

“Shorts on shortage”: notes for a talk

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“Shortages” – a word I’ve possibly never written but which in the UK has now become part of our everyday vocabulary: shortages of nurses, of medicines, food shortages... the doom that awaits us.

I have to say that I really like the play between “shorts” and “shortages,” the relationship implied by their linguistic proximity, one containing the other.

The description of this event defines “shortage” as “lack, want or scarcity.”

Scarcity is the model that drives the art market, whereby an artist’s work is made rare in order to gain value. A model based on uniqueness and that doesn’t work for the moving image. A model in fact with terrible consequences for the moving image: at an age when all of the cinema can finally be available, all at once, and everywhere (and not only in metropolitan centres like Paris, New York and London), the art market makes certain films very hard to see.

And thus they become forgotten.

Distributors of artists’ moving image such as LUX (and our sister organisations in other countries including Vtape and CFMDC in Canada, EAI in NY, sixpack in Austria, etc) work in a diametrically opposed logic. We believe that “value” (to stick to the art market’s mercantile logic) is not created through shortage but through wider exposure. And that the more a film is shown, discussed, written about – the greater visibility an artist has – the more such “value” is increased.

But I don’t particularly want to talk about shortage as a value-creating strategy, nor about distribution in opposition with that idea of shortage.

I’m more interested in that relationship between short and shortage...

And so I started looking at some of the shortest films in our collection...

There are a number of works in the LUX archive that emphasize their shortness. There’s for instance Guy Sherwin’s “Short Film Series” – 3 minute films, the length of a film roll, black and white and silent, which in their simplicity might recall the primitive Lumière films but which also emphasize the material qualities of film, as well as, and very explicitly, the relationship between material and time.

There’s the “Hang on a Minute” series by Lis Rhodes and Joanna Davis. A playful

jeu de mots (word association) between this sense of “watch out, pay attention to this” and the fact that the films are actually one minute long (which is not even true, most are slightly longer). These one-minute films were made to be broadcast in television and the title is perhaps a reference to the ongoing BBC radio programme “Just a Minute,” a panel show that has been going since the late 1960s and in which the panelists need to be able to talk for sixty seconds on a given subject, “without hesitation, repetition or deviation.” The *Hang on a Minute* films tackle with serious subjects, from domestic abuse to nuclear disarmament.

When looking at short films in the collection (especially the very short ones, around a minute long), there’s a sense of great economy, of how much can be done with so little, how much can be told/said/IMPLIED in such a short amount of time. But also of how time can be “extended” through filmic means so that one minute can contain so much information.

A tension between material scarcity (or shortage) and wealth of meaning which is hardly surprising as 1 minute is after all 1440 frames.

One film that manages to condense a lot of meaning in an extremely short length, and thus seems to extend each frame, each second to eternity is Peter Gidal’s *Assumption* (1997), which we will now watch in full.



Assumption is a very short film but is dense in meaning, dense in images, voices and text. It's a film for Mary Pat Leece, founder of Four Corner films who had then just died.

In a text from the following year "Against Metaphor," Gidal writes: "we know since Zeno of the infinite divisibility of the moment. Ever shorter *longeurs*."

Gidal writes about the relationship between time and recognition and therefore between time and metaphor.

Dividing time, dissecting the image to the limit.

But also an impossibility to grasp, to identify.

Resistance of representation, throughout Gidal's film work is an ideological resistance. It's also a way of making the spectator aware of the image itself, and of its materiality, its grain, and therefore its production as a film image, and with that of the labour process behind it.

Whereas many of his films are very long, out of focus, abstract, the resistance of identification/representation operating in the expansion of time, here it's the shortage itself that is preventing identification and recognition.

Peter Gidal is one of the "ideological architects" of the "structural/materialist" film project in the early years of the London Film-Maker's Co-op (the early 1970s). The project of the LFMC itself can be seen as a response to a shortage of sorts, by providing filmmakers access to the means of production.

The Co-op operated on precarious circumstances for 30 years, from run-down building to the next, the emphasis on materiality driven at the same time by the Marxist politics of the early years and by the material shortages they operated in.

The Co-op had to face another form of shortage: shortage of critical attention, which they did in the same DIY spirit.

Aware of the lack of critical attention given to the LFMC and its related film activity, Malcolm Le Grice and Peter Gidal began to regularly contribute to art magazines and journals, later expanding their theories in book length form. Writing was part of their creative practice, distinct from but inextricably linked to their film work.

In his essay "Technology and Ideology in/through/and Avant-Garde Film: An Instance" (1980), Peter Gidal delineates that relationship between the material (technological) conditions of the Co-op and their ideological position.

Or in the context of this seminar, the relationship between one form of shortage

and another (material shortage – ie short – and shortage of representation, lack of identification, lack of spectacle, resistance)

Here is an excerpt from Peter Gidal's "Technology and Ideology in/through/and Avant-Garde Film: An Instance" :

"So work had to be done by those involved and work was done: building a cinema, projecting, cleaning, writing about films. Thus already, based on the material necessity for an audience, a critical context had to be developed. If you want an audience to see your films (no matter how that *want* is defined), you need to write about the works *in advance*. So certain critical work was done in those – and other – interests, further elaborating the 'machine' called the Co-op, that *apparatus* of experimental film (the term fits precisely). It now became impossible to separate the critical context in which the films were seen and presented from the further work and the retrospective thought about the works and the capacities of specific machines, together with the capacities of the lm-makers, were inseparable from the capacities of the social space to allow, to a certain degree, a certain social practice to take place. This social practice, namely Co-op films in London, was thus processed through and into and from an ideological space and a theoretical ideology soon to be recognised as such.

[...]

"For us, the project was one of the inseparability of the technology from the ideological and the inseparability of both from representations/ constructings. By inseparability one is referring here not to any singularity or univocality or to some amorphous conglomerate but to integrated practices which gure on, in and through one another."

To conclude and return to the shortage of representation, another excerpt. This time from a short text by British artist and filmmaker John Smith in which he recalls his days as Gidal's student at the RCA :

"In terms of representational imagery, very little was delivered over the course of the black and white (or should I say grey and grey?) film's ten minutes – just an occasional tiny and indistinct aeroplane (more a sign than an image) jittering uncertainly into the restless hand-held frame, together with one or two peripheral architectural details, minimal clues that nevertheless left me in no doubt that the empty rectangle I was looking at was a representation of an overcast sky. But it was precisely this absence that made me aware of just how much was going on. The film was alive with grain, dust, processing marks and scratches that fought for attention against the grey little world that was trying to

break through. But they didn't win, and neither did the world; a dialectic was created that persisted throughout the film. I perceived both material and representation as a rectangle filled with grain and dirt turned time and time again into a murky sky whenever the plane lurched briefly into shot. Concentrating intensely on the 'empty' frame, I started to see faces in the clouds, or was it in the grain? Was that a cloud? Was that the sun coming out or was it the lens aperture being opened up? Was the sky fluctuating in brightness or had the film been unevenly processed? Watching *Clouds* made me aware that the most minimal of works could also be the most captivating and rewarding. I shall be eternally grateful to Peter Gidal for depriving me of so much."

References :

Peter Gidal. *Flare Out: Aesthetics 1966-2016*, London: The Visible Press, 2016.

John Smith, "John Smith on Peter Gidal", LUX blog, April 2016:
<https://lux.org.uk/writing/john-smith-peter-gidal>

Assumption (Peter Gidal, 1997)

Hang on a Minute (Lis Rhodes & Jo Davis, 1983-85)

Short Film Series (Guy Sherwin, 1976-1979)