

**Interview with Malcolm Le Grice by Simon Payne, 2001**

***On colour, expression, and provisionality in the recent works of Malcolm Le Grice.***

SP: What I want to discuss, or plot even, is the relationship between your earlier and later work. And I'd like to start by asking you about your use of colour.

In the film *Whitchurch Down* the coloured filters that saturate the shots of the landscape, automatically or almost immediately flatten any depth in the image. In *Digital Still Life* there is the transformation of the seemingly naturalistic colour of the fruit through all the pixels of digitally synthesised colours. And so questions seem to arise which challenge our perception of images and that which they represent, be it through the way that we accept certain colours as naturalistic or relate the flatness of the screen to the illusion of three-dimensional space. These are determined strategies and to some extent similar questions seem to be being addressed by these works.

MLG: You're right to pick up that question of the separation of the colour values from their normal naturalistic reproducing qualities. I think that there's not been a single work that I've made where I've been happy to have a high resolution representational colour image of something. I've always felt the need to be at a distance somehow or other from the naturalistic image, and that's both colour and high resolution. I'm interested in high and strong resolution now but not for its representational qualities. I'm also interested in high quality sound. I'm not interested in any accident of deterioration in the image which I don't want to be there. I'm not interested in high resolution as a further movement down the line of making the image more naturalistically engaging for the spectator. Everything has always resisted the spectator going inside the image as if the image was transparent, so I think colour has played some role in that again. One of the tactics was to separate the colour as an abstraction and reduce the image in one sense to its tonal values and to replace its tonal values with colour, which I think started with *Berlin Horse* and then went through quite a lot of things including *Digital Still Life*.

I've always seen colour as an abstractable element. I was always very interested in the way that, in Impressionism through Cezanne, Matisse and the Fauves, colour could become an abstractable element and I still think there is a way of thinking about colour which makes the experience of the visual, and certainly the time-based visual, have some correspondence with structures in music. Colour more than any other feature has the quality of being non-semiotic at the first level of experience, as music does. And certain tactics like separating colour from the image is, you could say, like separating the musical qualities from the text of a song. It's not the same thing but there's a kind of an equivalence of thinking there which opens up for film a similar territory – firstly an interest in the nature of colour before it becomes semiotic. It may stay experiential all the way, although even in music you have to form some kind of sub-referential semiotic in order to make structures of meaning; in terms of a rhythmic gestalt sort of thing. You still have to establish some kind of semiotic even if it's not a representational semiotic. But it also opens up a possibility of a dramaturgy, which is not the same as narrative. Because film is a time-based art and is experienced in time and in the main, unless you go in for gallery installation, it does proceed from one thing to another. It matters if you see the end before the beginning, or the beginning before the middle or whatever, it matters

in which order you see things because they're cumulative in some way. A structure and temporal sequence matters, without it necessarily being in a representational sense, and that interests me.

SP: In pieces such as *Arbitrary Logic* and also *Joseph's New Coat* there is a very close formal or musical relationship between synthesised colour and synthesised sound. In other pieces it seems to me that colour is used in terms of questioning representational imagery. But in other pieces of yours, especially for example the three-screen video piece *Even The Cyclops Pays The Ferryman*, there's another tendency. The combination of tone, colour and image with the effect of a more emotional outcome.

MLG: *Even The Cyclops Pays The Ferryman* is a very particular film. It's one of the few which I've made where in a sense I've taken on a territory that is sort of traditional; about life and death, about the ritualistic things of earth, air, fire and water. And it takes on a certain element of ritual and sort of primitive emotions. It has got an emotional content. It's unusual for me to take on something with emotional content, and there the colour does get attached as a component of handling those emotional questions, and even the tonal qualities are doing that. The section of black and white with the thunderstorm and this village dance that's going on is very black and white and it's about those sorts of ways in which people handled the major events of life, birth, marriage, death and procreation and the continuity of one generation to another. So there's a lot of things in that film which are fairly untypical. But it's not in any way a religious expressive work and I do think it's – it's not so much that it's engaged in a problematic about the medium and the production of the media – it's problematic regarding the question of its authoritativeness. The audience still have to construct their own space and their own meanings for those images. Most of the images are very personal images but there's no stress on their autobiographic aspect. The stress in the work is on much more cultural, ritual aspects. That's quite deliberate.

It's a work made about or around the death of my father who was one-eyed, the cyclops, but I'm much more interested in the way in which that fragment of something personal for me, that matters to me, (perhaps less than it might seem) becomes metaphorical, transforms itself into a metaphor. It's the transformation into metaphor that interests me, and the implication of that for each of us and our individual lives. They become our metaphors, if those symbols for us become our reference point and they work themselves through in dreams and daydreams and so on, but they belong to us. It's again still outside of the consumer assumption. I mean when you see death treated in the cinema it has no reality at all. It doesn't belong to us. It's some sort of game play fantasy but it doesn't belong to us and I'm interested in the way in which the spectator kind of owns what they see. You're right, going back to the colour question. I do use the colour to heighten that expressive content. I'm not sure that I think that colour has intrinsic expressive quality. When you see *Even The Cyclops* especially in the context of *Joseph's New Coat* where the colour is entirely separate from any representational element, the colour has a latency and it can be attached, or meanings can be attached to them, and so in some of those sequences (perhaps with the exception of the red around the fire and I might even question that) I think one might have been able to use other colours and still they would function to heighten the emotional value. It is their

separateness from their representational image which shifts them into the emotional field. It's because they're not attached to the representational function that they're able to take on another function.

SP: I don't quite see how it's colour taking on emotional content?

MLG: Well we attach our emotional response to the colour.

SP: But colour isn't separate from the form, which is the image.

MLG: Colour isn't separate from the form, but it is in a sense that it isn't fulfilling a naturalistic function in relationship to that form. So the two things are still functioning separately, the form and the colour are still as it were working in counterpoint to each other. And so both of them are subject to transformation. Both of them, as they are no longer playing the role of naturalistic representation, are free to do other things. In a sense they almost have to do other things, because we have to make sense of them. And if they're not there for their naturalistic function they must be there for something else.

SP: In re-reading that discussion between you and Stan Brakhage republished in *Experimental Cinema in the Digital Age* it seems significant that while at one time there was a great difference between your concerns and his, there now seems to be less of an obvious difference in a way. Your more recent videos work less in terms of an analytical framework or an investigation of problematics, and are of a more personal and expressive mode.

MLG: Their problematicness, I think, lies more in their tentativeness and their provisionality. As an artist I don't think I have a belief in the grand statement. Everything that I do now is seen as a provisional statement around fragments because I don't think I want to go beyond that provisionality but I'm interested in making art works which have a sort of sensory, sensual relationship. I think you're right, and I'm not sure quite what it's a product of. I think in one sense my work has become more personally expressive in recent years. I think it's become more, dare I say it, virtuoso, in the sense that I feel very much in control of the way of bringing images together and sequences together and bringing sound in. I don't feel there's any great struggle. I'm very much enjoying making work and I get a lot of pleasure from handling the work. So there's that bit. There's the other bit which, (I don't know whether this argument will hold up or not, but it's one that I've thought about) is the change in medium. Brakhage used Super-8 a lot; a highly personal medium. When I came to use Video-8, one of the things which appealed to me was that my life and practice were brought closer together and it was possible to have a much more sophisticated relationship with the images I'd recorded, which were a product of my life and a product of where I happened to be. So in a sense what you see in front of you is a product of your life, your life from a particular spot. And what you happen upon can become the raw material from which you make a sense that is more general. In a way this is less possible with 16mm film. Its clumsiness and the way you've got to keep loading is very intrusive. I don't mean just intrusive for the people in front of the camera; its very intrusive for you as the filmmaker and then also

very clumsy in terms of other processes whereby you've got to be very careful: it may not come out in the development; sprockets brake. All of that went out of the window when I started using video, and video with a high quality image. That opened up a different kind of content for me.

SP: Where does the space for the audience exist in a work that evidently references a sort of subjective expressive position?

MLG: There are big inconsistencies between one work and the next work. So the audience would find it difficult to feel as if they were following a single expressive aesthetic line, which is this thing I've been calling provisionality. When I make a work I don't believe I've got it right in a final sense, nor that I will ever get it right in a final sense because what you're doing is you're working in the art in the way that you work in life. You're trying to get things right, trying to make sense, but you never have the experience that you've got it right. Now the traditional expressive mode in any medium is to present it as if this is the artist's authority telling you this is the definitive statement that I'm making on this issue. I don't think any of my works are a definitive statement.

What I'd also suggest is that the space is there for the viewer to have an equal position in relation to interpreting and if necessary making the work. There's not any more that great distance such that the person who's sitting there looking at the work couldn't go out with their own video camera and make their own work. Previously with 16mm and our attachment with the cinema tradition, that gap was still quite big. Now there's nothing to stop virtually anybody in that audience getting hold of a video camera and making their own work. Everyone in the world now seems to be. Of course there's a certain privilege element to it, but fundamentally it's not the way that it was 20 years ago. We were driving towards a less exclusive position for the maker. That less exclusive position for the maker now exists. It's already much more equal, so the work's more conversational in that sense.

I also don't think that it's culturally the problem that it was 20 years ago when you had to continually counteract the culture. That's all been said. If you're climbing up a mountain you don't keep going back to the beginning, you keep going up or whatever. That's not a very good analogy, but it's really very dreary to keep pressing home something that is in a sense an ideological point, when it no longer has a strong artistic function. I feel that I have to make something which is a statement within the work that is of interest to the audience, but which is not taking them over, which is not saying that my experience as an individual is more special than yours. That's not what I hope the work is saying. I hope that the form and structure has within it always these little things which to some extent undermine me rather than the audience. It's undercutting the maker as having the authority, whereas in a sense it maybe undercut the medium as having authority in the past, maybe. I'm not sure and I've said that quickly, but there is a slight difference in it and I just don't think those issues are the same now as they were. And it gives me just a little bit more freedom to explore bits and pieces that I mightn't have explored previously, or to risk taking on something I might have thought wasn't acceptable before, because it's not going to get misinterpreted now as some sort of self-presenting romantic artist in the context and tradition of genius. It's not like that.

SP: There's much in recent work that seems to come out of the earlier video series entitled *Sketches For A Sensual Philosophy*.

MLG: Yes, and what I was interested in at that time was: how to we live better; how do we live in a way that's more ... that links pleasure to the way we live; what sort of philosophical position do we need to be able to be in touch with sensuality but not to kind of give it over to something that's commodified. So it was a kind of question of how we live.

SP: If we had time I'd ask you about the difference between the search for a sensual philosophy at the risk of Epicurean excess.

MLG: I don't see there's any point in being ascetic. It's not so much sensuality as not negating pleasure. I'm still ethical. Ethics is very important, but I think for me in that gap between the ethical and pleasure, that's the reference of the sensual universe, and as long as you're not doing anyone any harm, and as long as you're not exploiting the world's resources or anyone else, then in a certain sense the issue of pleasure isn't something that necessarily need be kept at a distance. I mean eating and drinking and sex and listening to music are things that delight us and I'm not going to reject things that delight us, because life is very, very short and there's probably not anything after it.