

After Le Grice: on inciting a new culture and infiltrating institutions

A conversation with Malcolm Le Grice, A Coruña, June 6 2019.

by Stefano Miraglia

Prelude

In May 2016 I was in London, at the BFI, to attend a special evening of performances by Malcolm Le Grice. An event so rare that I asked myself whether that would be my first and last chance to see Le Grice performing his iconic ***Horror Film 1*** (1971). The evening programme also comprised ***Threshold*** (1972) and ***After Leonardo*** (1973), of which you can watch below eighteen fragments:



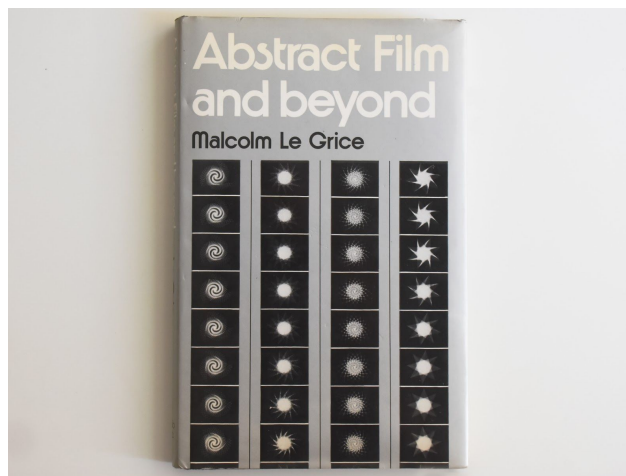
Three years later, the curators of **(S8) Mostra de Cinema Periférico** proved me wrong by inviting Le Grice (now aged 79) to A Coruña for a retrospective and a master class. The intensity of the retrospective last programme – composed of ***Castle 1*** (1966), ***Berlin Horse*** (1970), ***Threshold*** and ***Horror Film 1***, all presented in 16mm – moved the audience, some of them broke into tears. After performing ***Horror Film 1***, Le Grice said that it was maybe his last performance of the piece, adding *"I'm actually offering it to anyone else who wants to do it. There is a person in New Zealand, a woman, who does it, and I've given her all the materials for it, and she does it occasionally. She also does it with students"*. The emotions of that evening are still violently pulsating, and all I can say is: I don't want to believe you, Malcolm. You'll perform again, and we will all be grateful for that.

After his master class at Filmoteca de Galicia, I sat down with him for a short conversation on his first book, academia and more.

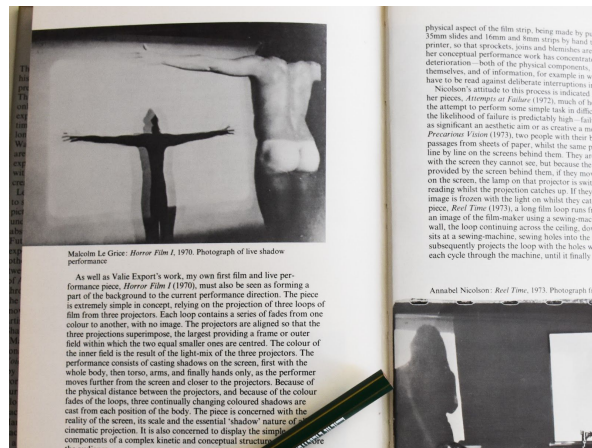
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I would like to start this conversation by engaging with memory. I have with me a copy of your 1977 book *Abstract Film and Beyond*. Can you tell me something about the time when you were writing this?

Well, it's interesting because I was working on it for at least two years, I think, but mostly the writing was done in six months. But then nearly a year and a half was spent in editing and getting the publication done. Now, goodness, how do I get my brain back to what was going on then? First of all, I wrote the book because there were things which I didn't know. So I had to do real research into the early period of experimental cinema, which was Léger and Man Ray, and even Oskar Fischinger and Hans Richter, all of that. And not just abstract: my understanding of abstract is not the same thing as non-figurative. My understanding of abstract is when you draw out the properties and separate the properties from each other: that's abstraction. If you take the colour from the form, so you got an orange or whatever, and you take the colour away, you've got orange and you've got the form. And those are two abstractions. So, once you've abstracted, instead of putting back orange you could put back green, or blue, or whatever. That, for me, is for example what Matisse does in the Fauves. So, for me abstraction is not just about films with no representation. I took the interpretation that you could take films that had photographic images and they could still be abstract. So, Léger's *Ballet mécanique*, for example, is abstract.



Then, there was a polemical question as well, although it didn't play so heavily in this. A very important polemic at that time was to establish the British and the European artists in the experimental cinema, when it was completely dominated by the American. Because the Americans had a lot of developed artists, but they also had all the publicity system, they had promotion. You know, I talked about the CIA this morning, but actually, the CIA was promoting artists, as a cultural promotion. It's not true that I was cynical, because actually a lot of people involved in the CIA liked the work, they actually appreciated it. From the politics of American culture it was very important to make an establishment of the European work in a way that could be compared with (and compete with) the American work, so that polemic is in there.



I've always felt that *Abstract Film and Beyond* was more of an artist book than an academic one – I don't think you like the word *academic*. I see it as an artist book because the research you were doing, the type of questioning, has the urge of a creator, of someone who wants to understand something, reach a perspective, in order to keep creating. You've also inserted yourself, your artistic practice, in the book: you write, briefly, about your work, one can see reproductions of film strips from *Little Dog for Roger* and *Berlin Horse*, and also a picture of you performing *Horror Film 1*. Because of this aspect of your book, I wonder if you've ever been questioned about research rigour, in an academic context.

Not at all. I mean, there wasn't the same academic establishment then, that there is now. Now, a lot of publication is done in universities to make sure that your research rating is high. And that you could get your money for research. So it's a gain now. When I wrote this I didn't think of it being in the university at all, for me it was in the public domain, it wasn't for the university. In fact, there really wasn't any experimental film in the British universities at all, at that time. Even the art colleges, many of them didn't even offer degrees, they didn't offer a Bachelor of Arts or a Master of Arts, a lot of the art colleges simply offered diplomas, so there was no establishment of a research culture within the universities. That changed, and I was part of the change, because when I became Dean of Faculty [at Harrow College in 1984, Ed.] and then Head of Research [at Central Saint Martins in 1997, Ed.] it was at a time when first of all we established that art could be a subject for a bachelor's degree, that it could have master's degrees and that it could have doctorates. That didn't exist. By the nineties we were establishing all of that, the BAs earlier, and I was part of this because the money for teaching was going down and down, so the only way of making up the difference of the money in the university context, was to build your research funding. I got very involved, I was on the national committee for how to define research in the arts, and that committee then decided on the equivalences for research. After that, the universities that had art departments were able to apply to the government for research funding. Of course that made a big difference to the teachers mainly, because the research money went to the teachers for their research activity. Some of it went to students for PhDs, but the main amount was going to the teachers. So that didn't exist at the time this book was written.

It was very naïve and very undeveloped. The awareness, the culture, was very undeveloped for experimental cinema and there was a sort of still uncertainty. The production money came from the British Film Institute or the Arts Council. The British Film Institute didn't have any understanding of experimental film at all, they brought me on to the committee of the production board of the British Film Institute [*from 1971 to 1975, Ed.*] and then I was the chair of the committee at the Arts Council, for artists' film and video [*from 1986 to 1990, Ed.*]. In that way, it was all about building up a basis for the culture.

You were creating tools for the future generations.

That's right, I don't think I'm making this up in retrospect. What I realised was that we needed a culture for this. We needed something more than individual artists trying to make films. We needed a culture. And obviously the focus for that culture, to start with, was the Arts Laboratory. It was more important than people realise. The Arts Laboratory in Drury Lane was the centre of counter-culture. But there was also the group who started the London Film-Makers' Co-op, they were all really *cinéastes*, not filmmakers, as far as I can recall, the only filmmaker in that group was Stephen Dwoskin. He was the only one, all the rest were all saying "*Wouldn't it be nice if we had a film culture?*". The London Film-Makers' Co-op was modelled completely on the New York's Film-Makers' Cooperative, but all the production idea came not from there, but from the Arts Laboratory.

In regard to building an experimental film culture, can you tell me more about the days at the Arts Laboratory?

It was me and David Curtis, we talked a lot about how to encourage and stimulate filmmaking, and David was very important in this. He dug up other artists and put on performances and various things in the Arts Lab. He was a very significant figure really, and he set a cinema up and really promoted experimental film. He and I were a lot together, it was he and I who really had the idea of a filmmakers' workshop. Then, he was always very supportive and he was working at the Arts Council as well. We were infiltrators.

You were injecting something new into the country's institutions - that were still not understanding what you were doing. Were you fully aware of the strategic possibilities given by this chance to infiltrate institutions like the BFI and the Arts Council?

There's something strange about the English: if somebody opposes, then what they try to do is not stop it but try to include it. I was a big, big critic, of the British Film Institute in relationship to contemporary and experimental cinema, so what did they do? They asked me to join the committee. So I'm infiltrating, and of course I don't say "*Oh no, I'm not going to go in that committee*". It's how the British at that time worked.

I would like to go back to *Abstract Film and Beyond*. Speaking in terms of research, of conceptual understanding: when you finished the book, do you recall of achieving something that you needed for your artistic practice?

The research and the thinking increased the intellectual content, the understanding, of what was going on. It is more analytical than it is theoretical, analysing what was going on in experimental film. I'm more of an analyst than I am a theorist. Peter Gidal is more of a theorist, I am a theorist, but mostly I'm looking at things and see *how does this work, what's going on with it, what's actually happening*.

Do you think that this analytical *modus operandi* is also reflected in your films?

I don't know, I think that's different. Again, Peter Gidal and I we've talked a lot over the years. One of the things I think we both agreed with is that none of us begin our work from theory, we always prefer a more spontaneous practice. Virtually none of the films that I made began from a theoretical position. The theory came as an analysis afterwards, by including what actually is now a very important essay, which is the *Real time/space* essay¹. But *Real time/space* did not lead the work, the work led the concept. And, certainly for my part, I've always trusted an unconscious instinct as a filmmaker. Writing the book gave a stronger rationale to the work, but it didn't actually change the work. I would go and do things like ***Little Dog for Roger*** for example: you could not begin that from theory, there's no way. When I look at it, I now know that there's a common set of aesthetic notions that come from ***Little Dog for Roger***, Birgit and Wilhelm Hein's ***Rohfilm*** and George Landow's ***Film in which there appear Sprocket Holes, Edge Lettering, Dirt Particles*** etc. When I made ***Little Dog for Roger*** I was not thinking of ***Rohfilm***, I was not thinking about George Landow, I was making ***Little Dog for Roger***, and I was making it in the same way I would make a painting. Only when I looked at it I would think "*What's happening here? What's the difference between this and other non-materialist film practices?*". It's still pretty much true that a lot of my filmmaking and videomaking comes out from the unconscious. I may have strategies of various sorts but [he pauses to think, Ed.]. There were a few films, the long feature-length films, which are ***Emily, Finnegans Chin*** and ***Black Bird Descending***², which address issues around narrative - they're works with a certain amount of theory-preceding-the-work, which was a bad thing. Fairly quickly after making them I said to myself: *you're on the wrong track*. You know, it was a big discussion going on at that time around deconstruction, narrative and feminism, with Laura Mulvey, who was a great friend of mine. Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen shot one of their films in my kitchen.

¹ Malcolm Le Grice, *Real time/space*, Art and Artists, December 1972, pp 39-43.

² *Emily - Third Party Speculation* (1979), *Finnegans Chin - Temporal Economy* (1981) and *Black Bird Descending: Tense Alignment* (1977).

The kitchen in *Riddles of the Sphinx*?

It's my kitchen in Harrow. There was a lot of that kind of cross-discussion and influence. And I was influenced by the debate about feminism, but in particular about the semiotics of cinema. But that was the only time, I think, in my filmmaking, where the theoretical got into the films ahead of the making. Also partly because I got a lot of money for those from Channel 4 and from the Arts Council, and you don't take as many risks, if you're working with a big budget. With a big budget you got a cameraman and a crew. I've looked at them recently, and they're not as bad as I think. But I realised that my earlier work was more in the right direction. So I then went back. That's when I started making short videos. I went back to saying "*OK, I'm going to make short films, I'm going to respond to the material, I'm not going to take on that kind of wrong ambition*".