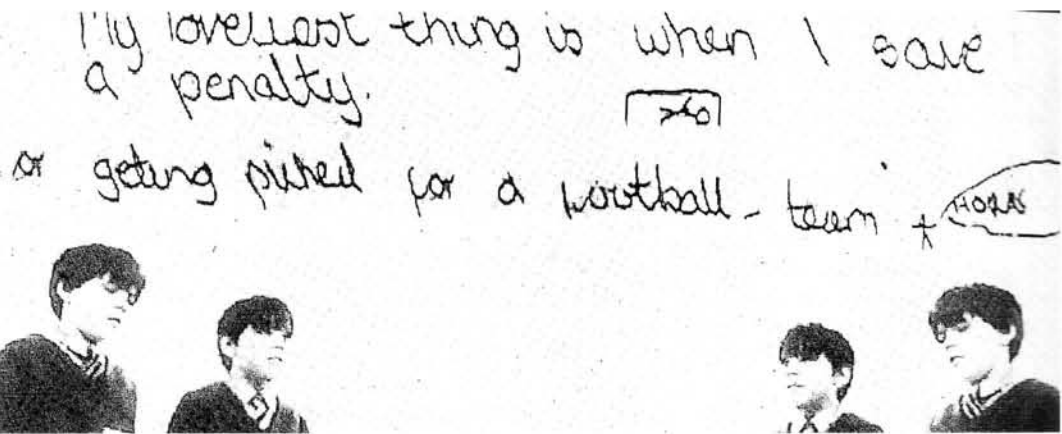


JACKIE HATFIELD

THE SUBJECT IN EXPANDED CINEMA



Chris Hales,
The Loveliest Things
1997

I have identified in previous writing, that there is now a need for a major critical review of the *practices* of experimental film and video to examine the significance of technological experiment, experiment with narrative (dramaturgy), and performance (of the artist or the audience) within the cinematic event, all hitherto under-explored in the written histories. Paradigms tested with expanded cinema', have largely fallen outside the orthodoxies of the available critical histories of the experimental film and video canons with their single-screen bias. Gene Youngblood's *Expanded Cinema*, Thorold Dickinson's *A Discovery of Cinema* and aspects of Malcolm Le Grice's *Experimental Cinema in the Digital Age*, are exceptions.² However, now is an opportune time to address this gap since current (post film) forms of expanded cinema open up possibilities for new hypotheses.

The ascendancy of any one theory, history, or lineage of experimental film and video is due to the scarcity of writing relative to other art forms, however overlooked critical histories *can* be addressed through a review of the practice. Despite emphasis on language, abstraction and medium in the modernist sense, many artists working with film or video have explored technology, narrative, image, spectacle, and foregrounded the artist or audience as subjects or participants in the work, or as part of the process or material. In the live event, the subject is the existential material of the artwork – the physical embodiment of its narrative history with the incumbent chaos and pandemonium of the spontaneous. In relation to expanded cinema

in particular, discourse focussed on the subject as central to the mechanism of the cinematic is a history waiting to be written, although there are theoretical precedents worth considering.

In *Apparatus, Cinematic Apparatus, Selected Writings* Jean-Louis Baudry deliberated on the language of the cinema mechanism, with emphasis on the 'subject' (audience) and their relationship with the projection in the dark space. With his Plato's 'Cave'³ analogy he argues, "describes [...] the cinematographic apparatus and the spectator's place in relation to it."⁴ Primarily Baudry was interested in the 'psychical' relationship of the audience with the 'image', and asked the question whether it was "real-effect or impression of reality?"⁵ Within the projected environment, the audience, he stated, are 'prisoners'⁶ of the projection 'shackled to the screen, tied'⁷. And he argued that the film projection is a representation of a kind of reality, not unlike painting and theatre ('dry-runs'⁸) in the human need for representation of 'psychical life'⁹, i.e. "the cinematographic projection is reminiscent of dream"¹⁰ an '*impression of reality*'¹¹ (my italics) a 'reproduction of the real'¹². Subsequent to cinema's technical invention it was predominantly the issue of reproduction of reality that was emphasised in analytical theory rather than the relationship between the subject and the image and the potential of the cinema apparatus as a reflection of 'states'. In contrast to this Baudry argued that cinematic signifiers and apparatus should not be exclusively oriented around the 'technique and content', i.e. "character-

istics of the image, depth of field, off-screen space, shot, single-shot-sequence, montage, etc."¹³ but should include the "position of the subject facing the image."¹⁴ In his analysis Baudry concentrated on the *subject*, the audience, and stated that cinema "is indeed a simulation of a condition of the subject, a position of the subject, a subject and not of reality,"¹⁵ and included the spectator as a major element within the definition of cinema apparatus. Similarly Roland Barthes described the audience as being anonymous, and the screen "visible and yet unnoticed, the dancing cone which drills through the darkness of the theater like a laser beam."¹⁶ Without distraction and unlike a painting or a video monitor, which can be seen in daylight, within the cinematic experience the audience is focussed upon the image and experience a kind of 'cinematographic hypnosis'.¹⁷ As Baudry argued in 'Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus' the "ideological mechanism at work in the cinema seems thus to be concentrated in the relationship between the camera and the subject."¹⁸

Baudry's analysis is rooted within the dominant or mainstream cinema, and as such is an imperfect start point for an experimental cinema tangential to the industrial institution. However, although it is true to say that many avant-garde film and video makers were historically

opposed to the mainstream; simply put, whether in the black space of the cinema or gallery space as cinema, the optical instrument of recording (the camera) with that of its reception (the projector), incorporate the cinema mechanisms as described by Baudry. Moreover, although there is not enough space here to fully interrogate this argument, expanded cinema often implicitly tests Baudry's theories specifically in terms of the subjects' relationship with the screen, camera and image, and here lies a fundamental difference between expanded cinema and the single-screen. Richard Abel positioned the transition to 'narrative cinema' in France around 1904-1907, the point at which cinema's industrialisation by Pathe Freres and Gaumont, and the consumer market and mass dissemination of films had created a financial necessity to standardise narrative structure. Abel has articulated various theoretical positions regarding the transition from 'primitive' to 'classical narrative cinema', but fundamentally, it was necessary for the industry to find economic solutions for the distribution and mass consumption of their product. Importantly, he identified that industrialisation led to a shift away from 'the exhibitor' as a 'film narrator' during the screenings, "this turn to narrative assumed a significant change in spectatorship in that the earlier collective audience that had experienced a physi-



Jackie Hatfield
*Distressing the
Surface*,
1999

cal, performative space now turned into isolated spectators, each of which was bound up with the imaginary representations or diegesis of a constructed screen space."¹⁹ Expanded moving-image in essence works against the industrial confines of single screen linear space. It is an expansion of the material in a physical sense and creates a sensorial experience or situation for audience participation similar to the 'the cinema of attractions' and pre-industrial 'primitive' cinema.

In expanded cinema (film, video or post film), the subject is often central to the screen or projection, as artist protagonist or spectator as protagonist, intervening directly with the cinematic apparatus. For example, with Michael Snow's *Two Sides to Every Story* (1974), the audience are confronted with two perspectives of the same situation on either side of one screen, the projectors taking the position of the camera so the audience are required to move either side of the hanging screen to see the image. Snow is playing with filmic reality, and the audience's perception of recorded space, time and the constructed event relative to the staging of it. Anthony McCall's *Line Describing a Cone* (1973) is almost physically tangible, the projector light transformed into solid shape through the black filmstrip. The image of a circle is gradually drawn on the screen (it takes 30 minutes and starts from a pin-prick and ends with a full circle) and with the addition of a smoke machine; slowly becomes a light cone. The image becomes a three dimensional object and gradually takes over the space between the projector and the screen, the viewer is an integral aspect of the cinema mechanism, mesmerised by the "dancing cone which drills through the darkness of the theater like

a laser beam," Barthes words made manifest.

In the 1960s artists such as Carolee Schneeman, (*Ghost Rev* (1965) *Night Crawlers* (1967)²⁰, *Snows* (1967)); Claes Oldenberg (*Moveyhouse* 1965); Robert Whitman (*Night Time Sky* (1965)), used film and performance to blur the boundaries between artist and audience, artwork and audience. The proscenium arch was extended out from the stage to create 'happenings' or situations that included the audience as part of the event, and film was opened up to new forms. With *Snows* Schneeman used 16mm and 8mm film, slides, sound, light and microphones as part of the enactment, the audience being required to crawl through walls of padded foam to get into the event, and once seated randomly triggered motorised 16mm projectors to move the image 360 degrees across the performance space. In 1967 she declared "I've always thought that I'm creating a sensory arena....we must deal directly with the audience itself as performers."²¹ and "My long range project is completely activated by the spectators. I'll sensitize the audience through a performance situation in which detailed film images are set off by the audience as they move into the performance environment. They'll activate overlapping timed projectors. If they want a film to be shown again they'll have to figure out what they did to make it start in the first place."²² Schneeman was clearly anticipating a technology that would enable the audience to trigger film/moving image projections and sequences of images, and for the artist to create an *active* environment, although this kind of fluid audience interaction with large scale moving images did not materialise until around 1990.²³ In 1966 during the *Experiments in Art and Technology, Nine Evenings Event at*

Carolee Schneeman
Snow, 1967





David Hall,
*Progressive
Recession*,
1975

the 69th Regiment Armory in New York, performance and technological experiment were fundamental to some extraordinary works from artists including Alex Hay, Robert Whitman, and Robert Rauschenberg. Rauschenberg's *Open Score* involved a tennis match with the amplified sound reverberating from micro phoned racquets; haunting singing by Simone Forti; and a group of five hundred participants projected on huge screens hanging above the audience, who were given a list of simple gestures to perform and each one introduced themselves stating 'I am'.

With *Zen For Film* (1964) Nam June Paik stood in the light of the projector, the clear film-strip gradually amassing dust and scratches, the artist a physical presence outside the projected image, real body relative to the acetate and the screen. In *Reel Time* (1973) Annabel Nicolson performed with a sewing machine and projector and "projected film of a sewing machine in operation, which was simultaneously sewn into a real sewing machine and re-projected."²⁴ Nicolson questioned the boundaries between audience and artwork, "the wooden camera and projector will also be used as elements in a situation where viewers and performers/film stars will be the same."²⁵ Deke Dusinberre described *Horror Film* (1971) where Malcolm LeGrice projected 'three coloured loops of film on the same screen as successively smaller images inside one another, then stands up to the screen toward the projectors, his shadow enlarges and he can 'contain' the screens in (the shadow of) his arms, and ultimately, in his hands'.²⁶ Also with the multiple-screened *Threshold* (1972)

Le Grice physically moves the projectors around creating colour cadences across the screen.²⁷ In *Materialfilme* (1976-77) Birgit and Wilhelm Hein combined found footage and hand painted film in multiple projections moving the projector around during the screening; and Marilyn Halford's *Hands Knees and Boompso Daisy* (1974) revolved around physical intervention by the artist.

Often questioning the materiality of film, illusion, representation, and linearity, the works I have described also centred on the experiential with the artist or audience as protagonists and *corporeal* material. In expanded cinema the real fleshy body of the subject i.e. the performative 'self', is often essential to the work, and emphasises a physical interaction with body, screen, and the image. Drawing from the histories of expanded cinema, video, theatre, performance, and 'primitive' cinema, current participatory cinema²⁸ extends the performative aspect of expanded cinema and closed-circuit video by including the active participation of the audience with technological experiment of digital systems. For example in Grahame Weinbren's *Frames* (1999) a three-channel computer controlled interactive cinema installation the audience effect a structural change in the montage sequences by their physical interaction with picture 'frames' suspended in front of the projection. Similarly with Chris Hales' *One-Person Touchscreen Cinema Showing Fourteen Interactive Movies* (1995-2000), the audience touches the screen, and the emphasis is shifted from artist as performer (i.e. subject in the work) to audience as performers.²⁹ In my own work, *Distressing the Surface*, a two-channel computer

controlled cinematic spectacle, the spectator is directly implicated in their own act of voyeurism; by touching the sexualised bodies on the screen, within a non-linear and abstracted structure (in the narrative sense), their participation is both indulged and frustrated. With these cinematic works the audience is absorbed into a synaesthetic and physical space and affect the montage or the structuring of the images – the collage. The process is both in its making *and* reception, the technology and the subject are its material.

My own interest lies with the live subject intervening with multi-screened moving image; the materialisation of the physical meeting with the psychological; and the body as disruptor of conventional (linear and narrative) imagistic codes. The expanded cinematic practices of the digital era, which engage the viewer physically, provide a basis from which to develop theories around performance, narrative (a-temporality, collage, illusion, dramaturgy) and technological experiment. Its influences include (with their divergent critical discourses) expanded film of the 1960s and 70s, and conceptual participatory video of the 1970s, although the length of this essay does not allow for the discussion of electronic closed circuit and multi-channel work.³⁰ An understanding of new forms of expanded cinema depends on a confrontation with some of the dogmatic theoretical debates of its past, and this might involve alternative interpretations of the material debates of late modernism, and consideration of critical histories more attributable to mainstream cinema than the avant-garde. The subject being one aspect of its diverse and complex history, there is enormous scope for a review of the historical positions to re-evaluate various overlooked aspects of this pioneering work.

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1. Expanded cinema describes synaesthetic cinematic spectacle whereby the notions of conventional film language (i.e. dramaturgy, narrative, structure, technology) are extended outside the *single*-screen space.

2. I am referring here to books rather than journals and acknowledge publications such as 'Peter Weibel's Expanded Cinema', *Film 11*, Nov 1969, and *XScreen Catalogue*, Phaidon, 1971

3. Jean Louis Baudry, 'The Apparatus' in *Apparatus, Cinematic Apparatus, Selected Writings*, ed. Theresa Hak Cha, Tanam Press, New York, 1981, p. 41; also in *Camera Obscura* 1.1, 1979, pp. 104-126.

4. *ibid.*, p. 44.

5. *ibid.*, p. 41.

6. *ibid.*, p. 44.

7. *ibid.*, p. 46.

8. *ibid.*, p. 50.

9. *ibid.*, p. 42.

10. *ibid.*, p. 51.

11. *ibid.*, p. 48.

12. *ibid.*, p. 55.

13. *ibid.*, pp. 55-56.

14. *ibid.*, pp. 55-56.

15. *ibid.*, p. 60.

16. Roland Barthes, 'Upon Leaving the Movie Theater' in *Apparatus, Cinematic Apparatus, Selected Writings*, ed. Theresa Hak Cha, Tanam Press New York, 1981, p. 2.

17. *ibid.*, p. 3.

18. Jean-Louis Baudry, 'The Apparatus' in *Apparatus, Cinematic Apparatus, Selected Writings*, ed. Theresa Hak Cha, Tanam Press New York, 1981, p. 34.

19. *ibid.*, p. 104.

20. This was staged at 'Expo' 1967 in Montreal and *Illinois Central* in 1968 involved film projection and live performers. Other work included *Kitch's Last Meal*, 1978, a two screen projection and variable lengths super 8.

Schneeman currently makes installation for example *Mortal Coils* 1994.

21. Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema*, Studio Vista, London, 1970, pp. 369 – 370.

22. *ibid.*, p. 366.

23. Gary Hill's interactive projections i.e. *Tall Ships*, 1992, and his video installations with computer controlled switching *Suspension of Disbelief (for Marine)*, 1991-92

24. Nicky Hamlyn, 'Structuralist Traces', Ed. Michael O'Pray, *The British Avant-Garde Film 1926-1995*, University of Luton Press, Luton, p. 231.

25. Describing a work in progress during 'Perspectives on British Avant-Garde Film' in 1977 From the Catalogue of 'Perspectives on British Avant-Garde Film', Hayward Gallery, 1977

26. Description of LeGrice's *Horror Film* by Deke Dusinberre 'St George In the Forest: The English Avant-Garde' 'Afterimage', 'Perspectives on English Independent Cinema', Summer 1976, p. 8. Note that Dusinberre's description was incorrect as LeGrice has never performed this work facing the projectors, but rather facing the screens with his back to the projectors.

27. LeGrice re-performed *Threshold* during the Experiments in Moving Image show at the 'Old' Cinema at the University of Westminster, January 25th-31st 2004; and *Horror Film* during X-Screen Film Installation and Actions in the 1960s and 1970s at MUMOK in Vienna, December 13 2003 – February 29th 2004.

28. Definitions of the cinematic in a digital era, and the complexities of freeing cinema from film, will involve a detailed and extended argument.

29. For an extensive anthology of some current expanded cinematic work, see Eds. Jeffrey Shaw and Peter Weibel, *Future Cinema*, a publication by ZKM Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe for the exhibition Future Cinema, ZKM Karlsruhe and MIT Massachusetts, 2003

30. This would include analysis of works such as: *Progressive Recession*, (1975), David Hall; *Yet Another Triangle*, (1975), David Critchley, Stuart Marshall, Keith Frake; *Violin Power*, Steina Vasulka; *Telemetric Drawings* (1976), and *EEG Video Telemetry Environment* (1975), Nina Sobel; *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy* (1972), *Organic Honey's Vertical Roll*, (1972), Joan Jonas. etc.