

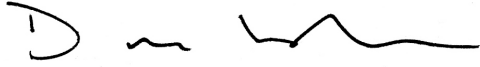
The Exhibition of Political Film and Video

PhD in Fine Art

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Date of Submission: 31 May 2018

Declaration: I confirm that this is my own work and the use of all material from other sources has been properly and fully acknowledged.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Dan Kidner'. The signature is stylized, with a large 'D' and a wavy line for the rest of the name.

Dan Kidner

28 May 2018

Abstract

In the 1970s an independent film culture was established in Britain. The filmmakers and institutions that constituted this distinct culture were a fragile coalition of activist filmmakers, proponents of structural film, artists exploring the specificity of the new medium of video, distributors, exhibitors and lobbying groups. This PhD by practice seeks to critically reflect on the historical narratives that have sutured this coalition. Across three essays questions about the nature of independence in 1970s British independent film culture, the influence of semiotic-psychoanalytic film theory through this period, and the merging of film and video cultures in the 1990s will be explored in relation to the *exhibition* of political film and video in the spaces of contemporary art.

The PhD is presented as a “thesis as a collection of papers” in order to accommodate three essays written through the process of completing this period of doctoral research by practice. These essays will be augmented by an introduction that presents my practice as a curator in relation to my practice as a writer. In this introduction I make a claim for a new approach to the presentation of historical works of experimental film, video art and political cinema in the spaces of contemporary art, that take into account the use of archives in these presentations, and the role of the spectator. In particular I will focus on two recent large group exhibitions I have curated “The Inoperative Community” at Raven Row (December 2015 – February 2016) and “Rozdzielona Wspólnota – The Inoperative Community II” at Muzeum Sztuki w Łódź, Poland (May – August 2016), and one editorial project: a publication and DVD box set of the films *Nightcleaners* (1975) by the Berwick Street Film Collective and *'36 to '77* (1978) by Marc Karlin, Jon Sanders, James Scott and Humphry Trevelyan.

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Introduction

This practice-based PhD brings together three essays published in the last three years that all, in different ways, align with a body of research instigated five years ago. That research, on the exhibition of political film and video, has ranged over British independent film culture of the 1970s, the impact of film theory on experimental film and video cultures in this period and through the 1980s and the 1990s, and the legacy of the influence of left political subcultures on the practice of artists' moving image from the early 2000s to the present. As well as the essays, the PhD comprises a number of curatorial projects completed in the same period. In this introduction, and in the conclusion, I will draw out some of the arguments from the essays; reflect on my curatorial practice in light of these arguments; and distil the main claim: that by looking back at the distinct moving image cultures of the 1970s, and critically reflecting on how film and video historiography is subsumed within a discourse of contemporary art, it is possible to build appropriate curatorial strategies for the re-presentation of historical works *and*, at the same time, construct new frameworks through which contemporary practices can be understood within these fractured histories. My unique contribution to the field of curating moving image has been to uncover little known works and histories and to introduce (or re-introduce) those works into multiple historical narratives, revealing the complex relationship between the film and video cultures that were established in the 1960s and 1970s and the current possibilities for the presentation and framing of historical works across the spaces, and within the discourses, of contemporary art.¹

¹ This has been characteristic of my work as an independent curator, and as director of two film and video organisations – City Projects (2006 – 2011) and Picture This (2011 – 2013) – for over 10 years. Two recent independent projects typify this approach: one on the German video art “magazine on video cassettes” from the 1980s, *Infermental*, and the other on British filmmaking collectives from the 1970s. Both projects had a number of outcomes including exhibitions, screening programmes and publications. See George Clark, Dan Kidner and James Richards (eds.) *A Detour Around Infermental*, Southend-on-Sea: Focal Point Gallery, 2012, and Petra Bauer and Dan Kidner (eds.), *Working Together: Notes on British Film Collectives in the 1970s*, Southend-on-Sea: Focal Point Gallery, 2012.

In the 1970s independent film was a term that held together a mixed constituency of three distinct, though overlapping, moving image cultures: experimental film, political cinema and video art.² Each culture, or scene, had its own infrastructure made up of distributors, screening spaces and journals. Experimental film had the London Filmmakers Co-op (LFMC), formed in 1966 to distribute the works of underground filmmakers, with a temporary base at Better Books on Charing Cross Road, then the centre of London's counter culture. It moved its operations to the Arts Lab on Drury Lane in 1967 and set up a film workshop, with step printer and negative/reversal processor, before moving again with the Arts Lab to a new venue on Robert Street, Camden Town, finally taking up solo residence at a building on Prince of Wales Crescent in 1971. Its in-house magazines *Cinim* (1967 -1969) and *Undercut* (1981 – 1990) published writing by its members and, in the case of *Undercut*, began to explore the full range of moving image practices, including video art. London Video Arts (LVA) formed in 1976, modelled its early operations on the LFMC, focusing on distribution and providing production facilities for its members. Magazines such as *Independent Video*, first published in 1982, which later changed its name to *Independent Media*, focused on issues specific to the medium (although its first issued carried an article by Sylvia Harvey which explored notions of independence in the practice of “counter-cinema”). The distributor The Other Cinema was founded in 1970 and distributed works of political cinema such as Jean-Luc Godard's *British Sounds* (1968) and works of Third Cinema such as *The Hour of the Furnaces* (1968) by Octavio Getino and Fernando Solanas. They would later distribute almost all works of British Independent Cinema from The Berwick Street Film Collective's *Nightcleaners* (1975), through to the work of other British filmmaking groups such as Cinema Action, the London Women's Film Group, Newsreel and the Sheffield Film Co-op, to the films of Stephen

² There are many historical accounts of these film and videos cultures. For a comprehensive history of the distribution of film and video in the UK in the 1970s and 1980s see Julia Knight and Peter Thomas, *Reaching Audiences: Distribution and Promotion of Alternative Moving Image*, Bristol: Intellect, 2011. For a history of the first decade of the LFMC see: Mark Webber (ed.), *Shoot Shoot Shoot: The First Decade of the London Filmmakers' Co-op 1966-76*, London: LUX, 2016. For a history of political filmmaking and video collectives in Britain since the 1960s, and the formation of the Independent Filmmakers Association (IFA) see Margaret Dickinson, *Rogue Reels: Oppositional Film in Britain, 1945-90*, London: BFI, 1999. For a history of The Other Cinema see Sylvia Harvey, 'The Other Cinema – A History: Part I, 1970 – 77', *Screen*, Volume 26, Issue 6, November 1985, 40 – 47, and Sylvia Harvey, 'The Other Cinema – A History: Part II, 1978-1985', *Screen*, Volume 27, Issue 2, March 1986, 80-93.

Dwoskin and Peter Whitehead. The journal *Afterimage* (1970 – 1987) was closely aligned with the radical-political leanings of The Other Cinema, and later the journal *Screen* would champion much of this work too, with a number of its writers also becoming filmmakers.³ *Screen* would also make an attempt, at the end of the 1970s, to represent voices from across the spectrum of British independent film culture, commissioning writing from LFMC member Peter Gidal on structural/materialist film and “anti-narrative”; Stuart Marshall on video art and Claire Johnston on feminist film theory and practice.⁴

Representatives from all of these constituencies were involved in the formation of the Independent Filmmakers Association (IFA) in 1974, which I discuss further in the first two essays collected here. By the end of the 1970s there is more cross fertilisation between the scenes, and in the 1990s the cultures begin to merge – in all the senses (aesthetic, legal and technological). This trajectory is tracked in the final essay collected here: “‘The Hoxton Mob Are Coming’: The Lux Centre and the Merging of Cultures of Experimental Film and Video Art in the 1990s.”

By looking back at British independent film culture in the 1970s, it is possible to both highlight the shortcomings of the discourse of political modernism that supported it and draw out lessons for contemporary moving image practices.

³ Claire Johnston was part of the London Women's Film Group, which formed in January 1972 with two aims: to disseminate the ideas of the Women's Liberation movement and to give women access to the skills and facilities denied them by the film industry. They distributed and screened their own films, and those of others. *Women of the Rhondda* (1973) by Mary Capps, Margaret Dickinson, Mary Kelly, Esther Ronay, Brigid Segrave and Humphry Trevelyan, which follows the lives of four women in a South Welsh mining village, was distributed by the Group, and the critical discussions around it informed their own film *The Amazing Equal Pay Show* (1974), which adopted a more didactic approach in order to 'provide an analysis of sexism within capitalist society'. Described as a “political burlesque in seven tableaux,” *The Amazing Equal Pay Show* examines the questions of equal pay, women's roles within the unions, and the status of women's work. Peter Wollen and Laura Mulvey made their first film together in 1974, *Penthesilea*. Mulvey has described the reasons for their move into filmmaking thus: “Two influences on Peter's and my move into making films stand out: The rise of the Women's Movement and its collective perception that images of women were a political issue and site of struggle gave us an immediate impetus to take our written theoretical work about film into practical theoretical work with film. Second, for Peter in particular, Godard's late 1960s/early 1970s films showed a cinema, out of, or alongside modernist aesthetics, could be used to convey ideas and depict thought.” See Laura Mulvey, *Penthesilea and Riddles of the Sphinx*, DVD Booklet, London: BFI Publications, 2013, 17.

⁴ For the full range of positions represented in *Screen* at the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s see: Sue Clayton and Jonathan Curling, ‘On authorship’, *Screen*, vol. 20, no. 1, 1979, 35–61; Stuart Marshall, ‘Video: Technology and Practice’, *Screen*, vol. 20, no.1, 109–119; Peter Gidal, ‘The anti- narrative’, *Screen*, vol. 20, no. 2, 1979, 73–93; Claire Johnston, ‘The subject of feminist film theory/practice’, *Screen*, vol. 21, no. 2, 1980, 27–34; and Felicity Opeé, ‘Exhibiting Dora’, *Screen*, vol. 22, no. 2, 1981, 80–85.

One of the earliest uses of the term political modernism, to name the interrelatedness of film theory to film practice in the 1970s, was in Sylvia Harvey's essay "Whose Brecht? Memories for the Eighties" published in 1982, in which she describes the process by which British film theory takes up and transform Brecht's ideas about cultural production.⁵ It is from this essay that D.N. Rodowick takes the term and extends Harvey's robust critique in his influential book, *The Crisis of Political Modernism: Criticism and Ideology in Contemporary Film Theory* (1988). Rodowick describes political modernism as "the expression of a desire to combine semiotic and ideological analysis with the development of an avant-garde aesthetic practice dedicated to the production of radical social effects."⁶ While adhering to a doctrinaire psychoanalytic-semiotic film theory, structured by the relation of formalism to realism, many theorists and filmmakers missed the opportunity to critically reflect upon the concepts of independence and collectivism on which it depended.⁷ In this introduction I will reflect further on political modernism, which held sway over independent film culture in the 1970s, while the writing of one of its chief architects, Peter Wollen, is explored in the first essay collected here, "To independent filmmakers: Stephen Dwoskin and 'the international free cinema'". Dwoskin and Wollen both attempted to solve the formalist/realist split: Wollen by imagining a kind of "counter-cinema" that would return film to the origins of the historical avant-garde, banish illusionism and construct, "a dialectical montage within and between a complex of codes,"⁸ and Dwoskin, by creating an open ended and hybrid film form – exemplified in the films *Behindert* (1974) and *Central Bazaar* (1975) – that evacuated signs and signification and threatened to collapse into formlessness.⁹

By the time that other paradigms emerged for the study of moving image culture and independent film in the field of film studies, such as cultural studies or a

⁵ Sylvia Harvey, 'Whose Brecht? Memories for the Eighties', *Screen* vol. 23, no.1, May/June 1982, 45-59.

⁶ D. N. Rodowick, *The Crisis of Political Modernism: Criticism and Ideology in Contemporary Film Theory*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988

⁷ See Stephen Heath, 'Narrative Space', *Screen*, Vol. 17, no. 3, 1976, 68-112; Colin McCabe, 'Realism and the Cinema: Notes on some Brechtian theses', *Screen*, Vol. 15, no.2, July 1974, 7-27; and Peter Wollen, 'Godard and Counter Cinema: Vent d'Est', *Afterimage*, 4, 1972, 6-17.

⁸ Peter Wollen, 'The two avant-gardes', *Studio International*. Vol. 190, no. 978 (1975), 71 - 75

⁹ Wollen became a filmmaker while working on 'The two avant-gardes,' making *Penthesilea* (1974) and *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977) with Laura Mulvey, in this period.

reconsideration of the Frankfurt School critical theory of Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno (which was ignored in the 1970s by film theorists), many practices and important works that I discuss in this thesis had already drifted from view.¹⁰ Films that made an impact during this era such as the Berwick Street Film Collective's *Nightcleaners* (1975), Jackie Raynal's *Deux Fois* (1968), and Dwoskin's *Central Bazaar*, after a period of obscurity in the 1990s re-emerged in the 2000s thanks to DVD editions and renewed critical interest in the 1970s.¹¹ However, while this is to be celebrated, the re-emergence of these films begs the question: how should they be understood in the absence of the vibrant, if fractious, film culture that once supported them? *Nightcleaners* in particular, arguably inaugurates, or at least exemplifies the "independent political film".¹² Its striking combination of the political documentary with structural/materialist film, and its impact on British film culture in the 1970s is the subject of the second essay collected here, "The Berwick Street Film Collective: Independent Film Culture in the 1970s."¹³

In the third essay collected here, the focus shifts to the 1990s and the Lux Centre, a media arts centre tasked by its funders – the British Film Institute (BFI), Arts Council England (ACE), and the London Film and Video Development Agency (LFVDA) – with housing the facilities and offices of both the LFMC and London Electronic Arts (LEA, formerly LVA), and leading the charge of cultural

¹⁰ Miriam Bratu Hansen has written about the challenge to the hegemony of psychoanalytic-semiotic film theory in the 1980s and 1990s by the "competing and asymmetrical paradigms of, on the one hand, cultural studies and, on the other, neoformalism or historical poetics and cognitivism." In her own writing Hansen returned to the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School, and questions of film and cinema aesthetic posed by Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno. See Miriam Bratu Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2012.

¹¹ Raynal's *Deux Fois* was released on DVD by RE:VOIR in 2003; Dwoskin's *Central Bazaar* was transferred and graded in High-Definition from a new 16mm restoration Interpos created by the BFI National Archive, and released by the BFI in 2009. *Nightcleaners* will be released in September 2018 as part of a publication and DVD/Blu-ray box set published by Koenig Books and Raven Row.

¹² Claire Johnston and Paul Willemen, 'Brecht in Britain: The Independent Political Film (on The *Nightcleaners*)', *Screen*, Vol. 16, No. 4. Winter 1975/1976, pp. 101-118

¹³ This essay will be published in a book and DVD edition I've edited that includes newly commissioned essays from Shelia Rowbotham, Kodwo Eshun and Sukhdev Sandhu, alongside contributions from the members of the Berwick Street Film Collective who made the film: Marc Karlin, Mary Kelly, Humphry Trevelyan and James Scott. The edition will also include the film *'36 to '77* (1978), which began life as a sequel to *Nightcleaners*, but was eventually released under the individual names of the filmmakers involved: Karlin, Trevelyan, Scott and Jon Sanders. My work as editor of, and contributor to, this DVD edition (to be published in September 2018 by Koenig Books and Raven Row), which includes new High-Definition transfers and digital scans of both films, constitutes a significant contribution to ongoing research into the work of the Berwick Street Film Collective and the film culture to which they contributed in the 1970s.

regeneration in London's East End. The Lux Centre becomes both witness to, and engine of, a number of changes taking place within the independent film sector in the 1990s: the merging of film and video cultures; the accommodation or absorption of these cultures into the institution of contemporary art; and the creeping neo-liberalisation and commercialisation of avant-garde forms of culture. The essay, entitled "The Hoxton Mob Are Coming: The Lux Centre and the Merging of Cultures of Experimental Film and Video Art in the 1990s," explores what was at stake in the merging of these cultures – cultures that were previously defined by their animosity to one another. I describe how the internecine fighting between the fields of experimental film, video art and political cinema and their staking out of alternative modes of distribution and exhibition were constitutive of their collective claim to independence.

However, this claim to independence was somewhat spurious. As philosopher Peter Osborne has pointed out, in the 1970s (or subsequently) there never was a sustained critical debate about the meaning of independence within independent film circles.¹⁴ As the journal *Screen* moves, at the end of the 1970s, from an investment in a psychoanalytic-semiotic film theory to an interest in theories of spectatorship, the *independence* of independent filmmakers is assumed rather than theorised or critically reflected upon. For Osborne the very possibility of independent cultural production emerges from Left-intellectual political cultures, and at the end of the 1970s organisations such as LFMC and LVA were already becoming *dependent* upon state-subsidy for their continued existence. This acceptance of state support very quickly became orthodoxy, and the rapid move from voluntarism to state-subsidy meant that they were increasingly led by the priorities of their funders and the public policy to which those funders were subject.¹⁵ Toward the end of the 1990s these organisations would also draw closer to an increasingly privatised cultural sphere. In "The Hoxton Mob Are Coming" I discuss this trajectory in light of the Lux Centre's sometimes awkward accommodation of the work of young British artists (yBas) and the

¹⁴ 'Peter Osborne in conversation with Paul Willemsen', in Petra Bauer and Dan Kidner (eds), *Working Together: Notes on British Film Collectives in the 1970s* (Southend-on-Sea: Focal Point Gallery, 2012), 39.

¹⁵ For an in-depth look at this process see Julia Knight and Peter Thomas, *Reaching Audiences: Distribution and Promotion of Alternative Moving Image*, Bristol: Intellect, 2011.

attendant art market. This accommodation would continue after the closure of the centre in 2001, when LUX, the organisation that emerged from the ashes of the Lux Centre, collaborated with Frieze Art Fair on the Artists' Cinema project.

In the 21st century “artists’ moving image” has become established terminology, primarily in the UK, to describe contemporary and historical practices encompassing not just work made for the gallery, but also works of experimental film, video art, and political cinema that have converged on the spaces of contemporary art. There is a need here for a detailed etymological study of terms, but this is beyond the scope of this thesis. It is possible, however, to sketch a short history of the term artists’ moving image, which although is very much used in a UK context, is less widely used internationally. When the Lux Centre closed, and discussions began about the founding of a new organisation, with support from Arts Council England, director Ben Cook made the conscious decision in the language used when establishing this new organisation to try and distance it from their previous funders, the British Film Institute (BFI) and the Film Council, and to draw closer to the language of the visual arts.¹⁶ Although the logic of this change of language was compelling, it has also compounded the issue of comprehension with respect to the discrete, if intertwined, histories that I will go on to discuss. The earlier nomenclature of independent film, which was adopted in the 1970s is continually expanded as all visual media begins to settle under the sign of the digital: the IFA accepts video makers in the early 1980s and becomes the IFVA, before later in the decade changing its name again to the IFVPA to accommodate “independent” photographers.¹⁷

If in the last 10 years the category artists’ moving image has started to draw all mediums *and* historical practices into a single historical continuum, jettisoning the words independent, video, film and media, then it is important to reconstruct what was at stake in collectively claiming independence for these mediums in

¹⁶ As detailed in an email from Ben Cook to the author, dated 25 May, 2018. Cook described how the term caused issues when, as a new organisation, they applied for charitable status. The Charity Commission initially turned down the application on the basis that the use of the possessive, artists’, seemed to exclude the public.

¹⁷ Julia Knight and Peter Thomas, *Reaching Audiences: Distribution and Promotion of Alternative Moving Image*, Bristol: Intellect, 2011, 225-227.

the first place. In a 2010 conversation between Osborne and film theorist Paul Willemen, a writer for *Screen* in the 1970s, Osborne claimed that “the critical purchase of the notion of independence derives from the classical philosophical distinction between freedom and dependence [...] That distinction is the basis for the whole of the twentieth-century German critical theory tradition, which was, by and large, rejected by British film theory.”¹⁸ Although, Osborne continues, British film theory famously adopted the earlier discourse of Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin of “film as the basis for new forms of collectivity,” it rejected the later Frankfurt school culture industry theory of Adorno and Horkheimer. Had this tradition been taken up at this point, Osborne argues, film theorists and independent filmmakers would have had a theory with which to reflect on the distinction between art and the culture industry (or independence and dependence) that you find in Adorno and Horkheimer’s “Culture Industry” chapter in their book, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.¹⁹

It was simply assumed by *Screen* writers, and filmmakers, that independent film *was* independent of the market, and therefore not a product of the culture industry. In an interview published in 1980 in *Screen*, filmmaker Marc Karlin, one of the directors of *Nightcleaners* makes an attempt to address the notion of independence. He claims that “Independence is not just a matter of economic independence, it’s also the ability to work for difference within dominant institutions such as TV”.²⁰ This cursory, or non-philosophical, reading of independence was typical of many independent filmmakers who moved into television in the 1980s. But before this happened films like *Nightcleaners* existed in a hinterland – made just prior to the formation of the Independent Filmmakers Association (IFA) and before the formation of Channel 4, which provided many independent filmmakers with financial support and a platform.

¹⁸ ‘Peter Osborne in conversation with Paul Willemen’, in Petra Bauer and Dan Kidner (eds), *Working Together: Notes on British Film Collectives in the 1970s* (Southend-on-Sea: Focal Point Gallery, 2012), 39.

¹⁹ Max Horkheimer and T. W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002.

²⁰ Claire Johnston, Marc Karlin, Mark Nash and Paul Willemen, “Problems of Independent Cinema,” *Screen*, Vol. 21 No. 4, Winter 1980/1981, 19-43.

Because substantive debates about independence were avoided or deferred, claims for films that were emblematic for the sector, like *Nightcleaners*, were made on the basis of their formal difference to other kinds of filmmaking. On its release *Nightcleaners* was lauded as the product of a new kind of political cinema: “The Independent Political Film” as Willemen and Claire Johnston dubbed it in a paper delivered at “Brecht and Cinema/Film and Politics” event at the 29th Edinburgh Film Festival in 1975.²¹ They distinguished the work from agitprop and campaign films and criticised the work of other filmmaking groups for their conventional form, idealism and “social-democratic” politics. The form of the independent political film should be as radical as its politics they argued. This reception and the challenge that *Nightcleaners* and its sister film *'36 to '77* posed to psychoanalytic-semiotic film theory is explored in the second essay collected here.

The other way in which the independent political film could assert its politics, for Johnston and Willemen, was by exposing the conditions and processes of its own making. They identify the two main subjects of *Nightcleaners* as “the analysis of a process of struggle and the cinematic presentation of that analysis.”²² Many sequences in *Nightcleaners* are re-filmed and presented as grainy abstractions; black leader is introduced between shots, where one would normally expect an edit; and interviews and voice-overs are cut short before narrative continuity takes hold. The film is always *at a distance*, made in the editing suite and the product of hours of conversations and arguments about the politics of form, but also about the efficacy of radical politics in action. The campaign to unionise women night cleaners was an important struggle that mobilised the women’s movement through the Cleaners Action Group between 1970 and 1973, and Rowbotham, a leading organiser in the movement writes in the DVD Publication – discussed in detail later in this introduction – about how the film, on its release in 1975 divided opinion within that constituency:

²¹ Claire Johnston and Paul Willemen, ‘Brecht in Britain: The Independent Political Film (on The *Nightcleaners*)’, *Screen*, Volume 16, Issue 4, 1 December 1975, 101–118.

²² *Ibid*, 105.

The effort to break with the realism and naturalism associated with documentaries made the film seem contrived and abstruse to the audience it had sought in the trade unions and the feminist movement. Hence an inadvertent distancing dogged the film's reception. The space for imagining which had opened after the May events had swiftly closed.²³

The film contains sequences of the night cleaners, cleaning office buildings, largely in isolation and often shot from a distance or through windows; meetings of the Cleaners Action Group discussing strategy; and a meeting between the cleaners a representative from the Transport and General Workers' Union. There are also snatches of conversation where the filmmakers attempt to interest exhausted cleaners in the idea of socialism: "what does socialism mean to you" Karlin asks; "Nothing. Nothing at all [...] it's like asking for the moon isn't it?" one cleaner replies. The reply is left to hang in the air. The film isn't without hope, but as Rowbotham writes, the space for imagining that opened up after the events of May '68 in Paris had closed, even for believers. The events of spring 1968 across the Western world were in many ways the condition of possibility for the independent political film, and the discourse that supported it. But from the early 1970s the radical politics of independent filmmakers starts to turn inwards and towards modelling their politics: the pursuit of independent cultural production; working collectively. They began to assert their politics through their attempts to take control of not just the means of production, but also the way in which their films were distributed and screened. And in this they were aligned with "access workshops" like the LPMC. Margaret Dickinson, filmmaker and author writes in her book *Rogue Reels: Oppositional Film in Britain, 1945-90*, of the difference between collectives and access workshops.²⁴ Both motivated by radical politics at the time, and although the two scenes differed in approach to making films, and their critical understanding of the role of film, they were united in their attempt to carve out a space outside the mainstream of art and cinema production and exhibition.

²³ Sheila Rowbotham, 'Resonance: *Nightcleaners*', in Dan Kidner and Alex Sainsbury (eds), *Nightcleaners and '36 to '77*, London: Raven Row and Koenig Books, 2018.

²⁴ Margaret Dickinson, *Rogue Reels: Oppositional Film in Britain, 1945-90*, London: BFI, 1999, 41.

It is the filmmakers and video artists associated with the LFMC and LVA who were the first to make an impact on the kinds of moving image practices that were exhibited in the spaces of art in the 1990s. This is in part because of experimental filmmakers and video-artists' closer links to the art world – many in the 1970s and 1980s were teaching in, and graduating from, art schools and looking for ways to explore the possibilities for the moving image in the gallery space. This tendency first manifests itself as video installation, and many of these practices were represented in the exhibition *Signs of the Times: A decade of video, film and slide-tape installation in Britain 1980 – 1990* discussed later in the introduction and in more detail in the Lux Centre essay. The LFMC was also opening up to different kinds of filmmakers (and even video artists) as discussed earlier. The assimilation of political film and video into the spaces the art happens later in the decade and is more circuitous. Independent filmmakers, as diverse as Chantal Akerman, John Akomfrah, Harun Farocki, Isaac Julien, Chris Marker and Yvonne Rainer all started to migrate to the gallery in the late 1990s. Firstly, advances in the technologies of projection had made it possible to screen longer works in the gallery, and secondly this move had become expedient for filmmakers because this is where the financing was coming from for adventurous, experimental films.²⁵

Across all the essays collected here I trace the processes outlined above in British independent film culture, which could also be broadly understood as a move from the distribution of film and video, to its *exhibition*. I argue that the institution of contemporary art now provides both the home, and filters the discourses, through which all moving image practices are understood and read. In the next section we will see how my own exhibition practice constitutes an attempt to critically reflect on the migration of political film and video into these spaces and the challenge that these they pose to these discourses.

²⁵ For a discussion on the technologies of projection and its impact on contemporary art in the 1990s see Liz Kotz, 'Video Projection: The Space Between Screens', in *Art and the Moving Image: A Critical Reader*, ed. Tanya Leighton (London: Tate and Afterall, 2008), 371-385.

The Inoperative Community

In the following section I will discuss two exhibitions that I began to research and develop in the Summer of 2013: *The Inoperative Community*, Raven Row (3 December 2015 to 14 February 2016) and *Rozdzielona Wspólnota (The Inoperative Community II)*, Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź, Poland (20 May to 28 August 2016).

Although in the essays collected here I focus exclusively on British independent film and video cultures of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, I have attempted, in my exhibitions to reflect on the impact of some of the debates from Anglo-American film theory internationally, but also to trace the impact of the “afterlives” of May 1968 and the insurrection and uprisings that occurred across the globe in the 1960s.²⁶ For example the inclusion of Filipino filmmaker Lav Diaz’s epic 480 minute *Melancholia* (2008) in “The Inoperative Community” signalled an interest in non-western cinema as the site of experiments in mixing documentary with fiction modes, but also in an international community of filmmakers looking back, from the point of view of now, at the rise of radical politics in the 1960s, the global impact of communist ideas, and Maoism in the particular.²⁷

Thinking through modes of presentation of independent film in the spaces of art was one of the key concerns of the first curatorial project to emerge directly from my doctoral research. “The Inoperative Community” was an exhibition for which I brought together works from different film and video traditions

²⁶ For a discussion of the social and cultural impact of the events of May 1968 in Paris see Kristin Ross, *May '68 and its Afterlives*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002. For a dissection of the impact of May '68, and French theory, on British film culture in the 1970s see Sylvia Harvey, *May '68 and Film Culture*, London: BFI Publications, 1978.

²⁷ Diaz’s film interrogates the legacy of dictator Ferdinand Marcos’ imposition of Martial Law on the Philippines in 1972, whose brutal crackdown on the Communist Party and Maoist cadres scarred the country. Also included in “The Inoperative Community” was Eric Baudelaire’s *The Anabasis of May and Fusako Shigenobu, Masao Adachi, and 27 Years without Images* (2011), which tells the stories of Adachi, Shigenobu and her daughter, May. Involved with Japanese cinema’s New Wave in the 1960s and 1970s, Adachi abandoned commercial filmmaking in Japan and fled the country to Beirut with the Japanese Red Army. Shigenobu, one of the group’s founders was in exile in Beirut for almost 30 years until arrested and repatriated to Japan in 2000. Baudelaire’s film reflects on these details, but also tries to re-imagine Adachi’s “landscape theory” of filmmaking. See Rei Terada, “Repletion: Masao Adachi’s Totality,” *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences*, Volume 24, Number 2, Spring/Summer 2016, 15-43. Also included in the exhibition was Johan Grimmonprez’s *dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* (1997), a found footage film that revisited the radical politics of the 1970s by recycling passages from two novels by Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (1985) and *Mao II* (1991) and staging a conversation between a terrorist and a novelist.

(documentary, non-western cinema, independent film, video art and artists' film and video), to explore ideas of community and spectatorship. It included work from the historical fields of video-art (Stuart Marshall and Ericka Beckman) and experimental film (Anne Charlotte Robertson), but most of the work was drawn from the fields of independent political film and avant-garde cinema (Cinema Action, Berwick Street Film Collective, Stephen Dwoskin, Helke Sander, Pere Portabella, Jean-Luc Godard, Jean-Pierre Gorin, Yvonne Rainer and Jackie Raynal). The exhibition also included films by contemporary artists, made for gallery *and* cinema presentation, but with a clear connection to the traditions of avant-garde cinema and independent political film (Luke Fowler, Eric Baudelaire, Mati Diop and Johan Grimmonprez).

The first iteration of the exhibition at Raven Row featured over 50 hours of film and video, all projected digitally, and all the works posed important questions about the place of political film and video in the gallery. All the exhibited works explored or reflected on narrative filmmaking and ranged across the forms of experimental documentary, diary film, counter-cinema and essay film. As many of these films would normally be shown in a cinema and benefit from beginning to end viewing, in the spaces of contemporary art, where one is used to watching moving images on loops, absorbing a fragment before moving on or as visual noise in an immersive experience, they provocatively stage a conflict between two apparently different modes of spectatorship: a distracted mode of reception (gallery) and a more contemplative mode (cinema). One of the aims, therefore, was to question this strict dichotomy, and to ask the viewer to consider shifting modes of attention required for the moving images that animate the many screens that now pervade everyday life. The absolute immersion once considered the ideal condition for the viewing of moving images is no longer possible, if it ever was.

To stage this conflict and at the same time be faithful to the original intention that the films should be screened from the beginning to end, all the films (with the exception of Stuart Marshall's *Journal of the Plague Year*) were placed on timed screenings. This was one of the most important aspects of the project –

in that, curatorially, the temporal nature of the exhibition would take priority over the spatial arrangement of works. Although timed screenings within group exhibitions and solo presentations are not rare, this was the first time, that the author is aware, that this was attempted at the level of an entire group exhibition. Although, strictly speaking, because of the inclusion of *Journal of the Plague Year*, this “pure” realisation of the show was only realised with the second iteration, to be discussed later.

The unique gallery spaces of Raven Row, converted from eighteenth century domestic rooms, also presented a challenge.²⁸ Each of the domestic scaled rooms housed one work, which played a number of times each day, with a short gap in between screenings. A second temporal framework was constructed for the show, through the introduction of a screening room, or quasi-cinema, in one of the two contemporary galleries (in the other, which led to the screening room, *Journal of the Plague Year* was installed). For the screening room a more linear approach was taken to the historical and political framing of the exhibition with a different sequence of films programmed to run each day of the week.²⁹ These five programmes were, broadly speaking chronological but also thematic. They began with three films made in the immediate aftermath of the student demonstrations and workers’ revolts of May ’68 in France, moving on to UK independent political films made in the 1970s and early 1980s, before concluding with several programmes of films made in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s looking back on the “long 1970s.”

The first programme consisted of three films made by directors associated with, what later became known as the Zanzibar group.³⁰ All the films produced by the group (13 in total), financed by French heiress Sylvina Boissonas, were made in and around the events of May ’68. As one of the filmmakers, Patrick Deval, later

²⁸ Founded and financed, by director Alex Sainsbury, Raven Row was constructed within a series of eighteenth century domestic rooms housed in a building dating back to 1690, and located in the heart of Spitalfields, London. It opened in 2009 and has since become known for its rigorously researched exhibitions, often focusing on neglected histories. See www.ravenrow.org/about/

²⁹ “The Inoperative Community,” Raven Row (3 December 2015 to 14 February 2016), Gallery Guide. <http://www.ravenrow.org/exhibition/the-inoperative-community/>

³⁰ For an historical study of the Zanzibar group and their work see Sally Shafto, *Zanzibar: Les Films Zanzibar et les Dandys de Mai 1968/The Zanzibar Films and the Dandies of May 1968*, Paris: Classiques de l’Avant-Garde, Éditions Paris Expérimental, 2007.

recalled, the films were made “before [May], in a prophetic manner, during in a documentary and historical way, and after in a Melancholy way.”³¹ Mostly shot on 35mm these unique and largely forgotten works tend to eschew plot and often language, in search of a primal expression of ennui, disappointment and melancholy. Raynal’s *Deux Fois* is the emblematic Zanzibar film and one of the key works in “The Inoperative Community”. As discussed in the Dwoskin essay, Raynal’s film posed a problem for Wollen’s famous schema of the “the two avant-gardes”. By delineating a divided history of avant-garde film with the formalists on one side (the artist filmmakers of the filmmakers’ co-op) and the political modernists on the other (the kinds of films distributed by The Other Cinema) *Deux Fois*, by his own admission, fell “somewhere in between”.³² This quality of falling between is common to many of the films in “The Inoperative Community”, and one of the keys to understanding the selection of works.



Fig 1. “The Inoperative Community”, exhibition view. Photograph: Marcus J. Leith

The novelty of structuring an exhibition of film and video around timed screenings meant that there was an immediate address to a different mode of spectatorship, one more familiar to cinema audiences than visitors to an art

³¹ Quoted in Shafto, *The Zanzibar Films and the Dandies of May 1968*, 174.

³² Wollen, ‘The two avant-gardes’, 171-75

gallery. This reflection on the conditions of display was one of the central concerns of the exhibition and designed to cause an oscillation in the visitor between engagement with the works, and acknowledgement of the displacement of those works. This intention was signalled in two ways at the beginning of the exhibition. Firstly, in the lobby space of the gallery there was hung a very large timetable – larger than many of the screens in the show, but of similar dimensions (Fig 1). In an immediately legible way it was possible for the visitor to position themselves both temporally and spatially within the exhibition. By checking the timeline the visitor could see which films were about to start, which were mid-way through, and which were about to finish. Secondly, if the visitor decided to enter Gallery One from the lobby, they were presented not with a film, but with an empty room with a glazed round aperture in one of the room's walls. Through this was visible a simple screening room, with a bench and a screen, and quite probably a number of people watching the screen. The glass window was a two-way mirror, which meant that those in the screening room, looking out, were presented with a reflection of the projected image rather than a view into the empty room.

This installation was designed with the filmmaker, Leslie Thornton, whose work *Peggy and Fred in Hell: Folding* (1984 – 2015) screened in the space. Thornton was one of the first filmmakers invited to participate in the exhibition, and the conversation with her, from the beginning, was about how to frame a long edit of the project she'd been working on for over 30 years. Over that period Thornton reworked footage, she had shot over a number of years from the mid-1980s to the end of the decade, with two children, Janis and Donald Reading, who lived next door to her. Periodically she would produce a new "episode", and occasionally some of the episodes were stitched together to form longer edits. The conversation with her centred around these two questions: how to spatially frame the work, and which edit of the film to screen. Early on in the conversation she decided to make a "definitive" edit *and* installation for the "The Inoperative

Community” and even shot some additional footage in Whitechapel, London, while in residence at Raven Row, which was secreted into the final edit.³³



Fig 2. Ericka Beckman, *You The Better* (1983), 16mm film transferred to digital, 32 mins. “The Inoperative Community” exhibition view. Photograph: Marcus J. Leith

³³ The realisation of a definitive edit of the Peggy and Fred in Hell project and an “ideal” installation was discussed, with the author, in a public conversation, recorded and archived on Raven Row’s website at <http://www.ravenrow.org/events/dan-kidner-and-leslie-thornton-in-conversation/>



Fig 3. Ericka Beckman, *You The Better* (1983),
16mm film transferred to digital, 32 mins.
"The Inoperative Community" exhibition view. Photograph: Mark Blower

Another artist involved from an early stage was Ericka Beckman, whose film *You The Better* (1983) was screened in one room with an ante-room attached. For this unusual setting the installation component which normally accompanies gallery presentations of the work (large, illuminated house shaped structures) was stripped back to include just one sculptural element. (Fig 2 and Fig 3) Both of these filmmakers, because of the attention their works needed in order to be accommodated at Raven Row, were invited to spend time staying in the gallery's apartments. This also enabled me to spend time with them talking about the exhibition concept as it developed and also to forge meaningful working relationships with them. This approach to curating has always distinguished my practice and enriched the projects I've worked on. To reflect on these questions about the presentation of historical works of political film and video in the spaces of contemporary art, and the merging of film and video cultures, that I have pursued in this period of doctoral research, it is important to focus briefly on this aspect of care. (This will also be pursued later in relation to the restoration of *Journal of the Plague Year*). Both Thornton and Beckman in particular have seen their works move from the initial contexts in which they were made (as exemplary works of new media and video art), screened at

festivals or new media arts centres, to the contemporary art world. Their works bear the marks of this transition and working closely with them has increased my understanding of some key issues discussed in this introduction. Thornton in particular has talked at length to me about her relationship to the art world.³⁴

One of the starting points for considering how to *think* the 1970s and its afterlives was Jean Luc Nancy's essay, from which the exhibition took its name.³⁵ Although never meant to be a theme in the sense that it would guide the selections of the work, the use of Nancy's title was used primarily to signal an interest in the discourse of communization or re-communization, which Nancy's essay in many ways inaugurated. For Nancy, the concept of community is not tied to a liberal-democratic notion of communities circumscribed by race, religion or social class. Community is, "not a project of fusion, or in some general way a productive or operative project – nor is it a *project* at all [...]"³⁶, but instead something inherently contradictory. Nancy maintains that "In a certain sense community acknowledges and inscribes [...] the impossibility of community".³⁷ The discourse of communization that takes root towards the end of the 1990s, led by French philosopher Alain Badiou and others, in many way reinvigorates this earlier moment in political theory and philosophy when not just Nancy, but others such as Maurice Blanchot, Félix Guattari, Antonio Negri explored the limits of the philosophical name of communism.³⁸ Most of these debates revolve around the project of separating the philosophical name of the communism from the political name, in order to reinstate the political idea. However, "the philosophical renewal of the name of communism [...] is both the site of

³⁴ http://www.ravenrow.org/events/dan_kidner_and_leslie_thornton_in_conversation/

³⁵ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, ed. Peter Connor, foreword by Christopher Fynsk, trans. Peter Connor, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland and Simone Sawhney, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and Oxford, 1991.

³⁶ Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 15

³⁷ Ibid., 15

³⁸ See Félix Guattari and Antonio Negri, *Communists Like Us*, with a 'Postscript, 1990', by Antonio Negri, trans. Michael Ryan, Semiotext(e), Foreign Agents Series, New York, 1990, and Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, trans. Pierre Joris (New York: Station Hill, 1988), which was published as a critical response to Nancy's *The Inoperative Community*. In return, and over thirty years later Nancy published his response, *The Disavowed Community*. New York: Fordham University, 2016. For a thorough discussion of the discourse of communization and a survey of its literature see John Roberts, "The two names of communism," *Radical Philosophy* 177 (January/February 2013).

communism's re-emergence as idea/ideal and also the place where it is foreclosed, or suffers collapse, as a politics."³⁹

The process being described here, of a future foreclosed through its own imagining has a corollary in independent filmmaking. In the 1970s, as the New Left rose and fell, the left-political subcultures that provided independent film culture with its oxygen started to retreat into permanent state of crisis, and independent film went into mourning. Through all that was positive about many of the films made in the early 1980s, especially through the workshop movement and in particular the work of the Black Audio Film Collective, this work was already in a very different mode to say, *Nightcleaners*.⁴⁰

The discourses of political modernism and communization were very important in providing an intellectual framework for "The Inoperative Community". But it was always important, curatorially, that this framework would not determine which works were selected. Although many of the works in the exhibition directly address radical politics and the issues that preoccupied 1970s film theory, many did not. As far as there was an organising principal for the show, or a requirement the works were expected to fulfil, it was simply that they should be made after the events of May 1968 and that in direct or oblique ways address the idea of community, in the deep philosophical sense of *being-with* rather than manifesting a singularity. Nancy makes this distinction by stating, "The community that becomes a single thing (body, mind, fatherland, Leader . . .) necessarily loses the in of being-in-common. Or, it loses the with or the together that defines it. It yields its being-together to a being of togetherness."⁴¹ This deeper notion of community, rather than the liberal-democratic one favoured by policy makers and public funding bodies such as Arts Council England that emphasise the identity of a given community (being of togetherness), also guided the design of the exhibition.

³⁹ John Roberts, 'The two names of communism', *Radical Philosophy* 177, January/February 2013, 10.

⁴⁰ See the chapter, 'Paradoxical Success (1980-90)', in Margaret Dickinson, *Rogue Reels: Oppositional Film in Britain, 1945-90*, London: BFI, 1999, 62-85.

⁴¹ Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, p. xxxix.

The exhibition was designed around the idea of creating an experience of fluctuating proximity and distance to the works on display. Interstitial spaces were created for the visitors, such as the lobby space, and by opening up one of the gallery's apartments additional seating was available outside of the screening rooms. As well as this theoretical and thematic framework for the exhibition, it was also navigable, conceptually, by way of a *periodization*. The exhibition wasn't to be read, however, as a survey. In the exhibition's booklet I described this periodization as the "long 1970s."⁴² The works in the show weren't necessarily made between the years 1968 and 1984 (my definition of the long 1970s) but they all in some way responded to, or reflected on, the radical social and political movements of that era, broadly understood as beginning with national liberation struggles around the world, mass student movement and workers' revolts, and ending with the abrupt foreclosure of the dreams of these movements and the birth of neoliberalism.

All the works (with the exception of the *Journal of the Plague Year*) were projected digitally and played to a computer-controlled schedule. The visitor had the option to watch something from beginning to end or to browse the exhibition. This browsing was made possible by carefully considering the placement of the benches in each room. The benches, designed for the exhibition, had a high back [fig 4] and were placed so that visitors entering the room after the start of the film would cause minimum disturbance to the visitor already seated and engaged in the film. A consideration all too often not made when installing moving image work in museums and galleries, where the entrances and exits of visitors disrupt the viewing of a film. The benches were designed to be comfortable and adaptable to each of Raven Row's domestic scaled rooms. Each of these rooms housed one work, while one of the two contemporary gallery spaces within the building housed a dedicated screening room (or quasi-cinema), with tiered seating. Similarly, there was ample space at the back of the screening room for visitors to gather before deciding to take a seat. These liminal spaces, which littered the exhibition, meant that there were many opportunities

⁴² The exhibition programme and guide are available from Raven Row's website: http://www.ravenrow.org/exhibition/the_inoperative_community/

to pause and reflect on the disparity between the architecture of the galleries and the architecture of the exhibition. [fig 5]



Fig 4. The Inoperative Community Bench. Designed by Simon Jones Studio (2015)



Fig 5. Jackie Raynal, *Deux Fois* (1968). 35mm transferred to digital, 64 min.
Courtesy Collectif Jeune Cineema. Photograph: Marcus J. Leith

In the other contemporary gallery space at Raven Row, *Journal of the Plague Year* (1984) by the late video artist, theorist and activist Stuart Marshall, was installed. I had already planned to restore the work years before for an exhibition of Marshall's work at Picture This, where I was director between 2011 and 2013. Although this exhibition never happened I continued researching the work and met with many of Marshall's former friends and colleagues, as well as possible exhibition partners. The work, a multi-monitor video installation, had not been exhibited since its inclusion in an exhibition curated by Chrissie Iles, *Signs of the Times: A decade of video, film and slide-tape installation in Britain 1980 – 1990*, held in two parts from 7 October to 4 November and 11 November to 9 December 1990 at Modern Art Oxford.

Journal of the Plague Year was a vulnerable work. When installed previously the work consisted of five monitors embedded into a long, partitioned wall. Each panel a text. A few photographs existed of the work installed, and these were either partial – only showing a portion of the work – or the text, hand painted on the panels, was indistinct. And although all the video tapes existed, in LUX's collection, there were no preparatory drawings or copies of the texts to facilitate easy reproduction.

Journal of the Plague Year was something of a transitional work for Marshall, moving him closer to the films he would make later for television exploring gay histories and the media's reporting of the AIDS crisis. As with much early video art, Marshall's first works had sought to reflect on the material of video itself and test the medium's possibilities. After making a number of tapes exploring the voice, he began to interrogate the conventions of television, uncovering its hidden structures and codes, and to draw closer to narrative filmmaking. Chronicling "the experience of AIDS from within the gay community,"⁴³ *Journal of the Plague Year* was originally commissioned for the festival 'Vidéo 84' in Montreal, Canada and shown again later that year in the exhibition *Cross Currents* at the Royal College of Art, London. Five silent videos, each running a

⁴³ Stuart Marshall's artist page in Chrissie Iles, *Signs of the Times: A Decade of Video, Film and Slide-Tape Installation in Britain, 1980-1990*, Oxford: Museum of Modern Art, pp. 12-17, p.47.

little over ten minutes, depict different representations of the gay experience from within the public and private spheres.

Each monitor is embedded within a partitioned, white, freestanding wall. Marshall aimed for a visual effect somewhere between the cubicles in a public lavatory and the cells of a prison; two key references were Frank Ripplloh's *Taxi Zum Klo* (1981) and Jean Genet's *Un Chant d'amour* (1950).⁴⁴ The text painted onto the panels either directly or obliquely refers to the video images. On the first panel, text rendered in a typewriter font describes the Nazis' 1933 raid on Berlin's Institut für Sexualwissenschaft (Institute of Sexual Science). The video shows books and papers being burned in barrels, in a reconstruction of the actual event, with a date stamped in the bottom left hand corner: Berlin, 1933. The text on the second panel consists of three enigmatic handwritten sentences: "It's been two weeks and three days now. His mother keeps trying to enter the apartment. She threatens to call the police." The images, shot inside a Parisian apartment, are of empty rooms; an empty bed, the bed and pillow still holding the impression of a sleeping body; a mantelpiece; and cluttered abandoned desk. The third panel is inscribed with the title and subtitle of a medical report on Kaposi's sarcoma, whilst the video scans the front pages of tabloid newspaper, featuring sensational and homophobic reports on the spread of the "gay plague". The fourth contrasts tender images of Marshall's sleeping partner with a transcription of some graffiti the artist had seen in London: AIDS = Arse Infected Death Sentence, and the final panel features what looks like a journal entry written by an internee of Flossenbürg concentration camp. Accompanying the text, which describes the work prisoners were forced to do extracting and "hewing" stones for "Hitler's great building projects", are shots of the quarry and buildings in Flossenbürg and Nuremburg.

A few of the panels were changed or altered when Marshall reconstructed the work for the *Signs of the Times*, notably the second and fourth panels. The fourth originally featured another piece of graffiti: Kills Queers. Each of the panel's texts was hand painted by Marshall using an overhead projector. It took hours of

⁴⁴ Related by Chrissie Iles to the author in a conversation in New York on 13 May, 2015.

careful work, and Iles remembers spending time with the artist during this process and discussing the “apocalyptic” scene in London – at that moment both Derek Jarman and Leigh Bowery were sick, and “Thatcher and Reagan were doing their worst, and there was a sense of a dark, oppressive moment, impending nuclear war, attacks on the gay community, things falling apart.”⁴⁵ What had been, in 1984, a work expressing resistance and fury had become melancholy, sombre and elegiac. This transition to a more reflective mode – a state of mourning – was also evident in many works by filmmakers who had fused activism with formalism through the 1970s and 1980s, such as the Berwick Street Film Collective (and the later films made for television by collective member Marc Karlin), the Black Audio Film Collective, and Sally Potter.⁴⁶ Marshall’s work was deeply personal and universal, its message both clear and nuanced. At the time of the first iteration of the work, the artist dedicated it to his colleague John Lewis. In the *Signs of the Times* catalogue, Marshall dedicates the second and final iteration, “to all those men I have worked with, admired and loved who are now dead”. Marshall died in 1993 of AIDS-related illnesses. *Journal of Plague Year*, like much of the work in the exhibition *Signs of the Times*, fell between two periods. It was both formally experimental and political, and was at odds with the more conventional forms of film and video installation that would come to dominate the UK scene in the 1990s.

Until relatively recently, Marshall’s work was rarely screened and his important critical essays largely forgotten. This was in part because of the dispersed nature of his archive and lack of an estate. Much of Marshall’s personal archive was destroyed or lost when his partner Royston Edwards died shortly after Marshall’s own untimely death in 1993. What remains of Marshall’s archive is divided between the British Artists Film and Video Study Collection and LUX.⁴⁷ Restoring *Journal of the Plague Year* was made especially difficult for these reasons. Other than a blurry and cropped installation shot from the Gallerie Optica presentation that appeared in both the *Signs of the Times* catalogue and

⁴⁵ Chrissie Iles, email correspondence with the author, 9 February 2015.

⁴⁶ See Marc Karlin’s *For Memory* (1986), Black Audio Film Collective’s *Handsworth Songs* (1986) and Sally Potter’s *The Gold Diggers* (1983)

⁴⁷ Most of Marshall videos are in the collection of LUX. His later documentary films are distributed by Maya Vision

David Curtis' *A History of Artists' Film and Video in Britain* [fig 6] there was little to help reconstruct the text described above.⁴⁸ There were no drawings or notes in what remained of Marshall's paper archive, but I did find a rough drawing of the wooden structure in Modern Art Oxford's archive, which gave me the dimensions of the structure and its apertures into which the five monitors were set.

Although LUX held the tapes of *Journal of the Plague Year*, the structure described above was destroyed after its last presentation in the *Signs of the Times* tour.⁴⁹ Possibly because of the fact that Marshall's "estate" isn't administrated by a commercial gallery or a distributor, and despite the work regularly being lauded as an important work of art and accorded its place in the history of video art, the work was in danger of being lost. I first set about trying to find additional photographs of the text obscured in the Galerie Optica image and became optimistic of the prospects of restoring the work when I tracked down a copy of the book *Vidéo* published after the festival in Montreal, *Vidéo 84*. The book's aim was to contextualise the event, which combined the festival, a symposium and a number of installations, and it contained historical essays about the emergence of video cultures in nine countries represented in project.⁵⁰ The countries represented were Germany, Belgium, Canada, USA, France, UK, Japan, Switzerland, and Yugoslavia. The essay on British video culture was by Mick Hartney and titled *Video in Great Britain. Or, How We Lost an Art-Form and Found a Medium*.⁵¹ In it Hartney traces the emergence of video installation in the UK, and tentatively maps the difficulties of exhibiting "tapes" as opposed to video installations, which "operate most effectively in the gallery or museum spaces, where lighting and ambience can be controlled."⁵² He writes that both "curators and writers have tried, with varying success, to incorporate programmed video

⁴⁸ See Chrissie Iles (ed.) *Signs of the Times: A Decade of Video, Film and Slide-Tape Installation in Britain, 1980-1990*, Oxford: Museum of Modern Art and David Curtis, *A History of Artists' Film and Video in Britain*, London: British Film Institute, 2007.

⁴⁹ *Signs of the Times*: Judith Goddard, Roberta Graham, David Hall, Susan Hiller, Tina Keane, Stuart Marshall, Jayne Parker, Chris Welsby (26 novembre 1993-13 février 1994). Ferme du Buisson, 1993.

⁵⁰ Rene Payant, *Video. Montréal*, Artextes 1986.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 78 - 91

⁵² *Ibid.*, 89

tapes into an exhibition structure.”⁵³ With *Journal of the Plague Year* Marshall’s solution to this problem was to create narrative through the structure itself, rather than at the level of the individual films, which are fragmentary, silent, and dependent on the text and resonances set off by the mise-en-scène of the atmospherically lit construction as a whole. A similar approach to video installation was shared by a number of the works in *Signs of the Times*, particularly the projects of Judith Goddard, Tina Keane and Susan Hiller, which I discuss in the Lux Centre essay.

As I began to assemble more visual material and anecdotes, from Goddard and Iles in particular, it became clear that Marshall had made changes to the work between the Galerie Optima/RCA presentations and its reconstruction for *Signs of the Times*. The Dilemma then was, which version to reconstruct. At first, I only had sufficient information to reconstruct the Galerie Optima iteration of the work, even after discovering that one of the touring venues of *Signs of the Times*, La Firme du Buisson Centre d’Art Contemporain, in Noisiel, France had produced a catalogue in which was reproduced an image of the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford iteration of the work. This image, strangely, hadn’t surfaced in the archive of Modern Art Oxford. Although this image was also rather blurry, rendering most of the text unreadable, it did feature all five panels as well as a transcription of the text, albeit in French. And it was clear enough to discern that the second and fourth panels were different from the first iteration of the work made six years earlier. This meant that in the intervening years Marshall had made the decision to alter the work. In the absence of an estate or owner, I felt a responsibility to restore the 1990 version. This became possible after sharpening the image, translating the transcript back into English, and painstakingly tracing it onto the general shape of the text that was barely visible in the photograph. [fig 7]

⁵³ Ibid., 89

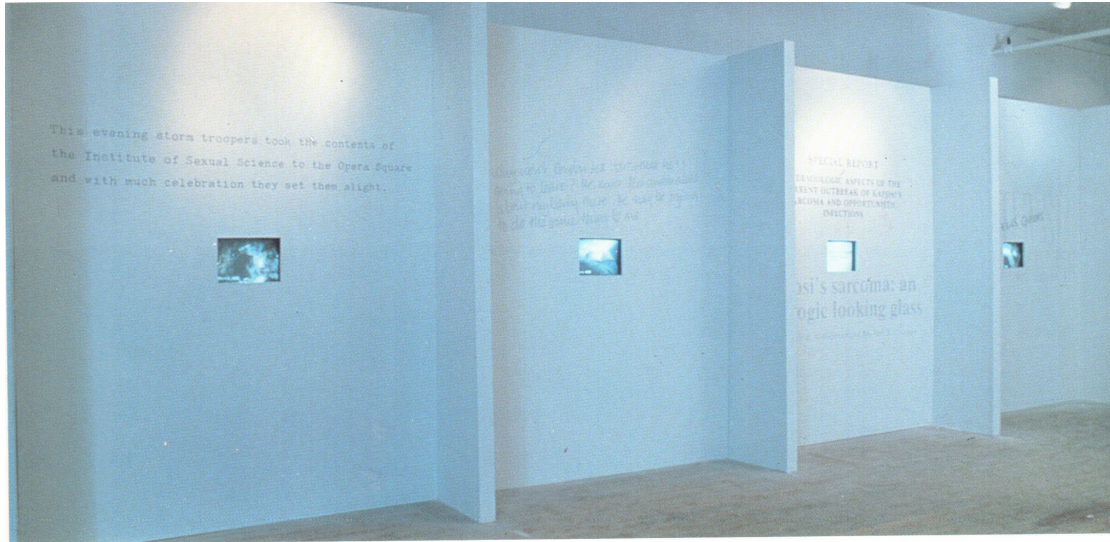


Fig 6. Stuart Marshall, *Journal of the Plague Year* (1984). Installation view, Gallerie Optica (3 – 27 October 1986). Photograph reproduced in Chrissie Iles (ed.) *Signs of the Times: A Decade of Video, Film and Slide-Tape Installation in Britain, 1980-1990*, Oxford: Museum of Modern Art and David Curtis, *A History of Artists' Film and Video in Britain*, London: British Film Institute, 2007. (Photographer: unknown).

There was a level of care, attention and historical research needed to sensitively restore the work that would have been difficult to secure ordinarily within the context of the production schedules and priorities of an art institution. Working in such a way has also become difficult for the contemporary curator, whose function is all too often to mediate existing material or instigate curatorial conceits or themes to frame contemporary work alongside historical works. Irit Rogoff has called this aspect of contemporary curating “an imperative to create a fit between a thematic and a series of works that function as the representation of that thematic.”⁵⁴ By reflecting on the essential and consequential role of the curator in the process of the stewardship of history and production of knowledge, I have begun to conceptualise a new understanding of my own working practices, and the importance of research time for curators working with historical material.

⁵⁴ Irit Rogoff and Beatrice von Bismarck, ‘Curating/Curatorial’, in Beatrice von Bismarck, Jorn Schaff, Thomas Weski (eds). *Cultures of the Curatorial*. Sternberg Press, 21-40.

the specificity of this new context. *Rozdzielona Wspólnota – The Inoperative Community II* was the result of, if not a complete rethinking, then a refining of the initial ideas for the Raven Row iteration. Muzeum Sztuki is made of three buildings spread through the city of Łódź: MS1, MS2 and the Muzeum Pałac Herbsta. The exhibition was staged across one floor of MS2, a former textiles factory. The industrial and open nature of the space presaged a different approach to the design of the exhibition. Instead of adapting to and responding to individual rooms, each room had to be built from scratch. Working with the architect, Krzysztof Skoczylas, I designed a matrix of six rooms constructed from raw plasterboard walls, which were left unpainted. The effect was of a building under construction, emphasising the temporary nature of these screening rooms or micro-cinemas, and their uncertain relationship to the institution of contemporary art.

The new venue for the project also threw into question decisions that were made for the installation of some of the work for the Raven Row iteration. *Journal of the Plague Year* was the first consideration. Although the work had, from the beginning, been integral to the whole project, through the process of restoring it and reflecting on its role within the first exhibition it became clear that in many ways the work detracted from the clarity of the idea to show works that engaged with narrative and benefited from beginning to end viewing. Consequently, the work wasn't included in the Polish iteration.

DVD Publication: *Nightcleaners* and '36 to '77

The final project to emerge from this period of doctoral research is a new DVD edition and book on the work of the Berwick Street Film Collective, featuring digital restorations of the films *Nightcleaners* and '36 to '77. I've worked on the edition as editor, contributor to the book, consultant on the restoration, and coordinator of a series of events being organised around the launch in November 2018. The project as a whole will constitute a major contribution to scholarly work on British independent film and the independent film culture of the 1970s. The release of these two important films, as well as the screening events that are

being organised to coincide with the launch, will further open up onto questions about the relevance of the films today, particularly to contemporary art audiences. In her endorsement for the cover of the publication Laura Mulvey writes:

These two essential films had a central, even mythic, place in the 1970s juncture between radical politics and radical aesthetics. Controversial at the time, much speculated about since, thanks to the Raven Row restoration project a new audience can now discover this uniquely beautiful and meditative cinema.⁵⁷

The book features newly commissioned essays by feminist historian Shelia Rowbotham, filmmaker and academic Kodwo Eshun and writer Sukhdev Sandu, alongside my contribution, “The Berwick Street Film Collective: Independent Film Culture in the 1970s,” included here and discussed earlier in this introduction. The book will also contain a contribution from each of the surviving members of the collective – Mary Kelly, James Scott and Humphry Trevelyan – and an excerpt from an interview between Marc Karlin (1943 – 1999) and *Screen*, discussed and cited earlier in the introduction. In addition to this book of essays and contributions there is a second book containing historical material in facsimile, including leaflets from the Cleaners Action Group, a copy of an edition of *Shrew*, the newsletter of the Women’s Liberation Workshop, which focused on the cleaners’ struggle and was designed by Mary Kelly, and reviews of the films published in feminist magazines *Spare Rib* and *Red Rag*.

Working with designers John Morgan Studio, who also designed the programme and publicity material for “The Inoperative Community”, special attention has been paid to the look of the edition, which is presented in a simple white box. The box, published in an edition of 1000 in partnership by Raven Row, Koenig Books and LUX, will be distributed largely to museum and gallery bookshops through Koenig Books’ distribution arm. LUX will distribute a small number to

⁵⁷ Shelia Rowbotham, ‘*Resonance: Nightcleaners*’, in Dan Kidner and Alex Sainsbury (eds), *Nightcleaners and ’36 to ’77*, London: Raven Row, Koenig Books and LUX, 2018.

similar organisations dedicated to the promotion of artists moving image. A small number will inevitably be sold at events, and some of these will take place at venues such as May Day Rooms, an education charity founded to safeguard historical material linked to “social movements, experimental culture and the radical expression of marginalised figures and group,”⁵⁸ which also hosts a number of groups, who use the space to hold meetings and coordinate activities. Those groups include, among others, the Independent Workers of Great Britain (IWGB), who recently took part in a demonstration at Tate Modern to protest the sponsorship of EY (Ernst & Young) for the exhibition *Picasso 1932: Love, Fame, Tragedy*.⁵⁹ IWGB were there representing the EY office cleaners facing losing their jobs in a latest round of cost cutting.⁶⁰ The plight of these precarious workers and their representation by a small but committed union echoes the situation of the Cleaners Action Group, set up by the Women’s Liberation Workshop, who attempted to unionise London’s women night cleaners in the early 1970s, and were the subject of the film *Nightcleaners*.⁶¹

Nightcleaners therefore finds itself relevant again for a newly emboldened and growing left in the UK, but also isolated again. Its status as a campaign film was always equivocal, as discussed in my essay for the edition. *Nightcleaners*, and many other independent films and videos produced in the 1970s and early 1980s, emerged from a fiercely politically engaged field. But far from instruments for activism, many of the political films and videos coming from this field risked seeming rarefied and more interested in debates about formalism and realism in film. There is a misconception about *Nightcleaners*, that it was intended as a campaign film, and by virtue of the length of its production (almost five years), and the fact that production period exceeded the length of the actual dispute, it became a very different cultural object. This is disputed by all the

⁵⁸ <http://maydayrooms.org>

⁵⁹ IWGB is a small and relatively new union particularly active fighting for the rights of workers in the gig economy, particularly migrant workers. See more information see <https://iwgb.org.uk>

⁶⁰ The EY cleaners are actually employed by outsourcing company ISS. For a report on the demonstration see Aditya Chakraborty, “Here’s another job for migrants in Britain – taking on the City’s greed,” Guardian, Wednesday 18 April 2018 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/apr/18/migrants-britain-city-greed-union-cleaners-tate-modern>

⁶¹ There is a reference to the Cleaners Action Group earlier in the introduction and in the essay collected within this thesis, ‘The Berwick Street Film Collective: Independent Film Culture in the 1970s’. See also: Shelia Rowbotham, ‘Resonance: *Nightcleaners*’, in Dan Kidner and Alex Sainsbury (eds), *Nightcleaners and ’36 to ’77*, London: Raven Row, Koenig Books and LUX, 2018.

members of the collective involved in the production of the film, who from the outset intended to an avant-garde film. As Rowbotham discusses in her essay, very early on in the film's production the collective assuaged the impatient campaigners by producing a short campaign film that was screened at the Workers' Control Conference in Birmingham and the Skegness Women's Liberation Conference in the early 1970s.⁶²

These details about the film's production are particularly pertinent because they correct or temper some of the myths about the film that have persisted over the last forty years, but they also speak to the difficulty in assessing the *politics* of the film. For Johnston and Willemen, as discussed earlier, it was a political film precisely because it manifested, in its form, the contradictions and struggle of political activism which, for them, are eliminated in political documentary and activist film that draw on what they saw as ideologically predetermined forms such as cinema vérité and direct cinema.⁶³ And by arresting these contradictions and struggle at the level of the film's form, the audience would be activated; the space of the screening would turn into the space of a political meeting, and the viewer would become an active participant in the raising of consciousness. Claire Johnston wrote in her review of the film for *Spare Rib*, collected in the DVD publication:

The film questions the traditional passivity of the spectator in the cinema. It attempts to create a situation whereby the viewer is not only able to participate, but is in fact required to do so – to make his/her contribution, as the film-makers have done, to the process of meaning-production which is the film.⁶⁴

⁶² Unfortunately, this short campaign film has not survived, and both Shelia Rowbotham and the surviving members of the collective have only vague memories of it. From a conversation between Humphry Trevelyan James Scott and the author: Trevelyan remembers that a few minutes were cut from footage that was being used in the film, and given a musical soundtrack of "predominantly drumming"; Scott remembers a conversation about delivering a straightforward "Russian style agitprop" film for the Workers Control Conference in Birmingham.

⁶³ Claire Johnston and Paul Willemen, 'Brecht in Britain: The Independent Political Film (on The Nightcleaners)', *Screen*, Vol. 16, No. 4. Winter 1975/1976, pp. 101-118

⁶⁴ Claire Johnston, 'The Nightcleaners (part one) Rethinking Political Cinema', *Spare Rib*, no. 40, October 1975.

To independent filmmakers: Stephen Dwoskin and 'the international free cinema'

DAN KIDNER

1 Stephen Dwoskin, *Film Is ... The International Free Cinema* (London: Peter Owen, 1975).

Filmmaker Stephen Dwoskin dedicated his 1975 book on underground cinema and experimental film, *Film Is ... The International Free Cinema*, 'To independent film-makers'.¹ Dwoskin's highly personal paean to the 'painters and poets who have become filmmakers' constitutes a brisk and somewhat eccentric history of avant-garde film since the 1920s. In the first chapter, 'Early history', he moves breathlessly from Fernand Léger's *Le Ballet Mécanique* (1924) to Robert Frank's *Pull My Daisy* (1959) in under twenty-five pages, laying the foundation for a loose concept of independence based primarily on independence from the market and the mainstream film industry. Reading his introduction, and the following chapter, which profiles the 'contemporary scene' country by country, can feel a little like skimming over a list of significant filmmakers, with brief sketches of the conditions of production and distribution in each country. Dwoskin attempts to picture the scale of activity across the globe but is always frank about omissions – India and Latin America, he readily admits, are not well served by his whistle-stop survey. As a document of Dwoskin's own personal travels, his expanding network at the mid-point of the decade, and as a snapshot of the emergence of a strong if labile international 'independent' film culture, it is invaluable.

Film theorist Peter Wollen's influential essay 'The two avant-gardes', published in *Studio International* later that same year, also seeks to provide a service to 'independent filmmakers'. In it Wollen begins by

- 2 Peter Wollen, 'The two avant-gardes', *Studio International*, vol. 190, no. 978 (1975), pp. 171–75.
- 3 Dvoskin writes that 'It took someone from outside Britain (Godard) to make a politically meaningful film about Britain (*British Sounds*)', in *Film Is* . . . , p. 73.
- 4 Peter Wollen, 'The avant-gardes: Europe and America', *Framework*, no. 14 (1981), p. 9.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 *Ibid.*

admonishing Dvoskin's *Film Is* . . . for its neglect of the 'crucial post-1968 work of [Jean-Luc] Godard and [Jean-Pierre] Gorin'.² This is a little unfair, as Dvoskin does mention Godard's post-1968 collective production, even if Gorin is not mentioned by name.³ What Wollen is really taking Dvoskin (gently) to task for, and he includes David Curtis's 1970 history *Experimental Cinema: A Fifty-Year Evolution* in his sideswipe, is what he sees as the privileging of one film avant garde over another. In a later essay, 'The avant-gardes: Europe and America', Wollen revisits his 1975 polemic and succinctly spells out that his intention had been threefold: to lay 'theoretical foundations [...] for the Independent Filmmakers Association'⁴ and facilitate their bringing together of "militant" (Newsreel, Cinema Action) filmmakers with "formalist" (Co-op) filmmakers';⁵ to prepare the theoretical ground for the film he was then planning with Laura Mulvey, *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1978), which was conceived as an attempt to 'combine the two avant-gardes'; and finally, 'to push the magazine *Screen* [with which Wollen was associated] away from a univocal 'Parisianism' towards a more cosmopolitan stance'.⁶

As different as they are in execution, Dvoskin's book and Wollen's essay share similar intentions. Each seeks to define independent filmmaking and each prepares the ground, or attempts to establish a context, for the writers' practices as filmmakers. They also both make a call, in different ways, for unity in the nascent independent film sector – both Dvoskin and Wollen played a part in the establishment of the Independent Filmmakers Association. In this short essay I will map the points of convergence in these two texts, and tentatively begin the project of critically reevaluating Dvoskin's feature film work from the early to mid 1970s.

The two texts appear, on the surface at least, to come from entirely different worlds. Dvoskin, an American living in London, was a graphic designer and filmmaker who had been making films since the early 1960s. He was closely tied to American Underground Cinema, and was cofounder of the London Film-makers' Co-op. Wollen was a Londoner living between the USA and the UK because of teaching commitments, and was the celebrated film theorist and author of *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (1969). He also wrote regularly on Hollywood and European Cinema for the *New Left Review* and *Screen*. But beneath Dvoskin's highly personalized history of experimental film and Wollen's compact fusion of semiotics and psychoanalysis there are striking similarities in the two pieces of writing. Both call for a wider definition of experimental film, one that would not necessarily, or automatically, exclude narrative and documentary feature films. And both texts are intimately networked into cross-currents that, for a moment in the mid 1970s, looked as if they might usher in a cinema and a film culture as radical, politically, as they were formally experimental.

Dvoskin's early films, shot in New York, were shown at Better Books, the unofficial centre of London's counter-culture in the 1960s,

7 There are numerous histories of the London Film-makers' Co-op. See in particular: Mark Webber, 'Shoot shoot shoot: British avant-garde film of the 1960s and 1970s', DVD notes (London: LUX/Paris: Re:Voor, 2006); David Curtis, *A History of Artists' Film and Video in Britain* (London: BFI Publishing, 2007); Julia Knight and Peter Thomas, *Reaching Audiences: Distribution and Promotion of Alternative Moving Image* (Bristol: Intellect, 2011).

8 Stephen Dwoskin and Simon Hartog, 'New cinema', in Joseph Berke (ed.), *Counter Culture: The Creation of an Alternative Culture* (London: Peter Owen, 1969), p. 371.

9 Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema* (New York, NY: Dutton, 1970); David Curtis, *Experimental Cinema: A Fifty-Year Evolution* (London: Studio Vista, 1971); P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant Garde* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1974); Amos Vogel, *Film as a Subversive Art* (New York, NY: Random House, 1974); Peter Gidal, *Structural Film Anthology* (London: BFI Publishing, 1976); Malcolm Le Grice, *Abstract Film and Beyond* (London: Studio Vista, 1977).

where he attended regular screenings and where he would, with Simon Hartog, Raymond Durnat and others, found the London Film-makers' Co-op.⁷ Between 1966 and 1968 he taught a number of informal courses on film at the London Free School in Notting Hill, which was closely associated with the *Longhair Times* (precursor to the counter-culture's newspaper, *The International Times*). Dwoskin also taught courses at the Anti-University, another short-lived experimental school, based on Rivington Street in East London. As a result of these associations, Dwoskin and Hartog were invited to write something jointly on underground cinema for the book *Counter Culture*, edited by Joseph Berke and published in 1969. The book also included contributions from such counter-cultural luminaries as poet Allen Ginsberg and black activist Stokely Carmichael.

Dwoskin and Hartog's essay, 'New cinema', was animated by the spirit of the times. They write of a new filmic avant garde, unhindered by the dogma of the old, and they assign equal weight to political and poetic modes of experimental film. At the time of writing 'New cinema', Hartog was invested in the late 1960s alternative newsreel films – especially those being produced by Robert Kramer and American Newsreel – and also in the Italian *Cine-giornale* and the French *Cinétracts*, made but not authored by Jean-Luc Godard, Chris Marker and others who had been part of the French New Wave. Where they are united is in their conviction that film must become its own object: 'the film itself becomes the reality, not the story from another place'.⁸ Because of their complementary but clearly split areas of interest, Hartog and Dwoskin in 'New cinema' offer up a very inclusive understanding of experimental film. Dwoskin notes in his unpublished autobiography that after the publication of *Counter Culture* the publisher Peter Owen offered him and Hartog a contract to write an entire book on avant-garde and experimental film. Hartog declined, so Dwoskin decided to write it alone. Although 'New cinema' now seems very much of its time, Hartog's growing awareness of world events, critical interest in forms of political cinema, and hope that the 'new politics' might liberate the 'new cinema' proved an effective foil to Dwoskin's allegiance to what he often refers to as the 'personal film'.

As it was, Dwoskin took up the challenge and almost six years later completed *Film Is* During this long gestation period a number of other notable histories were published. Gene Youngblood's *Expanded Cinema* appeared in 1970 and David Curtis's *Experimental Cinema: A Fifty-Year Evolution* in 1971; 1974 saw P. Adams Sitney's *Visionary Film* and Amos Vogel's *Film as a Subversive Practice*; then a little later in the decade came *The Structural Film Anthology*, edited by Peter Gidal in 1976, and Malcolm Le Grice's *Abstract Film* in 1977.⁹ Although by the mid 1970s a hardening of categories and positions had taken place, Dwoskin's book – and his attitude to filmmaking – in many ways remained rooted in that late 1960s/early 1970s moment. The book begins with an impressionistic introduction from Joan Adler, who appeared in Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures* and other seminal American

10 Dwoskin, *Film Is* . . .

11 Laura Mulvey, 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema', *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3 (1975), pp. 6–18.

underground films. Adler's introduction weirdly mentions Dwoskin only at the very end, in an oblique reference to the shooting of his film *Chinese Checkers* (1965), in which Adler appears with Beverly Grant. But it sets the tone, and Dwoskin picks up where he left off in 'New cinema' with its beat rhythms and references to the counter-culture. The first paragraph gives a sense of the tone and texture that continues throughout the entire book, making it an exhilarating if at times frustrating read:

The film-makers search. The names and places change. The talk goes on. Definitions are attempted; books are written; the press has more chat. The police move; the professionals watch; the critics play. The hustler exploits; the parasites linger; the groups form. Within all this there is the artist who tries to develop his ideas, dreams and fantasies out of the mainstream of contemporary society. [...] Though in any such movement there are many people, many ideas and many feelings, all beyond the limits of any one definition.

More than other histories of experimental film written in the 1970s, Dwoskin's functions a little like a map or an index of his own concerns. In the section on 'refilmed film', between a discussion of Ernie Gehr's films and Ken Jacobs's *Tom, Tom, The Piper's Son* (1969), he cites his own film *Dirty* (1965) as a typical example of this kind of filmmaking. On the subject of verbal expression versus visual expression he uses his 1972 film *Dyn Amo* as an illustration of the use of both techniques in a single film. And there are countless descriptions of films that read like blueprints for ideas or attitudes that characterize Dwoskin's own work. Smith's *Flaming Creatures* 'penetrates the false barriers society encases us in';¹⁰ David Larcher's 1969 film *Mare's Tail* 'follows the transience of life and nature, studying things closely, moving into vast space, coming in close again'. As positions became more entrenched during the 1970s, so it became necessary either to take sides or to write one's own history. Dwoskin shows an acute sense that if the experimental/avant-garde film scene was to bifurcate further, then his films, or his style of filmmaking, might fall between the cracks. This is because they contained no explicit political content, yet were not fully committed to a purely formal investigation into the material properties of film.

Between 1974 and 1976 there was something of a rush to define and understand the different possibilities for experimental film in the UK, and a need to relate the political to the experimental. Film and cultural theorists, who in the eyes of many had hitherto neglected experimental film, had begun to turn their attention to it. Dwoskin's close friend Mulvey's account of scopophilia in 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema', published in *Screen* in 1975, turned its attention to Hollywood cinema, when the subject seemed tailor-made for a dissection of Dwoskin's late 1960s and early 1970s films.¹¹ In fact Mulvey has recently revealed that an early draft of her essay actually included a section on Dwoskin's films. She writes how she was interested in his

12 Laura Mulvey, 'Obituary for Stephen Dwoskin', *Sight and Sound*, vol. 22, no. 9 (2012), p. 74.

13 The essay was later republished as 'The fourth look', in Paul Willemen, *Looks and Frictions: Essays in Cultural Studies and Film Theory* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994).

subversion of the 'voyeuristic position' in films like *Trixi* (1969) but decided against including the section when it became clear to her that it would disturb the 'symmetry' of her argument.¹² A year after the publication of Mulvey's essay, Paul Willemen, wrote 'Voyeurism, the look and Dwoskin' for an issue of *Afterimage*.¹³ This essay is notable because it contains a somewhat buried critique of the emerging discipline of British film theory. By extrapolating a 'fourth look' in addition to the three that Mulvey identifies, Willemen signals that 'the gaze' for Lacan is inscribed in the object and is not a property of the viewer. This critique would develop and gain traction in the following decades as British film theory came under fire for its perceived misuse of psychoanalysis, and other imported critical discourses.

For all of his insights, however, Willemen's primary address is Mulvey's essay and the influence of psychoanalysis on the emerging academic discipline of film theory. Beyond a number of favourable pieces of writing on Dwoskin's work over the years by Durgnat, whose writing is as neglected as Dwoskin's films, and Australian critic Adrian Martin, who has taken up the cause more recently, there has been little critical writing on Dwoskin's important mid-1970s films. Reading *Film Is* . . . alongside 'The two avant-gardes' provides one answer for this neglect, but also points towards the need to build a critical understanding of Dwoskin's project. *Film Is* . . . covers a huge terrain and was written between 1970 and 1975, crucial years in Dwoskin's development as a filmmaker and for British independent film culture. During this time his work matured and embodied what he very loosely called the 'personal' film. This personal and affective work, rather than adopting the certainties of one or other of Wollen's avant gardes, or welding their antinomies together, instead embraced ambiguity and uncertainty.

The body, in Dwoskin's early 1970s work, is not simply subject to, and producer of, a number of looks, as described by Willemen. Neither is it merely an agent for carrying narrative. In *Central Bazaar* we see bodies dance, stumble, collapse, threaten each other, submit to each other's embraces, cry and scream, but not for the purposes of expressing a particular human drama in a narrative, more to remind us that we too are embodied – the cinema can only temporarily convince us otherwise.

For Dwoskin *Central Bazaar* derived its main theme from 'a place for the sale of miscellaneous articles', and he proposed it as both a 'real place' and a 'metaphor'.¹⁴ Shot over five weeks in the living room of his house in Ladbroke Grove with only one professional among the group of actors (Carola Regnier, Dwoskin's former lover and star of his previous film *Behindert/Hindered* [1974]), *Central Bazaar* reimagines the encounter group as cinematic spectacle. But rather than working towards any kind of the resolution or psychological understanding, the participants are instead engaged in complex and shifting performances to the camera and each other, which lead only to despair and confusion. *Central Bazaar* is also a physical experience for the audience, not just because of its duration – the film's running time is 142 minutes – but

14 Stephen Dwoskin, statement from the DVD booklet of *Central Bazaar*.

because of its relentlessness and lack of resolution for the ‘characters’. An overwhelming sense of claustrophobia and melancholy is compounded by composer Gavin Bryars’s soundtrack, which starts with a clap of thunder and incorporates soaring strings, organ drones, bells and prepared piano laid on top of snatches of incomprehensible moans, sobs and breathy exhalations.

The film carries through on the sexual revolutionary promise of the counter-culture, but instead of picturing a space of freedom and liberation, Dwoskin’s bazaar is a nightmarish and oppressive space. Or as the filmmaker himself put it, ‘wandering through [...] we get lost and find little or nothing of use. There is a display of plenty but on singular examination it is empty inside.’¹⁵ The closer the camera gets to the naked and painted bodies of the participants, the further both they and the viewer get from joyful or meaningful fulfilment. The body that joins others to form a mass is not liberated and collectivized here, but alienated and atomized. This produces an admonishment to the viewer looking for gratification of any kind, or Willemen’s fourth look: ‘the look which constitutes the viewer as visible subject’.¹⁶

Reading *Film Is* . . . alongside ‘The two avant-gardes’ sets Dwoskin’s films in a new light, especially his longer films made between *Dyn Amo* in 1972 and *Central Bazaar* in 1976, in part simply because they constitute something of a challenge to Wollen’s stringent mode of classification. At the beginning of his essay Wollen carefully builds up his schema; the first film avant garde he identifies with the co-op movement and structural film; the other with the European radical cinema of Godard, Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, and Miklós Jancsó, among others. Wollen never strays too far from an adherence to, and critical interest in, modernist aesthetics – his life-long project – so his proposal for a new way of making avant-garde film is also a return, although less to the avant-garde film of the 1920s than to modernist painting and sculpture. For Wollen the two emblematic works of modernism, in both its formalist and generic iterations, are Pablo Picasso’s *Demoiselles d’Avignon* and Marcel Duchamp’s *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)*. Both works separate signifier from signified, ‘asserting [...] the primacy of the first, without in any way dissolving the second’.¹⁷ ‘The two avant-gardes’ is, then, Wollen’s attempt to recast the split he sees in modernist aesthetics. What he sees as the dialectic of illusion and realism versus the push towards abstraction and medium specificity (that is, Greenbergian modernism). Cinema, on the other hand, is a ‘multiple system’, which pulls in all the other art forms (music, literature, painting, and so on). So for Wollen, to look for the specifically cinematic in the film strip, and the mechanics of production and projection can be ‘deceptively purist and reductive’.¹⁸

Cubism brought about a ‘semiotic shift, a changed concept and practice of sign and signification’ before the tendency towards abstraction after Cubism introduced ‘an art of pure signifiers detached

15 Ibid.

16 Willemen, ‘The fourth look’.

17 Wollen, ‘The two avant-gardes’, pp. 171–75.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

from meaning as much as from experience'.¹⁹ But when this pursuit of the essential or the pure in film led to, for Wollen, a displacement of medium specificity from painting onto film, the problem became that the 'specifically cinematic' was taken to mean primarily the picture-track. On the other side of the argument, Wollen notes that André Bazin, who was committed to realism, based his ontology of film on the photographic reproduction of reality, and neatly summarizes these two opposing ontologies:

we now have, so to speak, both an extroverted and an introverted ontology of film, one seeking the soul of cinema in the nature of the pro-filmic event, the other in the nature of the cinematic process, the cone of light or the gram of silver.²⁰

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

He sees that the formalist avant garde has reached for a 'pure film [...] a dissolution of signification into objecthood or tautology'.²¹ On the side of the political film avant-garde, however – with Eisenstein as its figurehead – the signified (or content) is preeminent. Although Eisenstein put forward a dialectical theory of montage, his aesthetic, in Wollen's terms, was still 'content based'.

For Wollen it is Godard who picks up Eisenstein's theory of dialectical montage in his post-1968 films but instead of embedding the dialectic at the level of the content, as Eisenstein did, Godard drives a wedge between signifier and signified (or content and form). Godard's *Le Gai Savoir* (1968) serves here as the emblematic film. Where Eisenstein collides and juxtaposes, Godard splits apart. The film investigates how meaning is made, but does not construct alternative meanings; it is about breaking with the norms of storytelling not reconfiguring them. For Wollen this is the radicalism of the *Le Gai Savoir*, as distinct from Godard's late so-called 'radical' films that come under the influence of Brecht. It 'presents the language of Marxism [...] as itself problematic'.²²

22 Ibid.

Wollen's schema is crude, but necessarily so. It gives him the opportunity to hold up and understand what a fusion of structural film and the narrative feature might look like. And the films he made with Mulvey, particularly *Riddles of the Sphinx*, attempted to realize this fusion. But if we are to take his schema seriously then we could also begin to argue for the critical importance of films that belonged to neither political nor formalist avant gardes, or resulted from the fusion of the two. Wollen writes at the beginning of his essay that, 'There are other filmmakers too who do not fit neatly into either camp, and films which fall somewhere in between or simply somewhere else – Jackie Raynal's *Deux Fois*, for instance – but in general the distinction holds good'.²³

23 Ibid.

Raynal's *Deux Fois* (1968), like Dwoskin's *Central Bazaar*, is about looks exchanged between a film and its audience; it is also a howl of rage at the failure of the radical movements of the 1960s to produce change. Like *Central Bazaar* it mixes cinema verite tropes with different modes of performance. Unlike Dwoskin's film, though, Raynal's was not constructed on the editing table, and for much of it she is in front of the

- 24 Sally Shafto, *Zanzibar: Les Films Zanzibar et les Dandys de Mai 1968/The Zanzibar Films and the Dandies of May 1968* (Paris: Classiques de l'Avant-Garde, Éditions Paris Expérimental, 2007).

camera not behind. There are minimal edits, and each sequence is unconnected to the next. Like many of the films made under the rubric of Zanzibar Films, *Deux Fois* was neither formalist nor constructivist, nor a forced marriage of the two.²⁴ *Deux Fois*, as Wollen states, is 'simply somewhere else'. In this sense it could be seen as the missing link between the late 1960s films of Godard and the films of Andy Warhol. *Central Bazaar* could be said to occupy this same territory. Both were out of step with independent film of the time and both were concerned with the body under extreme trauma, and with pain and separation. It is this appeal from the body on screen to the bodies that come together to experience something that undoes Wollen's categories. It is also an interesting moment for the exploration of these themes of gender, sexuality and bodily experience before the discourses of identity politics forecloses precisely what these works might mean.

In Godard's *Le Gai Savoir*, a key film for Wollen, Juliet Berto implores that we must 'return to zero'. At the beginning of *Deux Fois* Raynal announces that 'tonight will be the end of meaning'. But instead of returning from zero with answers or a programme to begin again, Raynal returns with a blank stare; an invitation to stare back. In *Deux Fois* and many other Zanzibar productions the 'actors' stare at the camera; their physicality is an affront to reflection or Godardian estrangement. The protagonists in Dwoskin's *Central Bazaar* are similarly lost to a kind of narcissism as a result of the withdrawal of all traditional filmic structure (plot, narrative, acting, conventional editing). But neither is this a reduction to a kind of formalism, or a reductive reflection on the medium of film.

Ultimately Wollen's modernism, and sometimes convoluted application of semiotics bring him to a simple formulation. In order to solve to the formalist/realist split, and return to the beginnings of modernism when categories were more fluid, one must force the two avant-gardes together. Dwoskin chose a different path. Rather than attempt to mend the rift he simply chose, like Jackie Raynal, to go 'somewhere else'.

Dan Kidner

The Berwick Street Film Collective: Independent Film Culture in the 1970s

The Berwick Street Film Collective occupied a unique position within the field of 'independent film' in the 1970s and their film *Nightcleaners* (1975) has since become something of a touchstone for film theorists and art historians invested in the aesthetics of political film and video, the history of the women's movement in the UK and the cultural advance (and retreat) of left political sub-cultures.¹ They were among a number of British filmmaking groups who had, in the wake of the political and social upheavals of the late 1960s, sought to harness and embody those currents that they were convinced would transform society. What distinguished the Berwick Street Film Collective in the early to mid-1970s was their pursuit of a film form as radical as their politics, one that was equal parts experimental *and* political.

Ostensibly a political documentary, *Nightcleaners* chronicles the campaign launched in the autumn of 1970 by a working group of the women's movement to unionise the women night cleaners of London. However, over the four years of the film's production, the filmmakers developed and refined aesthetic strategies seemingly at odds with the historical forms of the political documentary and the campaign film. They combined formal techniques drawn from the lexicon of avant-garde cinema and structural film with strategies more commonly associated with the political documentary.² While adhering to the tenets of *cinéma vérité* during the shooting of the film, the group radically diverged from the conventions of documentary filmmaking when in the editing suite. By slowing down the footage and introducing lengths of black leader, creating pauses or ruptures between edits, the group found they were able to interrogate the image in such a way as to question the very possibility of making images of struggle. It is this fusion of film forms that set the work of the Berwick Street Film Collective apart and continues to fascinate and frustrate audiences.

Nightcleaners is cited in histories of documentary film, political cinema and artists' film and video, but its significance and challenge

to each tradition are frequently misrepresented or misunderstood.³ On its release, many contemporary commentators held it up as a pathfinder for a new type of political filmmaking. The fact that very few filmmakers chose to follow this particular wayward path perhaps says as much about the world that artists and filmmakers found themselves in at the end of the 1970s as it does about the work's hybrid and idiosyncratic form. *'36 to '77* (1978), which began under the auspices of the Berwick Street Film Collective and was initially pitched as its sequel, similarly collapses distinctions between the documentary and the experimental but is less well known.

In order to understand the nature of these challenges, it is first important to place the group and its work in some historical context. At the beginning of the 1970s, a decade of dwindling cinema attendance and decreasing funding for, and private investment in, the British film industry, the most visible products of a distinctly British film culture were sex comedies (Rank Organisation's *Carry On* series and EMI's *Confessions ...* films), television spin-offs (*On the Buses*, *Porridge*) and the successful James Bond franchise. At the same time, however, there was another homegrown cinema culture, supported by a small number of institutions and groups, all broadly aligned with left political subcultures, that would have a profound impact on screen culture in the UK through the 1970s and into the 1980s. These groups and institutions included the Society for the Education of Film and Television (SEFT), publisher of the journals *Screen* and *Screen Education*; the BFI production board, who financed many independent films through the 1970s and into the early 1980s; distributors such as The Other Cinema and Politkino; The London Film-makers' Co-op (LFMC); and filmmaking groups such as Cinema Action, Berwick Street Film Collective, Sheffield Film Co-op and Amber.

Within this field, a schism was often identified between the film-making collectives and the experimental filmmakers orbiting around the LFMC. The former were seen as invested to lesser or greater degrees in particular struggles and campaigns, while the latter were understood to be primarily concerned with a kind of film formalism: a Greenbergian medium-specificity transposed onto film. Although movement between these two constituencies was more fluid, and the

exchange of ideas more common than is sometimes assumed, there were differences in approaches to distribution, exhibition and presentation that set them apart. Despite these differences, for a time, from the mid- to late 1970s, there was an attempt, semantically at least, to hold together this diverse community under the rubric 'independent film', and the Independent Filmmakers Association (IFA) – whose membership was largely drawn from the organisations listed above – was formed in order to lobby on behalf of *all* independent filmmakers.⁴

The IFA set about challenging 'the monopolies which had for too long controlled the means of production and distribution'.⁵ But within the association, there were conflicting ideas about how this should be done. Some filmmakers wanted their work to be better represented within the mainstream of British cinema and television, whilst others wanted to rebuild British film culture from the bottom up.⁶ And if British film culture was to be rebuilt, what would its new purpose be? At the end of the 1970s, in the editorial to its 1979/80 catalogue of productions, the BFI asked what the 'new social function of cinema' was, and what the 'role of independent film in social, political and historical contexts'⁷ should be. Although a working definition of independence was never advanced and offered up for critical scrutiny by the IFA, or anybody else for that matter, both the LFMC and many of the film groups, including the Berwick Street Film Collective, owned the means of production and, at least in the beginning, controlled how their films were distributed and screened.⁸ Members of the LMFC and the film groups gave equipment and labour freely, but the voluntarism that underpinned the activity of both scenes in the late 1960s and early 1970s didn't last for long. By the mid-1970s they were all seeking support from funders such as the Arts Council and the BFI to pay for full or part-time members of staff and to finance film production.⁹

If independent film, however loosely defined, was to have a new social function, then was there a particular film form that was more likely than others to enable that? In many ways, questions about form were to prove more divisive than questions about the representation and distribution of 'independently' produced culture. Broadly speaking, filmmaking groups such as Cinema Action, Amber and the

Newsreel Group mobilised the formal tropes of direct cinema and *cinéma vérité*. Meanwhile, filmmakers who were strongly associated with the LFMC in the early 1970s – such as Peter Gidal and Malcolm Le Grice – sought to question the material properties of the medium itself, drawing upon avant-garde cinema and the traditions of North American underground film, from Maya Deren to Michael Snow and Andy Warhol. Both the LFMC artists and the filmmaking groups were, however, in one way or another, attempting to reconstruct what cinema *was* – experientially, socially and politically. What made the Berwick Street Film Collective so distinctive in this context was their insistence on placing this question of form at the centre of their films by employing *both* formal and realist strategies simultaneously. The infamous black spaces that interrupt the action in *Nightcleaners* recall the strategies of structural/materialist film, while the scenes of women working, filmed using lightweight cameras and natural lighting, evoke direct cinema's attempt to represent reality 'truthfully'.

In 1975, two festivals constituted important meeting places for independent filmmakers, and *Nightcleaners* was screened at both. In February, Independent Cinema West staged the first (and as it turned out, the last) *Festival of Independent British Cinema* in Bristol. In the self-styled 'polemic' published in the festival's catalogue, audiences were promised a meeting of 'the avant-garde on the one side, the overtly political on the other, plus a lot in the middle'.¹⁰ Representing the overtly political were the Berwick Street Film Collective, Cinema Action and the London Women's Film Group among others, while Le Grice, Gidal, Liz Rhodes, Annabel Nicolson and others represented the avant-garde. In the middle was everything from the films of Derek Jarman and Jeff Keen through to the community film and video projects of Liberation Films and the Basement Project Film Group. Later in the year, the 29th edition of the Edinburgh Film Festival featured a series of events and screenings organised by the editorial board of *Screen* entitled 'Brecht and Cinema/Film and Politics'. Under the directorship of Lynda Myles since 1973, the Edinburgh Film Festival had become a meeting place for makers of independent film and film theorists, and the 1975 edition included many of the films screened in Bristol, as well as an international selection, greatly expanding the field of what might be considered independent film.

first festival of british independent cinema in bristol



The members of the Berwick Street Film Collective were all changed by the social and political transformations of the late 1960s and early 1970s. In the wake of the rise of the new left, the radicalisation of the student body and the anti-capitalist and anti-authoritarian struggles that raged across Europe and the rest of the world, filmmakers and artists emerging from or identifying with left political subcultures attempted to give their commitments cultural form by experimenting with modes of collective production. In this they followed French filmmakers Chris Marker and Jean-Luc Godard, who both formed filmmaking groups in the late 1960s: Marker first, with his production company SLON (*Société pour le lancement des oeuvres nouvelles*), which produced the portmanteau film *Loin du Vietnam* (Far from Vietnam, 1967), and then Godard with the Dziga Vertov Group, formed with student activist and journalist Jean-Pierre Gorin. Out of Marker's experiment with collective cultural production emerged Groupe Medvedkine, initially a coalition of Marker and workers from the Rhodiaceta textile factory in Besançon. Marker and Godard's approaches to collective cultural production are often contrasted – Marker, invested in the project of placing the means of production at the disposal of those without a voice, and Godard the arch experimentalist, suspicious of the possibility of reflecting reality simply by filming it.¹¹

Among the first of the UK filmmaking groups to form in the late 1960s were Amber, in Newcastle, and Cinema Action in London. At least in the beginning, both were faithful to the same tenets of Direct Cinema that Marker espoused. Many more groups were to form in the early 1970s, including Liberation Films and the Sheffield Film Co-op. For all of these groups the problems faced and questions first raised by Marker, Godard and Gorin were to remain pertinent: who has the right to speak for whom? And what formal tropes are appropriate for films that wish to further the class struggle?

For the Berwick Street Film Collective, these questions were to reverberate in every frame. The group's uniqueness wasn't to be found in their ability to find answers, but rather in making these questions themselves the subject of their films. So, unlike other hybrid forms such as the essay film (which would be developed later) or Godard's influential brand of counter cinema, *Nightcleaners* and '36

to '77 occupy a nebulous and unformed ground. Both films teeter on the edge of formlessness and wander fearlessly into uncertain territory: particularly '36 to '77, which on the surface might seem to fulfil the criteria of a 'portrait film', albeit a very experimental one. The viewer is asked to become aware of their own watching, their listening, their participation and, in some sense, their responsibility – not just to the film's ostensible subject, but also to a mode of deep viewing and listening to which the filmmakers so evidently subscribe.

This commitment to capturing and reflecting back to the viewer a sensuous act of cinematic absorption is coupled with a willingness to risk alienating the very constituencies to which the film group was ostensibly aligned. Their embrace of a mode of spectatorship at odds with the one fostered by more straightforward campaigning films such as Cinema Action's *Arise Ye Workers* (1973) or *The Miners' Film* (1975) signalled a desire to harness contradictions and antagonisms in the audience as well as catching these on screen.

It is difficult to write about the Berwick Street Film Collective without ascribing to the group a solidity and definitive structure that it did not possess. The Collective was at once a production company, a facilities house and a filmmaking group, but is perhaps best understood as a loose and shifting collection of individuals for whom making films and doing politics became synonymous in the period between 1970 and 1978. Marc Karlin, Richard Mordaunt and Humphry Trevelyan had all been members of Cinema Action and, after leaving the group, formed the core of the Berwick Street Film Collective, along with filmmaker, James Scott. From 1972, Karlin, Mordaunt and Trevelyan were also directors of Lusitania Films, a production company Mordaunt had founded in 1965.

Between 1970 and 1978 three films were made under the aegis of the Berwick Street Film Collective – *Ireland Behind the Wire* (1974), *Nightcleaners* (1975) and '36 to '77 (1978) – although each by different personnel and under different circumstances. Most of the footage for *Ireland Behind the Wire* was gathered while Karlin, Mordaunt and Trevelyan were still in Cinema Action. Members of the group travelled to Derry in 1969 and shot footage of the events that followed the barricading of the Bogside and Creggan areas of Derry, and the Nationalist declaration of the area as a free state in January

1969. These images were also used as the basis for Cinema Action's film *People of Ireland!* (1971), which had sought to give an unflinching account of the civil unrest in Northern Ireland, out of which the modern Troubles emerged, whilst proselytising for the creation of a socialist workers' republic. Richard Mordaunt decided to revisit the footage in 1972, with some assistance from Trevelyan.¹² Similarly sympathetic to the republican cause Mordaunt, however, dealt with the footage very differently. While he worked on *Ireland Behind the Wire*, Karlin, Trevelyan and Scott began editing *Nightcleaners*, which they had shot between 1970 and 1972 with the artist Mary Kelly. Although Mordaunt had a particular vision for *Ireland Behind the Wire* he somewhat incongruously adopted some of the experimental editing techniques that were being developed for *Nightcleaners*.

'36 to '77 began life as *Nightcleaners Part 2* and was supported by the BFI Production Board in 1975. The film focuses on one of the cleaners, Myrtle Wardally, who took part in the campaign chronicled in the earlier film. Jon Sanders joined Trevelyan, Karlin and Scott for the film's production. By the time the film was completed in 1978, the group had effectively disbanded, which meant that the film was attributed to the individual directors rather than a collective identity.

Each individual who worked under the auspices of the Berwick Street Film Collective brought their unique experience to the group. Mordaunt had already made a number of television documentaries in the 1960s including one on Godard, and his production company Lusitania Film Ltd would act as the commercial arm of the group, providing it with equipment, facilities and financing throughout the 1970s. Karlin had studied acting at the Central School of Speech and Drama in the early 60s, and moved to Paris in time for the events of May 1968, where he made one film, *Dead Man's Wheel* (1968), under the influence of Chris Marker. Trevelyan had studied social anthropology at Cambridge and sociology at the University of Essex in the mid-1960s, and travelled to South America in 1967, before returning to London at the end 1968.¹³ Kelly, an artist and active participant in the women's movement, was in the process of making her pioneering work of feminist art, *Post-Partum Document* (1973–79), which chronicled her relationship with her infant son, an iteration of which was first exhibited at the ICA, London, in 1976. With Margaret



Nightcleaners



Nightcleaners

Harrison and Kay Hunt, she also produced the project *Women and Work: A Document on the Division of Labour* (1973–75), which was first exhibited at the South London Gallery in 1975. Through interviews, photographs and film, *Women and Work* recorded the division of labour at a Bermondsey factory following the Equal Pay Act of 1970.¹⁴ James Scott, who was close friends with Karlin, had been making films since the early sixties, including groundbreaking documentaries on artists including David Hockney, Richard Hamilton and R.B. Kitaj. He continued to make films while working with the Berwick Street Film Collective including the experimental espionage thriller *Adult Fun* (1972) and *Coilin & Platonida* (1976), which further developed some of the re-filming techniques that the collective had pioneered.

Perhaps because of the wide range of experience and interests among the group, they felt free to draw on different traditions of filmmaking, from the counter cinema of Godard to the British traditions of social documentary and structural/materialist film. They managed to reflect on the veracity of all these forms, whilst also transferring the debates that were taking place at production meetings and in the editing suite – debates about art, communism, feminism and political activism – to the screen. By layering apparently antipathetic filmmaking strategies over one another – a formal investigation into film's specificity as a medium onto the *vérité* strategies of the political documentary or campaign film – they were able to keep these debates alive because the content of the films was never foreclosed by the form.

A whole new lexicon of editing techniques and processes had been developed for *Nightcleaners*. These included inserting lengths of black leader between shots, and isolating, slowing down and re-filming particular sequences from the screen of a Steenbeck editing machine. Later, when editing '36 to '77, they would use a Specto MKII 16mm Motion Analysis Projector to achieve the same effects. By adhering to the tenets of *cinéma vérité* whilst shooting – using sync sound and lightweight cameras, and only shooting in available light – and then subjecting the footage to a kind of forensic examination in post-production, the Berwick Street Film Collective invented a new language for the political film; one that was as interested in what could be called the politics of form as in advancing political ideas.

At the beginning of *Nightcleaners* the viewer is presented with facts about the working conditions of night cleaners in London. The date, 'November 1970', appears in the top left-hand corner of the frame, just before the credits. This is the month when a strike took place at Sanctuary House, Victoria and marks the beginning of the group's involvement in the campaign to unionise the cleaners; a campaign spearheaded by former cleaner May Hobbs and supported by a working group set up by Sheila Rowbotham and members of the Women's Liberation Workshop.¹⁵ After the appearance of this date, the opening credits roll over a slowed down, closely cropped image of a woman's face. The camera traces the lines etched in her skin, moving in and out of focus as if surveying a landscape or a microscopic specimen. The credits themselves are typed and filmed, as the face is, in extreme close-up. They scroll diagonally from the bottom right to the top left of the screen and contain the name of the film and details about the night cleaners' paltry wages. But the camera is too close to read any of this information easily. The two close-up views, of the text and the woman's face, threaten to render the subject of the film unreadable. As the camera moves in close to her face, all one sees is the grain of the 16mm film. Although heavily invested in the political campaign, and interested in portraying the dynamic between the mainly middle class women in the movement, the working class women cleaners and the male union representatives, the filmmakers evidently had further concerns.

By resisting the temptation to tell the story of the campaign in a straightforward way, the filmmakers force the audience to produce meaning in the film for themselves from the partial information given. Writing at the time in the feminist journal *Spare Rib*, film theorist Claire Johnston described the film's power and critical function: 'Too often audiences and people writing about political films elevate their own dominant assumptions and their subjective responses into a way of judging a film without realising that these aesthetic problems should be examined more fully. *Nightcleaners* is a film which radically challenges such assumptions and the ideology which spawned them ...'.¹⁶ *Nightcleaners*, or so it seemed to a particular constituency at the time, was *the* film to usher in a whole new way of thinking about the truth claims of the documentary form and of political cinema.

By the mid-1970s psychoanalytic-semiotic film theory had taken a stranglehold on film studies in the UK. But it was largely a tool for interpreting the signs and meanings hidden beneath the 'texts' of Hollywood and mainstream cinema.¹⁷ By 1975 some theorists, such as Johnston, were looking for films that, beyond just being 'read', could extend an invitation to the viewer to 'make his/her contribution [...] to the process of meaning-production'.¹⁸ Rather than as passive consumers of an ideological position, which Johnston claimed was the situation for audiences of political films hitherto, or as careful readers of signs, viewers might now be active participants in the process of 'consciousness-raising'.¹⁹

In her *Spare Rib* article, Johnston drew on Bertolt Brecht's ideas of collective cultural production when she insisted that the viewer of political film must 'become part of a learning process' in contradistinction to the 'passive consumer' of conventional narrative cinema. Although it wasn't entirely clear how this could be done, Johnston was adamant that collective filmmaking was the obvious mode to adopt, eschewing as it did the notion of the auteur. And just as it was no longer considered enough (if it ever was) for an audience to be mere consumers of a political position, it was seen as insufficient for cultural and knowledge production to be the responsibility of a single author.

These ideas were further elaborated in a paper that Johnston co-wrote with Paul Willemen, *Brecht in Britain: The Independent Political Film (on The Nightcleaners)*, for the Brecht event at the 1975 Edinburgh Film Festival. In the paper, Johnston and Willemen extrapolated the precise ways in which *Nightcleaners* called into question the conventions of documentary filmmaking. They argued that films that incorporated cinéma vérité techniques merely created, 'the effect of reality, a reality from which contradiction and struggle have been eliminated'.²⁰ Johnston and Willemen advanced the idea that all political film must contain a level of critical reflection about its form. This meant that the work of other prominent filmmaking collectives came in for criticism: Cinema Action for 'documenting workers' struggles from an essentially workerist perspective'; Liberation Films for concentrating on 'populist, grass-roots struggles within local communities, taking up a liberal/social-democratic

stance'; and, Newsreel Collective for their 'ultra-leftist' idealism.²¹ Johnston and Willemen's analysis of *Nightcleaners* borrowed from Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Paul Narboni's much referenced 1969 *Cahiers du Cinéma* editorial, 'Cinema/Ideology/Criticism'.²² Written at the start of the journal's 'Marxist years' the editorial identified the different ways in which, formally, films either questioned or reproduced the 'dominant ideology'.

Johnston and Willemen argued that by introducing contradiction and struggle into the film form, *Nightcleaners* created space for viewers to collaborate in the process of making meaning. They didn't think it was the job of the 'independent political film' simply to highlight a political issue, rather they felt it should activate critical thinking. However, this could only occur under new social relations of consumption. And these new social relations – within which production and viewing have equal value and knowledge production is a responsibility shared by cultural producers, critics and audiences – required a particular cultural and political space; one that many within the IFA hoped to bring about, but which proved elusive.

Willemen and Johnston's paper still stands as the most theoretically astute interpretation of *Nightcleaners*. But their insistence on the constitution of new social relations of production and consumption depended upon robust and shared definitions of independence and collective cultural production, and these definitions needed to be agreed upon by all constituents (LFMC members, filmmaking collectives and theorists). Perhaps such definitions required an articulation of the relation of theory to practice, and of politics to art, beyond the capacity of psychoanalytic-semiotic film theory.

Although on its release *Nightcleaners* was afforded significant critical attention, there was always something incompatible about the film's ambivalence to the status and legibility of images, particularly images of struggle, and the psychoanalytic-semiotic film theory dominant at the time. The very critics and theorists that might have critically apprehended and historicised the work of the Berwick Street Film Collective in the 1970s were beholden to a theoretical model that arguably was only ever able to apprehend their work in one way: as a corrective to the extant forms of political filmmaking, or modes of making films politically, to make the Godardian

distinction. Similarly, historians of experimental film and video simply recognised *Nightcleaners* and '36 to '77 as novel or radical works of political cinema, or as placeholders for a type of hybrid work – films that were at once political and experimental. Both receptions missed what made these films so unique: their capacity to hold together the contradictions and antagonisms that existed within the field of independent film.

1. See Elizabeth Cowie, *Recording Reality, Desiring the Real* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011); Siona Wilson, *Art Labor, Sex Politics: Feminist Effects in 1970s British Art and Performance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015); *Rogue Reels: Oppositional Film in Britain, 1945–90*, ed. Margaret Dickinson (London: British Film Institute, 1999); and, Andrew Wilson, 'Art: Politics/Theory: Practice – Radical Art Practices in London in the Seventies' in *Goodbye to London: Radical Art and Politics in the 70s*, eds. Astrid Proll, Sacha Craddock and Walter Schönauer (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2010), 128–38.
2. P. Adams Sitney, 'Structural Film', in *Film Culture Reader*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: Praeger, 1970), 327.
3. The two most prominent retrospective accounts of British experimental film and video – David Curtis, *A History of Artists' Film and Video in Britain* (London: British Film Institute, 2006) and A.L. Rees, *A History of Experimental Film and Video* (London: British Film Institute, 1999) – both mention *Nightcleaners* and acknowledge its value but struggle to situate critically its challenge to established modes of filmmaking. Curtis recognised the film's 'structural' elements but sees this as evidence of 'how far the critical language of structural film had penetrated the wider independent cinema'. A.L. Rees' very brief mention casts the film as a 'highly formal film which questioned its own mode of representation and tried to break established conventions of viewing'.
4. The membership of the IFA was drawn from the full breadth of the scene and included Humphry Trevelyan, Marc Karlin and James Scott of the Berwick Street Film Collective, alongside Stephen Dwoskin, Laura Mulvey, Claire Johnston, Paul Willeman, Margaret Dickinson, Peter Gidal, Malcolm Le Grice and many others.
5. *Independent Film-making in the 70s: An introduction discussion paper from the Organising Committee of the IFA Conference held in May 1976* (London: Independent Filmmakers' Association, 1976).
6. Ibid.
7. *The New Social Function of Cinema: Catalogue, British Film Institute Productions '79/80*, eds. Rod Stoneman and Hilary Thompson (London: British Film Institute, 1981).
8. 'Humphry Trevelyan in conversation with Petra Bauer and Dan Kidner', in *Working Together: Notes on British Film Collectives in the 1970s*, eds. Petra Bauer and Dan Kidner (Southend-on-Sea: Focal Point Gallery, 2013), 54.
9. Julia Knight and Peter Thomas, *Reaching Audiences: Distribution and Promotion of Alternative Moving Image* (Bristol: Intellect, 2011), 54–57.
10. 'Polemic: Extract from the Festival Programme of the First Festival of Independent British Cinema', in *Rogue Reels: Oppositional Film in Britain, 1945–90*, ed. Margaret Dickinson (London: BFI, 1999), 137.

11. Trevor Stark, “‘Cinema in the Hands of the People’: Chris Marker, the Medvedkin Group, and the Potential of Militant Film’, *October* 139 (Winter 2012): 117–150.
12. Mordaunt also used additional footage of the arrest and internment of suspected republican paramilitaries during Operation Demetrius in August 1971 and the subsequent anti-internment marches, one of which resulted in Bloody Sunday – the fatal shooting of 13 protesters by the British Army – in January 1972.
13. Bauer and Kidner, ‘Humphry Trevelyan in conversation with Petra Bauer and Dan Kidner’, 47–55.
14. See Rosalind Delmar, ‘Women and Work’, *Spare Rib*, no. 40 (October 1975), repr. in *Framing Feminism: Art and the Women’s Movement 1970–1985*, eds. Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker (New York: Pandora Press, 1987), 201.
15. See Sheila Rowbotham, ‘Resonance: *Nightcleaners*’ in this publication.
16. Claire Johnston, ‘Film: *The Nightcleaners*’, *Spare Rib*, no. 40 (October 1975): 42–43. Also in this publication.
17. Two books in particular impacted the field of film studies in the 1970s: Peter Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, Revised edition (London: Martin Secker and Warburg/British Film Institute, 1969 [1972]); and, Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, trans. Michael Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974).
18. Johnston, ‘Film: *The Nightcleaners*’, 42.
19. Ibid.
20. Claire Johnston and Paul Willemen, ‘Brecht in Britain: The Independent Political Film (on *The Nightcleaners*)’, in *Working Together: Notes on British Film Collectives in the 1970s*, eds. Bauer and Kidner, 126.
21. Ibid., 125.
22. Jean-Luc Comolli and Jean Paul Narboni, ‘Cinema/Ideology/ Criticism’, in *Film Studies Reader*, eds. J. Hollows, P. Hutchings and M. Jancovich (London: Oxford University Press, 2000), 197–200.

“The Hoxton Mob Are Coming”: The Lux Centre and the Merging of Cultures of Experimental Film and Video Art in the 1990s

Dan Kidner

The 1990s were a period of great flux for film, video, and new media in the United Kingdom. On the surface, these forms were in the ascendancy. A new generation of artists working with film and video including Douglas Gordon, Tacita Dean, Jane and Louise Wilson, Sam Taylor-Johnson (formerly Sam Taylor-Wood), and Steve McQueen, had come to prominence alongside the more headline-grabbing Young British Artists (YBAs), with whom they were often associated. Yet the historical institutions that had supported the work of experimental filmmakers and video artists, such as the London Film-makers' Co-op (LFMC) and London Electronic Arts (LEA, formerly London Video Arts), were struggling to either assimilate into the buoyant field of British visual art or maintain a critical distance from it. The Lux Centre, which opened in 1997, constituted an attempt to do the former. The Centre, situated on the southwest corner of Hoxton Square, an area of London undergoing rapid regeneration, was purpose-built to house the offices and resources of the LFMC and LEA, as well as a cinema and gallery space. By the 1990s, the LFMC had moved away from its heavy association with 1970s' structural/materialist film, and in particular the practices of Peter Gidal and Malcolm Le Grice. Through the 1980s and into the mid-1990s, a diverse set of practitioners used its production and screening facilities, including John Akomfrah, Isaac Julien, and Sarah Turner. According to two later members, Nina Danino and Michael Mazière, throughout this period

the LFMC maintained “an emphasis on cinema, a certain isolationism [and] a collective ideology”.¹ With the opening of the Lux Centre, this isolation would be sacrificed in favour of an outward-looking, inclusive media hub, and any sense of collective ideology compromised by the organisation’s more hierarchical structure. Already in early 1991, changes to the way that the membership elected staff and the executive meant that the balance of power now lay with the paid members of staff, effectively ending the LMFC’s time as a functioning cooperative.² London Video Arts (LVA) too was changing through the 1980s and 1990s. In the 1980s, less emphasis was placed on distribution, and more on the provision of production facilities for independent video-makers preparing work for broadcast. A second name change to London Electronic Arts (LEA) in the 1990s saw the organisation shift its emphasis onto “digital medial” and return to its focus on art and artists.³

At this same historical juncture, galleries and museums began to show more video, in part due to the availability and affordability of video projectors, freeing the medium, as art historian Liz Kotz has written, from the technical support of the monitor.⁴ A new generation of British artists working with film and video, frequently grouped together with their peers working in other mediums as

¹ Nina Danino, James Mackay, Michael Mazière, Vicky Smith, and William Fowler, “Roundtable discussion: London Filmmakers’ Co-op – the second generation,” *Moving Image Review and Art Journal (MIRA)*, 3 (2), 2014: 237-247

² Julia Knight and Peter Thomas, *Reaching Audiences: Distribution and Promotion of Alternative Moving Image* (Bristol: Intellect, 2011), 233

³ London Video Arts was founded in 1976 by David Hall, Roger Barnard, David Critchley, Tamara Krikorian, Brian Hoey, Peter Livingstone, Stuart Marshall, Stephen Partridge, and John Turpie. In 1988, after a dispute over the name with John Cleese’s company Video Arts, the organisation changed its name to London Video Access. In 1994, the name was changed again to London Electronic Arts to reflect the increased use of digital media by its members and users.

⁴ For a discussion and theorisation of the medium of video and the technologies of projection in the 1990s, see Liz Kotz, ‘Video Projection: The Space Between Screens’, in *Art and the Moving Image: A Critical Reader*, ed. Tanya Leighton (London: Tate and Afterall, 2008), 371-385

Young British Artists (YBAs), exploited the “cinematic” potential of video installation by adopting the formal conventions of contemporary cinema or reflecting on its history. As has been pointed out by other scholars, including Erika Balsom in her book *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art*, many artists in the 1990s took cinema as a historical object to be scrutinised and dissected. Balsom contends that “Cinema enters the gallery on the tide of a culture converging under the sign of the digital, appearing there as something of an old medium to be commemorated and protected [...]”.⁵ In the mid-1990s, to commemorate cinema’s centenary, a brace of international exhibitions sought to explore the relationship between art and film, which meant drawing lines between the disciplines, if only to then insist on blurring them. In “Spellbound: Art and Film,” curated by Phillip Dodd and Ian Christie at the Hayward Gallery in 1996, the work of Gordon, McQueen and Fiona Banner was shown alongside specially conceived installations by directors Ridley Scott, Peter Greenaway, and Terry Gilliam. For Dodd, in contrast to artists who had recently made feature films, such as Robert Longo and Julian Schnabel, those featured in “Spellbound” had distinguished themselves because they had “taken to film and video not as light relief from their ‘real’ work but as a central and absorbing activity”.⁶ Whilst many contemporary art galleries and museums struggled to accommodate and reflect upon the complicated and interwoven histories of avant-garde film and video art, there were isolated attempts to bring all the traditions together. The first Pandemonium festival, organised by LEA, was staged at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in 1996 and combined an exhibition of new commissions

⁵ Erika Balsom, *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013), 11

⁶ Philip Dodd, 'Modern Stories', in Philip Dodd and Ian Christie, *Spellbound: Art and Film* (London: Hayward Gallery/BFI, 1996), 32

curated by Gregor Muir, who would later go on to curate the LEA gallery at the Lux Centre, and a screening programme of over two hundred films organised by the festival's director, Abina Manning. The new commissions focussed on YBAs, or artists often associated with the group, including Gillian Wearing, Mark Wallinger, and Jaki Irving, whilst the cinema programme consisted primarily of historical works of experimental film and 1980s' video art. Mazière, then director of LEA, later recalled that the idea behind the festival had been to bring together the YBAs and the artists associated with the LFMC and LEA. This was not a straightforward undertaking, however, because, as he pointed out, although they occasionally showed together, "they never interacted either socially or theoretically."⁷ As London metamorphosed into a new centre of the global art world and the work of the YBAs gained international notoriety, the Lux Centre—like the Pandemonium festival, of which it would host the second edition in October-November 1998—attempted to do two things: create a space for visual artists working with film and video, and provide a sense of security and continuity for institutions that had supported the production of experimental film and video art for decades. The complications involved in executing both of these projects in the form of a media arts centre are symptomatic of a transitional moment in the history of the relationship of moving image production to the gallery system in the United Kingdom, and may in some way have accounted for the Centre's short life. The Lux Centre closed in 2001 before re-emerging in 2002 as LUX, an organisation without a gallery or cinema, with a renewed focus on distribution and education, dedicated to

⁷ Danino, et al., 245.

preserving its valuable archive of films and videos, while distributing the work of a new generation of artists working with the moving image.

Many institutions, practices and histories had been held together in a fragile coalition through the 1970s and early 1980s. The extent to which the shared values, politics, and institutional forms of this earlier generation were at odds with the neo-conceptual strategies, interest in popular cultural and mass-media forms, and proximity to the market of the new British art arguably contributed to the persistent identity crisis of the Lux Centre, if not its downfall. From the early 1970s to the late 1980s, an infrastructure for the production, distribution, promotion, and exhibition of independent film and video established itself in the UK. This infrastructure was at once social, economic, and architectural. It was made up of organisations, groups, associations, journals, dedicated cinemas, screening rooms, and festivals. It existed outside of the gallery system and on the fringes of cinema culture, where three distinct moving image cultures overlapped: experimental film, political cinema, and video art. Each culture had its own dedicated distributor and support structure: the London Film-makers' Co-op for experimental film, London Video Arts for video art and new media, and the Other Cinema for political and avant-garde cinema.⁸ In different ways, left politics and radical notions of collaboration and community fuelled the work of each of these organisations, and within their orbit other, alternative distribution

⁸ The Other Cinema was founded in 1970 as a distributor of avant-garde cinema and merged with another distributor, Politkino, in 1973. Through the 1970s, it distributed the work of British film collectives such as the London Women's Film Group, Cinema Action, and the Berwick Street Film Collective, alongside works of radical cinema such as works by the Dziga Vertov Group and Jean-Marie Straub/ Danièle Huillet, and works of Third Cinema such as *The Hour of the Furnaces* (1968) by Octavio Getino and Fernando Solanas.

networks, screening spaces, and advocacy groups formed, the most significant of these being the Independent Filmmakers Association.⁹

This fragile coalition constituted something like a community: an alternative artistic community, existing outside of the art market and the gallery system, and on the fringes of official culture. Things started to change quickly and brutally for the film and video sector by the end of 1980s. Organisations had moved relatively swiftly from forms of voluntarism in the 1970s to models of state-subsidy by the beginning of the 1980s, before in the late 1980s being pressured to diversify and seek additional income streams as levels of funding were cut. In *Reaching Audiences: Distribution and Promotion of Alternative Moving Image*, Julia Knight and Peter Thomas narrate this period as one in which restructuring of the funding system and endless consultations and reports on the value of the sector pressured organisations to either cut back on vital work or overreach their core principles.¹⁰ Although organisations like LVA and LFMC had become adept at fundraising and utilising the language of state funding agencies, they were also subject to an increasingly privatised cultural sphere.

Exhibitions of video art were rare throughout the 1980s and were often relegated to the education spaces of museums or the “videotheques” of institutions like the Arnolfini in Bristol and the ICA in London. One that stands out is “Signs of the Times: A decade of video, film and slide-tape installation in Britain 1980 – 1990,” held in two parts from 7 October to 4 November and 11

⁹ The IFA was set up at the end of 1974 to represent the interests of a diverse range of filmmakers. They negotiated an agreement with the trade union ACTT for workshops and lobbied for a dedicated department of Independent Film and Video on Channel Four.

¹⁰ Knight and Thomas, *Reaching Audiences*, 54-57

November to 9 December 1990 at Modern Art Oxford¹¹. Part one featured six artists, with a further eight exhibited in part two.¹² Exhibiting were representatives from the first generation of British video artists including Stuart Marshall, Tamara Krikorian, and David Hall, alongside artists that emerged in the 1980s such as Judith Goddard and Jayne Parker.¹³ Although not the first significant exhibition of its kind, “Signs of the Times” signalled both a retrospective view and a turning point. It followed on from another survey show at Modern Art Oxford, “Current Affair: British Painting and Sculpture in the 1980s,” held in 1987. Both exhibitions were supported by the British Council and sought to export recent British art abroad; “Signs of the Times” toured to Leeds in 1991 and then to la Ferme du Buisson, France, in 1993.¹⁴ In the foreword to the catalogue, curator Chrissie Iles laments that although the period of 1980 to 1990 had been fertile for artists working with “video, slide-tape and film installation,” this work had received “scant recognition by the British art establishment, and almost total neglect abroad”.¹⁵ Working closely with participating artist Tina Keane and writer Michael O’Pray (named as “consultants” in the exhibition catalogue),¹⁶ Iles’ exhibition sought to take account of work she felt had been marginalised or overlooked by the gallery

¹¹ In 1990, Modern Art Oxford was known as Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) Oxford.

¹² Part one of “Signs of the Times” featured Rose Finn-Kelcey, Judith Goddard, Susan Hiller, Tina Keane, Tamara Krikorian, and Jeremy Welsh. Part two featured Roberta Graham, David Hall, Stuart Marshall, Jayne Parker, Holly Warburton, Chris Welsby, Anthony Wilson, and Cerith Wyn-Evans.

¹³ The exhibition had an interesting and noteworthy gender balance – eight to six in favour of women. It was noteworthy largely because neither the exhibition’s publicity nor its catalogue commented upon or promoted this fact.

¹⁴ The exhibition toured to Leeds City Art Gallery and Leeds Polytechnic Gallery, 19 September – 26 October, 1991 and La Ferme du Buisson, France, 26 November 1993 – 13 February 1994. Rose Finn-Kelcey and Holly Warburton were absent from the Leeds presentation. La Ferme du Buisson featured only Judith Goddard, Roberta Graham, David Hall, Susan Hiller, Tina Keane, Stuart Marshall, Jayne Parker, and Chris Welsby.

¹⁵ Chrissie Iles, “Foreword”, *Signs of the Times: A Decade of Video, Film and Slide-Tape Installation in Britain, 1980-1990*, ed. Chrissie Iles, Oxford: Museum of Modern Art, 11

¹⁶ Michael O’Pray had previously curated two important survey exhibitions of video art for the Tate Gallery: “British Film and Video 1980 – 1985: The New Pluralism,” 11-28 April, 1985, selected by O’Pray and Tina Keane; and “The Elusive Sign: British Avant-Garde Film and Video 1977-1987,” selected by O’Pray, Tamara Krikorian, and Catherine Lacey.

system during the preceding decade. Iles noted, “In 1990, it is easier for a young British artist making conceptual installation to gain international recognition than it is for a major artist of twenty years standing who works with film, slide-tape or video.”¹⁷ This fact was borne out when, in 1991, with the support of collector Charles Saatchi, Damien Hirst made his totemic *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, a tiger shark preserved and suspended in a tank of formaldehyde—a work that came to be a potent symbol of British art in the 1990s. Some artists working with video and film did gain international recognition in this period—McQueen, Gordon, and Taylor-Johnson among them—just not, for the most part, the artists represented in “Signs of the Times,” whose nuanced investigations into semiotics and the medium of television lacked the spectacle of the large-scale video projections and direct appropriation of popular cultural forms that younger generation embraced.

Cerith Wyn Evans was one of the contributing artists to “Signs of the Times” who actually did gain an international recognition, but this was largely because of his “conceptual installations,” bought by Saatchi in the 1990s. As such, he became a kind of honorary YBA despite the fact he had been making work since the early 1980s. Wyn Evans’ work in “Signs of the Times” was transitional in this respect. Coming after Super 8mm films made under the influence of and whilst assistant to Derek Jarman, *No title* (1990) featured the apparatus for both the production and the presentation of video. A circle of freestanding lights was trained onto the backs of a smaller circle of monitors. The monitors themselves displayed an actual circle of light, as if the light from behind had penetrated the shell of the

¹⁷ Iles, “Foreword,” 11

display unit. *No title* is rarely mentioned in histories of the artist's work, which tend to begin with his *Inverse Reverse Perverse* (1996), bought by Saatchi and featured in the controversial 1997 YBA showcase at the Royal Academy, *Sensation*.¹⁸ *No title's* concern with the language of television production aligns it with the video art of the 1980s while its preoccupation with transmission in a more abstract sense looks ahead to the sculptural work has undertaken Wyn Evans' since the mid-1990s.

Stuart Marshall's contribution to "Signs of the Times," the multi-monitor video installation *Journal of the Plague Year* (1984), was also something of a transitional work, moving him closer the films he would make later for television exploring gay histories and the media's reporting of the AIDS crisis. As with much early video art, Marshall's first works had sought to reflect on the material of video itself and test the medium's possibilities. After making a number of tapes exploring the voice, he began to interrogate the conventions of television, uncovering its hidden structures and codes, and to draw closer to narrative filmmaking. Chronicling "the experience of AIDS from within the gay community,"¹⁹ *Journal of the Plague Year* was originally commissioned for the festival "Vidéo 84" in Montreal, Canada. Five silent videos, each running a little over ten minutes, depict different representations of the gay experience from within the public and private spheres. Each monitor is embedded within a partitioned, white, freestanding wall. Marshall aimed for a visual effect

¹⁸ For monographic essays of Wyn Evans' work that neglect to mention *No Title* see Michael Archer, "Moon Turned a Fire Red," *Parkett*, vol. 87 (2010) and Daniel Birnbaum, "Late," *Cerith Wyn Evans: ...visibleinvisible*, Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2008, 23-29.

¹⁹ Stuart Marshall's artist page in Chrissie Iles, *Signs of the Times: A Decade of Video, Film and Slide-Tape Installation in Britain, 1980-1990*, Oxford: Museum of Modern Art, pp. 12-17, 47.

somewhere between the cubicles in a public lavatory and the cells of a prison; two key references for the artist were Frank Ripplloh's *Taxi Zum Klo* (1981) and Jean Genet's *Un Chant d'amour* (1950).²⁰ Each panel contains a text hand-painted by Marshall using an overhead projector, taking hours of careful work. Iles remembers spending time with the artist during this process and discussing the "apocalyptic" scene in London – at that moment both Derek Jarman and Leigh Bowery were sick, and "Thatcher and Reagan were doing their worst, and there was a sense of a dark, oppressive moment, impending nuclear war, attacks on the gay community, things falling apart."²¹ A few of the panels were changed or altered when Marshall reconstructed the work for the *Signs of the Times*, notably the second and fourth panels. The fourth originally featured a rendering of a piece of graffiti Marshall had spotted in London: "AIDS KILL QUEERS". When the work was re-fabricated in 1990 for "Signs of the Times" Marshall replaced this with a different line of graffiti: "AIDS = ARSE INFECTED DEATH SENTENCE". The text on the second panel, which had originally been the diary-like handwritten reflection, "Why won't Gordon tell Harry that he is going to leave? [...] He may be trying to do the same thing to me", was changed to three enigmatic sentences: "It's been two weeks and three days now. His mother keeps trying to enter the apartment. She threatens to call the police." The images on the monitor embedded in this second panel, shot inside a Parisian apartment, are of empty rooms; an empty bed, the bed and pillow still holding the impression of a sleeping body; a mantelpiece; and cluttered abandoned desk.

²⁰ Chrissie Iles, interview with the author, 13 May 2015.

²¹ Chrissie Iles, email correspondence with the author, 9 February 2015.

Although the tone of the work ostensibly had remained the same, what had been, in 1984, a work expressing resistance and fury had become melancholy, sombre and elegiac. The context for the work had changed. Neoliberalism was now entrenched and was changing both social and cultural as well as economic policy in the UK – the rise of New Labour in the early 1990s would do little to dislodge this hegemony. Marshall died in 1993 of AIDS-related illnesses. *Journal of the Plague Year*, like much of the work in the exhibition “Signs of the Times,” fell between two periods. It was both formally experimental and political, and was at odds with the more conventional forms of film and video installation that would come to dominate the UK scene in the 1990s. *Journal of the Plague Year* in particular, and Marshall’s practice in general, became marginalised and neglected in the 1990s and 2000s.

Many of the works in “Signs of the Times” were indebted to ideas that dominated the fields of film and social theory in the 1970s and 1980s, and aligned with those decades’ social movements and concern for ecology. Judith Goddard’s *Electron - Television Circle* (1987) was originally commissioned by TSWA-3D for a site on Bellever Forest and Tor, Dartmoor, and reconfigured for gallery exhibition. *Electron* featured seven television monitors encased in steel plinths arranged in a circle facing each other, their configuration echoing the stone circles commonly found in this part of England. Goddard described this combination of ancient and modern as “a brutal juxtaposition: the television set so familiar in the living room encased in a steel box with a riot shield/polycarbonate screen protecting its flickering image from rain and

vandals, standing like some 20th century menhir.”²² All the screens played the same six-minute video. The video begins with a backward tracking shot of a road, flanked on one side by electricity pylons. On the soundtrack, the hum of electricity is blended with the sound of a choir singing Blake’s “Jerusalem.”

Goddard’s concerns with the politics of domesticity, nationalism and landscape are echoed in other works in the show. Tina Keane’s *Escalator* (1988), originally made for Riverside Studios, Hammersmith, featured two large escalator-like structures that held monitors on each step. The monitors on the left showed the same images, scrolling up, of the prosperity of the City of London as embodied in its shiny reflective buildings and fast-moving, suited men and women. On the right, scrolling down, corresponding monitors showed images of the other people and spaces of London: the forgotten, the left behind. The viewer could move behind and underneath the structure, which was as commanding a presence as the images that played out on the monitors. For this kind of video installation, television, rather than cinema, was the primary reference. This could be seen more clearly in another work in the exhibition, Susan Hiller’s *Belshazzar’s Feast, the Writing on Your Wall* (1983-4), which explicitly referenced television’s place in the home. A sofa, rug, and houseplants suggesting a domestic space surround a single TV set, playing footage of flames. The soundtrack to the work, which featured the artist’s improvised singing, whispered stories reported in newspapers of people seeing apparitions on television after the end of broadcast at midnight, and Hiller’s young son

²² Judith Godard, “Works in the exhibition.” *Signs of the Times: A Decade of Video, Film and Slide-Tape Installation in Britain, 1980-1990*, Oxford: Museum of Modern Art, 35.

describing the Biblical story of Belshazzar's feast and Rembrandt's painting of the event at the National Gallery, London.

As these examples indicate, many of the works of video installation in "Signs of the Times" referenced broadcast media. By 1997, video installation had come to mean something quite different, with a widespread embrace of video projection. The primary referent was now cinema. When the Lux Centre opened in the autumn with a gallery space and a cinema with flexible seating to accommodate "expanded" presentations, it heralded a new phase for experimental film and video in the UK, promising to "reflect the richness and diversity of film, video and new media at a time when the work of British artists lead the world."²³

The directors of the LEA and LFMC, Michael Mazière and Nicholas Morgan, respectively, envisaged the Centre a place where historical works of experimental film, independent film, and video art would be shown alongside classic and contemporary European art house cinema, as well as the best new moving image work by British and international artists. After a tumultuous and prolonged period of negotiation with its funders—the British Film Institute (BFI), Arts Council England (ACE), and the London Film and Video Development Agency (LFVDA)—the Lux Centre cinema, programmed by the LFMC, opened on 19 September 1997 with a screening of Andrew Köttling's *Gallivant* (1996).²⁴ An off-beat road movie, *Gallivant* documents Köttling, his mother Gladys, and his

²³ Michael Mazière and Nicholas Morgan, "The Lux Centre", *The Lux Centre Programme*, no.1 (September – October, 1997), 1.

²⁴ Knight and Thomas, *Reaching Audiences*, 217-247

learning-disabled daughter Eden's circumnavigation around the coast of the UK mainland. Somewhat in the spirit of Derek Jarman and sharing affinities with Patrick Keiller, another British filmmaker working at the intersection of documentary and experimental film, Kötting's warm and funny film provided a suitable celebratory prologue to the first Lux Centre cinema programme. Connected to the traditions of independent and experimental film, Kötting's documentary also spoke to a style of filmmaking practiced by British eccentrics loosely affiliated with the LFMC, like Bruce Lacey and Jeff Keen.

The inaugural cinema programme, which commenced a month before the opening of the LEA gallery and was organised by Sarah Turner and John Thomson, explored the full range of British moving image practices from the previous thirty years. Included were Jarman's *Last of England* (1987) and Keiller's *Robinson in Space* (1997); programmes of the films of the Black Audio Film Collective and Sankofa; themed programmes from the LFMC and LEA collections; *Seacoal* (1985) by the filmmaking collective Amber; a tribute to Stuart Marshall; and an "artist's presentation" from YBA Georgina Starr. It was a confident and comprehensive review that carefully articulated the various historical trajectories and scenes that constituted the field, and illustrated well the strength and importance of membership organisations such as the LFMC and LEA, and a wider support network.

A month later on October 25, the LEA gallery launched with the presentation of Jane and Louise Wilson's four-channel video installation *Stasi City* (1997) and a series of artists' commissions throughout the building and in the park outside. At

the opening ceremony, artists and local celebrities Gilbert and George cut ribbons to signify the opening of all the public spaces of the building and Mik Flood, chair of the LEA, and Christopher Frayling, then rector of the Royal College of Art and member of the Arts Council of England, gave speeches. In his opening address, Frayling celebrated film and video's "coming of age" and quoted from a *Guardian* review of the ICA's Pandemonium festival the year before by film critic Jonathan Romney. Romney described the festival as "an end-of-millennium package to remind us we can expect increasing erosion of the prissier distinction between art, film and video."²⁵ Frayling read his words approvingly before continuing: "That, I believe, goes for this entire venture".²⁶ Frayling ended his speech by referring to a line of graffiti that he had come across whilst researching Victorian crime in London. Written in 1888 on a wall not far from the gallery, it spelled out "the Hoxton mob are coming."

Positioned awkwardly in the lobby of the building and announcing the Lux Centre's intention to bridge the gap between contemporary art and film and video culture was sculptor Elizabeth Wright's *Pizza delivery moped enlarged to 145% of its original size* (1997). The Lux Centre brochure described Wright's outsized moped as playing on "our expectations and experience of reality."²⁷ But this wasn't the only gap the Centre attempted to bridge. Although Benjamin Cook, then LEA's distribution manager, recently acknowledged that there was much shared by the LEA and the LFMC at this time, in terms of staff, artists, and collaborators there were still "significant cultural and ideological differences"

²⁵ Jonathan Romney, "The in crowd." *The Guardian*, 13 March 1996, A13.

²⁶ Video recording of the LEA Gallery opening ceremony, LUX archives. Thank you to Benjamin Cook for drawing my attention to this resource.

²⁷ "LEA/LMFC Joint Commissions", *The Lux Centre Programme*, no.2 (October – December, 1997), 1.

between the two organisations.²⁸ This separation between film and video cultures was a holdover from the 1970s and 1980s, and defined the field long into the 1990s. In 1998, once this gap had become less constitutive to the identity of each scene, in what Cook describes as a “post-media age”, the LEA and LFMC merged. Their funders had advocated the union of the two organisations since the early 1990s.²⁹ After the merger, the organisation fought rising rents and a changing and complicated funding system. Knight and Thomas describe this change in funder support as a move from reactive to proactive support, whereby the “stakeholder”—the one who takes the financial risk and sets the ultimate direction of the organisation—is the funder rather than the organisation itself.³⁰ Funding for culture had become intensely political through the early 1990s and into the New Labour years, as countless reviews, reports, and new policies put severe restrictions on what cultural funding could be used for. The BFI’s hope for a high profile digital arts centre in London’s new cultural quarter superseded the needs of the two organisations that would comprise it, organisations whose previous means of operation and communication had been cooperative and small scale. Cook writes of an “expansion beyond the skills and experience of the board and staff and significant ‘mission drift’ as the organisations were forced to deal with the implications of their new spaces,” stating that the organisations “lost sight of their core goals and mission”.³¹ The organisations’ transition from being artist-run, cooperative, and membership-based to companies limited by guarantee altered the stakes of their “mission”

²⁸ Benjamin Cook, “Lux et Umbra: On the slow rise and fast fall of the Lux Centre,” *Moving Image Review and Art Journal* 6, no. 1–2 (forthcoming).

²⁹ Knight and Thomas, *Reaching Audiences*, 228

³⁰ Knight and Thomas, *Reaching Audiences*, 246

³¹ Cook, “Lux et Umbra”.

and refocused their goals on audience engagement and cultural regeneration. The Lux Centre became a victim of the mismatch of funder priorities and the needs and requirements of the original organisations' principles and core communities. It also struggled to reconcile the histories its founding organisations represented with the gallery system's burgeoning needs and desires for moving image work.

The Lux Centre enthusiastically embraced contemporary visual art and attempted to bring the fields and histories of experimental film and video art into proximity, or at least constructive dialogue, with it. Although this was not a de facto utopian project, it was made difficult by the fact that the gallery and cinema programmes appeared at odds. The gallery profiled many artists who had been associated with the generation of YBA artists for the whom the cinema represented a cache of readymade images and tropes to be repurposed as video installations, whilst the cinema programme sought to connect avant-garde film and video with European art house and independent film.

Film and video cultures had for a long time been very much defined by their oppositional stance to official culture and antipathy to the gallery system, circulating their works by alternative means of distribution and exhibition. The institutions that supported these cultures started life as bottom-up, co-operatively run groups whose ideas were strongly aligned with left political subcultures. But by the late 1990s the full range of moving image practice had begun to enter the gallery, with public art institutions and the art market becoming vital sources of finance for artists and filmmakers from all traditions.

The Lux Centre had the almost impossible job of at once critically registering these movements, providing a platform for works from different traditions, and servicing its founding organisations' communities of artists and filmmakers. As these pressures began to weigh on the organisation, and it became more and more deeply mired in financial strife, the cinema and gallery programmes became less focused and more reliant on partnerships with outside institutions and festivals to deliver content. The contract that the lead funder, the BFI, had signed with the landlord was subject to regular reviews, with no protection from steep rent rises. As the Hoxton area became more desirable, ironically largely due to cultural regeneration, the rent quickly became prohibitive. With the almost constant threat of closure, cinema programmers Helen de Witt (1997 – 2000) and Ian White (2000 – 2001), and gallery curator Gregor Muir continued to pull programmes together, but the lack of resources meant showing more touring programmes from festivals such the International Short Film Festival Oberhausen and Helsinki's Avanto festival, and mainstream fare such as screenings of *Blade Runner* (1982) and a brace of recent films by the Coen Brothers. Despite this, the Centre continued to put out a varied programme spanning the full range of moving image practice. For example, across the July-August 2000 programme, it was possible to see the absurdist performance videos of Peter Land and the Pop-inflected video installations of Daniel Pflumm in the gallery, while the cinema showed Derek Jarman's *In the Shadow of the Sun* (1980), Horace Ove's *Baldwin's Nigger* (1969), a mini-retrospective of the work of Raúl Ruiz, a programme of Japanese experimental film from the 1990s, Chris Smith's *American Movie* (1999), a double-bill of David Cronenberg's *Crash* (1996) and Mary Harron's *American Psycho* (1999), and a programme called "Porn Chic:

A Festival of Sex and Style.” By spring 2001, the programmes became more sparse and repetitive, and more reliant on recent or classic European art house fare. Arts Council England had begun to support the Centre through its Recovery Programme, set up specifically to aid organisations who had struggled after receiving funding for ambitious capital projects. After various consultants and advisors sought to find a way to stabilise the organisation, a report was submitted to Arts Council England in Summer 2001 with a proposal to continue and an indication of the level of support that was needed. With worries about continuing rent rises and the organisation’s sustainability the proposals were rejected, the Lux Centre was liquidated and its staff made redundant.

Before the closure, and just two years after Mazière and Morgan trumpeted their respective organisations’ move to “London’s liveliest creative quarter,”³² they were joined in Hoxton Square by White Cube gallery, which opened a 9,500-square-foot space on the south side of the square in April 2000. Jay Jopling, White Cube’s director, had been a key player in the British art scene of the 1990s and represented many of the prominent YBAs, including Damien Hirst, Gary Hume, and Sam Taylor-Johnson. A few weeks after the Lux Centre closed, White Cube opened a show of new works by Taylor-Johnson. Occupying both floors of the gallery’s well-designed, museum-like spaces were the artist’s latest videos and photographs. In *Pietà* (2001), Taylor-Johnson holds actor Robert Downey Jr. in her arms. The work references Michelangelo’s famous *Pietà* (1499) and echoes its themes of maternal nurture and support. Shot on 35mm, *Pietà* depicts the artist in a white vest sitting at the bottom of a wide staircase. Downey Jr. is

³² Michael Mazière and Nicholas Morgan, “The Lux Centre”, 1.

draped over her legs, his back supported by her right thigh, whilst she gathers his legs in her left arm. After two minutes, and just before the film loops, Taylor-Johnson becomes visibly tired as she struggles to support the actor's weight. In another work in the exhibition, *Breach (Girl with Eunuch)* (2001), also shot on 35mm, a young woman sits on the floor, increasingly bothered by an unseen presence. For over ten minutes she squirms, grimaces, and looks uncomfortable, eventually succumbing to grief as her eyes redden and tears stream down her face. The work recalls Andy Warhol's *Beauty #2* (1965), a 65-minute 16mm film in which Edie Sedgwick is questioned and terrorised by the off-screen Chuck Wein, Sedgwick's former lover. Taylor-Johnson's use of 35mm, celebrity actors, and her high production values – all long anathema to the independent sector and traditions of experimental film – signal a more ambiguous relationship to cinema than the more nuanced and complicated narrative that the Lux Centre had attempted to enact. Taylor-Johnson's works reference and quote from both High Renaissance art and underground cinema, summoning a commemorative relationship to both. However, like many artists of her generation working with the moving image, her work's relationship to, and interest in, experimental film, video art or political cinema of the 1970s and 1980s is more tenuous.

Artists' film and video and artists' moving image have become the default terms used to describe contemporary gallery practices that utilise the moving image, but have also retroactively come to name any historical film and video practice or work of cinema that has found a home there. Works of experimental film, video art, and even political cinema are now routinely bought by collectors and curated into exhibitions. The internecine fighting between the fields of

experimental film, video art, and political cinema, which for many people had split or defined the field in the 1970s, was by the 1990s on the wane.

Furthermore, the pronounced animosity or mistrust between this coalition of film and video avant-gardes and visual artists using the medium in the 1990s also started to dissipate in the early 2000s. But did something vital get lost along the way? Wasn't the critical function of experimental film and its institutions precisely their constitutive opposition to the market and the gallery system? And didn't video artists seek to find new modes of display and distribution both inside and outside of the gallery system?

By the end of the 1990s, London had established its credentials as an art world centre. Artists from the UK were exhibiting internationally in unprecedented numbers, and the city itself was about to get its very own world-class venue for the display of contemporary and modern art. When Tate Modern opened in 2000, it quickly became the world's most visited art museum.³³ One of its inaugural exhibitions, on view from 12 May – 3 December 2000, was "Between Cinema and a Hard Place." Taking its title from a 1991 work by American video artist Gary Hill, the exhibition sought to explore relationships between "cinematic and real space."³⁴ Of the artists concerned with cinematic space were video artists from the 1980s and 1990s such as Hill, Bill Viola, Douglas Gordon, Stan Douglas and Matthew Barney, while sculptural works and installations by, among others, Rachel Whiteread, Mirosław Balka and Christian Boltanski occupied and explored "real space". Although in this instance there was an

³³ <http://www.tate.org.uk/about/press-office/press-releases/tate-modern-may-2000-may-2001>

³⁴ <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/between-cinema-and-hard-place>

attempt to delineate the different works into two thematic categories of “cinema” or “hard place”, by the 2000s such a mixture of moving image and sculptural works was commonplace; film, video, and new media were by then as much at home in the gallery and museum as painting and sculpture. At the beginning of the 1990s, “Signs of the Times” profiled work from the 1980s that drew on theories of semiotics from the 1970s that had attempted to decode the signs and meanings produced by the cinematic image. These theories were adapted for the small screen of television, augmented by the social theory of Raymond Williams among others, and influenced by the radical social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, from the women’s movement to gay liberation. Once the moving image is at home in the gallery these currents seem to get lost; at this point any attempt to read the moving image’s presence in the gallery as in any way disruptive is made purely at the level of the phenomenological experience of encountering different temporal media in the gallery space.

In 2003 London further established its place on the global map of contemporary art when the first Frieze Art Fair took place. As much a cultural event as a fair, it incorporated film and video into its very fabric, regularly moving image work through its Frieze Projects strand. In 2005, Frieze Projects curator Polly Staple established the Artists’ Cinema in partnership with LUX. The “cinema”, a bespoke auditorium built within the fair, was coordinated by Ian White, with programmes by artists and curators including Wyn Evans, Iles, and many others. Featured artists and filmmakers ranged from Kurt Kren, Joan Jonas, and Jean Painlevé, to

Marshall, Warhol, and Akram Zaatari.³⁵ In many ways, the Artists' Cinema was the afterlife of the Lux Centre, only now the status of film and video within the art world had been totally transformed. The mediums were no longer marginal or oppositional; many curators and programmers, like White, formerly a programmer at the Lux Centre, were now working across the experimental film and art worlds, helping to bring them together.³⁶

From one perspective, it might seem that by the mid-2000s, the hard-fought battles of the 1970s and 1980s to provide a space for the production, distribution, and exhibition of experimental film and video art, and to define these mediums against each other and against other art forms had become irrelevant, or no longer necessary. Yet as these forms migrate to the gallery and are supported by the institutions of contemporary art, the mediums of film and video somehow became divorced from their own histories and institutions. It was common for artists working with film and video in the 1990s to both disavow cinephilia and show little regard for the traditions of experimental film.³⁷ The antipathy, misunderstanding, or suspicion that had existed between gallery artists and film or video-makers working outside that system slowly began to erode through 2000s, thanks largely to the work of the reborn LUX and curators such as White. The twenty-first century has seen the emergence of a generation of British artists more connected than their 1990s forebears to the

³⁵ The Artists' Cinema also commissioned, in its first year, video work by artists Roger Hiorns, Donald Urquhart, and Cathy Wilkes, who had never worked in the medium before. In addition, LUX launched 'A Movie' in collaboration with SPACEEX gallery, Exeter, a series of commissions for artists to make short work on 35mm, screened at the fair and then distributed to a selection of cinemas around the UK to be screened before feature films.

³⁶ White also coordinated the influential LUX Associate Artists Programme, a 12-month post-academic development course for artists working with the moving image, and was adjunct film curator at Whitechapel Gallery from 2001 to 2011.

³⁷ Balsom, *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art*, 115

aesthetic traditions of experimental film, video art, and independent cinema, such as Ed Atkins, Maeve Brennan, James Richards, Anja Kirschner, Luke Fowler, the Otolith Group, Ben Rivers, and Emily Wardill—but each of these artists is supported by the gallery system and most are represented by commercial art galleries.

With the homogenisation of film and video cultures, and the possibility that their histories are read within the single continuum of art history, comes a greater acceptance that the traditions are connected. But a closer look at these histories reveal more complicated, nuanced, and critical relationships to each other, to other art forms, and to art history. In the 1960s and 1970s film and video makers, inspired and formed by left political subcultures, started cooperatives, filmmaking collectives, and associations. These alternative group formations and institutional forms created not just a vibrant, if sometimes volatile scene, but critical frameworks from which to launch attacks on official culture. Now artist filmmakers must attempt to do this from within.

Conclusion

The curatorial practice, described in the introduction, which has been developed over 15 years, is driven by research and encompasses exhibition making, commissioning, producing, publishing, programming and writing. For this period of doctoral research, begun in September 2013, I have engaged with the history of independent political film. Although this research has ranged over, what I call here, the “long 1970s,” I have focused on the years 1968 – 1975, and number of films that became emblematic in this period such as the Berwick Street Film Collective’s *Nightcleaners* and Jackie Raynal’s *Deux Foix*. Both of these films, as I write in the Dwoskin essay, posed problems for Peter Wollen’s famously controversial schema of the two avant-gardes. These films also pose a challenge to the researcher trying to construct a relationship between them and contemporary art, and the curator wishing to *exhibit* them. Although some recent artists’ moving image work would seem to possess an aesthetic kinship with these works, and others made in the 1970s, they emerge from a culture altogether different.¹ And although independent film culture in the 1970s was not *independent* in any substantive or philosophical sense, as shown in the introduction, in its alignment with left political subcultures and attempt to model the associations, distributive networks, and political commitment of these cultures, it staked out a territory between cinema and art, and between politics and culture.

From one perspective, the struggle to secure a space for the production, distribution and exhibition of independent moving image work was won by the beginning of the 21st century. As I write in the Lux Centre essay, through the 1990s, “The antipathy, misunderstanding, or suspicion that had existed between gallery artists and film or video-makers working outside the system slowly

¹ For a discussion of the “artists’ feature film” and its relationship to the traditions of avant-garde and political cinema see: Dan Kidner, ‘The Long and Short’, *Frieze*, Issue 173, September 2015, 110–117. <https://frieze.com/article/long-and-short>

began to erode..."² Yet, as we have seen, particularly in the Lux Centre essay, once these very specific cultural forms merge and are embraced and supported by the institutions of contemporary art, they become disconnected from their own histories and institutions (most of which no longer exist). And, they also become dissociated from, however poorly theorised at the time, notions of independence and collective cultural production; notions, circumscribed by the closeness of independent film and video cultures to left political subcultures. The essay details how most (if not all) artists, whose works bear formal similarity to the works of their forebears from the field of independent film, are supported by public museums and galleries and are represented by commercial galleries. Similarly, artists and filmmakers from earlier generations have found that, to continue working and to support their practices, they too must seek commercial gallery representation.³

I conclude the essay by describing the process by which the discrete, if intertwined, histories of political cinema, video-art and experimental film homogenise through the lens of the single continuum of the history of contemporary art. As a result, comes a greater, and unquestioned, acceptance that the traditions are connected. But, to understand the more nuanced and critical relationship that these mediums and cultures once had to one another and the "dominant culture" is to gain insight into debates about both the *politics* of political modernism and the curating of moving images across the spaces of contemporary art. As I conclude in the Lux Centre essay: "In the 1960s and 1970s film and video makers, inspired and formed by left political subcultures, started cooperatives, filmmaking collectives, and associations. These alternative group formations and institutional forms created not just a vibrant, if sometime volatile scene, but critical frameworks from which to launch attacks on official culture. Now artists filmmakers must attempt to do this from within."⁴

² Dan Kidner, "'The Hoxton Mob Are Coming': The Lux Centre and the Merging of Cultures of Experimental Film and Video Art in the 1990s", in *Artists' Moving Image in Britain After 1989*, ed. Erika Balsom et. al. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018.

³ Particularly illuminating in this area were conversations with Leslie Thornton and Ericka Beckman, who both participated in "The Inoperative Community." Both described having to accept and adjust to the commercial gallery system.

⁴ Ibid.

In my curatorial work I have attempted to carefully register and critically respond to the changes that I track in the essays. And also, to use the exhibition form as a vehicle for my research questions by allowing, if not openly fostering, contradictions and conflict between the spaces and institutions of contemporary art and the radical practices that now must call these spaces their home. At the same time, because it is not only the histories that are vulnerable but the objects themselves, I have exercised great care when exhibiting the works and archives of filmmakers and video artists. All the works in “The Inoperative Community,” and the DVD Publication, but especially the ones under discussion here - Stuart Marshall’s *Journal of the Plague Year* (1984), Leslie Thornton’s *Peggy and Fred in Hell: Folding* (1984 – 2015), *Nightcleaners* (1975) by the Berwick Street Film Collective and Ericka Beckman’s *You the Better* (1983) – have been exhibited with care taken to ensure that, where necessary they are restored, and that they are shown under the best possible conditions.⁵ With both exhibitions I attempted to do two things simultaneously: appropriately display the work, taking care that the viewing experience is prioritised, while exposing the conditions of display and the temporary nature of the systems of display.

Black boxes, screening rooms and quasi-cinemas have become a mainstay of the way the contemporary art institution displays moving image work. These conventions have evolved since the beginning of the 1990s, precipitated by advances in the technologies of projection and have been discussed at length in the literature on art’s relationship to the moving image.⁶ What hasn’t been addressed in any great detail is the effect of the migration of particular practices and the attendant historiographies on those practices and historiographies themselves, or the wider field of visual art. This has, broadly, been the focus of this period of doctoral research and my practice over the last five years.

⁵ Both iterations of “The Inoperative Community” had teams of technicians in constant dialogue with myself, the artists and filmmakers, and the gallery and museum curatorial staff, and attendants.

⁶ See in particular Liz Kotz, ‘Video Projection: The Space Between Screens’, in *Art and the Moving Image: A Critical Reader*, ed. Tanya Leighton, London: Tate and Afterall, 2008, 371-385; Erika Balsom, *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art*, Amsterdam University Press, 2013; and Maeve Connolly, *The Place of Artists’ Cinema : Space, Site and Screen*, Bristol: Intellect, 2009.

Although, architecturally, the spaces of the gallery and museum, whether domestic (Raven Row) or industrial (Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź) in origin, can be readily transformed into screening spaces, these are neither substitutes for the cinema nor new and alternative spaces for historical and contemporary moving image practices. In the case of the exhibitions under discussion here I have proposed the gallery as a liminal space, where practices are travelling through rather than arriving at. The spaces of contemporary art, and the institution in its broader sense – discussed earlier – become, then, a lens through which to view the full range of moving image work and reflect on the trajectory of specific practices and the cultures that once supported them.

In Jean Luc Nancy's essay, *The Inoperative Community*, rather than attempt to reconcile what could be seen as the central contradiction at the heart of political modernism's call to a community of spectators – one that would not just change the work but produce the work – he proposed that the community that becomes a "single thing" ceases to be a community: "It yields its being-together to a being of togetherness."⁷ As Catherine Elwes points out in her review of the "The Inoperative Community," the exhibition purposefully stages this contradiction: "Both Bataille and Nancy wrestled with the apparent incompatibility of the sovereign subject (artist) and community [...] in "The Inoperative Community" that tension is deliberately played out."⁸ By bringing works from the fields of political cinema, experimental film and video art, together with contemporary artworks made for the gallery and hybrid works designed for both contexts, I attempted to stage a number of dialectical impasses. Not just between the sovereign subject and the community of spectators, but also between specific cultural forms and the institutions that house them. Under the conditions set by the exhibition the works and the gallery in some way should remain in an unresolvable relation to one another.

⁷ Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, p. xxxix.

⁸ Catherine Elwes, 'The Inoperative Community, Raven Row, London, 3 December 2015 – 14 February 2016', *Moving Image Review & Art Journal*, Vol. 5, nos. 1 & 2, 2016, 233–244.

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The In operat ive Co mmun ity

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