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MALCOLM LE GRICE

By **Simon Payne**

1. Spheres of Influence

Malcolm Le Grice has produced a vast body of work since 1965 incorporating single-screen films, expanded cinematic performances and three-screen digital video works.

Pieces such as *Castle 1* (1966), *Berlin Horse* (1970), *Horror Film* (1971) and *Threshold* (1972) are canonical, but in the present era of 'digital aesthetics' there are other avenues of his work and biography that have become increasingly significant. Some of his earliest work involved video, multi-media and computer generated imagery and his use of different technologies has always influenced his understanding of film.

Le Grice has adopted paradigms from a number of different media, the most significant of which is painting. Pieces such as *Academic Still Life* (1976) and *Digital Still Life* (1989) pay homage to Cézanne and Seurat respectively, deconstructing generic still life compositions through the exploration of movement, quick cutting and the manipulation of individual pixels. Le Grice could also be described as a 'colourist', but his use of colour has not been limited to one manner. *Gross Fog* (1973) creates abstract rhythmic patterns in colour. In many of his videos hues are subtly altered to heighten impressionistic values. In films such as *Whitchurch Down* (1972) bold coloured filters are used to flatten the illusory depth of a landscape.

Relationships between abstract cinema and music have been of continued interest to Le Grice. He has collaborated with a number of musicians, the most significant of whom are Brian Eno and the seminal improvisation group AMM. In films such as *Berlin Horse* and *Threshold* analogue tape-loop soundtracks mirror looping imagery. In videos such as *Arbitrary Logic* (1988), digital programming affects relationships between abstract colour patterns and musical tones. Even where musical structures are not obvious, Le Grice's editing is often related to an abstract score, or inspired by a frenetic jazzy improvisation.

Le Grice's book *Abstract Film and Beyond* was published in 1977. In this and a number of other writings to date, he has been a formidable advocate of experimental cinema. Le Grice began teaching at St. Martin's School of Art almost directly after graduating from the Slade in 1965. In the subsequent academic posts that he has held and his various associations with BFI and Arts Council committees, he has continually helped to provide a practical context for experimental cinema in the UK. Le Grice helped to set up the developing and printing facilities at the London Filmmakers Co-op in the late 1960s and during the early part of his career, his central involvement in the Co-op provided a model for collective practice. At that time a significant difference between the English filmmakers and their American counterparts was the degree to which the latter were working much more independently and in what P. Adams Sitney saw as a 'visionary' tradition. In contrast, the more personal vision of Le Grice's later work brings him in some ways closer to Stan Brakhage, with whom he had at times vehemently disagreed.

2. Expanded Practice

The term 'expanded cinema' suggests multi-screen work, installation, elements of performance or the use of different technologies.

Le Grice has continually sought to explore the parameters of cinematic practice, but rather than the drive for 'synaesthesia' that Gene Youngblood proposed in *Expanded Cinema* (1970) he has focused on an investigation of the material and experiential properties of the medium.

From his earliest films Le Grice has been intent on accessing and manipulating every aspect of filmmaking. Pieces such as *Yes No Maybe Maybe Not* (1967), *Berlin Horse* and *Threshold* thoroughly explore optical printing: sequences are numerous repeated, they involve complicated superimposition and positive and negative images challenge each other for dominance. In the multi-screen versions of these films the composite imagery and juxtapositions are made even more complex.

In the essay *Real Time/Space* (1972) Le Grice proposed that, in terms of the characteristics of a work that an audience directly experienced, 'the primacy of the projection event' could not be underestimated. While suggesting that conventional projection situations had been stretched to their limits in works by David Crosswaite, Birgit and Wilhelm Hein, Mike Leggett and Tony Hill, Le Grice also exercised his own work in the context of exhibitions such as the Filmaktion shows in the early 1970s. In addition, many of his works from this period were made while working closely, and exhibiting with Gill Eatherly, Annabel Nicholson and William Raban.

Horror Film 1 is Le Grice's most dynamic approach to the projection event. While standing directly in front of the screen, with arms outstretched, his reach marks the dimensions of three overlapping projected colour fields. As he backs away, through the audience and the space between projectors and screen, his shadow becomes the figure of measurement. The nearer he gets to the three projectors the more prominent his three shadows become, and in each of the penumbra complicated patterns of colour mixing occur. Many of Le Grice's films incorporate colour mixing, layering and superimposition, but in *Horror Film* these characteristics evolve in the presence of the audience.

In his interest in technology beyond film, Le Grice's move to video has sustained the project of an expanded cinema. There are a number of similarities to the way in which he has used both film and video: the incisive qualities of his editing is retained; optical printing has found an analogy in processing digital imagery; and the seven pieces in *The Cyclops Cycle* (1998-2003) are a further investigation of the potential in multi-screen configurations. In addition, footage is often reworked and reused in both his film and video work. *Threshold*, for example, utilises the sentry guards that previously appeared in *Castle 2* (1968) and the concentric circles that were originally seen in *Your Lips* (1970). Amongst his videos, *Even The Cyclops Pays The Ferryman* (1998) incorporates material from *Chronos Fragmented* (1995) and it also includes fleeting imagery that references *Berlin Horse*. In working through combinations and configurations, and across technologies, Le Grice has always looked to avoid limiting factors.

3. Critical Cinema

If the general and overwhelming experience of cinema is one that represents coherent narrative space, then Le Grice's work tends to disavow the capacity for the transparency upon which cinema depends.

His exploration of printing and projection is 'anti-illusory' and illuminates many of the elements of cinema that usually remain hidden. For Peter Wollen, in 1975, Le Grice was at one pole of the 'two avant-gardes', that which took its lead not from the language

of cinema but the legacy of the avant-garde and modernism in the (other) visual arts. *After Manet* (1975) is a good example in this respect. The piece reconstructs the generic scene of the Déjeuner sur l'herbe but fractures the location into four screens of separate but simultaneous time-frames, each filmed by the four active protagonists.

Le Grice has often referred to the 'structural' strategies of filmmakers such as Kurt Kren, George Landow, Paul Sharits and Michael Snow. In the long takes of Warhol's films Le Grice also saw 'concrete duration' as a device that would seriously test audience passivity. The multi-projector piece *After Leonardo* (1973), which presents numerous reproduced and refilmed images of the Mona Lisa, clearly follows Warhol too. If *After Leonardo* questions the status of the image through proliferation, *White Field Duration* (1973) operates through extreme reduction. There are some faintly recognisable textures towards the end of the piece, but otherwise the only 'pictures' are images of scratches and the light reflected from a blank screen that's been refilmed.

In its 'anti-art' tropes of appropriation, cut-up and confrontation, *Castle 1* is Le Grice's most combative film. The soundtrack is a repetitive assortment of extracts from sources such as news reports, advertising slogans and organ music. The television and documentary film footage of industrial, political and military activities is similarly repetitive. While a shot of a light bulb also recurs, a real light bulb that hangs in front of the screen flashes on and off throughout the film, sporadically obliterating the projected image and illuminating the audience.

Le Grice approaches similar targets in the video *Beware* (1988), albeit in a more cautious and elliptical manner. A close-up shot of a fish on a kitchen table is intercut with footage from the windscreen of a car driving through pouring rain. In a bold typeface the words ROAD, RAIN and FISH intermittently flash up on the screen, followed later by- BEWARE ... MEDIA ... DISTRACTION ... DEMOCRATIC ... FASCISM.

Le Grice's video work is generally motivated by an attitude that is quite different to that which one would associate with *Castle 1* or indeed *Spot The Microdot* or *How To Screw The CIA* (1969). He is no longer interested in combative deconstruction or the effects of distanciation, and he has instead spoken about searching for popular appeal. But it isn't the populism of mainstream cinema or prime time television that Le Grice aspires to. His most recent work suggests a search for that role which a more personal, poetic and associative practice might play.

4. Video

Le Grice's decision in the mid 1980s to begin using video instead of film marked a distinct change in his approach.

Many of his early films used found footage and drew on printing techniques to develop complicated permutations from short sequences. Most of his videos draw on observations from a video diary.

He usually uses the directly recorded synch-sound that his handheld camcorder records, and though footage seems as if it has been tentatively shot, his material is subsequently worked up in the edit suite.

Sketches for a *Sensual Philosophy* (1984-8) is a compilation of videos that includes pieces as diverse as *Arbitrary Logic*, *Digital Still Life* and *Beware*; but many of the pieces evoke an experience of landscapes that are ethereal or mythological. The mountains and gorges in *Juniper* and *The Myths of Origin* have a sense of foreboding. *Et in Arcadia Ego* concludes on a reflection of the moon in a pond of lily pads.

Trials and Tribulations (1990-95) is a compilation of works that are by far the most concise that Le Grice has made. They are generally impressionistic and fragmentary. In *Seeing the Future* people beneath umbrellas in a Far Eastern marketplace are glimpsed through a solarised picture that quivers and intermittently freezes. In *Balcony Water Colour* the soundtrack of a cut-up Mediterranean thunderstorm accompanies the study of a pink flowering bougainvillea.

Chronos Fragmented begins with a self-portrait that the piece often returns to. It is followed by footage from a number of foreign travels and moments with family and friends. The autobiographical status of this work is not uncomplicated however. There are often sequences of intercutting, rapid editing and analytical passages that look at rhythmic and chromatic relationships. Largely Le Grice breaks shots down and disassembles recorded observations in favour of exploring chronology. In having catalogued hours of footage he is able to draw quite disparate material together, and his method of working with this archive takes advantage of potent collisions that are not necessarily obvious or expected.

Even the Cyclops Pays the Ferryman, the major episode of *The Cyclops Cycle*, is his most overtly symbolic work. A circular motif recurs on each of the three screens of the piece. These apertures centre compositions that are dense with colourful imagery variously associated with air, fire, earth or water. Woven within the complex soundtrack are field recordings, primal percussive rhythms and a fading piano melody played by his father. His father also appears in the video: having had only one-eye he is the eponymous Cyclops.

There are recurring themes and tendencies in Le Grice's work: an investigative and analytical approach, a brilliant use of colour, and structures that derive from musical form. All of Le Grice's works are also assertive, and whether it is in these videos or the expanded performance pieces he is very present within them. What makes the later videos distinct from the earlier films is that their content has primarily developed from a more personal point of view and perspective.

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