

Interview with Peter Gidal by Simon Payne, 2001

On anonymity, being lost, light, metaphor, writing and the difficulties involved when discussing materialist films.

SP: Somewhere in your book *Materialist Film* there's a statement about 'process' having to be 'repossessed for and in materialism'. It's a reference to the problems there might be for a film practice if and when the use of certain processes and procedures of filmmaking become formulaic or fetishised even. Beyond that there's also the possibility that processes might come to signal a particular filmmaker's approach or style over and above anything else. Something that you're very resistant to is the filmmaker or 'artist' apparently being the subject of their work. But is it possible that despite a filmmaker's aspiration for anonymity or even because of it, that their presence is still partly perceived as such?

PG: What can happen is that you recognise and that's the real problem certainly for me, (it's not only a problem though) but let's not use 'recognition', it's been used in other ways, it's an acknowledgement that you can tell who the film is by. And with many filmmakers or artists you can tell. That fits with what you're saying about the artist-as-subject. It's still sort of there somehow because otherwise it would be truly anonymous. But the whole thing about creating anonymity in the process of the work doesn't mean that creating anonymity is a true anonymity. And my whole thing was to create anonymity in the process of the work so that, by the time you're half way through a work let's say, you really lose the kind of subject overview, or even implicit, or even assumed teleology of where it could be going for that maker's consciousness as assumed by the viewer from what they *perceive* - that doesn't exist anymore. But even if that's true what I'm saying, (and that might be my own wish to see it that way) but even if it's true that it works like that, what you're saying is still there. It doesn't therefore obliterate that tenuous connection to the stylistics almost, (but you don't want to say 'stylistics' because that's like the *stylistics*, so it shouldn't be that) the *whatever it is*, the conglomerate of things that makes *that* work, somehow refer to the sensibility of the maker, which is terrible. But the link isn't the maker but the sensibility of that maker as transformed into works previous. It isn't the sensibility of the maker that you recognise. It's just the fact that the previous works led to similar results.

SP: But to what degree might we recognise say, the maker's political stance?

PG: In the work? That would be good, if it was a political stance, but how do you disinter that from the aesthetic look of something, which really is a bit of a problem? How do you disinter it from the look, the physicality?

SP: When we go and see a film of yours, we may well have previously seen other films by you, perhaps read your writings about your own and other films, and we may well understand a certain political impetus behind the work. So might it be that the aesthetic strategy of the film we're watching represents a certain motivation?

PG: No, because that would be representing a motivation and that would be like a teleology again. You know why I don't think it works that way ... theoretically what you're saying should warrant the answer – *yes* – because there's no reason to assume

that what you just asked should be answered by - *no* - because it seems theoretically coherent to say that makes sense – *the answer is yes* – it represents a strategy or an aesthetico-political strategy. But actually I think it's not *yes*, I think it's *no*. And the reason I think it's *no*, is because I think the way the films are made means that you're actually, pretty early on in the viewing, lost. And if you're actually lost in them, if you really don't find a temporal rhythm, if you're really not sure what you're seeing, and if you really are trying to make sense of the bits of representation or recognition that might be there but aren't, and in addition to that there's frustration through elements of repetition or temporal length, if you're actually lost you can't be at the same time and simultaneously, (it's almost a Proustian thing, which I never thought of before this second) you can't at the same time that you're lost and desperately through whatever motives, desirous motives, and nondesirous motives, technical, just being there, if you're unable because of that, to think back to a self of your own and your own consciousness and being and thoughts and ideas because you're so lost in that moment, then you also can't be coherent enough to remember a position of someone else's to have a relationship to, to be in relationship to as a viewer. So that when *quote - Peter Gidal who one knows through reading something or having seen a previous film - two minutes into No Night No Day*, I would have thought, is as lost to one as anything else in the world at that moment of perception being so impossible as to provide the viewer with no hold. If you really lose your hold, you lose your hold of your own recognition and your own history at that moment too. It actually means that you have to create the kind of work which really replaces or unplaces a person. Not just the way it's said in the deconstructionist argument of unplacing you from here to there, or to recognise this not that, but actually to go from where you are when you come in to actually be going to ... really to nowhere ... for a moment. Temporal and spatial ... I don't want to say emptiness because emptiness sounds like a filled Kafkaesque universe. But in a way it is like that. Now Kafka as well is clichéd and all that, but at the time when one reads the words one actually becomes disinterested at moments sometimes. Certainly if you read Kafka in German the words themselves are so, both material and evanescent that you can hardly get, (while he's describing someone who can barely get from one point of consciousness to another) you can barely get from one point to another in the physicality of trying to get from one word to another in the sentence, just in the choice of words and the way the sentence is constructed. And in a weird way you get lost, actually lost.

SP: Do you recognise that you're lost?

PG: No, you don't even recognise yourself being lost. No, it's not like a metadiscourse where you can say - *oh god this is really putting me in position of lost*. Which is presumably why it's as frustrating sometimes for some viewings, for whoever, for people who let's say *quote - love the work, people who hate the work, people who have never seen work like that, people who hate all experimental & avant-garde and can't stand any of it because its all that kind of stuff that they can't relate .. others who love it all and go but each time again*. I get the feeling that at that certain moment there is a kind of anonymous equaliser which puts even the most sympathetic viewings ... (which come from a history of being involved in the work, reading stuff, all that) ... that you're, and the maker is, actually at that moment in front of it as something that you don't know. And I have that all the time with my own writings too. I sit there sometimes and read sentences I've written, that I've worked on very hard to get them the way I want them, not to make them clear but certainly to

make them the way they should be. And then reading them four years later in a book (where it had been rewritten forty-two times 'til I finally got it right and I was happy with it, and all that) and I read it and still struggle with it, and find the subject is referring not to what I thought it was, and the verb is referring not to what I thought it was, and it all falls apart and I actually have to struggle to even put myself in a position where I can use some of that to make some sense of it, even if its not the sense that's in the sentence. And the same way that works for me, I'm assuming, works on readers, or on people who watch the films. Anyway that's the ideal reading.

SP: Ideal reading?

PG: I think ideal reading in the sense that ... ideal reading is a dangerous one too, but ideal reading in a sense of - that the thing that would make me the most pleased if I heard someone, (who I never met and didn't know about and didn't know what they thought) and they came out of *No Night No Day* and said three sentences to me on the way out ... 'ideal reading' would be if those three sentences were roughly similar to what I just said in the last five minutes to you. That's ideal because it would cohere with the way... that just means ideal. It means a thing you like to hear about your work because it means your work is functioning the way you hope it does. But that doesn't mean its *ideal*.

SP: But if you were to hear a reading of the work that didn't seem ideal? If someone was to tell you they liked a film because it looked or reminded them of this or that or they appreciate the light and its qualities say ...

PG: But that's ok. That's fair enough because I spend most of my time trying to deal with light so if I'm spending half the time at least, and all the work I've ever done has been to do with light and its absence, or darkness and *its* absence and the fact that, the thing I think I once wrote about *Room Film 1973* - light obliterates form as much as darkness. And if that's my real interest on that level, on that part of the area that interests me, like in *Guilt* (the Prague film) where there's almost ... You just can't even tell if it's light - is the grey whiteness light or dark, and then something flickers in and is it lighter or is it darker? It's that Wittgenstein problem: is a shadow darker than the ..., is the paper's shadow when painted, bluer ... or greyer ... or lighter - all that stuff. And also light, just the amazingness of light as to create form. It's almost a gnostic thing. Although I'm by no means interested in being gnostic. But the fact that light creates form, and the fact that it can disinter form equally and the fact that that doesn't mean that form doesn't exist in the real material world at the same time, and those two things are such an amazing contradiction. That interests me terribly much. And so therefore if that's what I've been aesthetically most involved in or equally involved in with two or three other things that I've been equally most involved in, in the work, and if someone resultantly says, 'the light, wow that was great' I think that's fine. It's sort of like that's what I do. I haven't answered really what I feel about reactions out of the blue that are to my mind completely disconnected from what I wish, let alone want, the work to be ... though I must say I am terribly happy just that people sit through the work and deal with it in their own way, even if they did say things totally at odds with my thoughts, that might also only be language, which as we know after all doesn't adequately represent anything.

SP: There's a comment by Michael Snow, about him seeing *Room Film 1973* and saying it was like, 'a blind man trying to see'.

PG: And his father was blind, which I only found out ten years later.

SP: How is it that this was reading of the film that you liked to encourage?

PG: A blind person *trying to see* is fine. Because of the grasping and the attempt to see. That I did like. Because that's exactly the way I felt about *Room Film 1973*. I thought it's about attempting to grasp, 'attempting but being unable', which is the way that I phrased it in those days, slightly more straightforwardly than after that. But attempting to grasp and being unable means the same thing in a way - as not ever having the hold of recognition.

SP: What I wondered about why you might not appreciate a comment like that is, well it just sounds to me like quite a neat metaphor.

PG: Yes, too neat you mean.

SP: Yes.

PG: And a metaphor god forbid. Bad on both counts. Both a metaphor and a description, which is I mean a horror of horrors, because description doesn't work and metaphor doesn't work, in my view, and suddenly they're both working at once and I'm saying - *well that's a good way to look at it*. But that's just a matter of... In a sense what you're leading to is - one should actually say nothing. Which is also an overriding and very adequate metaphor for some people's works. I mean that wouldn't get me out of the problem. That wouldn't solve it would it?

SP: This is a quote now, from *Materialist Film*: 'Contradictions are found when any film is spoken about afterwards. The contradictions occur because the social space in which such a film or anything exists is contradictory. Thus a film can be interpreted after the fact, in relation to those contradictions, but they are not necessarily produced by the work.' The interpretation of these contradictions is the realm of film theory and criticism I suppose. Your argument would perhaps be that the aim of a materialist film is the production of contradictions. But how much was your writing about structural/materialist film actually a process of making evident the contradictions in the work?

PG: I don't think it was at all. The writing became the writing. It's almost like the writing became a separate practice. It really did, in a weird way. Although at first, like all theory it comes out of ... it's never totally pure is it? It always has an ostensible object, even if it's an object in one's head. I mean even philosophers who are totally abstract have something in their head other than *completely* pure language. Because there ain't no such thing anyway, as we know. So therefore when writing there was always some attempt to link it, even though that's not possible, because you can't link two things, and you can't describe anything. So in that sense, though it's impossible, it was an attempt to link, to some degree, the use of language and some kind of aesthetico-philosophical reflection if you want, or theorisation is better, to the object. That writing did stem not out of nowhere in terms of questions of

representation, but particularly out of *Room Film '73* and questions of representation, or whatever. So in that sense although the writing came after, I claim it sort of in a sense became a separate, no it really did become a separate practice. I mean the writing sort of takes off on itself and you're sitting there and you're writing. But it still has a link. I don't understand how one says that properly. But there is a connection to an ostensible object which produces certain effects which you are trying in language to disinter to some degree, and in the process of that, (of language) finding that the materiality of language is as interred in problematics, and as hard to then disinter itself. At that point it suddenly gets further and further distanced from the initial ostensible object, which is the film object, and becomes about the ostensible new object, which is language.

SP: About the link between the film work and the writing though. Weren't *Materialist Film* and the preceding essays also, in a way trying to write about how materialist films work? You refer to the fact that the writing came after the filmmaking, but then once you've written the theory and definition of structural/materialist film that will always proceed the films that come next. Doesn't that produce certain problems in terms of making 'materialist' films?

PG: If it's no longer before the written ... if the film's after, the written, how could it be materialist, because it then could be only an enactment of a pre-given ...? That has never come up for me at all. I don't know why. It's not inhibitory at all. It's like maybe I'm so lost each time, that it's like each time it's new. Maybe one could then say that's a sign of ahistoricism or something... But each time in the making itself, just like writing but let's stick with the films, the filmmaking each time, a new film, is each time again *ahistorical*, which puts it into history. That act is *historical* which no one could ever ... I could never get that through a lot of people's heads. That doesn't mean that you believe in its mystifyingly, you know - *I'm in a vacuum floating above the world ahistoricism*. It just means that history is made by moments of ahistoricism, of forgetting, of not-ego. And sometimes a psychoanalytic has helped certain people understand that there is such a thing as a *nonhistorical*, *nonteleological*, *nonlogically* positivist way of going through the world, and the world going through itself, *and still* there is a history in retrospect. But history is always retrospective. And if history is always retrospective then there's nothing, in a sense, so problematic even about saying that the moment of making is always *ahistorical*. That's not to deny, you know, context, history, social politics, meaning, economic determinations, all that stuff, is it? The point about this point, is that it's in answer to your thing about, 'is it a problem'. It isn't because the making each time is ahistorical, and really memoryless, at that moment. So there's no problem in the sense of making and of *material engagement*.

SP: I want to ask you a question about what enjoyment of the films there might be for the viewer and your use of the term aesthetic as well. Sometimes your films are described as anti-aesthetic, perhaps because they're thought of as difficult or demanding. You talk about the aesthetics of materialist film in terms of processes of production that incorporate the viewer. But what is the significance of a viewer's reading of your films if theirs is a reaction where there is some kind of pleasure to be had in watching them?

PG: Which there is.

SP: There is ...

PG: There always is.

SP: But it is a kind of pleasure we can define?

PG: I don't know.

SP: Presumably if it were a pleasure that one could define, then it wouldn't be a materialist film that we were talking about.

PG: No, that's right, but that doesn't mean it isn't pleasurable to sit and watch.

SP: No.

PG: You're not gonna get me much further on that one.

SP: I'm not am I.

PG: No, because that would lead to a whole kind of attempt to put into words what it is that the pleasure of one of my films is for someone other than myself. But that's you not me. That would have to take someone to work out how to enunciate that in a way, which neither denies the films for what they are as materialist films, nor makes a mockery of language, let's say. That's up to the person who can use language in such a way as to do that. But I'm certainly not going to do that.

SP: It would be totally antithetical I suppose.

PG: Oh absolutely. I've never tried to do that. I use language a lot, but not for that. I don't think. I'm not going to go any further because I haven't got anything else to say and I wouldn't even want to say anything else.

SP: There's nothing else to say?

PG: That's right, no. Yes, I won't even quote the quote.

SP: Which quote?

PG: No, nothing, that's great.