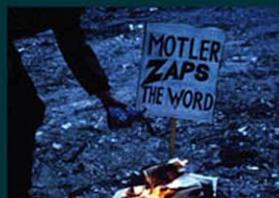


PATTI GAAL-HOLMES



A HISTORY OF 1970S EXPERIMENTAL FILM:

*Britain's Decade of Diversity*



# A History of 1970s Experimental Film

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# **A History of 1970s Experimental Film**

## **Britain's Decade of Diversity**

Patti Gaal-Holmes

*Independent Artist/filmmaker and Historian, UK*

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*For Marcus, Tarquin, Benjamin and Zsuzsa: for the wonderful adventures ... long may they continue ...*

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# Foreword

To experience experimental film in Britain in the 1970s meant – for that rare creature the serious devotee – regular visits to the London Filmmakers Co-operative (LFMC), in whatever obscure venue it might be housed: The New Arts Lab, Robert Street (1969–71); the Dairy (1971–5), a semi-abandoned factory building in Prince of Wales Crescent, where SPACE studios had secured temporary use of a short-life building from Camden Council; then The Piano Factory (1975–7) in Fitzroy Road (in fact what might have been the works canteen in the yard behind the factory), again a mix of artists’ studios and workspaces; and, finally, 42 Gloucester Avenue (1977–), another ex-industrial building formerly belonging to British Rail, reached by climbing a metal fire-escape-like staircase to a leaking space above an abandoned laundry (where presumably British Rail staff uniforms were washed). There were other venues in London where experimental film was occasionally shown – the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA), the National Film Theatre (NFT), the New Cinema Club – and towards the end of the decade new artist-led venues appeared, dedicated to video, installation and performance, such as 2B Butlers Wharf (1975–78), the ACME Gallery (1976–81) and the adopted spaces of London Video Arts (LVA), such as the Air Gallery (1977–). There were even a few galleries that showed the moving image from time to time – commercial galleries (perhaps more altruistic than truly commercial) such as The Lisson, Nigel Greenwood, Jack Wendler and Situation – and publicly funded ones such as Camden Arts Centre, the Whitechapel Gallery, and outside London the Arnolfini (Bristol), the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA; Oxford), the Bluecoat and Walker Galleries (Liverpool). All these – and many others – contributed to the rise in public awareness of the moving image as an artists’ medium during this decade, and their individual contributions have yet to be properly acknowledged. Yet, a listing of the regular once/twice-a-week screenings of the LFMC throughout this period surely provides the fullest account anywhere of the sheer diversity of the British contribution to the art form, which is the subject of Patti Gaal-Holmes’ invaluable study.

Spawned in the freewheeling 1960s international underground culture, by the early 1970s experimental film had taken root in the UK’s art schools, sharing their ethos of direct hands-on production. Whereas

the classic film or television studio was based on the specialist division of labour, the art school studio fostered individual authorship and the experimental exchange of views, processes and ideas. Some offered courses in new media, both in graphic design and fine art; others simply had ‘the Bolex in the cupboard’, which enterprising souls would discover and use. By the 1970s, art schools were less training grounds than places where new art was made directly. Much of the work of this period went far beyond the student film category; for example, John Smith’s *The Girl Chewing Gum* (1975), made at the Royal College of Art and still generating variations and riffs by new makers.

In another view, this whole period is often unfairly characterised as narrow, didactic and partisan – Smith providing a clear exception – reflecting a hardening of cultural and political attitudes more widely across the arts and society. Despite this, the LFMC screening programme was remarkably consistent in its diversity, responding to two vital yet unwritten objectives: (1) showcasing new work as it was made (a priority that benefited those running the place most immediately), and (2) honouring the repertory of avant-garde classics, the latter as much for the pragmatic reason that ‘that’s what will bring in the paying punters’, as for the more noble and far-sighted ‘because that’s how we build an audience for our work’. Patti’s study covers the period that begins when the LFMC was associated most closely with Structural Materialism (Peter Gidal’s formulation) and ends with the linked events on the South Bank – the exhibition ‘Film as Film’ (Hayward Gallery 1979) and the ‘Film London: 3rd International Avant-garde Festival’, (NFT 1979); one (Film as Film) attempting to construct a history of ‘where we have come from’ (which proved highly controversial, as Patti shows), and the other (Film London) celebrating the diversity of the moving image ‘now’. Between these poles, the LFMC exhibited an extraordinary variety of works, reflecting the curatorial interests and insights of many artists and programmers: Peter Gidal, Annabel Nicolson, Lis Rhodes, David Curtis, James Mackay, Deke Dusinberre, Anna Thew and others. Patti quotes Malcolm Le Grice’s call – made in *Studio International* in 1973 – for the Tate to commit to showing ‘an historical repertory of avant-garde film, regularly presented as an aspect of the Tate’s permanent art exhibition’. In its absence, the LFMC dutifully filled that gap.

In an age before home-video recording, before DVD publishing, before YouTube and Ubuweb, before Facebook and Twitter, you saw an artist’s work when it had its first screening – or you didn’t see it, and indeed might never see it again. The only forms of advance notice

of a screening were the roughly printed flyers you picked up at some sympathetic sister venue, or – if you were lucky – a *Time Out* or *City Limits* listing (usually written by the filmmaker, sometimes illuminating, often not). Even the early film works of B. S. Johnson, already a much discussed novelist in the 1960s – had just one showing at NFT (July 1967), before returning to long-term obscurity. The experimental film works of another novelist, W. S. Burroughs were first shown in his filmmaking partner Anthony Balch's Oxford Street cinema, entirely off the LFMC radar, though they soon entered distribution and became part of the repertory. Derek Jarman's first screenings of his Super-8 films took place in his studio and were attended only by close friends, until he showed them more publicly at the LFMC and ICA towards the end of the decade. No wonder the sense prevailing among groups such as the LFMC, LVA and Circles (1979–) was that you should organise your own screenings and support your peers by religious attendance. Film-viewing was an act of pilgrimage. Jarman would have admitted the same of his own studio screenings, even though he mocked the LFMC's air of seriousness.

That seriousness was in part illusory – there was plenty of fun at the LFMC (what was expanded cinema if not at least, in part, joyous and celebratory?) Where it existed, seriousness was associated with the critical writing of the period and its response to high (film) theory. Before the liberating impact of feminism and gender studies took hold at the end of the decade, before *Undercut* and *Independent Media* arrived to give more power to artists' own voices, before the 'image' returned (not that it ever went away, as Patti demonstrates), 'serious' debate in England was led by the British Film Institute's (BFI) journal, *Screen*. This remarkable development is so familiar now that it deserves a brief step back to focus on what was going on, especially as film and/or media studies were not then academic disciplines. At best they were add-ons to another new topic – 'popular culture', a subset of English and General Studies for 16–19-year-old further education students.

That all changed on a massive scale in the early 1970s when *Screen* – up until then a rather staid journal promoting film and media education, such as it was – was taken over by an ambitious group of Oxbridge graduates, '68-ers for whom culture was a zone of contestation and struggle. As the most popular medium of the twentieth century, commercialised and led by the USA, cinema had shaped the imagination of global mass audiences. Its mechanisms – industrial, psychological, ideological – demanded attention, with the 'new science' of structural analysis as a guiding model. Next, unknown or obscure critical alternatives

were translated into English (notably the 1920s Russian Formalists and Futurists with their deep commitment to montage cinema, and the radical Brechtian legacy of the 1930s freed from its official fetters). In addition, 'the news from Paris' – cultural critiques by Barthes, political critiques by Althusser – updated and expanded Marxism and modernism for English readers.

*Screen's* interest in the avant-garde was limited, but significant. Art schools had regularly shown avant-garde classics by Leger, Man Ray and other pioneers; and some, such as the Slade, had substantial screening programmes long before the universities targeted by *Screen*. The films actually made in this milieu were clearly radical and demanding, undermining every convention of film form and – in expanded cinema – breaking open its borders. Even the (accidental?) chime between 'structural film' and 'structuralist theory' added to the mix. Connections beckoned, so that by the mid- to late-1970s, *Screen* had published texts on the avant-garde by Peter Wollen, Peter Gidal, Stephen Heath, Deke Dusinberre, Annette Kuhn, A.L. Rees, Malcolm Le Grice, Ben Brewster, Paul Willemen and Paul Marris. Parallel to this, avant-garde film was featured in *Screen*/BFI events at the Edinburgh Film Festivals and many other conferences and gatherings.

The gains and losses of this brief and rare conjunction between advanced film theory and radical film practice are weighed and assessed in Patti's book. It is hard to think of a precedent to the brief, if intense, debates of the 1970s. Earlier writers such as Kracauer and Arnheim – sadly neglected in this era – took the avant-gardes of their time seriously, but found them wanting; too painterly, too many 'tricks'. The best US critics, from Parker Tyler to P. Adams Sitney and Annette Michelson, forged a new film aesthetic from the models of literature and poetics. *Screen* itself paid a price for its revaluation – sometimes overvaluation – of Hollywood films by finding in them ever more ingenious psychoanalytic depths. The rise of defiantly celebratory accounts of popular culture in the 1980s blunted the edge of this kind of critical theory, and mocked avant-garde aspirations (post-structural enthusiasms migrated elsewhere, to the fringes of an expansionist media culture). A decade later, ironically enough, 'artists' film' dominated the gallery world from the late '90s, led by new generations mostly wholly unaware of any predecessors.

As we look to perspectives on our recent cultural context and its histories, the 1970s avant-gardes prove to be illuminating, provocative and suitably contradictory. Critical discussion of the artists' work of this period is often over-assigned to Le Grice and Gidal; their voices were indeed important, but the film viewing culture was more catholic, as

was the writing in other journals: Simon Field on David Larcher and Dwoskin and Nicolson on films by conceptual artists in *Art & Artists*; John Du Cane on Larcher, Le Grice, EXPORT and others in *Time Out* (a listing magazine then capable of serious reviews), Tony Rayns on Jeff Keen, Kenneth Anger and others in his magazine *Cinema Rising*, and not least Nicolson's own magazine *Readings* (1977) which boldly proclaimed its interest in new music and performance art – subjects far beyond any supposed LFMC orthodoxy. The range of essays in the exhibition catalogues of the confusingly similarly titled 'Perspectives on British Avant Garde Film' (1977) and 'A Perspective on English Avant Film' (1978), was equally catholic. Video was a real force for change during this decade, following the inaugural fanfare of 'The Video Show' (Serpentine Gallery 1975), a show that was itself a proclamation of diversity that encompassed agitprop, community video and artists' works from the UK, USA and across Europe. Video brought its own critical agendas, and certainly helped to re-contextualise 'the image'. Subsequent accounts of developments in this diverse decade by Mike O'Pray, Nicky Hamlyn, Le Grice, Cate Elwes, Jackie Hatfield and our own published histories – have inevitably attached labels and constructed narratives that oversimplified the chaos and contradictions of the reality, in their attempt to impose some kind of narrative flow. Patti Gaal-Holmes' welcome addition to this field benefits enormously from being seen through the eyes of an artist from another generation, free of the blinkers of direct personal involvement at the time, so bringing fresh insights to the works. It challenges us to think again, and more importantly, to look again – to reconsider and re-value the works of these still underappreciated artists.

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## Image credits for book cover

Patti Gaal-Holmes:  
*just looking*, 2004, 8mm  
Courtesy of the artist

Guy Sherwin:

*Flight*, 1998, 16mm

Courtesy of the artist

Ben Rivers:

*Sørdal*, 2008, 16mm

Courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry Gallery

David Larcher:

*Monkey's Birthday*, 1975, 16mm

Courtesy of the artist

Derek Jarman:

*Journey to Avebury*, 1973, 8mm

Courtesy of James Mackay © LUMA Foundation

Tacita Dean:

*FILM*, 2011, 35mm film still (detail)

Courtesy of the artist, Frith Street Gallery, London and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/Paris

Jeff Keen:

*Rayday Film*, 1968–70 and 1976, 16mm

Courtesy of the artist's estate

Annabel Nicolson:

*Sweeping the Sea*, 1975, black-and-white photograph  
still from performance

Courtesy of the artist

John Akomfrah:

*The Unfinished Conversation*, 2012, video

Courtesy of the artist © Smoking Dogs Films 2012

# List of Abbreviations

ACGB	Arts Council Great Britain
BAFVSC	British Artists' Film and Video Study Collection
BFI	British Film Institute
BFIPB	British Film Institute Production Board
CND	Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament
FMOT	Film-makers on Tour
GLC	Greater London Council
ICA	Institute of Contemporary Art
IFA	Independent Filmmakers Association
LEA	London Electronic Arts
LFMC	London Filmmakers Co-operative
LVA	London Video Arts
NFT	National Film Theatre
RCA	Royal College of Art

# Introduction

This book acts as a form of historical reclamation, demonstrating the complex and rich diversity in 1970s British experimental filmmaking. The intention is to integrate films that have not received adequate recognition into the field alongside those that stand as accepted texts. While filmmakers such as Derek Jarman, Ian Breakwell, Jeff Keen, David Larcher, Margaret Tait and Peter Whitehead have been recognised in 1970s histories, this collectively extensive (image-rich and representational) body of work has been overshadowed by structural and material film experimentation taking place predominantly at the London Filmmakers Co-operative (LFMC). I also advocate for the recognition of films by Jane Arden and B. S. Johnson – albeit perhaps awkwardly situated within this history – as these are sufficiently innovative and experimental to warrant inclusion. This re-evaluation of the history, situating more personal, poetic or expressive forms of filmmaking *alongside* the already well-established history of formal, structural/material film, brings unique insights to the fore and importantly recognises the richness and diversity in 1970s experimentation. While LFMC histories are already fairly well-documented, they also, in my mind, problematically focus too much on 1970s filmmakers/theoreticians Peter Gidal and Malcolm Le Grice’s structural/material(ist) theoretical positions, thereby also belying the rich seam of material produced at, and affiliated to, the LFMC during the decade. The particular ‘culprit’ which I argue is responsible for numerous biased historical accounts is the term embodying the myth that a ‘*return to image*’ (that is personal, visionary and expressive forms of filmmaking) occurred at the *end* of the 1970s, whereas in fact these types of filmmaking existed *throughout* the decade. ‘Image’ never disappeared in the 1970s, and thus made no return.