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Beyond Abstract Film:

Malcolm Le Grice's _Experimental Cinema in the Digital Age_

Malcolm Le Grice

Experimental Cinema in the Digital Age

London: British Film Institute, 2001

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330 pp.

Malcolm Le Grice's 1977 book, _Abstract Film and Beyond_, was an outstanding history of that major genre of motion pictures typically termed 'experimental', in opposition to more common fictive-features and documentaries. That is to say, these experimental productions are comparatively acollaborative, economically independent, briefer, and greatly devoted to exploring structures beyond the fictive narrative, which is still motion picture's royal-road. [1] In the years following the publication of _Abstract Film and Beyond_ Le Grice continued his exploration of experimental productions (cinematic and electronic) in a body of articles from which the British Film Institute selected 25 for publication in 2001 under the title _Experimental Cinema in the Digital Age_.

As I set out to review this, his second major publication, I should point out that Malcolm Le Grice is an artist, with a film/videography listing almost 50 works produced between 1965 and 2001, as well as an academic, with a job as Professor and Head of Research at Central Saint Martin's College of Art and Design in London, England. [2] Personally, I have found Le Grice's writings to be extremely important to my understanding of the international aspect of experimental film and video, which began in the European avant garde but then flourished in the United States after the Great Depression and World War II. For the few scholars whose books progressively allowed this major genre to be accepted within US academe (e.g. Sheldon Renan in 1967, Gene Youngblood in 1970, David Curtis in 1971, and P. Adams Sitney in 1974) the extant, implicit historiography was, to coin a term, Amercentric. Almost all of Le Grice's writings are designed to mitigate this

weakness:

'My main work on the history of experimental film in general is contained in _Abstract Film and Beyond_ . . . The articles selected [for _Experimental Cinema in the Digital Age_] are not a description of historical events but instead reflect on a cultural context in which the avant-garde or experimental film developed in the UK and more generally in Europe.' (3)

Equally important is Le Grice's ability to relate 'art practice to research'. [3] His book begins with the succinct assertion: 'I am an artist rather than a scholar.' (1) Personally, I tend to see his oeuvre as a blend of written theory and what I like to call 'direct-theory'. [4] Few experimental artists write about theory (the late Stan Brakhage is an outstanding exception), but Le Grice does. However, he does not seem to share my concept of direct-theory when he writes that his involvement in the discourses of theory:

'has run parallel to that of film practice itself and has been pursued as a film-maker/theorist rather than as a critic -- the theoretical ideas have been imported where they have stimulated practice but I have always been wary of expecting any direct link -- the theory does not explain the films nor the films demonstrate the theory' (2).

Still, this major genre is the most marginal and least understood. Only recently have select artists' works become even somewhat available on VHS or DVD. Indeed, my having seen a few examples of Le Grice's own productions has only served to help me understand his written theory. [5]

In my own book, _Direct Theory: Experimental Film/Video as Major Genre_, I have argued that this marginal (and, as a result, heuristic) type of motion picture -- which Le Grice likes to label as 'experimental, independent, avant-garde', to touch all bases -- has by its very nature (and quintessential reflexivity) constituted a special mode of theory that supercedes the limited (logocentric) semiotic system of written/spoken language. This special mode is the intrinsic stuff and substance of reflexive film. To varying degrees, they do not tell stories or entertain or make money or embody 'themes'. Further, they greatly evidence an historiographic term/concept which I call 'technostructure', [6] and which contends that there are no 'mere' technical changes; rather all such changes are structurally consequential. As motion pictures moved from mechano-chemical technologies to the more electronic technologies of (first) television and then video, the resulting structural differences were at least as pronounced as the differences between oil and water colors in painting. Furthermore, as I write this our civilization is on the cusp of what will likely prove to be the greatest technological change in the entire history of motion pictures: the digital revolution.

While the book's opening chapters come from a period preceding our digital age (the 1998 essay on the work of the Japanese experimental film artist, Takahiko Iimura, is the singular exception), the book's final section on 'Digital Theory' is so concerned with this technostructural phenomenon that, for me, it constitutes the most significant part of the book. Le Grice's '1994' essay, 'The Implications of Digital Systems for Experimental Film Theory', is exemplary here, especially if we recall that what we today call the World Wide Web did not exist before 1991 (indeed, only as recently as 1992 was the expression 'surfing the internet' actually coined). In it, Le Grice sets out the 'theoretical context' for the paper (namely Peter Gidal's 'materialist film'), including three 'key features of the theoretical position', which Le Grice had 'come to hold' (235). I found myself especially drawn to the last: 'The attempt to stress the material conditions of production and viewing of works both as a creative basis of practice and as a strategy for the counteraction of narrative identification' (235). Let me quote Le Grice's elaboration of this third 'key feature':

'It is in relationship to the last of these [features] that the attitude towards technology needs to be clarified. Consistent with a fundamental 'tenet' of twentieth-century art, evident in the plastic arts and music but rarely in mainstream film, is the concept that there can be no convenient separation between the material 'means' of a work and its meaning -- that meanings derive from the working of the material. This is a concept similar to that of semiologists, that there can be no separation between the

production of a thought and the operations of language' (235).

This single paragraph at once confirms Ferdinand de Saussure's classic semiotic premise of the inextricable unity that bonds signifier and signified, and Raymond Fielding's more contemporary insight into the dynamic interrelationships between technical and structural changes ('technostructure'). Compare the following quotation from Fielding's Introduction to _A Technological History of Motion Pictures and Television_:

'There is a temptation for film historians in particular to interpret the development of the motion picture teleologically, as if each generation of works had sketched out the future of the art in advance of the technology required for its realization. In fact, however, the artistic evolution of the film has always been intimately associated with technological change, just as it has, in less noticeable fashion, in the older arts. Just as the painter's art has changed with the introduction of different media and processes, just as the forms of symphonic music have developed with the appearance of new kinds of instruments, so has the elaboration and refinement of film style followed from the introduction of more sophisticated machinery. The contribution of a Porter, Ince, or Griffith followed as much from the availability of portable cameras and improved emulsions as it did from their individual vision and talent. Similarly, the cinema verite movement . . . could not possibly have appeared and prospered . . . prior

to the miniaturization of camera and sound equipment, and with dramatic improvements in film stocks. If the artistic and historical development of film and television are to be understood, then so must the peculiar marriage of art and technology which prevails in their operations.' [7]

Raymond Fielding was/is my mentor, and I am quite certain that he remains unaware of Le Grice's writings. Nor is there any evidence that Le Grice, especially at his European remove, has ever read Fielding. Thus, I suggest that what we witness here are examples of T. S. Kuhn's famous concept of a 'paradigm shift'. Allow me to quote from Le Grice's twentieth chapter, 'The Chronos Project' (1995), on 'Questions of Art and Technology', to make this clearer:

'The most important issues remain the aesthetic, philosophical and theoretical questions which the [Chronos Project] raises. These are difficult to approach directly, especially for the artist who has made the work. Choosing to start from questions of technology is due partly to the simpler approach to some of the artistic issues which this offers. But it is also because the artistic choices and opportunities in this project are fundamentally tied in with technological matters. I have always contended that form (or language), content and technology are inseparable' (251).

Experimental Cinema in the Digital Age consists of 25 chapters of which the last is dated 1999 and entitled

'Digital Cinema and Experimental Film -- Continuities and Discontinuities'. In it, Le Grice begins with an explicit framing of what might be called the modernist ethos: 'Definition of the intrinsic characteristics of a medium has been a major component of the modernist enterprise' (310). He then goes on to compare and contrast modernism with postmodernism, especially with regard to motion pictures and the digital age. 'The modernist approach', he writes, 'lost theoretical credibility to the concepts of post-modernism for a number of reasons. One was a confusion by both artists and critics of the phenomenological concepts of art with notions of a pure essence of medium' (311).

In this, his concluding essay, Le Grice lists six 'Fundamental Characteristics of Digital Systems': digitization, analysis, synthesis, transformation, algorithmic programmability, and arbitrary access (i.e. RAM). This latter characteristic, he points out, 'has little to do with randomization or chance':

'all address locations are conceptually equidistant. The computer does not walk past house numbers 2, 3, 4, and 5 to get from 1 to 6 -- number 1 is as close to number 1000 as it is to number 2 . . . This form of storage is known as Random Access Memory. The use of the term 'random' here is confusing as it has little to do with randomization or chance. The term 'arbitrary' in its classical sense of 'chosen' expresses this concept better. Whatever terms are used to describe this, if seen as an intrinsic property of digital

media it has radical implications for art, structures of aesthetic expression and representation. The principles on which data, information or fragments of the represented world may be combined are only limited by the systems which can be defined for creating links, and these systems are clearly not confined to simple linearity' (315-316).

The title of this book thus links up with Le Grice's earlier book, _Abstract Film and Beyond_, in a remarkable way. The 'beyond' of abstract film proves to be the 'digital age' of experimental cinema. So pronounced is the technostructural leap from analog to digital motion picture technologies that the difference is not one of degree but of kind. Furthermore, even gifted theorists like Le Grice can only begin to glimpse the perhaps currently ineffable changes that future art, artists, and society will witness long, long beyond our little life-spans. I found _Experimental Cinema in the Digital Age_ to be a wonderful work; indeed, I think I will use it as a required text in my next doctoral seminar on film theory. Its maturity, sophistication, and, I believe, prescience, demand an equally mature and sophisticated audience.

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Notes

1. These characteristics (and others) are detailed in my first book _Direct Theory: Experimental Film/Video as a Major Genre_ (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1994).

2. See Le Grice's homepage: <http://www.research.linst.ac.uk/filmcentre/le_grice.htm>.

3. Ibid.

4. Direct Theory's thesis is that experimental film/video's remarkable reflexivity allows this major genre to function as a type of theory, which bypasses the limiting intervention of separate semiotic systems -- especially spoken or written language.

5. For those in the US both his work and the works of most of the artists discussed in _Experimental Cinema in the Digital Age_ are thankfully available through Film-maker's Cooperative, 175 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York, 10016.

6. As I will explain, my concept of 'technostructure' derives from the publications and teaching of Dean Raymond Fielding, who has just retired from Florida State University.

7. Raymond Fielding, Introduction, in Fielding, ed., _A Technological History of Motion Pictures and Television: An Anthology from the Pages of the Journal of the Society of Motion Picture and Television Engineers_ (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), p. 4.

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