

STRUCTURAL INTEGRITY

Noam M. Elcott on Peter Gidal and the LFMC

Shoot Shoot Shoot: The First Decade of the London Film-Makers' Co-operative 1966–76, edited by Mark Webber. London: LUX, 2016. 288 pages.

Flare Out: Aesthetics 1966–2016, by Peter Gidal; edited by Mark Webber and Peter Gidal. London: The Visible Press, 2016. 288 pages.

IT WAS NOT a shot heard round the world. It was more like a birth announcement, couched in playfully telegraphic syntax and supposedly cabled to Jonas Mekas, a founder of the New York Film-Makers' Cooperative, in 1966: LONDON FILM-MAKERS COOP ABOUT TO BE LEGALLY ESTABLISHED STOP PURPOSE TO SHOOT SHOOT SHOOT SHOOT SHOOT STOP NEVER STOP . . . IF YOU WANT TO MAKE FILMS . . . COME ALL YOU NEEDS IS EYES IN THE BEGINNING STOP. This legendary telegram (likely never sent) is one of many primary documents reproduced alongside ample oral histories in a volume aptly titled *Shoot Shoot Shoot: The First Decade of the London Film-Makers' Co-operative 1966–76*. A second book, *Flare Out: Aesthetics 1966–2016*, an anthology of texts by leading Co-op filmmaker and theorist Peter Gidal, likewise marks—in complementary and competing fashion—the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the London Film-Makers' Co-op.

If the LFMC began as the European gateway for American experimental film, it quickly grew into a unique experiment in the integration of film production, distribution, and exhibition, and the films it gave rise to presented a materialist—in the medium-specific and Marxist senses of the term—alternative to American structural film (which, despite its formal rigors, was perceived by the London collective to be steeped in Romanticism). The Co-op survived until 1997, when it merged with London Electronic Arts to form LUX, and it is now enjoying renewed attention from diverse artistic, cinematic, and historical perspectives.

This renaissance can be attributed, in part, to the efforts of the indefatigable Mark Webber, who, in addition to organizing last year's exhibition about the work of the LFMC at Tate Britain in London, edited both volumes under consideration here. *Shoot Shoot Shoot* is an institutional history assembled through letters, film programs, posters, magazine covers, notebooks, snapshots, film stills, filmstrips, legal documents, and, above all, oral histories compiled by Webber in the early aughts.

The works produced at the London Film-Makers' Co-operative forced a confrontation with media infrastructure, its politics and poetics.



Left: Peter Gidal building the London Film-Makers' Co-operative projection booth at the Dairy, London, 1971. Photo: Malcolm Le Grice. Above: Malcolm Le Grice in the London Film-Makers' Co-operative cinema at the Dairy, London, ca. early 1970s. Photo: Roger Hammond.

It is replete with anecdotes about financial distress, unheated spaces, arduous physical labor, accidents (happy and otherwise), petty grievances, and acts of kindness. Here, the LFMC seems much like other co-ops from the 1960s and '70s; its singular aesthetic, not to mention its philosophy, emerges largely between the lines—or, more precisely, in the divisions it limns. The book is organized around the five locations—from a bookstore basement to arts labs to derelict factories—sequentially occupied by the Co-op between 1966 and 1976. *Shoot Shoot Shoot* eschews familiar art- and film-historical bailiwicks such as movement, style, and school to argue (albeit implicitly) that the Co-op's identity was a product of its infrastructure. Its core aesthetic and ethic developed from its operations: The LFMC was the sole film co-op to house production, distribution, and exhibition under one roof. No other organization provided filmmakers the facilities necessary for each stage in the realization of an experimental film, from conception to projection. The cultural techniques of shooting, developing, printing, editing, projecting, and viewing soon became the essential subject matter of the films shot, developed, printed, edited, projected, and viewed at the Co-op.

Often accused of evincing warmed-over medium specificity, films and expanded-cinema performances such as Malcolm Le Grice's *Little Dog for Roger* (1967), Lis Rhodes's *Dresden Dynamo* (1971), William Raban's *2'45"* (1972), and Annabel Nicolson's *Reel Time* (1973) extended the purview of modernist reflexivity to include the whole of production and reception. Raban's *2'45"*, for example, films its own screening over multiple nights, inscribing today's context (screening and audience) as the content for tomorrow's audience, like nesting dolls that subsume their owner. The production-reception loop was not always so taut. And not all LFMC films reflect on the institution and its operations. But this avant-garde experiment in vertical integration was the defining feature of the Co-op's first decade, and it is detailed in all its beauty and bathos in *Shoot Shoot Shoot*.

The Co-op's infrastructure—not least the floor plans that integrated workshops and cinemas; the secondhand Debie step printer that encouraged experimental printing; the wide white walls and mattresses (in lieu of chairs) that facilitated double projections and expanded-cinema events; and the gift economy and rotating leadership that dictated the operations of the film program and filmmakers' workshop—also undergirded the theoretical writings that emerged from the LFMC: essays, reviews, and books that came to be far better known than the institution and films that inspired them.

Preeminent among this body of writing were the essays of Peter Gidal. *Flare Out* is, surprisingly, the first anthology of his short-form literary output—he has also

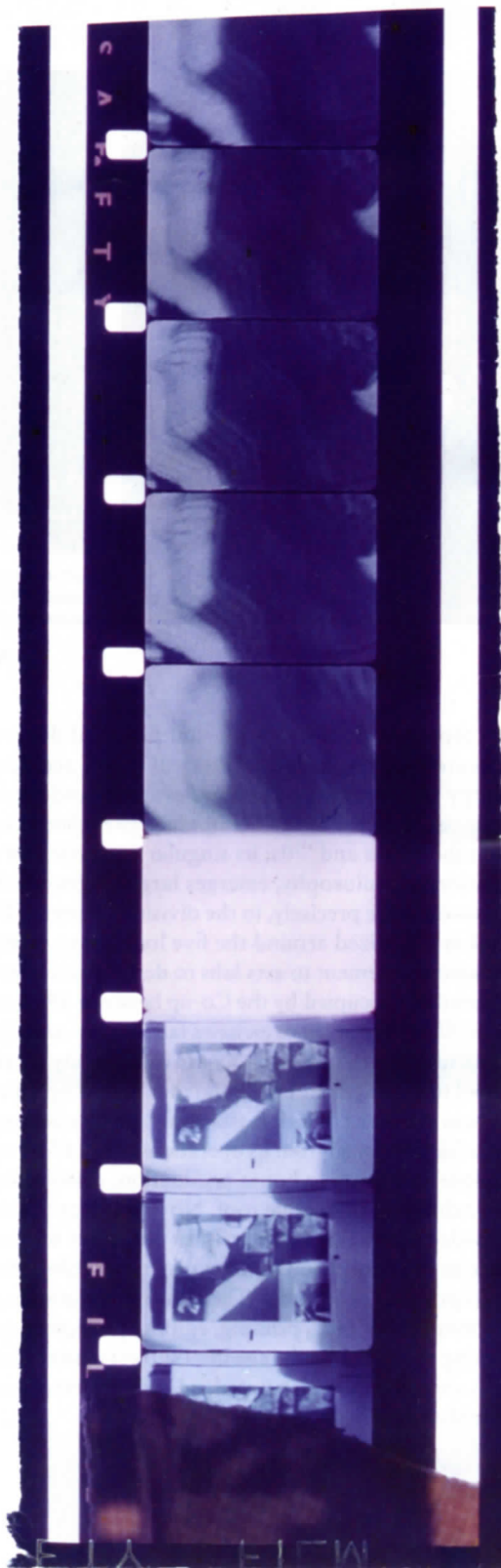
authored many monographs dating back decades—and it covers more than forty years and a startlingly wide range of topics: Film theory, leftist politics, Andy Warhol, Samuel Beckett, Thérèse Oulton, and Gerhard Richter loom especially large; discussion of his own films is largely absent. *Flare Out: Aesthetics* is just that: a book of aesthetics. Its vital connection to the LFMC—the sole subject of *Shoot Shoot Shoot*—remains, for the most part, implicit.

Nevertheless, one central idea unites these divergent projects and is latent in both volumes—namely, infra-structuralism (to use the coy coinage of media theorist John Durham Peters): “Its fascination is for the basic, the boring, the mundane, and all the mischievous work done behind the scenes. It is a doctrine of environments and small differences, of strait gates and the needle’s eye, of things not understood that stand under our worlds.” If a single concept makes the LFMC seem essential to our moment, it is this one.

The Co-op’s infrastructuralist theory was dominated by two filmmaker-theorists: Le Grice and Gidal. Astutely aware that avant-garde film required critical support to reach a wide public—and acutely cognizant of the apathy with which *Screen*, *Artforum*, and other journals generally sympathetic to American structural film greeted LFMC films—the two sought to publicize, historicize, and theorize the work of the Co-op through Gidal’s weekly previews of LFMC screenings in *Time Out*, Le Grice’s long-running column for *Studio International*, essays in a range of journals, and several book-length studies. Le Grice’s insightful essays were anthologized in 2001 as *Experimental Cinema in the Digital Age*. Gidal’s monographs remain widely available yet underutilized, particularly his 1971 volume on Warhol, the first to treat the artist’s paintings and films on equal terms. *Flare Out* includes writings both essential and tangential to the Co-op’s central mission.

On offer is an overriding political aesthetic summed up best in the opening lines of Gidal’s most famous essay, “Theory and Definition of Structural/Materialist Film” (1975): “Structural/Materialist film attempts to be non-illusionist.” For Gidal, this meant that “the process of the film’s making deals with devices that result in demystification or attempted demystification of the film process.” Only the proper film infrastructure could yield films that reveal the infrastructure of film. Accordingly, the principal technology of the LFMC was not the camera, the printer, or the projector, but rather “the ‘machine’ called the Co-op, that *apparatus* of experimental film (the terms fits precisely),” as Gidal wrote in a later essay. The LFMC understood as machine, apparatus, *dispositif*, or simply infrastructure is what weds these complementary volumes.

Historically, the marshaling of the LFMC as an apparatus entailed the dogmatic rejection of illusionism. And yet the limitations and equivocations of anti-illusionist theory constitute one thread that links the two publications, specifically via the papers delivered by Le Grice, Gidal, and Peter Wollen at a seminar held at the LFMC



Peter Gidal, *Film Print*, 1973–74, 16 mm, color, silent, 40 minutes.

in February 1976. Le Grice’s text is one of the final entries in *Shoot Shoot Shoot*. Gidal’s is among the first in *Flare Out*. (Wollen’s talk does not survive.) The conversation took place against the backdrop of Gidal’s “Theory and Definition of Structural/Materialist Film” and Wollen’s “The Two Avant-Gardes,” both published in *Studio International* a few months prior. Rather than reassert their radical anti-illusionism, Gidal and Le Grice cede ground to Wollen’s insistence that illusionism and narrative, on the one hand, and abstraction and reflexive (Greenbergian) modernism, on the other, cannot be opposed absolutely. Le Grice concludes his paper with an open question as to “whether any aspect of illusion or sequential (narrational) structure can be made compatible with the anti-illusionist materialist aesthetic which the earlier period of my work has helped to establish almost to the level of a dogma.”

Le Grice’s query was largely answered in the late 1970s and ’80s, as the LFMC and other experimental film groups turned to narrative. Wollen won. But as we revisit the first decade of the LFMC and its structural/materialist films, what is most salient is not the dogmatic rejection of illusionism and narrative in favor of materiality and process, a position asserted already in such landmark exhibitions as 1969’s “Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials” at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York; rather, the works produced at the LFMC forced a confrontation with the politics and poetics of media infrastructure—a confrontation that is ever more urgently needed.

A final point demands attention. In tone and substance, many of the essays in *Flare Out* testify to Gidal’s “ultra-left” politics, polemics that were widely criticized and eventually abandoned by most LFMC adherents for their seemingly intractable dogmatism. And yet many of his arguments seem all too timely today. What was once dismissed as a puritanical asceticism at odds with rudimentary aesthetic pleasure seems sensible now, even compulsory, given our ascendant patriarchal politics. Consider the opening lines of “Against Sexual Representation in Film” (1984): “The vehement determination in patriarchy to reproduce the oppression of women in the interests of male power exists in all social practices. . . . The reproduction of male power in *representation* is one instance.” Infamously, Gidal advocated for a moratorium on representations of women on-screen. Perhaps we consider ourselves too enlightened to brook, or the feminist project too far advanced to warrant, such blunt statements—even in the months dominated by the venom of Trump, the vitriol of Bernie Bros, and the broadcast and social media that enabled both. But Gidal’s unfashionably radical feminism deserves more than a second look in the current climate of fashionably virulent patriarchy. Clearly, work the LFMC began half a century ago remains to be done. □

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