked Magus, reeling in the excessive array of tacky plastic toys, junk and consumer goods that are repeatedly burnt, smashed or dismembered. Shots of Keen's comic book illustrations fuel the disarrayed narrative disorder, and in both films an interesting relationship can be drawn between the ritualistic, frenetic rhythm and the use of fire.

Gesturing, as part of an apparent ritual, occurs in both Derek Jarman's *The Art of Mirrors* (1973) and Anger's *Lucifer Rising* (1972) and with the viewer appearing to be momentarily implicated in an arcane ritual. Both films were informed by mythology and mysticism, with the symbolic use of light and shadow informed by alchemical texts, the Tarot or occult symbolism. However, they differ significantly in their visual style and mythological focus, with *Lucifer Rising* consisting of mostly crisp, single-shot images and *In the Shadow of the Sun* being made up of superimposed, re-filmed or single shots filmed at slow speeds. Anger's film was inspired by a poem by his revered Aleister Crowley (the occultist), and celebrated Lucifer as the 'beautiful and rebellious angel of light: Lucifer not the devil, but Venus, the morning star' (Hutchison 2004: 176). Jarman was similarly interested in light, but more specifically on the dual integration of light and dark with the idea of 'the shadow of the sun' – synonymous with the Philosopher's Stone – enabling a

continuous interplay of images. In Jarman's film the mirror, held by a performer, appears to be gesturing to the viewer and is used not to reflect an image but to refract the light into the camera, while in *Lucifer Rising* Isis and Osiris raise their wands repeatedly, gesturing to signal the birth of their son Horus.

A short film by Jane Arden and Jack Bond, *Vibration* (1975), similarly informed by mysticism and the occult also includes gesturing, with the film operating as a non-linear (although still somewhat didactic) exploration into altered states of consciousness with a 'psychodramatic trance' state reached through Sufi mysticism and meditation. *Vibration* was filmed on Super-8 and converted to video, facilitating the special effects and editing which play a key role in the film's structure. Therefore, content (the search for self-actualisation) and technology (audio, film/video) were integrally combined in this search for self-realisation, with its protagonists also operating as Sitney's 'somnambulists, priests [or] initiates of rituals' (Sitney 1979: 21).

In contrast to Sitney's 'psycho-dramatic' films, 'lyrical' and 'mythopoeic' filmmaking (discussed in relation to the early films of Stan Brakhage) differed in its approaches to consciousness, as 'the filmmaker could compress his thoughts and feelings while recording his direct confrontation with intense experiences of birth, death, sexuality, and the terror of nature' (Sitney 1979: 150). With superimpositions, rapid editing, hand-painting and scratching on the filmstrip, Brakhage's films created a lyrical poetic sense embodying a personal vision and an 'uneasy inwardness' (Sitney 1979: 164). The general preoccupation of 'mythopoeic' filmmaking identified filmmakers drawing inspiration from a range of sources firmly bound up within their visions of dream, nightmare, religion or symbol, thereby creating a kind of personal mythology. It signalled a type of filmmaking drawing heavily on a self-referential poetic sense of mythology and invention, including classical mythologies (Greek, Roman or Egyptian), earth cults or the supernatural. In the British films this is evident in (amongst others) number of Jarman's short films and Larcher's diaristic but poetic and lyrical *Monkey's Birthday*.

Larcher's epic travelogue, *Monkey's Birthday* (1975) was filmed on a journey across Europe and Asia, recording the people and places in the guise of the Rimbaudian wanderer (albeit with family and friends), as the film historian, David

Curtis noted 'experiencing the romantic artist's life of poverty and visionary experience' (Curtis 2007: 179). For the editing of *Monkey's Birthday* Larcher spent the best part of a year working at the LFMC, on the filmed footage by tinting, toning, scratching into the celluloid, adding newly printed material to create repetition and with 'almost every frame of this six hours … subjected to a practically alchemical barrage of procedures and treatments' (Larcher REWIND). The soundtrack mirrors the eclecticism of the imagery, consisting of music, found-sound recordings, recordings of Larcher discussing the filmed image and quoting the mystic, Gurdjieff, (also informing Arden's *Vibration*). It is almost 6 hours long and Hendrikson suggested that the multi-layered film 'must be appreciated in the simplicity and beauty of its diary format, in the intensity of its personal quest, and in the ambitiousness of its representation as universal odyssey' (Hendrikson 1977: loose leaf).

While the countercultural milieu influenced certain aspects of 1970s British experimental filmmaking akin to Sitney's 'psychodramatic trance', 'lyrical', and 'mythopoeic' distinctions, the wider framework of personal, expressive filmmaking also included poetic renderings of individual observations, reflections or memories which can collectively be considered British 'diary' films. These include Margaret Tait's *Tailpiece* (1975) and *Place of Work* (1975), documenting the move from a long-term family home and Larcher's afore-mentioned epic travelogue *Monkey's Birthday* (1975), which 'must be appreciated in the simplicity and beauty of its diary format, in the intensity of its personal quest, and in the ambitiousness of its representation as universal odyssey' (Hendrikson 1977: loose leaf). In B. S. Johnson's enigmatic, self-parodying *Fat Man on a Beach* (1973) he paid homage to Carl Jung and Robert Graves' *The White Goddess*, while Anne Rees-Mogg's autobiographical diaristic trilogy drew on American sources to document her family history: 'I was trying not to be within the conventions of the English avant-garde. I felt much more related to American films like Jonas Mekas, and diary film' (Walkin 2003: 72). Breakwell, one of Britain's most tireless diary artists, observed the minutia of daily life with acute observations of the absurd-in-the-ordinary in written, drawn, painted and filmed accounts.

Sitney's 'diary' films – while also including self-referential approaches to filmmaking – did not include the extent of invention and personal mythology revealed in the 'psychodramatic trance', 'lyrical' or 'mythopoeic' films. The relationship between the individual and their place in the world focused many of these diary films, although these rarely followed a didactic, narrative style. Although approaches to 1970s British diary filmmaking varied greatly, generally films revealed no chronological account of events, but were more akin to Sitney's description:

> Unlike the literary diary, the diary film does not follow a day-by-day chronology. Structurally, it corresponds more to a notebook, but in its drive towards a schematic or fragmented expression of the totality of the film-maker's life, it is more like a diary, perhaps one in which the entry dates have been lost and the pages scrambled (Sitney 1979: 360).

In his account Sitney discussed the films of the prolific American film diarist, poet, archivist, writer and filmmaker, Jonas Mekas, who has spent the past fifty years recording his life events and reflections. Mekas documented his life as an exile in New York, attempting 'in a period of desperation' to 'grow roots into the new ground, to create memories' (Mekas 1977). Although the British diary filmmakers had no need to find a sense of connection to their surroundings through exile, relationships between themselves and the world they inhabited were key to their ruminations. Collectively these autobiographically informed (often poetic) filmed recordings of the everyday and ordinary (sometimes extraordinary) life form a substantial body of 'diary' works, adding to the rich diversity in 1970s filmmaking.

A film worth identifying specifically as it includes numerous countercultural and psychoanalytic influences is Whitehead's *Fire in the Water* (1977) which is arguably one of the most informative 1970s experimental films documenting the socio-political and cultural milieu. It operates simultaneously as a diary of sorts and Sitney's definition of a 'lyrical' film, with Whitehead's final work functioning as a kind of somnambulant leave-taking from filmmaking. It includes clips from many of his previous films and an aural repertoire of 1960s and 70s musicians, including The Doors, The Rolling Stones, Pink Floyd and Bob Dylan. The 80-minute film is divided into seven parts, with inter-titles like 'Requiem for the '60s', 'The Inner Self', 'Assassination: the Other Self', 'The Collective Self' and the 'Divided Self'

demonstrating clear references to Carl Jung's 'collective unconscious', as well as references to the anti-Psychiatrist R.D.Laing's influential book *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* (1960).

In the opening scene of *Fire in the Water* a young couple drive through isolated, mountainous terrain to a cottage in the Scottish Highlands. The film then cuts between footage of the couple watching clips of Whitehead's films on a Steenbeck editing table accompanied by the musical soundtrack; and scenes of the woman walking in the mountains, surrounded by the sounds of nature: bird calls, brooding thunder, a running river, wind blowing or alternately, silence. The countercultural-infused pop songs set the mood for the viewing of the film clips, reinforcing a nostalgic atmosphere. This contrasts with the scenes depicting the woman's slight figure in the wilderness, giving the impression of being both at one with nature, yet also engulfed by it. In these latter scenes a sense of foreboding prevails – as if predicting some unpleasant event – compounded by the progressively ominous soundtrack of rolling thunder, rushing water or strong wind, seemingly exacerbating the woman's danger which is revealed in the film's denouement as she is surrounded by writhing snakes and disappears into the watery depths.

While Whitehead has in the past dismissed *Fire in the Water* as being an unimportant film, my belief is that it stands as a significant historical texts, imbued as it is with a counter-cultural patina of introspection, turning to psychology, mysticism or the arcane in the search for self-realisation. The film clips shown on the editing table in *Fire in the Water* form a unique countercultural narrative, providing significant visual and spoken accounts of historical events. These include an interview with David Hockney, Michael Caine discussing the loss of the British Empire, Allen Ginsberg and Ernst Jandl's readings from the 1965 Albert Hall event, Peter Brook and Glenda Jackson protesting about the Vietnam War, Martin Luther King's memorial service (1968), the W. B. Yeats poem, 'Things Fall Apart', the Columbia University student rebellion (1968) and the artist Ralph Ortiz's performance where he 'dusts' the audience with a bird and proceeds to smash both bird and piano to pieces, to the strains of The Doors song 'The End'. For these cultural references alone it is an important film, being the cultural and historical indicator that it is.

Concluding Thoughts

The issue of historical recognition and inclusion/exclusion is a complex domain, particularly as an understanding of the institutional contexts surrounding filmmaking also reveals why certain works may go unrecognised. In the book this is discussed in some detail with Michael Mazière's research project, *Institutional Support for Artists' Film and Video in England 1966-2003,* indicating that a complex web of support facilitated 1970s experimental film production, distribution and exhibition; and that this matrix also included the wider theoretical and political frameworks shaping and forming historical readings of the decade. Clearly the lack of a collective voice (which the LFMC had) for filmmakers working independently in more personal, expressive and representational ways or using the 'amateur' 8mm formats and existing (to some extent) outside of the institutional frameworks, meant that a considerable proportion of the films fell out of some historical accounts of the decade. The fact that some of the personal 1970s films also fitted uncomfortably within dominant socialist and Marxist ideologies, due to their expressive or image-rich representational content, clearly also presented some problems for writers and critics championing the cause of politically or theoretically-engaged work. Personal filmmakers like Tait, Jarman and Keen made no attempts to justify their films through theoretical or critical frameworks like the modernist discourses prevailing at the LFMC or the *Screen*-theory abounding in other independent circles. And, problematically, many of their films were not in distribution or existed through a single screening, often to a small coterie of friends.

The discovery that this history was in parts biased, misaligning certain filmmakers and failing to account for the actual diversity in the already established history of structural and material experimentation, was made plain by the recognition that the 'return to image' – perpetuated throughout these histories – was simply not true. It is my belief that the accepted understanding that 'image' made a return at the end of the decade has allowed for a neat packaging of 1970s history – notably the theoretically-informed dominant formal or structural and material position – to set it apart from other types of filmmaking allegedly emerging at the beginning of the 1980s. I imagine that one reason for this was the need to

maintain a sense of authority and orthodoxy about the hard-core and earnest theoretical work – namely the LFMC's structural/materialist filmmaking – which could set it apart from (so as not to be tarnished by perhaps?) a filmmaking full of image, intuition, chance and personal expression. In this respect, it may also be useful to ask how much Marxist ideological positions potentially militated against forms of personal expression; and how the absence of a collective voice for more expressive, personal forms of filmmaking has also resulted in the lack of adequate recognition in 1970s historical accounts. It is useful to briefly turn to Pam Cook's essay, 'The Point of Expression in Avant-Garde Film' (1978), as she identified some important issues about personal forms of filmmaking:

> The idea of "self-expression" suggesting as it does the creation of a private language to convey the personal fantasies and obsessions of a single individual, has come under attack from "structural" film-makers in America and Europe with their formalist concerns, and from Marxists for whom it is a concept based on bourgeois individualism which asserts an independence from the dominant system that can only be illusory, thus relegating itself to a politically marginal position from which it can never radically change the dominant ideology (Cook 1978: 53).

Perhaps these expressive types of filmmaking, therefore, ricocheted against 1970s collectivist Marxist ideals seeking to dispel any sense of 'bourgeois' individualism and personal expression.

While the range of more personal, expressive forms of filmmaking discussed in my book may not form a cohesive body of work driven by a single overarching theoretical, philosophical or aesthetic premise, they are united by their individual styles, and their personal, image-rich approaches informed by literary, scientific and mystical texts or simply in recording the world. These films include superimpositions, are richly textured through physical work on the filmstrip, subjects have been 'stalked' and voyeuristically stared at and actors have performed bizarre rites and rituals. Filmmakers have reflected on themselves and their lives in attempts to uncover possible connections between past and present that may shape a hidden narrative and they have also wandered without restraint, merely looking and recording what is observed in pure wonderment, with no predetermined purpose.

The book outlining this revised history approximates a two-part structure, with the first half focusing on historiography specific to 1970s filmmaking and the organisational strategies or institutional frameworks making it all possible. The second half situates specific types of filmmaking within aesthetic, theoretical and socio-political contexts, including the visual arts; criteria informed by Sitney's 'visionary', 'mythopoeic' and 'diary' films; structural and material experimentation and women's filmmaking. The re-evaluation of this history, situating more 'personal', 'poetic' or 'expressive' forms of filmmaking *alongside* the already well-established history of formal, structural/material film importantly recognises the richness and diversity in the decade. This re-examination of the decade's filmmaking takes an alternative position, developing new forms of categorisation in order to show that dominant accounts of 1970s experimental film history have papered over a diversity of filmmaking approaches, particularly where the image was centrally placed within the texts. This history therefore provides an understanding of how experimental filmmaking grew from a small handful of films and filmmakers at the start of the decade to a veritable 'explosion' in filmmaking by the end of the 1970s. I believe this unprecedented re-examination forms an essential part in understanding the rich diversity in 1970s filmmaking, and in giving *all* filmmakers the recognition they deserve: centrally placed, equally, within the lamplight beam illumination of history.

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