

ANGLIA RUSKIN UNIVERSITY

FACULTY OF ARTS, HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL
SCIENCES

MEDIA BLACKOUT: THE POLITICAL AESTHETICS OF
STRUCTURAL/MATERIALIST FILM AND THE TERMS OF A
CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL MOVING IMAGE PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

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This practice-based PhD project formulates a new inquiry into the political aesthetics of Structural/materialist film in order to establish the terms and issues that are relevant to contemporary political moving image practices. The project does this through revisiting Structural/materialist film theory, examining selected films in their historical context, and thinking through making. The project has two components: practice work and theoretical work. The practice work is comprised of three digital videos and an expanded cinema piece: *Media Blackout I* (2016), *Media Blackout II* (2017), *Media Blackout III* (2018) and *A+* (2018-20). All of these are concerned with the question of how to politicise aesthetics. They are an attempt to develop a critical experimental practice, without negating the political image/content as in Structural/materialist films and theory. The thesis investigates Peter Gidal's Structural/materialist film theory and its nexus with Marxist political and aesthetic theory in light of the question of what constitutes a contemporary political practice. The critique is mapped out in the context of Marxist political and aesthetic discourse, drawing on key texts by Louis Althusser, Theodor Adorno and Fredric Jameson. The thesis offers critical analysis of several key films by Peter Gidal, William Raban and Lis Rhodes, from the 1970s to more recent work; as well as a critical examination of aesthetic strategies of Forensic Architecture, and how their work functions in the context of contemporary art. The works produced through the course of this research also are concerned with the problems that are discussed in the critiques of these key examples. A substantial portion of the thesis is a critical evaluation and contextualization of the creative outputs of the research: *Media Blackout Series* and *A+*.

Key words: Experimental Cinema - Political Aesthetics – Materialist art practice - Structural/materialist film.

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Introduction

This practice-based research project presents my attempt at establishing the aesthetic terms of a critical film and video practice. Inspired by Marx's renowned notion that "philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, is to *change* it" (1999:123) the purpose of this research is to formulate an experimental practice that goes beyond describing and critiquing the world as is, and which challenges the dominant structures of relations between the viewer and the aesthetic object in aesthetic experience. Thus, the focus of my attention is on the political implications of film's construction and particularly on the relationship between the film/video work and its viewer. While these issues are explored by many artist filmmakers throughout the history of the avant-garde film and video, my interest lies particularly with Peter Gidal's theorization because of the ways in which Gidal underpins his theory in Marxist materialist terms and because his theorisation takes place in the context of the London Filmmakers' Co-op. These two aspects of Gidal's film theory are most significant for my practice as Marxist theory and the experimental film and expanded cinema events from 1970s have consistently influenced my work and the way I think about film. I relate to the political aesthetics that are formed by critical, theoretical, or materialist explorations of the medium implemented in that decade.

This research is practice-based for several reasons. Firstly, my research questions were generated by the problems I encountered in practice as a maker. Secondly, the theoretical arguments I present here are developed through practice: namely making new works that are reflexive and investigative of their mode of operation. Hence, the research questions were not only generated by practice, but also tested and addressed by practice. Some of these questions also concern politically problematic filmic constructions in artists' practices in the context of contemporary art. Therefore, the thesis includes close critical analyses of other artists' films and videos. My critical engagement with each film not only highly informs my practice and thought process but also helps me reflect on and contextualise my own work. Accordingly, there are two outcomes in two spheres: the creative work and the written thesis. The video works submitted with this thesis together with the documentation of an expanded cinema piece should be viewed before reading this text.

Methodology

The principal method that pertains to the body of work I produced during this research project is minimalist in its aesthetics and economy. Two out of four pieces are made without a camera and the other two are made with a single photograph each. All the works address my concern with establishing a political aesthetic that reflects the specificities of the medium (its limitations, processes and extensions), and at the same time attempts to address a political issue or event. These are three experimental digital videos and an expanded cinema piece:

Media Blackout Series:

Media Blackout I 2016 (4', B&W, silent, two version: single and multiple screens)

Media Blackout II 2017 (live performance, variable duration)

Media Blackout III 2018 (3', colour, silent, loop monitor installation)

A+ (4'30" colour, sound, 2018-2020)

The Media Blackout series has two reference points. Firstly, it refers to actual media blackouts. The year I began this research, the phrase 'media blackout' was ubiquitous in Turkey, as the government regularly issued official media blackout orders during a period of civil unrest and suicide attacks. This coincided with me thinking about Gidal's Structural/materialist film project and his persistent negation of images (which I discuss in Chapter Two), and problems associated with representation, visibility, and the ways in which language has been utilised in experimental film and video (discussed in Chapters Three & Four). Consequently, the pieces that make up the series, *Media Blackout I*, *II*, and *III* are poised against the image, and specifically against the moving image, which offers the most realistic but paradoxically also the most illusionistic representation of reality.

Media Blackout I is a black and white single-screen/multichannel, computer-generated digital video, in which the phrase 'MEDIA BLACKOUT' is spelled letter by letter in rapid succession, growing in size, from invisibly small to illegibly large (Fig. 1). As the letters grow bigger, they gradually become abstracted shapes, pulsing out of the screen until the black dominates the screen completely. With this piece I wanted to use words, not as a vehicle of a given meaning for the viewer to consume, but by turning the words against representation. And I wanted to see what

other meanings can be generated when language as a system of representation is challenged by way of dismantling the words and letters into abstracted shapes.

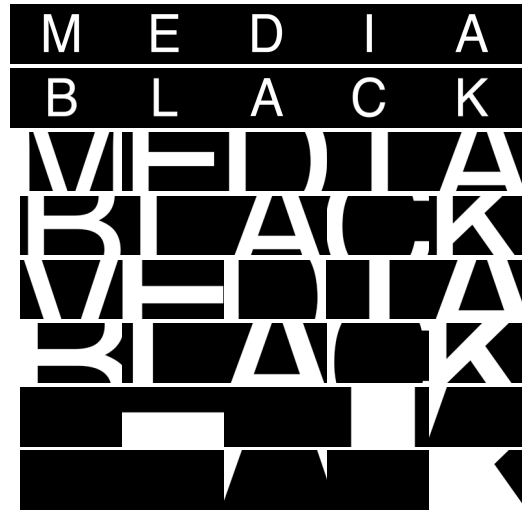


Fig. 1. *Media Blackout I* (2016, Deniz Johns)

Media Blackout II is an expanded cinema piece that dispenses with all the filmmaking apparatuses, and which is performed in a dark space in which a lit lightbulb hangs from the ceiling several meters away from a mirror. I swing the lightbulb towards the mirror in measured intervals until it breaks smashing against the mirror, ending in a complete blackout. *Media Blackout II* is a further investigation of the degree to which I could remove the mechanically reproduced image and still construct a cinematic experience in which a critique of representation to some degree constitutes a political aesthetic. The swinging lightbulb can be read as an aggressive and even violent act against vision, like in *Media Blackout I*, but what happens during the live event is self-effacing (Fig. 2 & 3).



Fig. 2. *Media Blackout II* (2017, Deniz Johns) Stuttgart



Fig. 3. *Media Blackout II* (2017, Deniz Johns) London

Media Blackout III is a digital video that is constructed out of 2402 screenshots created on a smartphone, and is screened on a flat screen monitor in portrait orientation to resemble a smartphone screen. Each image is produced by taking a screenshot of the previous version, starting with the 'original' digital photograph of my reflection in a bathroom mirror. Within 15 seconds, the image degenerates to a point where it is unrecognisable due to image data compression. This piece can be read as a critique of the avalanche of selfies proliferating across digital media, as well as the contagion of self-importance and narcissism in social and personal digital platforms, however for me and for this project it has another significance. It is about subjectivity and identity, a feminist concern and contradiction between wanting to be visible and at the same time refusing to be the seen as an object. It is also about drawing attention away from the subject (the individual) towards the process and the material (Fig. 4). Most significantly for me is that the process of making this video helped me think through questions of identity and Gidal's concept and a method of "de-subjectivisation" (discussed in detail in Chapters Two and Five).

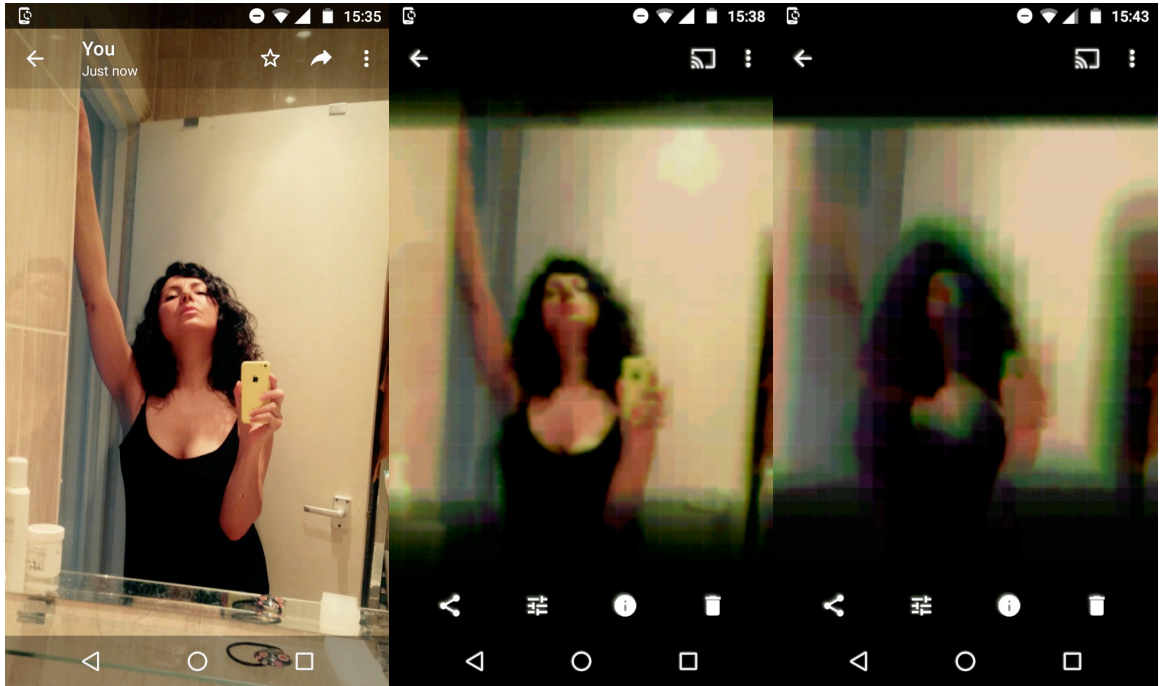


Fig. 4. Media Blackout III (2018, Deniz Johns)

In contrast to *Media Blackout I and III*, *A+* starts with abstraction and gradually reveals a figurative image. It takes a well know media image from the Gezi protests: a photograph of a grey-haired woman hurling a small stone with a catapult, and combines it with a sound of protesters from another protest in Turkey. While the image is revealed fully through zooming out, the sound of protestors, chanting a slogan, is gradually cut down. Then the video complicates the sound and image further by playing them in reverse and layered, following a predetermined process. *A+* explores the possibilities of problematising the images and language that are explicitly political (Fig. 5). One of the key methods for the Media Blackout series was to develop a process of negation of image that methodically ends with black; the duration of each piece is based on the time that process takes. In the final video, *A+*, I try a different method: instead of negating the image, the video gradually reveals a photograph while withholding part of the sound, which is then played backwards, so that the slogan is obliterated, giving way to other, unfixed meanings conveyed by the sound of the protestors.



Fig. 5. *A+* (2018-2020, Deniz Johns)

Film criticism has been my principal method in writing this thesis. My criticism directly corresponds to the research question and concerns I have addressed in my own work. Hence, the critical analysis of these works has a crucial function in this project. However, this project approaches theory and practice in a circular relationship, like an infinite spiralling spring. And I imagine the moment of theorising and practice as stops on that spiral, each stop containing traces of the other. Throughout this project the processes of critical thinking, theorizing and making have been in constant communication, informing and influencing each other. Correspondingly, when I began working on the *Media Blackout* series, right at the beginning of the research period some theorisation had already taken place. In retrospect, my point of departure was heavily influenced by Gidal's Structural/materialist film theory, certain aspects of which I challenge in Chapter Two of this thesis. While making *Media Blackout III* highly influenced my critique of Gidal's aesthetic strategies, the decisions involved in making *A+* are informed by that critique. This dialectical relationship between theory and practice constitutes the overall method for production of knowledge in this research project.

Historical context: Artistic and personal

The context of my practice-based research has two major influences. The first is to do with my personal history, which carries a lot of social threads within itself, considering the collective trauma of living through the pre- and post-coup era in Turkey, and then being an immigrant in England for most of my adult life. The second is the critical theory and practice of experimental film in 1970s Britain that thrived in the London Filmmakers' Co-op (LFMC), and continued to be influential in later years. Although the LFMC ceased in late 1990s, and even though I primarily

work with video, I see my practice and the conceptual framework of my research project situated in relation to this historical context. When I was first introduced to LFMC and the experimental film theory and practice that grew on its grounds, I was struck with a new form of political film art that I had not seen before; a kind of political work where the content often has nothing to do with actual political issues. Nevertheless, I perceived the films as radical and critical because they changed the way I watched, saw, and understood cinema. That was because they often revealed certain aspects of filmmaking that is hidden or mystified in mainstream narrative cinema. These aspects varied from narrative structure to editing or the visibility of film material such as grains, light sensitivity or frames.

The first instance was when I dropped in at a film screening and talk by John Smith, organised by Simon Payne in 2007, during the first year of my film studies undergraduate degree. Possibly because of my previous degree in philology, linguistics, and literature (before I read film in England, I had already gained a degree in Turkey), I immediately felt an affinity with Smith's concerns about language and his mistrust of narrative and representation. The next filmmaker to visit our university to present his films was William Raban. In contrast to Smith's work, some of Raban's films that I saw for the first time avoided language altogether, but created their own audio-visual language via various cinematic devices, such as montage, double exposure or time-lapse. Through these events, a door opened up for me to explore the LFMC as an organization, and certain cohorts, especially of the 1970s. I was most struck with how some of the films I saw—Lis Rhodes' *Light Reading* being one of them—interrogated their own making, structure, and relationship to the viewer. To me, these films were radical, in the sense that they were not trying to change the viewer's opinion on this or that matter, but change the viewer, by attempting to change the ways they relate to films by problematizing the conventions they are likely to be accustomed to, towards a more critical viewing experience and consciousness. This, to me, represented a very firm political position. As A.L. Rees states in his posthumous book *Fields of View* (2020), the LMFC "had a distinctly social aspiration, built on self-help socialism and anti-Vietnam War sentiment" (2020: 33), which also provided production facilities. Artists having access to the equipment and technology, which normally only film labs had, expanded the creative possibilities and experimentation with film material and filmmaking processes. Form and structure constituted the main feature of many experimental films made in these years, which Jacques Rancière refers to as "the

leftist decade” (2014) and D.N.Rodowick calls “the era of political modernism” (1994: vii) in which the prevailing question was “what constitutes a political film?” (Rodowick, 1994: xii).

Coincidentally, I was born in that era to politically involved parents, a few years before the brutal 1980 coup in Turkey. The conditions were harsh under the rules of the military junta and the circumstances that resulted from it, such as media censorship, a state-controlled curriculum, state surveillance and so on. But thanks to my critically-minded, cinephile parents—my mother was an art teacher and a photographer and my father a trade unionist—art, literature, film, and politics were part of everyday life experience, and not in a superficial way. For instance, my father was taken into custody during a midnight police raid while he was doing an oil painting with my mother. It was a portrait of Atatürk for a local exhibition but apparently the police were convinced that it was Lenin. Furthermore, there was a print of Francisco Goya’s execution painting *The 3rd of May 1808 in Madrid (1814)* (Fig. 6) on our wall, which my mother taught us about. I grew up looking at it, while real executions were happening outside our door, and near-executions inside our home.



Fig. 6. *The 3rd of May 1808 in Madrid* (1814, Francisco Goya) oil on canvas, 268.5 x 347.5 cm (Museo Nacional del Prado).

Thus, even as a child, I knew that there were profound consequences of having certain paintings on the wall or painting certain pictures. I knew we were on the same side as the man in the white shirt in the Goya's painting. I identified with him as we had rifles pointed at us, and someone else was painting the picture. So, at an early age I was aware that the representation of terror and real terror were intimately related.

When I came across practices and theories that challenge narrative structures and the notion of representation itself, which thrived in that era in the context of LFMC, I felt a deep intellectual connection. This specific practice is often put under the broad and vague umbrella term of 'structural film' which was first coined by the American critic P. Adams Sitney in 1969, and later contested by Peter Gidal, Malcolm Le Grice and others. Gidal and Le Grice both wrote extensively on the specific characteristics of individual works and challenged Sitney's definition. These debates resulted in Gidal writing his well-known essay "Theory and Definition of Structural/Materialist Film" (1975), which he began formulating in "Definition and Theory of the current avant-garde: Materialist/Structural Film" (1974, *Studio International*) and there are traces in an earlier essay "Film as Film" (1972, *Art and Artists*). In comparison to the earlier essays, "Theory and Definition" reads more like a manifesto or a manual at times because of its assertions and instructions. But more importantly, Gidal differentiates between 'structural film' (Sitney's definition) and Structural/materialist Film, defined as "dialectically materialist" (Gidal, 1975, p.189). A.L. Rees points out that adding the word "materialist" was to "signal his Marxist revision of Sitney's primarily aesthetic definition" (2008: 82). In 1989, dropping the 'structural' part of the phrase altogether, Gidal published the monograph *Materialist Film* to emphasise the materialist concerns. While I am critical of certain aspects of Gidal's theorisation and practice, which I discuss in Chapter Two in detail, his writing has been influential in my practice and I have found it significant in establishing the terms of my own practice as well as identifying issues that are relevant to contemporary political moving image practices.

The contemporary context (2010-2020)

In the last decade, there has been a significant interest in the 1970s experimental filmmaking in Britain. This interest has been manifest in form of exhibitions,

publications, talks and events. Some notable exhibitions included *Lis Rhodes: Dissonance and Disturbance* at ICA in 2012. The same year Rhodes also showed *Light Music* (1975) as part of the opening of the Tanks at Tate Modern. The *Film in Space* exhibition at Camden Arts Centre (2012-2013) curated by Guy Sherwin, exhibited many LFMC artists such as Gill Eatherley, Nicky Hamlyn, Annabel Nicolson and William Raban. Malcolm Le Grice enjoyed a solo exhibition at Richard Saltoun in 2015. This list grew even larger with LFMC's 50th anniversary in 2016 with the addition of talks and other events linked with the publication of *Shoot Shoot Shoot The First Decade of LFMC 1966-76* (Ed. Mark Webber, 2016) taking place at Tate Britain, the BFI, Lux and other venues internationally. Another significant exhibition was a weekend of expanded cinema at Raven Row in March 2017, curated by Mark Webber, showing works by filmmakers associated with Filmaktion group (Eatherley, Le Grice, Nicolson, Raban) (A lengthier Filmaktion programme was also held at Tate Modern in 2012).

In the second half of the last decade there have been a substantial number of publications in the field of experiment film, most of which revisit experimental practices from the 70s (these include Peter Gidal's own *Flare Out Aesthetics 1966-2016* [The Visible Press 2016]). Many of these books, such as *A History of 1970s Experimental Film: Britain's Decade of Diversity* (Patti Gaal-Holmes, 2015), *Other Cinemas: Politics, Culture and Experimental Film in 1970s* (Eds. Sue Clayton and Laura Mulvey), *Kurt Kren: Structural Films* (2015, Eds. Nicky Hamlyn, Simon Payne and A. L. Rees), *Experimental and Expanded Animation* (2018 Eds. Vicky Smith & Nicky Hamlyn), and *Experimental Film and Photochemical Practices* (Kim Knowles, 2020), and last but not least A.L. Rees's *Fields of View* (Ed. Simon Payne 2020) have sections or chapters that revisit or rethink Structural/materialist film theory. Some of the mentions are sympathetic and some not, such as David Levi Strauss's essay, which is extremely critical of Gidal's theory, identifying it as 'dogmatic' and likening Gidal's arguments to "the preaching of religious fundamentalists" (2015: 212).

During this decade, there has also been an abundance of political moving image works exhibited widely. Discourses on art and politics and "political art" began to be embraced by major art institutions, and by extension have become more widespread. The evidence of this can easily be located in the programmes of several major art events such as dOCUMENTA 13 (2012), the 7th Berlin Biennial

(2012) and the 13th Istanbul Biennial (2013). This meant that one could see a film by Malcolm Le Grice from 1970s and a contemporary artist video in close proximity of time and space. What I observed was that many of the contemporary political films and videos displayed in galleries and museums were rhetorical and journalistic and mostly occupied with representing the atrocities that are taking place in various parts of the world, generally elsewhere, often showing violence inflicted on people in protests, or war zones or people of colour in the Western countries. The examples of such works are varied: *All That Is Solid Melts into Air* (2008) by Mark Boulos; Forensic Architecture's 'video investigations' as well as *Ambiguous Journeys* (2018) by Lis Rhodes, who comes from a Co-op background. One could argue that these works constitute art as activism; an effective humanitarian act that hopes to mobilise action by showing what is happening, even if it involves showing people in pain. As I will discuss later in detail, I identified that many of these works appeal to people's moral judgement; they are constructed to move people emotionally. Hal Foster in his recent book *What Comes After Farce* (2020) makes a similar statement, but claims that it is the viewer who looks for emotional involvement. He writes:

The prevalent mode of art viewing today is an affective one. If Kant resumed the ancient question "Is the work beautiful?" and Duchamp formulated the avant-garde query "Is the work art at all?" our primary criterion seems to be "Does this image or object move me?" Where we once spoke of the "quality" of a work, as judged by comparison with great art of the past, and then about its "interest" and its "criticality," both of which were measured by relevance to contemporary aesthetic and/or political debates, we now look for pathos, which cannot be tested objectively or even discussed much. (2020: 9)

But I argue that the problem is not only to do with the viewer seeking to be touched but also the artist soliciting viewers' feelings. For example: according to Eyal Weizman of Forensic Architecture, "No matter if you are a building, a territory, a photograph, a pixel, or a person, to sense is to be imprinted by the world around you, to internalize its force fields, and to transform. And to transform is to feel pain" (2017: 129). However, this gets complicated and more problematic when Weizman also claims to "produce and stage the truth" (2017: 74). Videos such as *The Killing of Tahir Elçi* (2019), which I discuss in Chapter Four in detail, is concerned with

staging “the truth” or revealing some knowledge that is hidden from public. Lis Rhodes, in her video *Journal of Disbelief* (2010-2016), also expresses similar concerns about state powers obfuscating information from the public.

Research questions:

The critical concerns introduced above constitute the foundations of my research questions, which I articulate as follows:

- What is Structural/materialist film theory’s relation to Marxism, and what are its limitations and significance to contemporary film and video practice?
- How have the formal strategies of several key works—involving negation, the use of voiceover, and different manifestations of verbal and visual language—been deployed as political aesthetics?
- What lessons can one learn from these works regarding the conception of a political film practice?
- What are the ethical and political implications of filming people in struggle or filming people suffering? What are the problematics around the spectatorship with regards to such questions?
- How can I politicise aesthetics in my own work, rather than aestheticising political events and activities such as protests or state violence? To what degree does the negation of imagery constitute a method by which to politicise aesthetics?

Some of these questions are aimed at several key films and videos, and some questions are intended particularly for my own practice. The works produced through the course of this research also are concerned with the problems I discuss in my critiques of these key examples. In Chapter Five I have also discussed a number of other film and video works which correspond with the work I made more directly. My critical engagement with each film that I discuss is connected by the arguments I develop and interrelated decisions I make in my practice.

Thesis structure

Chapter One introduces Peter Gidal’s Structural/materialist film theory and its historical context before focusing on tracing its nexus with Marxist political and

aesthetic theory to formulate a new critique. Even though there are only a few direct references to works of Karl Marx, Gidal's theory echoes a Marxist critique of capitalism and a critique of associated philosophies regarding the cultural realm. While I see Gidal's materialist film theory as arguably the most radical of its time, I also identify some discrepancies between his theory and practice post 1980. In this chapter I aim to trace how and to what degree his theory aligns with Marxist theory, and the flaws in his theorization and aesthetic strategies.

Chapter Two deals with concepts that Gidal develops based on the principles he developed, against illusionistic film and identification processes. This chapter raises critical questions about three important concepts in his writing: "construction of non-identity in the filmic process" (Gidal, 1989: 12); "de-subjectivisation" (Gidal, 1989: 36) and "the emptying-out of potent signifiers, of meaning" (Gidal, 1989: 54). I see these as potential shortcomings of Structural/materialist film theory and practice, especially in the current context. In this section, I also discuss these concepts in relation to the works I produced during this research, and the problems and concerns they posed for me. In the second half of the chapter, I examine the limitations of Gidal's project through a close reading of *Room Film* 1973 (1973) and *Denials* (1986).

Chapter Three involves a formal and contextual analysis of Lis Rhodes' *Light Reading*, a key film, which challenges language and its complicity with patriarchal structures and directs the political feminist critique at the heart of representation, rather than representing gender inequality unproblematically. This chapter explores the role of language in filmic representation and constructions and how Rhodes, utilising voice-over, problematises language by challenging the fixity of subjectivity. While *Light Reading* has been considered as Structural/materialist film and Nancy Wood's and Gidal's writings on it appear in *Materialist Film* (Gidal, 1989), I suggest it can also be read as critique of the several aspects of Structural/materialist film discussed in Chapter Two, regarding identity and subjectivity. This chapter argues that *Light Reading* manages to construct collective sense of identity, which is more aligned with a Marxist materialist position than Gidal's notion of construction of non-identity that leans towards non-being.

Chapter Four "Unlikely Assembly," which is dedicated to a critical engagement with contemporary practices, brings together Rhodes' latest video *Ambiguous Journeys*

(2018), William Raban's *Laki Haze* (2019) and *The Killing of Tahir Elçi* (2010) by Forensic Architecture. When Raban's and Rhodes' videos were first screened I was already planning to include a close critical analysis of several videos from the contemporary "artists' moving image" sphere, to support my argument against "political" works that represent current issues without considering the ideological implications of their aesthetic and narrative construction and use of language. However, upon viewing *Ambiguous Journeys* and *Laki Haze*, I identified similar traits in Raban's, Rhodes' and Forensic Architecture's work, such as the investigative commentary and research imbedded in the works; their interest in traces, evidence, and testimonies to reveal truth, along their desire to be the spokesperson for humanity in our age of 'alternative truth' and disinformation. The common characteristics that I identify are not in the videos' aesthetics specifically, but in their humanitarian ambition and intention, and the ways in which they employ language in an affirmative way.

Chapter Five involves a critical reflection on the four works outlined above, which I produced during the research period. I also discuss one project, under the heading 'The Absent Project: the non-representable', that could not be made but nevertheless informed this research immensely. In the commentary and evaluation of my work I also discuss other films that have been influential, and correspond with them aesthetically or thematically. Each analysis critically examines and contextualises the work and my intentions in relation to the research questions outlined above.

Chapter 1

Structural/Materialist Film and Marxism

My first encounter with Peter Gidal's theory of Structural/materialist film was through A. L. Rees' interpretation in *A History of Experimental Film and Video* (BFI, 1999), after I saw some of his earliest films during my undergraduate years in England. Because of my previous studies in semiotics and literature I was well equipped for reading signs and symbols, but when I first saw *Clouds* (1968) I was struck (if not shocked) with its extreme resistance to signification (Fig. 7). The more I found out about Gidal's films and theorisations, the more intrigued and challenged I was on many levels: as an artist and viewer. His writing has helped me to better understand the mechanisms of dominant cinema, the political implications of those mechanisms, and the ways in which experimental cinema can challenge those mechanisms.



Fig. 7. *Clouds* (1968, Peter Gidal)

Even though I have been predominantly working with digital video and not film, Gidal's theories have become the critical voice in my head and influenced my practice ever since. However, I could not correlate certain aspects of his theories and some of his films with the Marxism that I knew (which is drastically different to Western Marxism). When I surveyed the literature on Structural/materialist film, I could not find a sufficient account or examination of its relation to Marxist theory or political philosophy. D.N. Rodowick likewise pointed out, in 1988, that "there has so far been little serious examination of Gidal's relationship to the most radical elements of French theory, including the theories of political modernism presented

by the *Tel Quel* group” (1994: 130) and this is still the case. So apart from fleeting comments or statements claiming Gidal’s Marxist position or Gidal’s own brief references to Marx or Lenin, and lengthier citations from the French philosopher Louis Althusser, there was hardly anything that examined why or how Structural/materialist film theory and practice are considered Marxist. It is crucial to investigate this for my project, to see if Gidal’s Structural/materialism can still be relevant and useful to establish the aesthetic terms of a contemporary critical experimental film and video practice. In this chapter, I introduce Structural/materialist film theory and trace the nexus of its relation with Marxist political and aesthetic theory.

An introduction to Structural/Materialist film

Peter Gidal begins formulating his theory of Structural/materialist film in a short essay titled “Film as Film” in which he attempts to assert film as a form of art, by discussing film’s material characteristics in relation to painting; pointing out the similarities such as “flatness”, “light”, “hand-touch sensibility” with one distinct difference: duration (although one could argue that duration is implied in series paintings such as Monet’s *Rouen Cathedral* 1892/1893). As A.L. Rees discusses, for Gidal: “Film is very clearly a “modernist art”, defined by “flatness, gain, light, movement”, in a state of tension with its representational content and with the viewer” (2008: 83). “Film as Film” which is reprinted in the Lux publication *Shoot Shoot Shoot* (2016), is the essay in which Gidal begins to define certain structural film aesthetics as Marxist, challenging the definition by American historian and critic P. Adams Sitney, who coined the term “structural film” and defined it in an article in *Film Culture* in 1969. Before outlining Gidal’s Structural/materialist film theory it is important to provide a brief introduction to Sitney’s definition of structural film because Gidal develops his theory through a critique of Sitney. The way in which he does this recalls Fredric Jameson’s assertion about Marxism’s critical quality:

Marxism is a critical rather than a systematic philosophy, however, we would expect the materialism of Marx to be not a coherent position in itself but rather a correction of other positions—a rectification in dialectical fashion of some pre-existing phenomenon, rather than a doctrine of a positivistic variety existing in its own right. This is to say that we cannot really understand Marx’s materialism until we

understand that which it is directed *against*, that which it is designed to correct (Jameson, 1974: 365).

Correspondingly, Gidal's theory of Structural/materialist film can be identified as "a rectification" of Sitney's characterization and definition of "Structural Film". When Sitney, who wrote extensively on American avant-garde film, chose to use the word 'structural' in his attempt to theorise a certain characteristics in several North American films from early to late 60s, he had no idea that this article would get so much attention, debate and dispute. And according to his conversation with Le Grice in 1977, Sitney declared that he regretted using the term "structural" (Le Grice, 2009: 140). However, at the time he identified the emergence of structural film as "the most significant development in the American avant-garde cinema" (2002:347) since the early 60s. In this essay he defines structural film thus:

The structural film insists on its shape, and what content it has is minimal and subsidiary to the outline. Four characteristics of the structural film are its fixed camera position (fixed frame from the viewer's perspective), the flicker effect, loop printing, and rephotography off the screen. Very seldom will one find all four characteristics in a single film, and there are structural films which modify these usual elements (Sitney, 2002: 348).

When defining structural film, Sitney considers the North American examples, such as works of Andy Warhol (as precursor) Michael Snow (as the 'dean' of structural film), Hollis Frampton, Paul Sharits and George Landow. In his analysis of their films, he pays specific attention to the qualities that are to do with the image and its construction via various camera movements. He rarely mentions film material or materiality, even when he writes about George Landow's *Film in which there appear sprocket holes, edge lettering, dirt particles, etc.* (1966), which one could argue—with such a title—begs a discussion of the celluloid film strip. Even though the image is the feature of film's materiality, his discussion seems to focus on the profilmic event: what it represents and through what kind of construction it is achieved. A few years after the publication of Sitney's article "Structural Film" in *Film Culture*, Le Grice takes issue with Sitney's descriptions and criticises him for being too simplistic. In his 1972 essay "Thoughts on Recent 'Underground' Film", Le Grice accuses him of being ignorant of the European counterparts and states:

Sitney's use of the term 'structural', to cover what he makes it cover, is totally misleading and does not help the perception or understanding of any of the films which he puts into the category.... If he knew the European scene well enough (which he ought to, but does not) he would now doubtless include Kren, the Heins, early Nekes, Schoenherr, Gidal, Crosswaite, Nicolson, Hammond, Drummond, Siep, Raban, Leggett and myself; he would also include the Americans, Gottheim and Gerson and the Canadian Rimmer. (Le Grice, 2009: 13)

Le Grice claims that if these filmmakers do have something in common, it certainly is not a simple thing. He goes on to outline possible common concerns in detail, which derive from the filming apparatus: camera (its limitations and extensions), projection apparatus (its properties and components), processing and editing procedures (refilming, recopying), film material itself, perception, "duration as concrete dimension", and "semantics of image" (2009: 14-15).

The central terms of Le Grice's discussion concern the materiality of film and films in which materiality is foregrounded. He expounds further on this in a later essay, "Material, Materiality, Materialism" (1978), in which he states: "The ideological stance, will remain mostly implicit though it is clearly oriented towards a Marxist-materialist position" (2009: 165). Le Grice's implicit Marxist-materialist stance is explicit with Gidal's reformulation—or correction—of structural film as Structural/materialist film. When Gidal encounters Warhol's *Blow Job* (1964), Snow's *Wavelength* (1967) or Le Grice's *Yes No Maybe Not* (1967) and the distinctive ways in which these films foreground the material and/or the process of filmmaking, coupled with anti-narrative elements, he identifies the aesthetics as Marxist (1972: 14). In his essay "Film as Film" (1972) he argues (against Sitney's characterisation of structural film as romantic): "The attempt at clarification of material objectivity, the process awareness (of consciousness of actuality), the attempt to deal with the given in a dialectical manner rather than in a model-oriented one, belies the tradition of romanticism to the core. If anything, a Marxist aesthetic lies behind these films, whether the film-makers know it or not" (1972: 14). In contrast, Sitney theorises structural films in the context of American avant-garde film and contextualises them in relation to the lyrical film. He begins his essay by asking what their similarities and differences would be. He claims that "The structural film is

in part a synthesis of the formalistic graphic film and the Romantic lyrical film” (2002: 348). In the later essay “Definition and Theory of the Current Avant-garde: Materialist/structural film” (1974), Gidal tries harder to reframe and recontextualise structural film within Marxist terms and adds “materialist” to the phrase in his title.

In “Theory and Definition Structural/Materialist Film” (1975) Gidal defines Structural /materialist film as anti-illusionist, anti-narrative and materialist, emphasising that it is a dialectical materialism and not a mechanistic one. According to Gidal, Structural /materialist Film demystifies or at least attempts to demystify the filmmaking processes by foregrounding film’s material relations and construction. For example, making cuts in between shots visible foregrounds the editing process of the film, or through repetition the viewer becomes more aware of the viewing process. Thus, the demystification is a material process, not a documentation of these processes that represents them in the same illusionistic manner (for example making the cameraman filming the scene visible as in Godard’s *Contempt* [1963]). The filmmaking activity is not one of representing some content, idea or story, but presenting its own making. He writes:

When one states that each film is a record of its own making, this refers to shooting, editing, printing stages, or separations of these, dealt with specifically. Such film militates against dominant (narrative) cinema. Thus viewing such a film is at once viewing a film and viewing the 'coming into presence' of the film, i.e. the system of consciousness that produces the work, that is produced by and in it. (Gidal, 1975: 189)

In this essay he reiterates his opinion of structural film as a “radical break” (1974: 55) with idealist and romantic forms and Warhol as a guide, he writes: “one must go on after Warhol, not revert to a reinvigorated pre-Warholian state’ (1975: 194 and 1974: 55). This notion of “radical break” evokes Althusser’s concept of “epistemological break” (1969: 34), a term he borrowed from Gaston Bachelard to describe a rupture, a radical break in Marx’s work, from all idealist (Hegelian) tendencies towards a new dialectical materialist future, break occurring with *German Ideology* (Marx & Engels, 1846). In this sense Gidal’s theorisation has an anti-idealist, anti-humanist philosophical stance, not dissimilar to Althusser’s interpretation of Marx’s later work. In the following, I will elaborate further on Gidal’s

conception of Structural/materialist film and its relation to Marxist theory, especially to Althusser's interpretations.

Structural/Materialist film and its relation to Marxist theory

In a post screening Q & A, in 1975 Gidal asserts that Althusser is “the only political philosopher” who is “worth reading” (1975). Even though there are only a few direct references to works of Karl Marx, Gidal’s theory echoes a Marxist critique of capitalism and its devices and strategies in the cultural realm. With an attempt to merge theory and practice, or to work out his dialectical practice as theory and his theory as practice, he utilises some of the fundamental Marxist concepts in his overall project, and more often than not he does so through Althusserian interpretations. The reflections of Althusser’s theories, directly or indirectly, appear in Gidal’s writing from “Theory and Definition” (1975) through to his book *Materialist Film* (1989) and many other essays compiled and published in *Flare Out Aesthetics 1966-2016* (2016).

Like Althusser, Gidal posits dialectical materialist (theoretical) practice as oppositional to ideological, idealist practice. For example, in his essay “Against Sexual Representation In Film” (1984), Gidal defines Structural/materialist film as “a concrete, theoretical, *filmic* practice” (2016:148). His emphasis is on “filmic”, but “theoretical” and “concrete” highlight Althusser’s influence, given his use of these terms. Likewise in “Theory and Definition” Gidal writes, “The filmwork itself is an ideological practice, and in some cases a theoretical practice” (Gidal, 1975: 193). I would suggest that these terms refer to Althusser’s concepts of Marxist science and theoretical practice that he discusses in *For Marx* (1969). In the essay titled “On the Materialist Dialectic” (in *For Marx*) Althusser elaborates on the theory that social formations are established via three practices: economic, political and ideological. In addition these, Althusser introduces “theoretical practice” (2005: 166) as the fourth practice, he writes:

Theoretical practice falls within the general definition of practice. It works on a raw material (representations, concepts, facts) which it is given by other practices, whether ‘empirical’, ‘technical’ or ‘ideological’. In its most general form theoretical practice does not only include

scientific theoretical practice, but also pre-scientific theoretical practice, that is, 'ideological' theoretical practice (2005: 167)

And he adds that “Marxist theoretical practice” does not exist in every domain of transformation, as the Marxist practice of epistemology is not fully established in every domain, such as history of art or philosophy. Without denying that there are Marxists working in those domains and forming a practice, he claims that:

They do not have behind them the equivalent of *Capital* or of the revolutionary practice of a century of Marxists. Their practice is largely *in front of them*, it still has to be developed, or even founded, that is, it has to be set on correct theoretical bases so that it corresponds to a *real* object, not to a presumed or ideological object, and so that it is a truly theoretical practice, not a technical practice (2005: 169).

It seems that Gidal takes some of Althusser's theories as basis in his theorization and definition of Structural/materialist film practice, he writes:

There remain the few Structural/Materialist film-makers, lamentably largely existing without the beginnings even of a theoretical/historical approach. Consequently, in most cases (at best) these films open up contradictions between theory (not necessarily of film) and the practice of film-making as it embodies theory, i.e. *is theoretical*. That these contradictions are opened up by films which are largely ‘unconsciously thought’ on the film-makers’ parts is another problem. (1975: 193)

Gidal identifies the beginnings of “Marxist theoretical practice” (that Althusser refers to) in these filmmakers’ work and defines it as Structural/materialist film. He admits that the way that these contradictions open up in these films are mostly “unconsciously thought” by the film-makers. Hence he ends this influential essay with a statement that also sounds like an appeal: “To *crucially* intervene in film practice, the ‘unthought’ must be brought to knowledge, thought. The set of relations between film practice, theoretical practice, and film as theory, can then be brought forth to operate in clarity” (1975: 194). This appeal, I would argue, is very much to do with Althusser's claim quoted above. The “Theory and Definition” essay is one of the earliest efforts by Gidal to attempt at formulating a “Marxist theoretical practice”

in the domain in which—according to him—a “theoretical/historical approach” had not even begun.

Althusser’s elucidation of how a Marxist practice is not fully developed in every field resonates with some of the difficulties I came across throughout my research, when I questioned what a Marxist aesthetics might look like, or whether Gidal was right to identify Marxist aesthetics in Warhol’s *Blow Job* (1964). As per Althusser, I could not find an “equivalent of *Capital*” in the visual aesthetics domain to guide me.

Furthermore, what I did find were difficult to relate to experimental film and video practices. Historically speaking the discourse around Marxist aesthetics has often had its roots in literature, which might be a reflection of Marx and Engels’ sporadic texts, as they often discuss literature in their correspondence with each other and other writers and philosophers. Engels has various letter exchanges with writers such as Paul Lafargue, the philosopher Karl Kautsky and writer Minna Kautsky, discussing literary works. In various other writings they bring Balzac, Goethe, Lessing or Schiller—just to name a few—into their discussion (Baxandall and Morawski, 1973). Most of these elaborations or critiques are based on the content of literary work: how situations and characters are depicted, how realistic these depictions are, the ideology they represent and so on. Engels in his letter to Franz Mehring confesses explicitly that he and Marx both failed to stress the matters regarding form, he writes: “we neglected the formal side—the ways and means by which these notions, etc., come about—for the sake of the content” (Baxandall and Morawski 1973: 99). Perhaps because of the scarcity of Marxist theoretical study on form, especially non-literary works until much later in 20th century, many filmmakers from Vertov to Eisenstein, Guy Debord to Gidal, have gone back to Marx’s *Capital* and other writings and attempt to adopt Marx’s concepts for their practice. So what are the concepts Gidal exports from Marx’s politico-economic theory?

There are two major Marxist concepts upon which Gidal establishes his theory of Structural/materialist film: one is “the Fetishism of commodities”, and the other one “reproduction of the conditions and relations of existing mode of production”. In *Capital*, as part of his investigation into use-value and exchange value of commodities in capitalist economies, Marx explains that commodities are fetishised by concealing the labour processes that produce the commodities (1990: 126-177). The capitalist economic system thus provides the illusion that wealth is accumulated by exchange of goods, concealing its exploitation of the labourer. By doing so the

capitalist system not only fetishises the commodity but also mystifies the labour process (1990: 163-177). Correspondingly, Gidal declares “Structural/materialist film attempts to be non-illusionist. The process of the film’s making deals with devices that result in demystification or attempted demystification of the film process” (Gidal, 1975: 189). In 1986, he reiterates this position and warns against the tendency of fetishizing the film process while trying to demystify it. He writes: “*Process* must be brought back into the vocabulary minus its fetish meaning” (1989: 35). Hence he tries to develop strategies that foreground the filmmaking processes and material and attempts to demystify film material and the processes, which I will discuss in detail in relation to his films in Chapter Two.

The second influential Marxist concept in Gidal’s agenda is the fact that the capitalist system (any system) has to reproduce the conditions and relations of existing mode of production to maintain it. However, this is not to say things stay the same, so it should not be understood as a static set of conditions and relations. Marx and Engels write: “The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instrument of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society” (2016: 9). This also goes for reproduction because as Marx writes in *Capital* “The conditions of production are also those of reproduction” (1990: 282). According to Althusser, capitalism reproduces these conditions keeping things in order via “Repressive and Ideological State apparatuses” (1971: 127). There are echoes of these ideas in Gidal’s severe criticism of every form of narrative cinema and representation, based on the refusal of taking part in the filmic reproduction of the existing capitalist conditions. As Nicky Hamlyn observes: “In the work of Peter Gidal, representation, explicitly theorised as a political process, is withheld, on the grounds that it is necessarily conservative, since it reproduces what is already there and hence is complicit in the maintenance of an ideological status quo” (2003: 185). For Gidal, the dominant commercial cinema not only reproduces the dominant capitalist ideas but also the capitalist form of relations in the viewing process. This final point is particularly significant in my own practice, as I think examining the ways in which the viewer relates to the viewed is most crucial and most pressing in today’s film and video practice; a topic I will return to in later chapters.

The fundamental position of Structural/materialist film is that it goes against illusion, and this entails all the filmic devices and strategies that facilitate illusion as well,

such as narrative structure, any form of “realistic” representation, reproduction and mechanisms of identification. Thus, according to Gidal, the task of Structural/materialist film is to demystify the film process, and foreground the material relations of film/filmmaking, rather than concealing them, and hence attempt to change the dominant mode of viewing and the way in which the viewer relates to film. Thus Gidal persistently opposes any form of narrative, just like Althusser, who goes as far as saying “Not to indulge in storytelling’ still remains for me the one and only definition of materialism” (1993: 221). In a recent interview Gidal states: “Theoretically, i.e. as the theoretical position, I’m opposed to narrative completely, as I think everything gets projected to some imaginary level (of narrative) by narrative” (2015: 263). I would argue that Gidal’s hostility is related to Althusser’s definition of ideology as “a system of representations” with a “practico-social” function. And that function is to do with Marx’s concept of “the reproduction of the existing relations of production”. They both position materialist practice in opposition to narrative, because narrative is always to do with illusion and the imaginary—as far as they are concerned—and it operates similarly to ideology. It removes the individual from their actual material conditions and places them in an imaginary fictitious situation through identification (or “misrecognition” in Althusser’s terms) processes, so as to gain an imaginary fulfilment of desires, fantasies, truth and knowledge. Therefore, narrative reproduces the viewer/individual as a constructed subject, with a given subjectivity. Gidal and Althusser both imply that this is always part of the capitalist mode of production/reproduction/consumption.

The capitalist mode of production needs to reproduce the work force, or labour power to maintain itself. This reproduction is not possible only by paying them a wage, or improving their skills, introducing new technology, as Althusser writes, it “requires a reproduction of submission to the rules of established order” (1971: 132). According to Althusser, this submission is either forced by “the Repressive Ideological State Apparatuses” explicitly, or by “the Ideological State Apparatuses” implicitly, in the guise of religion, education, culture, media and so on. And in the second case, the subjects’ submission is constituted in the practice of responding to interpellation. In the context of film, this process would involve the viewer’s identification with the characters, the camera/filmmaker and/or objects. Gidal writes:

The whole concept of identification is problematic, as that force which impels a movement from one’s position in a social space of social

meanings or a political space *to* an *into* a different human residence – another body or another figure – where the phantasm and fantasies, the realities of one's projections are enacted (Gidal, 2016: 101).

He considers identification as an inevitable mechanism of narrative procedures.

Literary theorist Mieke Bal defines narrative text as “a text in which an agent or subject conveys to an addressee (“tells” the reader, viewer, or listener) a story in a medium, such as language, imagery, sound, buildings, or a combination thereof” (2017: 5). So a narrative agent/subject addresses or ‘hails’—to use Althusser’s term—the reader/listener/viewer and implicates them into the narrative and by extension to its ideology, often through the processes of identification with the characters or what Bal calls “character-effects” since they are not real characters but “fabricated figures”. She states:

The character-effect occurs when the resemblance between human beings and fabricated figures is so strong that we forget the fundamental difference: we even go so far as to identify with the character, to cry, to laugh, and to search for or with it —or even against it, when the character is a villain. (2017: 105).

Each medium has different tools and devices to get its addressee to relate to its narrative. The classical narrative cinema typically offers a unified and fixed subject position for its viewer. Each medium or institution has its own strategies to establish these positions. If we briefly go back to Althusser, the Ideological State Apparatuses (such as church, school, media) take advantage of this power of narrative and actively produce and utilise narrative texts to the benefit of the dominant ideology (be it socialist or capitalist). The lists of these narrative texts are myriad, from national anthems, to religious verses, pop songs to news reports. For Gidal, narrative cinema is no different to those apparatuses, it is an ideological structure, which constructs the viewer/subject as patriarchal, passive subjects and reproduces dominant social relations and at the same time reproduces “the dominant ideologies of viewing,” to use his phrase. Gidal endeavours to establish a theory and practice that changes these dominant relations in filmmaking practice by attempting to construct an intellectually active viewing experience. For him, the construction of the viewer in narrative film, as a passive consumer of film’s pleasure, fear, meaning and

so on, is fascistic and cannot be reconciled with Marxism. And for him, the concept of illusion, narrative, identification and ideology are interrelated, particularly in relation to construction of a passive viewer-consumer-subject in film.

So far I have demonstrated that Gidal tries to develop his concept of Structural/materialist film as a radical Marxist theoretical film practice, which aims to transform the existing capitalist modes of relations in film production and film viewing towards dialectical-materialist modes. He states: "The argument is for a truly materialist practice, which is one of the presentation i.e. demystification of the material construction of the film, a dialectically constituted 'presentation', of film representation, film image, film moment, film meaning in temporalness etc." (Gidal, 2016: 72). In contrast to left-wing directors such as Ken Loach, for example, the Structural/materialist film does not attempt to represent class struggle or a critique of the capitalist system in terms of the film's content. For Gidal, this is imperative in the formation of Marxist aesthetics in film.

Herbert Marcuse, another Marxist philosopher, whom Gidal rarely mentions in his writing, expresses similar ideas, elucidating on Marxist aesthetics in his *The Aesthetic Dimension*. Marcuse states: "The political potential of art lies only in its own aesthetic dimension" (1977: 7). Without claiming that Marcuse and Gidal have completely parallel approaches, I would argue that the aforementioned statement encapsulates a fundamental position in Gidal's approach. In Marcuse's sense—although he does not write about film and mostly writes on theatre and poetry—Gidal's films are profoundly political. While there is nothing political 'in' his films (except *Close up* [1983]), as I will explore in the next chapter, he attempts politicising film aesthetics by confronting all illusionistic strategies and devices of filmmaking; challenging and problematizing viewer's position; and dealing with film's relations dialectically. Marcuse and Gidal echo each other also on the subject of form and content: Marcuse writes 'Aesthetic form is not opposed to content, not even dialectically. In the work of art, form becomes content and vice versa' (1977: 30) and Gidal writes: "The usage of the word *content* so far has been within the common usage, i.e. representational content. In fact, the real content is the form, form become content. Form is meant as formal operation, not as composition" (1975: 189).

But how does the form become content in his films without falling into formalism, which he opposes? What kind of strategies and devices does he utilise to develop an anti-illusionist, anti-narrative Marxist materialist aesthetic? And how is his attempt at situating “the viewer in a different way, in terms of truth, in terms of believability, in terms of anticipations not being “fulfilled”, in terms of being, in terms of the split between perception and knowledge” (Gidal, 2015: 273) materialised in his films? In the following chapter, drawing from Gidal’s writing as well as Marxist theorists such as Althusser, Adorno and Jameson, I will explore these questions and the strategies and filmic devices he develops against illusion, narrative and identificatory processes, to examine how these Marxist principles materialise in his films. There is no doubt that Gidal’s theoretical underpinnings and the concepts he develops for his practice are based on Marxist footings that can be traced back to *German Ideology* and *Capital*. However, I will argue that in practice his films increasingly began to speak to the model of Western Marxism that Perry Anderson assesses in his book *Considerations of Western Marxism* (1976). This is a model of Marxism that is dominant in the context of art and cultural criticism and problematic, not only because of its distance from working class struggles, as Anderson points out (1989: 92), but also because of its affirmative, pessimist position, which creates anti-Marxist pitfalls in the aesthetic domain. As I discuss in the following film analyses, the severe reduction of imagery, accompanied by rapid cutting and extreme illumination or under-illumination in certain Gidal films, produce an aesthetic experience that is closer to nihilism than Marxist materialism. In *Denials* (1986), *Guilt* (1988), and *No Night No Day* (1997) a sense of nothingness is the dominant feature.

Chapter 2

The Shortcomings of Structural/Materialist Film

There are several aesthetic strategies that Gidal develops against illusionistic film and its *sine qua non*: identification processes, which are in line with his anti-narrative and Althusserian Marxist stance. In this chapter I will focus my attention on three important processes: “the construction of non-identity in the filmic process” (Gidal, 1989: 12) in relation to the viewer; “de-subjectivization” (1989: 36) in relation to the artist/filmmaker, and “the emptying-out of potent signifiers, of meaning” (1989: 54) in relation to film images. According to Gidal, these concepts are key to develop a non-hierarchical relationship between the viewer and the filmmaker and creates more space for a dialectical viewing experience. Thus, he presents these concepts not just as abstract aims but practical tasks and aesthetic strategies for materialist filmmaking. These propositions have been most influential in my practice and preoccupied my thought since I began to think deeply about Marxist materialist film practice. While I could understand how the first two concepts could relate to Marxists anti-individualistic ideas, I could not associate attempting to empty-out ‘of potent signifiers, of meaning’ with Marxism. To me this concept is more likely to be aligning with nihilistic philosophy.

In this chapter, I will examine the terms of Gidal's film practice from a Marxist point of view, through close reading of *Room Film 1973* (1973) and *Denials* (1986) in order to locate the limitations of his Structural/materialist project. While I could not include several film analyses of Gidal's first films due to the length constraints of this thesis, I will argue that the first decade of Gidal's practice is most significant in terms of grounding his film theory and practice, especially between 1967 and 1975, a time during which he experiments with distinct aspects of film apparatus, resulting in some of his most important works, namely *Hall* (1969), *Clouds* (1969), *Room Film 1973* (1973), and *Condition of Illusion* (1975). This first decade also happens to be his most active years in terms of his theorising, critical writing and polemics. I maintain that the work he produced in these years in theory and practice corresponds with each other more than his work post-1980. After the mid 80s, ‘the break’ with idealist past that I discussed earlier begins to reverse, the film's negation of representation comes to take the form of an affirmation of a negative and pessimistic position. The contradictions that he set up in the filmic constructions

in the earlier films became nihilistic ambiguity, *Denials* being the most extreme example. In the following analyses, I trace the influences of materialist dialectics in Gidal's films, compare and contrast his earlier and later practice to demonstrate that his early films generate a more dialectical relationship between the viewer and the viewed, providing more space for dialectical thinking. I will propose that this element in Structural/materialist film is exactly what can be utilised most in contemporary practices.

Blind filming

Room Film 1973 remains one of the prime examples of Structural/materialist film and can be identified as the encapsulation or condensation of Gidal's Structural/materialist film theory and practice, which he has been working through since the late 1960s. Even though it is a quite different film to his earlier *Room (Double Take)* (1967) and *Key* (1968), there are significant similarities in terms of camera/lens movements and in terms image quality and colour. For example, while the handheld camera hovering on various surfaces and objects in a room is reminiscent of *Room (Double Take)*, the green tint, defocused objects, and the painterly quality of the film grain certainly bring *Key* to mind. In comparison to earlier experiments, the filmic construction in *Room Film 1973* is more complicated, following a more rigid system in terms of filming and editing. In his account of the film, Gidal emphasises the role of the film's process, construction and material qualities. He writes: "Each five second (90 frames, at 18fps) sequence repeated on slightly darker-green tinted stock. Operates as a five second continuity interruption (restart), every 'other' five seconds. But interruptive (non-taped) splice-flashes every five seconds to make vertiginous any supposed sequential consistency" (Gidal, 2016: 250). Furthermore, in comparison to earlier films, there is a significant reduction of imagery, through blurring the image via defocusing or underexposing the film, which continues to this date, becoming more severe in films such as *Denials*.

The earlier films *Room (Double Take)*, *Key*, *Hall*, *Clouds*, *Focus* (1971) can be characterised as minimalist but rigorous studies of film's apparatuses, mechanisms, processes, and material (camera/lens, zooming/focusing, framing, shots, cuts, light and grain), and by extension they are interrogations of seeing, looking, and perceiving in an anti-anthropocentric way (They could be examined as early

experiments with 'machine vision', in another reading). Utilising aspects of these films, *Room Film 1973* is constructed in such way that the viewing becomes much harder work. However, as complex as it is, because of the systematic repetition, the rhythm of camera movement and editing (which is not as frantic and fast as in some of the later films), the construct becomes quite graspable, while the images of things on film remain mostly unrecognisable. The ways in which objects appear blurred and lose their substance recalls German painter Gerard Richter's blur paintings (one of Gidal's key influences, along with Warhol and Beckett) and what Richter wrote about this strategy in the 1960s: "I blur things to make everything equally important and equally unimportant. I blur things so that they do not look artistic or craftsmanlike but technological, smooth, and perfect..." (2003: 759). These two aspects of blur image that Richter addresses, are also central for Gidal, as they refer to signification, hierarchies of meaning-making (making the important and unimportant look the same) and anti-anthropomorphism via the foregrounding of machine vision. All of which are connected to the three concepts that Gidal developed: "the construction of non-identity" (1989: 12), "de-subjectivization" (1989: 36), and "the emptying-out of potent signifiers, of meaning" (1989: 54). Gidal utilises de-focusing and/or under or overexposure as an aesthetic device to try and achieve these effects, which I will explain further in the following film analysis.

Room Film 1973 begins with a circular white light seemingly shining on a wall, in the middle of the frame, first with reddish edge then green, changing in size and confusing our sense of scale (Fig. 8). This ball of light temporarily and occasionally looks exactly like a shiny solid billiard ball and then becomes shapeless faint light. The camera is handheld: hovering or floating in the air but controlled to never give the viewer the full sense of scale or the space, or immediate, clear recognition of the objects. Into the second minute of the film, something (the first barely distinguishable thing) appears: white bed sheets or pillows. These are initially out-of-focus, then focused but without giving away what they are exactly. Through time we do recognise certain objects, for example: a light shape in the middle of the frame turns out to be a lightbulb possibly hanging from a ceiling; a sparkly metallic shape turns out to be part of a fireplace. Even though we do come to recognise certain objects, Gidal's negation of representation is palpable because of the contradictions. Gradually we gather that we are possibly looking around a dark room (or multiple rooms?) but because of this situation of recognising something one moment and not

being able to recognise anything at other moments, we are in constant struggle to see, trying to figure out what it is that we are looking at.



Fig. 8. *Room Film 1973* (1973, Peter Gidal)

While we are trying hard to see the shape and scale of the objects and make sense of the space, we perceive the material of film in process: its cuts, its light sensitivity, its grain, and its structure. In his discussion on Kurt Kren's *Trees in Autumn* (1960), Gidal theorises the film as “a new object.” He writes: “the film material and the process of viewing together transform film into a new object and process. Filmic “trying to see” instead of seeing, trying to know instead of (the illusion of) knowing. Not believing what is seen” (1989: 7). Correspondingly, in *Room Film 1973* the viewer is also in a constant position of questioning what is being viewed, which is part of Gidal’s dialectical materialist project. From the third minute to the seventh we barely see anything: the camera continues to linger, and zooms in and out, but it is too dark to see anything other than the movement of the lens and the changing graininess of the film, until a flashlight or a torch occasionally illuminates where the camera is pointing. The striking thing in this minimalist fragment is that the camera records these barely visible objects out-of-focus and hovers over surfaces—or is it a space—as if it is also trying to see and comprehend what it is recording.

Michael Snow reacts to the film in a comparable way. He states: “I felt *Room Film 1973* was made by a blind man, trying to see” (cited in Gidal 1989: 16), which might be partially true considering how difficult it is to see through the viewfinder of a film camera even in daylight conditions. Nicky Hamlyn, in his discussion of *Room Film 1973*, writes that Gidal himself mentioned the difficulty he had with his Arriflex ST

camera's eyepiece that mists up (Hamlyn, 2003: 96). The difficulty of seeing while filming, coupled with Gidal operating his camera as if the machine is learning how to see, learning its lens functions and dysfunctions, is transmitted to the viewer in a very tangible way. Through this strategy, the film attempts to position the viewer as a semi-blind subject, who is constantly struggling to see, and in that process hopefully taking up a dialectical position in relation to what is seen. This is not only to do with Gidal attempting to construct 'non-identity' in relation to the viewer but also to do with his intention of undermining the vision or subjectivity of the artistic subject behind the camera in line with his concept of "de-subjectivization". And for the same end the camera seems to be aimed at insignificant, arbitrary objects in the room, therefore no Warhol book on a bookshelf, or picture of Nico or Jackie Kennedy on the wall to be identified as in *Room (Double Take) or Hall*. Nothing in the room seems any more significant than any other thing. According to Gidal, "The notion of arbitrariness links to the concept of the empty signifier, the *attempted* (always failed) construction of such a signifier towards *non-identity*" (1989: 12). In *Room Film 1973*, this attempt to construct empty signifiers functions for both: towards non-identity and de-subjectivization.

The constant and pertinacious insistence on attempting to construct non-identity is the ultimate part of Gidal's materialist aesthetics, as for him that is where the materialist dialectic begins to develop for the viewer. Gidal deprives the viewer of a sense of identity as a revolt against fixity. He writes: "The construction of non-identity in the filmic process attempts to radicalise the conscious and unconscious positioning of the viewer/listener" (1989: 12). Here Gidal's aesthetic strategy corresponds with some of Theodor W. Adorno's writing. While Adorno's aesthetic theory was never a stated reference point for Gidal, I see a significant affinity between the two, as I will explore in more detail now.

According to Adorno, "Dialectics is the consistent sense of non-identity" (1973: 5). This is exactly what Gidal persistently attempts in his films and it is one of the most important aspects of his definition of Structural/materialist film. Snow's observant reaction after watching *Room Film 1973* is often quoted by Gidal, and it has proven significant for me because of the affinity I identify between Gidal and Adorno. Gidal's method and approach in *Room Film 1973* explained above is resonant with Adorno's proposal of 'blind filming'. Alexander Kluge, a German filmmaker and close friend of Adorno, claims: "Adorno said to us that we should film blind. If one records

something without intention, then something will always be tracked down. What it is will only be seen subsequently" (cited in Esther Leslie 2005: 39). Adorno suggests "blind filming" to Kluge possibly because it could be an equivalent of his notion of "nonidentity thinking". He writes: "identitarian thinking is subjectivistic even when it denies being so" (1973: 183). Thus, by "blind filming" or what one might call "nonidentity filming", one avoids one's own subjectivity, which is also similar to Gidal's concept of "de-subjectivisation". Gidal uses a similar term in his discussion of Richter's paintings in 1995. He writes: "disallowing given hierarchies of meaning, the painter must still work blind" (2015: 195). Aside from this, Gidal's theorisation also concerns the viewing process, materialised as attempts to construct "non-identity in the filmic process", that is viewing with no identity. But how do these notions of nonidentity thinking correlate with the filmmaking and viewing?

When Adorno writes "Dialectics is the consistent sense of non-identity" (1973: 5), he is writing about dialectical thinking, which is posed against 'identity thinking'. According to Adorno, "throughout history" it is "something deathly, something that devours everything" (1973: 139). As Oshrat C. Silberbusch explains in her book, *Adorno's Philosophy of the Nonidentical*, Adorno sees identity thinking as inescapably resulting in fascism, authoritarian philosophy, politics, and actions. Silberbusch gives racism as an example in her discussion to explain why Adorno opposes it so passionately, she writes: "Racism is not simply a psychological and sociological phenomenon which identity thinking helps to *express*—rather, thought with its drive for identity, for making the same, is a foremost factor in the former's coming into being" (2018). In this sense, nonidentity thinking is a resistance and revolt against the totalitarian and idealist way of thinking. According to Adorno, "Identity is always virtually out for totality" (1973: 139). Similar to Althusser's "theoretical practice", for Adorno dialectical thinking is a practice that is part of anti-fascist struggle. The same stance is present with respect to Gidal's attempting to construct de-subjectivisation and nonidentity in the filmic process, which he sees as a radically anti-totalitarian, anti-fascist practice:

The self-identity that is constantly reproduced in illusionist representations and the consequent positions of the viewer in his/her unconscious identities, according to the dominantly reproduced models of sex, class, race, is in opposition to a materialist practice which attempts the constant construction of non-identity. This is a break from infinitude and eternity,

which a religiously capitalist patriarchy attempts to designate and reproduce. Such imperialisms are dominant and in certain interests.
(Gidal, 1989: 12)

This correlates with both Adorno and Gidal's position against representation: Adorno's "ban on images" and Gidal's "emptying-out of potent signifiers". They are both aware of the difficulty of such a task, as Adorno writes in *Negative Dialectics*: "To think is to identify" (1973: 5), but the attempt to go against identity thinking, identification, signifying, representation is crucial for materialism. Adorno writes: "The materialist longing to grasp the thing aims at the opposite: it is only the absence of images that the full object could be conceived" (1973: 207). In *Room Film 1973*, that thing to grasp, the object to be fully conceived, is the film material itself and its construct: in other words, "film as film". Through negating images, therefore partially obliterating human vision and foregrounding the film machinery and the material, the viewer is put in an anti-anthropomorphic position—a position perhaps prerequisite for any non-identity viewing experience. Esther Leslie, in her discussion of film theories of Benjamin and Adorno writes that:

Adorno spoke of 'blind film', a filmmaking in which the technology does the seeing, detached from human vision. Benjamin wrote similarly of new ways of seeing, which have been mediated technologically. Human vision is supplemented by camera vision and, in this way, a new region of consciousness opens up, one that was previously invisible to the eye.
(2004: 44)

In *Room Film 1973*, the film's materiality and process, which are traditionally invisible to the eye, become visible.

What needs to be noted here is that this non-human, machine eye in *Room Film 1973* is not posing as an objective, omnipotent and omniscient eye that we are familiar with in the mainstream documentary or fiction film. On the contrary, Gidal's camera operation in *Room Film 1973* gives the sense of "ill-seeing", to use a phrase from Beckett (*Ill Seen Ill Said*, 1982), rather than "all-seeing". The hand-held camera is so unstable at times that it gives the sense that the camera is suspended in the air like a pendulum, rather than handheld by a person. The film forces the viewer to stabilise the camera's position in their mind, which sometimes involves tilting their

head, squinting their eyes, as if correcting the camera, and therefore becoming part of the filmmaking process. In relation to the viewers' experience Gidal writes that "Each film is not only structural but also structuring" (1975: 189). Hence the suggestion that the viewing experience also becomes a film production process. In *Room Film 1973*, human vision and machine vision are both present, even though they are in constant struggle with each other. This quality of conflict and contradiction, and therefore dialectics, is displaced by an affirmative nihilism in *Denials* (1986), which I discuss subsequently.

Blinding the viewer

Like *Room Film 1973*, *Denials* follows a strict configuration: the film is comprised of twelve segments, each comprised of 33-second fragments repeated four times. However, this progression and repetition is less graspable than in *Room Film 1973*. The first segment begins with deep blackness followed by a faint blue light leaking onto the left and right edges of the frame; then everything goes black, before going white and then black again, in such quick succession that our eyes get caught in between the pupil diluting and squinting. Thus, when we can vaguely see some substance, at around the 26th second, we cannot quite identify what it is, not only because the image is dark and unclear, but also because we are temporarily blinded in the process. The film continues with the sudden flashing of white light, which strikes more rapidly near the end of this sequence, following a period in black. Thus, the film begins with what can be described as a physical confrontation with the retina. During the dark interval, our eyes adjust to darkness and pupils dilate to get as much light as possible to see better, and when the sudden white light flashes, it feels like it stabs one's eye. Thus, the sense of "blind filming" in *Room Film 1973*, which constitutes a sense of "trying to see", is here a more forceful attempt to blind the viewer. While Gidal claims that Structural/materialist film is non-hierarchical in its process (1975, 1989), I identify this attempt in *Denials* as hierarchical and even oppressive. Adorno writes in *Minima Moralia* that "the splinter in your eye is the best magnifying glass" (2005: 50). While this splinter made us see the film's material and processes in *Room Film 1973*, what does it make us see in *Denials*?

Although Gidal quotes from Dante's *Inferno* in the epilogue to his later film *Volcano* (2005), considering the amount of time spent in darkness in *Denials*, it seems more fitting to this film: "We stood still to see the other cleft of Malebolge and the other

vain lamentings; and I found it marvellously dark.” (The same quote also appears in the beginning of *Materialist Film* 1989). Some will find this darkness ‘marvellous’ some not, David Finch describes his reaction to *Denials* as follows: “Although it probably was not the filmmaker’s intention, the film gave me an emotional feeling of death and blindness” (1988: 68). When I first saw the film, I had a similar emotional reaction—a kind of reaction that I do not normally associate with Gidal’s work—and also found *Denials* unusually affirmative in its negativity (Fig. 9). Instead of negating representation, it seemed the film was a representation of the filmmaker’s negativity, exemplified by the severe reduction of images and an attack on the viewer’s optical capabilities merged with nihilistic nothingness.

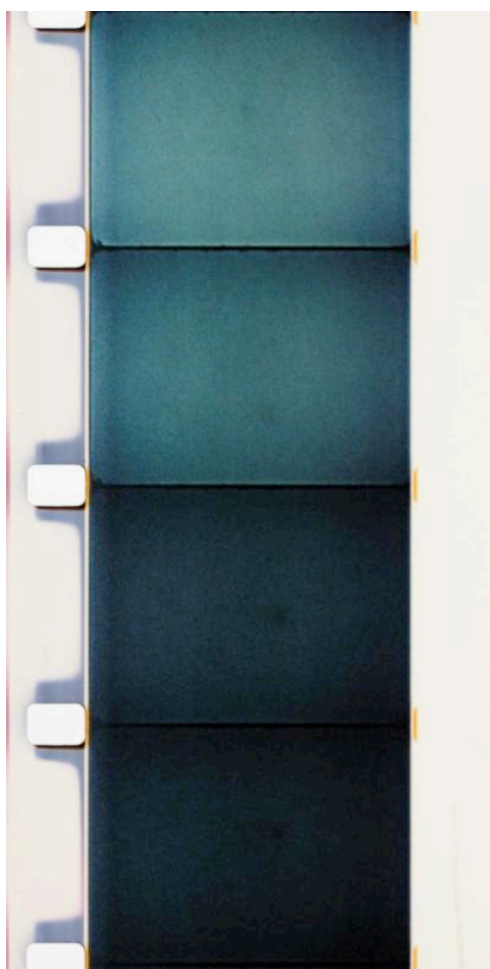


Fig. 9. *Denials* (1986, Peter Gidal)

The film begins with credit title, “A film by Peter Gidal” with white letters on black, without naming the title of the film. This to me evokes Beckett’s novel *The Unnamable*, from which Gidal quotes the entire first paragraph at the end of *Condition of Illusion* (1975). *Denials* recalls *The Unnamable* not only because it is untitled but because of the leitmotif of blindness, darkness and “ill-seeing”; the

uncertain identity of the narrator and the overall sense of uncertainty at knowing anything—even one's own self—and its allusions to nothingness. Beckett reflecting in an interview states that “In the last book, *L'Innommable*, there's complete disintegration. No 'I', no 'have', no 'being'. No nominative, no accusative, no verb. There's no way to go on” (in Wasser, 2011). So even though he does go on, and he reiterates in the exact work, he “will go on” (1958: 414), there is a strong sense of pessimism in the work, especially when compared with his plays. *Denials* is also reminiscent of a Warhol quote with which Gidal begins his book *Blow Job* (2008): “I never understood why when you died, you didn't just vanish, and everything could just keep going the way it was only you wouldn't be there. I always thought I'd like my tombstone to be blank. No epitaph and no name. Well actually, I'd like it to say 'figment'” (in Gidal, 2008). Considering the uncarved gravestone like surfaces in the film, I am tempted to think that the film is homage to this quote (Fig. 10).



Fig. 10. *Denials* (1986, Peter Gidal)

In an interview with Michael O'Pray, just after making *Denials*, Gidal declares: “My work is pessimistic” and he argues that “A materialist position cannot be optimistic” (1986: 64). In the same interview, he affiliates his “radical pessimism” with Beckett's work, and later in *Materialist Film* he brings the same issue up, relating this pessimism to anti-humanistic Marxism (1989: 152). However, I would argue that Gidal's pessimism in *Denials* cannot be defined as Marxist or materialist as it does not leave any space for dialectical thinking or viewing. It is a step further from non-identity towards non-being; from meaninglessness to nothingness. Not only the sense of nothingness, non-being and meaninglessness cannot be reconciled with Marxism it also differs with Beckett's significantly. In Beckett's works instead of non-identity there is often, if not always, the sense of a multitude of identities, even in

The Unnamable where Beckett claims there is complete disintegration of “I” and even “being”. And, as Adorno argues, “Beckett’s plays are absurd not because of the absence of any meaning, for then they would be simply irrelevant, but because they put meaning on trial; they unfold its history” (Adorno, 2013: 209). Thus, the absurdity in Beckett’s plays does not come from meaninglessness, but meaning is ridiculed through repetition and contradiction. In addition, Beckett’s pessimism is not affirmative; it is often contradicted with optimism: “If life and death did not both present themselves to us, there would be no inscrutability, if there were only darkness, all would be clear... but where we have both dark and light, we have also the inexplicable. The key word in my plays is ‘perhaps’ (Beckett in O’Hara, 1981: 251). What Beckett is describing here is a form of dialectics (though it is not a Marxist dialectics as such). In *Denials* Gidal loses sight of this dialectic, this perhaps-ness. Nothingness alone, without somethingness is deterministic and affirmative.

One could argue that there is an opposing somethingness in *Denials*, and that is the film material and its process, presented to us as ‘film as film’ as in *Room Film 1973*. But I would argue that while in the earlier films the material processes are visible—along with tangible struggle against representation—in *Denials* the strategy of rapid cuts between over and under-illuminated shots and the frenzied movement of the camera are taken to an extreme level. Coupled with darkness or sharp blinding white light creates such an extreme form of distanciation that we cannot engage with the film nor intervene and be part of “structuring” the film as in *Room Film 1973*. In *Denials*, the sense of contradiction is ungraspable. Thus, the film fails to establish a dialectical viewing process and we are left with passively perceiving the film as an aesthetic object. Since it is too hard to perceive the film’s material processes, the practice of viewing constitutes a phenomenological experience in which the film becomes a metaphor for death and darkness, or our mortality.

What does this mean from a Marxist perspective? The problem I identify in *Denials* is not an isolated artistic or philosophical problem. On the contrary, it corresponds with Western Marxism that dominated post-WWII cultural criticism. Perry Anderson, in his book *Considerations on Western Marxism* (1976), writes extensively on one particular emblem that unites the second-generation revolutionary theorists: pessimism (1989: 88). In relation to this aspect, Anderson discusses works of Adorno, Horkheimer, Gramsci, Benjamin, Althusser, and Sartre in detail. What

unites many of these theorists is that through the pre- and post-war period, they become increasingly isolated and removed from the working-class movement. Anderson notes this separation and how it forms some of the most significant characteristics of Western Marxism:

Born from the failure of proletarian revolutions in the advanced zones of European capitalism after the First World War, it developed within an ever-increasing scission between socialist theory and working-class practice...The result was a seclusion of theorists in universities, far from the life of the proletariat in their own countries, and a contraction of theory from economics and politics into philosophy. This specialization was accompanied by an increasing difficulty of language, whose technical barriers were a function of its distance from the masses. (1989: 92)

Tallying with this critique, Adorno and Horkheimer in their discussion *Towards New Manifesto* assert:

But today we have to declare ourselves defeatists. Not in a fatalistic way, but simply because of the situation we find ourselves in. There is nothing we can do. We should not turn this into a theory, but have to declare that basically we cannot bring about change. We must not act as if we still could. (2011)

Denials echoes this defeatist conviction. In *Materialist Film*, Gidal tries to link the concept of non-identity and meaninglessness in his work to Marxist concepts, declaring that “The attempt to construct empty signifiers and non-identities is a process for the production of the political anti-individualist” (1989: 154). If Gidal’s attempted construction of non-identity and de-subjectivization has the Marxist characteristic of anti-individualism, then the viewer also needs an alternative sense of being and agency, namely a collective one. If there is no “I” then there must be “we”, otherwise one is left with nothing, a non-being, which can only lead to nihilism rather than a Marxist materialist practice. Hence Gidal’s position and practice, with respect to *Denials* is completely paradoxical. The position we are given, as a viewer, is as fixed as that of narrative cinema, except not as “knower” but as “not-knower”, not as symbolic identity but as non-being.

While I am critical of Gidal's certain aesthetic strategies and theories discussed in the preceding analysis, his rigorously critical approach has been most influential in this project. The two videos and the expanded cinema piece in the Media Blackout series operate via various means of negation and even the final video *A+* adopts aesthetic strategies that involve negation. *Media Blackout I* (2016) is a computer-generated digital video, which is posed as a critique of the image and language as signifying processes through various means of negation. The work was prompted by the actual media blackouts in Turkey, but there is nothing in the work that suggests my personal/ethnic connection. I wanted to see if I could draw attention to an international political phenomenon objectively, through an aesthetic operation/process that involves text as a graphic image at the same time as problematising the process of reading. With *Media Blackout II* I developed and performed a live cinematic event, which dispensed with all the filmmaking apparatuses and used a lightbulb and a mirror instead. In this piece, I swing the lightbulb, which hangs from the ceiling, towards the mirror in measured intervals until it breaks smashing against the mirror, ending in complete blackout. *Media Blackout II* is a further investigation of the degree to which I could remove the mechanically reproduced image and still construct a cinematic experience in which a critique of representation to some degree constitutes a political aesthetic.

In *Media Blackout III* (2018) I dissolve my own image into the black abyss through a predetermined process of taking screenshots, until the image completely deteriorates on the final screenshot. This process involved repetitively looking at my own image, in which I also look at my self-image on the mirror. Thus, while taking the screenshots I also watched myself disappear into dark pixels. While I was sympathetic to Gidal's intentions of moving away from identity and subjectivity, this process made me question if a concept and strategy such as "de-subjectivization" is pertinent to a maker whose identity/subjectivity has been historically marginalised and oppressed, personally and as a group. Is the concept of "constructing non-identity" the same if you are a black queer viewer or white straight man? Similar argument can be carried out against Gidal's construction of "emptying-out of potent signifiers", which is often coupled with another concept: "production of meaninglessness" (Gidal, 1989: 78). These concepts become problematic when one asks who is signifying or whose meaning is communicated or negated. It is not that Gidal does not ask these questions, but his answer is to shift the attention from

subject-centred production to the material process of film. This way, all meanings are denied. Based on these questions, in my final video *A+* (2018-2020) I explored the possibilities of problematising the images and language that are expressly political, and to a certain degree personal.

What can Structural/materialist film theory offer to contemporary film and video practices?

In light of my discussion so far, I ask, can Structural/materialist film theory developed by Gidal in 1970s offer relevant aesthetic strategies and devices to contemporary film and video practices in the 2020s? I think it still can, if we put “equal emphasis” on the dialectical aspect of this theory and reassess its certain aspects such as its pessimism. In 1975 Gidal wrote: “Equal emphasis must be put on the Materialist ‘half’ of the term (and a dialectical materialism, not a mechanistic materialism is necessary)” (2016: 67). I suggest we take the dialectical out the parenthesis and make it central to the materialist film theory and practice. In doing so one might consider Fredric Jameson’s clarification of what dialectics is; he writes: “there are a number of forms that the dialectic can take. It seems abusive, except in a philosophy seminar, to speak of *the dialectic*” (ed. Ian Buchanan 2007: 193). Jameson proposes to think of the dialectic as a “thought mode of the future” instead of a concept from the past. In relation to his proposal, he discusses three features that the dialectic has: the first is on “the logic of the situation” and its constant changeability; the second is regarding the matter of dialectic of history, where the dialectic operates as a demystifying tool of already constructed historical narratives; and last but not least, “an emphasis on contradiction”.

It is also worth remembering Jameson has also argued that: “Marxism is a critical rather than a systematic philosophy” (1974: 365). It aims to rectify what it sees wrong in a dialectical manner. In this respect one could ask whether constructing the viewer as “not-knower” can still be identified as transgressive or critical? What if negativity has become a characteristic of the dominant culture? Sean Cubitt argues that Adorno’s negation, which was against the “positivity of the world he inhabited”, is now redundant, because now “the dominant culture itself is negative” and “performs its own rituals of self-abasement and negation” (in Le Grice 2001: xvi). Or, as Jameson claims, what if we now live in a world “which does not require a Brechtian V-effect since it is already objectively estranged?” (2015: 105). In our

increasingly polarised society I find dialectical thinking a firm base to test ideas, images and meanings, and evaluate their power and affect. Althusser asserts that ideology operates in the unconscious and that we are always in ideology, but he also emphasises: “it is necessary to be outside ideology” (Althusser, 1971: 175). Jameson elaborates on how that might be achieved:

The dialectic is designed to eject us from its illusory order, to project us in spite of ourselves out of our concepts into the world of genuine realities to which those concepts were supposed to apply. We cannot, of course, ever really get outside our own subjectivities: to think so is the illusion of positivism; but, every time they begin to freeze over, to spring us outside our own hardened ideas into a new and more vivid apprehension of reality itself is the task of genuine dialectical thinking. (1974: 372)

In agreement with Jameson, I maintain that dialectical thinking provides one the instrument to step out and see oneself in ideology and see one's own thinking, own filming, own viewing. In his discussion on Marxist dialectics Jameson writes: ‘Dialectical thinking is a thought to the second power, a thought about thinking itself in which the mind must deal with its own thought process just as much as with the material it works on’ (1974: 45).

I have found Jameson's definition useful when I think about what constitutes dialectical thinking with regards to film and video practice and in part it tallies with aspects of Gidal's theory and definition of Structural/materialist film, such as “de-subjectivization” and “non-identity” which could still be relevant if they also contain their opposites (the subject and identity) if the film/video presents that contradiction. A film that achieves that sense of anti-individualism, without sacrificing the female subject/identity and therefore its agency, with a powerful sense of collectivism is Lis Rhodes' *Light Reading* (1978), which I discuss in detail in the following chapter.

Chapter 3

Another materialism: *Light Reading*

Lis Rhodes, who has enjoyed two major retrospectives in the last decade – *Dissonance and Disturbance* (2012) at ICA, *Dissident Lines* (2019) at Nottingham Contemporary – has been making experimental films and videos since 1971. The London Filmmakers' Co-op was the context of her film practice in that decade, and she was an active and influential member. She made *Light Reading* (1978) after a series of abstract films and expanded cinema works, which deal particularly with the indexical relationship between sound and image. She experimented with sound compositions made with shapes on the optical soundtrack of the 16mm film, looking for material manifestations of image as sound. Her first film *Dresden Dynamo* (1971) is one of the most notable films of the series, where the geometric pattern composed on the 16mm filmstrip leaks onto to optical soundtrack, so that we hear the sound of the shapes we see on screen. As she puts it: "The film is the score is the sound" (1998-99). *Dresden Dynamo* is made without a camera, applying Letratone directly on clear, transparent filmstrip. According to Nicky Hamlyn, the imagery was created printing negative and positive copies from these originals. He writes: "The sound is generated by the image spreading over the optical soundtrack and it is left in 'level sync', which means that the sound actually comes 26 ½ frames after the picture when it is projected in the normal way." (2003: 166) Thus, in fact what we hear is what we have seen a few frames before. This material reality of film image and sound poetically reverberates in one section of the voiceover in *Light Reading*: "The sounds are always behind/ Behind in the depths of her mind/ Behind in the drumming of the present day".

Interrogating Language

These material investigations of the relationship between film and optical sound seem to have led Rhodes to explore the material connection between written language and image. In that decade, she also makes three other 16mm films, *Amanuensis* (1973), *Print Slip* (1975), and *Rip It Up* (1975). Although not so well known, these films were significant for the making of *Light Reading* and in fact some sections of these films later became part of *Light Reading*. *Amanuensis* and *Print Slip* are Rhodes' first investigations of words, language and meaning making in film. In *Amanuensis*, a used typewriter ribbon with letters punched in, which is almost the

same width as 16mm film, is aligned together with 16mm film stock. Then this double strip is hand wound through a film-editing device (a pic synch) under a lightbulb, which demonstrates a clear attempt at looking for film material's potential to give the written letter or word a sound. The film is not consciously manipulated to communicate meaning. Rhodes writes:

I tried to find the equivalent 'sound pictures' of words that had worked in the case of sound notation. To do this I printed used typewriter tapes onto 16mm film. These filmic experiments demonstrated the impossibility of making a material connection between 'what is said to be seen' and 'what is seen to be said'. There is no apparent connection between saying and seeing other than perceptually (1998/99).

The result of this, in *Amanuensis*, is that the words are dismantled into letters running down the screen vertically, in negative, like a stream of light on the screen, without meaning. Even though the words fail to manifest themselves as sounds on the film material, Rhodes continued to be preoccupied with her notion regarding "what is said to be seen and what is seen to be said" (1998/99), and the relationship between saying, seeing and knowing, especially from a feminist perspective. It is possibly because the film failed to give sounds to the words as shapes, in *Amanuensis*, that Rhodes decided to sound them with her voice in *Light Reading*.

It is likely that because of this move towards text and narrative there has been a tendency to read 'drama' into *Light Reading* in early criticism of the film. Joanna Kiernan starts her essay in *Undercut* by describing the film "as a personal drama, both metaphoric and psychological, it is radically removed from the visual abstract, systematic, and coolly intellectual films previously associated with the filmmaker" (2003: 111). While I agree that the change from abstraction towards representation is striking, I would argue that *Light Reading* is neither personal nor dramatic and in fact one of the most theoretical "coolly" films Rhodes had made. It is true that *Light Reading* might well allude to narrative cinema in terms of its association with Germaine Dulac's *The Smiling Madame Beudet* (1922) as suggested by Felicity Sparrow in "Her Image Fades Her Voice Rises" (1983). Sparrow writes: "*Light Reading* could be picking up the thread of Madame Beudet's story, the voice could be hers after seeing herself on film sixty years later" (2019: 87). Indeed, the blood on the bed—if it is blood—could be seen to symbolise Madame Beudet's, or her

husband's, whom she wanted to kill, but failed. However, these possible narrative threads are imagined or read into the film. I would argue that *Light Reading* is a film that challenges narrative, tests its devices, interrogates its patriarchal structure, and does so dialectically.

Light Reading starts with Rhodes' voice, she first enunciates the title, then reads a text for around two minutes over black film leader. Although only a few lines are directly borrowed from an early Gertrude Stein text "A Sonatina Followed by Another" (1921). Stein's influence is evident in the entire narration of Rhodes, and it is not only due to repetition of these lines throughout the film but because of the ways in which Rhodes decomposes the language, uses multiple pronouns—challenging the subject position of the reader—and her voice expresses a certain mode that evokes Stein. She even deconstructs Stein's text, which originally reads as:

And now mountains, and now mountains, do not cloud, over. Let us wash
our hair and stare stare at mountain ranges. How sweet are suns and suns.
And the season. The sea or the season, and the roads. Roads often
neglected.
How can you feel so reasonably? (1953: 10)

Or "Pussy said I was to wake her in an hour and a half if it didn't rain. It is still raining
what should I do. Should I wake her or should I let her sleep longer" (1953: 6).
Some of the words are omitted and some sentences re-structured, divided into parts
and repeated at several intervals. The first quotation of Stein comes at the
beginning of the film, setting the tone. Rhodes begins to read:

and now she wrote.
and now mountains do not cloud over.
let us wash our hair and stare.
stare at mountains.

she begins to read.
should I wake her or should I let her sleep longer.
she reads silently.
she reads in silence.

who turned the light away.
the light away from her.
she will not be placed in darkness.
she will be present in darkness.
only to be apparent.
to appear without image.
to be heard unseen.
she lightens her own reading.
she reads by the reflection of herself (my transcription)

This setting of the text above emulates the rhythm of the words spoken in the film. The text reads as numerous sentences uttered one after the other individually, rather than several sentences comprising a paragraph. Sometimes even the sentence is not fully formed syntactically. This mode of expression resonates with Stein's prose but also her theories around writing. In *How to Write*, she has a substantial chapter on sentences, where she writes many sentences on sentence and a shorter chapter called "Sentences and Paragraphs" in which she claims: "A Sentence is not emotional a paragraph is" (1973: 23) A paragraph is emotional for Stein because a paragraph involves narrative, a point she explains further in the book, *Narration*:

I said then that sentences as they have for centuries been written were a balancing a complete inner balance of something that stated something as being existing and that a paragraph was a succession of these sentences that going on and then stopping made the emotional content of something having a beginning and middle and ending (2010: 20).

Whereas "Sentences are contained within themselves and anything really contained within itself has no beginning or middle or ending" (Stein, 2010: 20), in *Light Reading* the structure of the entire text is composed of sentences without a paragraph. There are only a few occasions where two or three sentences read one after another do relate to each other, but even then, there is still no sense of chain of events, causal relations or a fixed subject. Rhodes dismantles linear narrative structure, which is the dominant construction in literature and film. And there are always direct references to this in the film's voiceover, such as "The end began where the beginning ended" or "is the end the beginning or the beginning ending".

But paradoxically the text is divided to three sections in the film, perhaps alluding to a beginning, middle and end, but without giving a sense of causal relations.

Who is speaking?

In *Light Reading* the voice mostly speaks of “she”, the third person female singular pronoun, very rarely speaks as “I” and sometimes refers to “us” and “you”. This is one of the reasons why I disagree with Kiernan’s assessment of *Light Reading* as a “personal drama”. The use of the third person makes the narration impersonal. Arguably, the voice belongs to all women. Rhodes speaks as, to, and for woman under the pronoun “she”. The voice possibly speaks as herself/the filmmaker when she says: “She writes on small white frames, turns them over”. The voice possibly speaks as a viewer when she says, “In mind of herself she listens” or “Blurring her mind with the sound of words”. The voice also possibly speaks of Madame Beudet when she says “She slept a little this morning. Feeling physically grey. Pale with self-absorption”, as this could well refer to the scene in Dulac’s film when Madame Beudet wakes up after a nightmarish evening and is tormented with self-absorption and ideas of killing her husband. The voice could also be ascribed to Gertrude Stein, as quoted at the beginning of the film.

Lucy Reynolds suggests that “the ‘she’ of a female subject ... never assumes the shape of a particular woman, but remains an identity out of reach, the question of female posed by patriarchal language; the female hidden in the narratives of history, of cinema, literature and music” (2012). While this is a reasonable analysis, and it is right that there is no particular woman to identify with, I find it hard to match Rhodes’ ‘she’ with “an identity out of reach” or a represented mythical ‘she’ “hidden in the narratives”. To my mind ‘she’ is very visible and present: she is the woman sitting next to me in the dark room; she is the woman I see in the film, and the one making the film. I see her hands and hear her voice. In viewing *Light Reading* we are collectively, speaking, reading, writing and making the film as women. In this respect I equally find it hard to accept Kiernan’s suggestion that refers to switching between ‘she’ and the authorial ‘I’ as a “metaphor of the self who, unable to speak herself, is asleep, or dead, or dreaming” (2003: 113). I find Rhodes’ ‘she’ far from dead or asleep, even if the text alludes to a ‘she’ who might be dead, dreaming or sleeping. On the contrary, I find ‘she’ is quite alive: ‘she’ is an active agent, she listens, she looks, and she reads in silence, darkness and light. And she is certainly not “unable

to speak herself”, because ‘she’ is also Rhodes who is indeed speaking. The following films that Rhodes made prove the point. The voice became louder and stronger—metaphorically speaking—and certain films have involved other female voices besides Rhodes’.

After around two minutes, the voice stops and images begin to appear. They are negative images of letters, words and numbers but nothing can be read. Nothing can be heard either, except the reverberations of Rhodes’ voice in our minds from a minute ago: “The words dance in a moment of light. Re-gathered to the sound of her voice.” Did she “say” what was to be “seen”? Are we “seeing” what we are “told”? Here, Rhodes seems to be testing the perceptual connection between “saying and seeing”. This segment and some of the other parts of the film, where letters and words appear are composed from Rhodes’ earlier film *Amanuensis* (1973) as mentioned earlier. In this experiment with typewriter ribbons and filmstrips, Rhodes not only poses an enquiry into film material, namely investigating the material connection between sound and image, she also attempts to shake the authority of words and by extension language by emptying out meaning. Sentences on the typewriter ribbon are dismantled into words and letters, pulled through the optical printer, abstracted into a line of light (Fig. 11).



Fig.11. *Light Reading* (1978) and *Amanuensis* (1973) Lis Rhodes

The dance of words is followed by a montage of various still images. There are hardly any images that represent natural movement or perspectival space. Most of the images we see have already been photographed. They are flat negative film

prints or photographs. These images are recurrent throughout the film: black and white photograph/s of an unmade bed with dark stained sheets: 16mm negative film strips (from earlier films *Rip It Up*, *Print Slip* [1975]) showing a man with glasses in a couple of frames (*Rip It Up*); a deteriorated photograph of a man's legs walking; and negative and positive image of a ruler and scissors (Fig. 12). There is constant repetition of images that are layered, torn, separated, collaged, zoomed-in, zoomed-out. Images of words also pour down like a light stream. In this respect there is never a sense of depth; the space is flattened out, which keeps the viewer at a distance. Almost everything that appears on the screen look like clues laid out on a flat surface (and the film's surface). This pre-empts Rhodes' interest in forensics and justice systems, which she deals with extensively in later films and her most recent videos, which I return to in the next chapter.

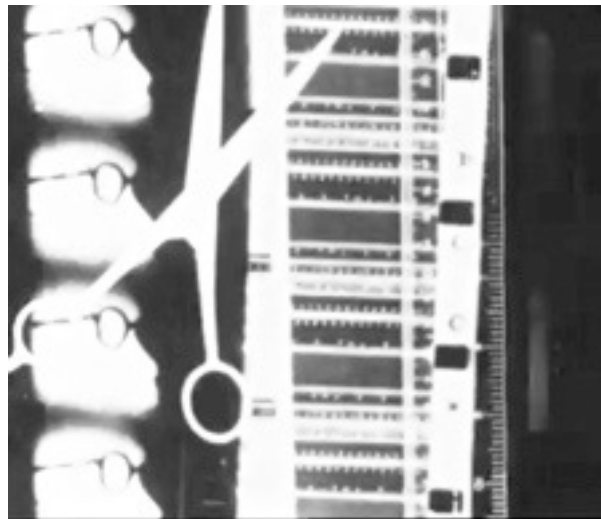


Fig.12. *Light Reading* (1978, Lis Rhodes) (detail)

In *Light Reading* the viewer is part of the film's production and meaning, nothing is pre-given. In the third part of the film there are several lines in the voiceover that resemble a shooting plan, or instructions for the film's making: "Hold still shot of her raised hand", "Move around from top to right of frame in a complete circle/No sound". However, could these also be instructions for the viewer? This incorporation of the viewer recalls Gidal's Structural/materialist film theory in which he states: "the mental activation of the viewer is necessary for the procedure of the film's existence" (1975:). There are also numerous other characteristics of *Light Reading* that can be, and have been, read in the context of Structural/materialist film: the filmic constructions that foreground the materiality of the film and the processes of its own making; the construction of active viewer, involved in "structuring" the film,

and so on. Nancy Woods states: "The film exceeds the present political boundaries of structural/materialist filmmaking in harnessing this 'presentational strategy' [of the processes and materials of the film's construction] to a feminist critique of language and representation" (1989: 68). I would propose that the feminist critique of language and representation, and how it dialectically problematises subjectivity, is a materialist film practice. And I would argue that *Light Reading* offers a Marxist feminist alternative formulation of subjectivity, from the position of the oppressed, which challenges Gidal's notion of "constructing non-identity" and the viewer as "not-knower". Thus, *Light Reading* can also be read as a critique of Gidal's terms and offer a valuable perspective by which to reassess and surpass them.

The French feminist writer Christine Delphy, whom Gidal often quotes, writes: "The term oppression is therefore the base, the point of departure, of any feminist research, as of any feminist approach" (2016: 269). In dominant political, economic, cultural structures, along with most other systems of representations in culture, art and so on, women are oppressed with the aid of verbal and visual language, by supressing women's subjectivity as a viewer as well as supressing representation of women as subject. Simone de Beauvoir states: "Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth" (in Code 1991: ix). Lorraine Code investigates women's position in relation to knowledge, looking at its roots in epistemology in her book *What Can She Know* (1991) in which she demonstrates the ways in which women are methodically excluded in the production of the theory of knowledge. Starting from Aristotle, she discusses how and why many Western philosophers downgrade women's cognitive capacities. She argues that: "Women have to be in positions where they can know, if they are effectively to challenge the oppressions that have shaped their lives" (1991: xii). Rhodes makes the exact point when she says in *Light Reading* "she will not be placed in darkness".

Oppression is not always visible or overt. It is embedded in language and representation, and that is precisely where Lis Rhodes directs her criticism, she challenges language with words, narrative with story and filmic representation with images. She attempts to dismantle, decompose and reconfigure them all. But what makes *Light Reading* extraordinary, even within the experimental film discourse, is that Rhodes constructs a film that opens up a new dialectical experience, which is outside the paradigm of existing dominant film discourse of the time and similarly

the dichotomies that Gidal sets up. *Light Reading* is a film that searches for its own language, voice and images outside of the existing patriarchal paradigms and discourse.

Light Reading is significant for this project as it offers a different model of dialectical materialism that I see as a point of departure for future critical practices. The film represents an assertion of the subject, but at the same time it complicates it. And this was a lesson I utilised in my work. While my work does not necessarily deal with identity explicitly, the issues that I deal with do stem from a clear subjective intention. Hence there are always traces of my identity – who I am and where I come from geographically and politically – in the work I produce.

Chapter 4

Unlikely assembly: William Raban, Lis Rhodes and Forensic Architecture

Since the late 2000s, methods of political citizen activism and political art have begun to merge in a new way with the advances of smart phone and video technologies and major events on a global and local scale: Wiki-leaks, whistle-blowing in the US, the 2008 banking crisis, “The Arab Spring”, The Gaza War, London riots, the Occupy Movements, Syrian Civil war, refugee crisis, and the Black Lives Matter Movement. Citizen journalism and activism often utilise digital photography and video to record human right violations or collect visual evidence of police violence. Particularly in the last decade, these types of images began to appear in artists’ films and videos more widely. Numerous artists have been using found footage or they—including Lis Rhodes—were indeed recording personally at anti-war protests, refugee camps or civil war zones either to document the events or collect evidences of atrocities (similar to citizen activism). Some of this material made their way to art galleries, some to court files, or, in the case of Forensic Architecture’s work, to both. Of further significance is that, in the last decade, discourses on art and politics and “political art” began to be embraced by major art institutions and by extension have become more widespread. The evidence of this can easily be located in the programmes of several major art events from 2010s such as dOCUMENTA 13 (2012), the 7th Berlin Biennial (2012), the 13th Istanbul Biennial (2013), and the recent list of nominees for Turner Prize 2018, 2019 and 2021. Looking back at the last decade, we can observe that lens-based media coupled with voice-over narration has become very popular amongst artists.

This chapter brings three very different work together: William Raban’s *Laki Haze* (2019), Lis Rhodes’ *Ambiguous Journeys* (2018), and Forensic Architecture’s “video investigation” *The Killing of Tahir Elçi* (2019). As unlikely as it may sound, I find common traits in these works including: the investigative journalism imbedded in them; their interest in traces, evidence, research and testimonies to reveal truth; and the way they speak for the humanity. These common characteristics are not necessarily in the works’ aesthetics but in their ambition and intention. What is similar in the outcome is that they tend to be descriptive. The works assign themselves as the spokespeople of “truth” and describe how things are, or, more specifically, how bad things are. In the case of Forensic Architecture, they also

visualise and simulate events, regardless of how horrific some of those things happen to be.

Historically, the voice-over has been a key device for filmmakers who have political concerns to express. The list is extensive, from Hito Steyerl, Harun Farocki and Jean-Luc Godard to Lis Rhodes, John Smith and the Otolith Group, to name just a few from divergent avant-gardes. Even William Raban, who decisively eschewed using voice-over for so many years, has lent his own voice to recent works such as *Laki Haze* (2019). Through viewing a wide range contemporary films and videos, and thinking through making *A+*, I observed that amongst filmmakers with strong political convictions, the voice-over often goes hand-in-hand with the aspiration or intention of telling “the truth”. In our age of “alternative truths”, “fake news” and disinformation, or, to use Raban’s words from *Laki Haze*, “this febrile age in this new crisis of obfuscation”, it seems reasonable that filmmakers have become like investigative journalists or political activists recording and collecting evidence and testimonies to reveal what is obfuscated. In this chapter, I examine the strategies, devices and technologies William Raban, Lis Rhodes and Forensic Architecture utilise in these recent works, and raise questions about the ethical and political implications of filming suffering people and the problematics around the spectatorship with regards to such questions.

The Power of Speech: *Laki Haze*

William Raban made his first films in 1970 while he was still a painting student at Saint Martin’s School of Art. He was one of the most prolific experimental filmmakers of that decade, in which he made over 20 works. Like Lis Rhodes and Peter Gidal, he was one of the most active members of the LFMC, and the workshop manager between 1972-76. While he is mostly known for his landscape films and multi-screen installations, the London cityscape occupies most of his films in the last thirty years. To categorise his work as social documentary might not be accurate, as his practice continues to be diverse, but social and political concerns have become more overt in his work, especially since he began to use his own distinct voice. This steady move towards documentary coincides with the period of Thatcherism that began to dominate the political, economic and social sphere. Its visible effects can be seen in the London cityscape, in terms of its constant “regeneration”, particularly in the reconstruction of the Isle of Dogs as the new

Financial centre, the destruction of council houses and the rise of far-right movements.

During the first decade of his practice, one of Raban's main concerns seemed to be with how time can be materialised, recorded and represented with cinematic devices. The last paintings that he was working on, when he began filmmaking, also anticipate this concern: Raban wrapped a piece of canvas around a tree trunk, tied it around and applied a layer of paint at intervals. Through the passing of time, the paint got washed off by rain, retaining some traces of the paint, the tree liquids and rainwater marks over a several months (O'Pray, 2003: 107). Thus, instead of painting the tree, Raban allows the tree to paint itself, or print itself on to the canvas, including traces of weather conditions (humidity, heat etc.) and time. This pre-film work not only shows his interest in time and duration, the weather and landscape, it also indicates his interest in a form of indexicality that pre-empts the photochemical, mechanical representation of time in film. Correspondingly, Raban's filmmaking practice, like that of Rhodes and Gidal, took the material conditions of the medium as a starting point. Considering his early works, his approach can be identified as starting out with materialist concerns.

Raban's latest video *Laki Haze* takes a ruinous historic event from 1783—a volcanic eruption in Iceland and its catastrophic effects across Europe as a departure point—to comment on the present eco-political crisis. The video shows waves hitting the shore at sunrise in Cabanyal, Valencia (Fig. 13), and is comprised of a single take that lasts—as specified in Raban's synopsis on the Lux website—17 minutes, 57 seconds, which suggest that Raban wants to be specific about the length. It facilitates a long, pensive and worrisome contemplation on the eco-political problems we face today.

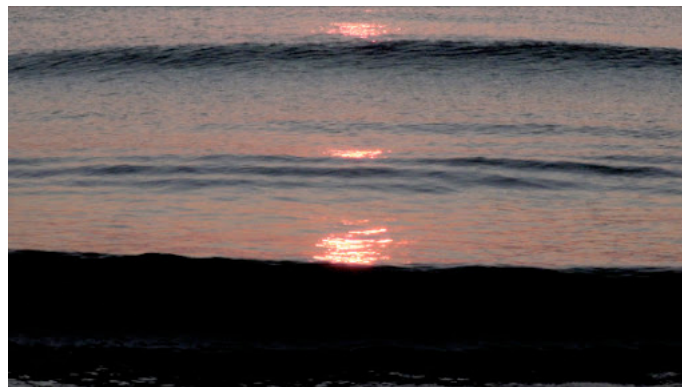


Fig.13. *Laki Haze* (2019, William Raban)

The video begins at twilight, with black waves rolling towards us, covering the entire screen, but it is so dark that it is only the sound of the waves that helps us identify them. The quote from Samuel Johnson's *The Idler*, dated 24 June 1758, gradually reveals itself at the bottom of the frame "The weather is a nobler and more interesting subject; it is the present state of the skies, and of the earth, on which plenty and famine are suspended, on which millions depend for the necessities of life." This quote encapsulates Raban's concerns rather well. Weather indeed is a fascinating subject, when it is conceptualised as a gauge, indicating the present state of the skies and the earth. The Johnson quote goes deeper by pointing out that necessities of life depend on it, and this is where politics also come to play in the form of wealth distribution, property, means of production and so on. Thus, Raban seems to comment not just on the isolated ecological crisis, but also how it is linked with global politics.

Into the first minute of the film, another caption appears, telling the viewer where the next seven citations are coming from. They are eyewitness observations of the Lakagigar volcanic eruption in Iceland. It is also known as the 1783-1784 Laki Eruption, which lasted for several months in between June 1783 and February 1784. As we learn in the film, the effects have been observed and documented by many across Europe. Raban reads seven eyewitness accounts that were written by an Icelandic priest Jón Steingrímsson and another eight by others from various European cities, ending with an account by Gilbert White, a naturalist from Hampshire, and finally an observation by English poet William Cowper. Most of these observations focus on the quality of the air and the look of the Sun. The first one, for example, is: "When it could be seen, the Sun appeared as red ball of fire, the moon was as red as blood. When their rays of light fell upon the earth it took on the same colour". The words, 'blood', 'red' and 'fire' are recurrent in the descriptions of the sun as well as the moon and the colour of the air and the earth.

William Cowper, reporting in his letter to Reverend John Newton, dated 29 June 1783, writes that some believed the Day of Judgment may be at hand and the tone of the letter is rather apocalyptic. The Cowper quote is followed by one from a contemporary essay by Tobias Menely: "The Present Obfuscation: Cowper's Task and the Time of Climate Change" (2012), in which he discusses how this apocalyptic tone is adopted by scientists in our time. These two quotes are

particularly significant in *Laki Haze*, as they bridge the concerns of late 18th Century and the early 21st. In his essay, Menely draws from Gilbert White and Cowper's writings, especially the latter's correspondence with John Newton, which crop up under the subheading "The Laki Haze" (Menely, 2012: 480). Cowper, not knowing what was happening in Iceland, writes to his friend and talks about how thick the fog is in the air. In the same letter (not quoted in the film) he writes: 'We never see the sun but the shorn of his beams' (Cowper, 1969: 83). Interestingly, we also never see the sun in *Laki Haze*, only its reflection on the sea. We know the sun is rising, as the scene gradually gets lighter and the shimmering red reflections on the sea get brighter, but we are not shown the sun directly. Nonetheless, since many of the observations we have heard thus far in the soundtrack elaborate on how the sun looks, one cannot help but imagine images of a 'blood-red' sun.

In the beginning of the film the sea looks dark, almost black, gradually becoming dark purple, mix of blue and red in the air. The surface of the sea looks restless, almost trembling. By the time we hear Cowper's words, the presence of the rising sun is felt: a shiny reddish pink reflection begins entering the frame from the top, traveling through the centre of the screen and disappearing at the bottom, carried by the waves. By now our perception of what we are looking at—the reflection of the sunrise over the sea—which is generally accepted as a beautiful view, is distorted by the horrific accounts we have been hearing, uttered by Raban's potent voice. By the 14th minute of the video, the reflection begins to look like liquid fire or magma mixed with blood, flowing towards us. Gradually a potentially beautiful scene has been turned into a nightmarish vision. The video ends with a final quote, from the Lord Byron poem "Darkness" (1816), not uttered by Raban but presented as caption at the bottom of the frame. As the title of the poem suggests it is indeed a gloomy poem, as indicated by this extract:

The rivers, lakes and ocean all stood still,
And nothing stirr'd within their silent depths;
Ships sailorless lay rotting on the sea,
And their masts fell down piecemeal: as they dropp'd
They slept on the abyss without a surge—
The waves were dead; the tides were in their grave,
The moon, their mistress, had expir'd before;
The winds were wither'd in the stagnant air,

And the clouds perish'd; Darkness had no need
Of aid from them—She was the Universe. (in *Laki Haze*)

There are also mentions of famine, fire and volcanoes in the poem, which is written in the summer of 1816 following another catastrophic eruption of a volcano, which affected the weather and livelihood of most of the Northern Hemisphere. Byron's poem is about a dream—though the first line of the poem declares that it is apparently “not at all a dream”—in which he describes a universe where the sun is “extinguished” the moon is “expired” and “the waves were dead”. This recalls the short quote from Tobias Menely, read by Raban earlier in the film: “Today, it is the scientists, not prophets, who speak the language of apocalypse”. It seems that the filmmaker also speak the language of apocalypse. Considering Raban's earlier film and video works, that challenge the construction of meaning in their incorporation of slogans on posters, walls and graffiti and the voices of protestors chanting at rallies—as in *A13* (1994) and *Island Race* (1996)—*Laki Haze* uses language rather unproblematically. The remarkable films Raban made with his long-time collaborator David Cunningham are also a contrast. In *Civil Disobedience* (2004) and *Available Light* (2016) there is a distortion of language that challenges the authority and power of language alongside a subtle political critique.

The use of language in the form of a voice-over commentary and the image of catastrophe enters Raban's films with *Thames Film* (1986), which opens with an image of a skeleton playing a drum; a detail from the *Triumph of the Death* (1562) by Pieter Bruegel the Elder (Fig. 14). A slow zoom-out reveals the rest of the painting: death depicted as skeleton winning over humanity and nature; dead bodies; animal fossils; a grey sea with sunken ships; a sunless but red, hell-like sky on the horizon giving the red yellow tinge to bare lifeless earth. Byron could well have been looking at this painting while writing his poem “Darkness”, as well the actual dark skies of his time. This terrifying image is accompanied by sombre hymn sung by soprano Paula Bednarczyk, which is exceptionally emotive. This image and sound reoccur as a set, later in the film, sometimes in close-up, revealing more details of the painting. Considering that *Thames Film* is made in the mid 1980, one cannot help but link this gloomy mood of the film with the years of Thatcher's government.



Fig. 14. Triumph of the Death (1562-63, Pieter Bruegel the Elder) Oil on canvas. 117cm x 162 cm.

The famous British actor John Hurt narrates the film's texts, taken from various sources. In addition, T.S. Eliot's voice is also heard, reading extracts from *Four Quartets* (1941) and voices of news reporters from post-war newsreels are also included. From 1991, voice-over narration in this vein is abandoned for 20 years. In *The Houseless Shadow* (2011) and *Time and the Wave* (2013) Raban uses his own, one might add distinguished, voice, lending it to texts by Charles Dickens in both films. And in *London Republic* (2016), he tells his own partly prophetic short story about the EU referendum that took place in June 2016 in the UK. And in *Laki Haze* Raban voices the words of all-male reverends and scientists while adding his own commentary within.

There is an interesting point to make here about Raban's use of his own voice and the texts he chooses to use in relation to language, authority and didacticism. In *Language and Symbolic Power*, Pierre Bourdieu claims that the power of the word comes from outside of language. He writes: 'The illocutionary force of expressions cannot be found in the very words' (1991: 107). According to Bourdieu, it is a mistake to look at words themselves if one is searching for where power comes from: "the power of words is nothing other than the *delegated power* of the spokesperson" (1991: 107). It could be argued that in *The Houseless Shadow*, *Time*

and *the Wave* and *Laki Haze*, Raban assigns himself as the spokesperson of the words he recites and hence embodies these “great men” of literature, the Christian Church and social science, and that through the authority he gains by voicing their text he empowers his own words. One could also add that this authority is an unchallenged male authority that dominates most institutional discourse, particularly in religion but science too. He utilises this authority to alarm the viewer. Raban’s words are as apocalyptic as Cowper’s: he mentions “brutal murder” of Labour MP Jo Cox, rise of extreme far right, racism and climate change. He ends his words on an anxious note: “this febrile age in this new crisis of obfuscation”, with the last word here referring back to Cowper’s “present obfuscation” (1969 and in Menely 2012).

A striking contrast appears if we compare the sound and the voice in the above-mentioned films and the earlier *A13* or *Island Race*. Language in the guide of the voices of protestors and the slogans and text from posters and graffiti in *Island Race* function quite differently to Raban’s authoritative voice and the words by influential men in *Laki Haze*. In *Laki Haze*, there is no detectable attempt at constructing a dialectical mode of communication: Raban speaks *to* the viewer, telling us how things are, albeit by way of quotation. Image, sound and language are utilised to increase the efficacy of his message, without problematizing their constructions. When the language is utilised unchallenged, the possibility of a dialectical viewing experience seem to regress. It regresses because we perceive a set of predetermined facts, we need not do anything but be informed: the filmmaker undertook the research, did the thinking, and presented us his decisive findings. This mode leaves little space for a dialectical viewing experience. At the same time, the long single-take in *Laki Haze* does at least encourage a long reflective look, contemplating connections between the past and the present. So although the video conveys a sense of despair, it avoids showing images of violence inflicted on people (unlike *Ambiguous Journeys* and Forensic Architecture’s *The Killing of Tahir Elçi*) and invites the viewer to contemplate and reflect on the catastrophic image described.

Ambiguous Journeys: from interrogating language to embracing it

In contrast to *Light Reading*, Rhodes’ latest work, *Ambiguous Journeys* (2018), utilises language in a more conventional manner, often oscillating between the poetical and statistical, or the role of chronicler. Rhodes’ voice is more assured, her

political convictions more explicit and her expressions more acute. *Ambiguous Journeys* is concerned with multiple humanitarian, socio-political and financial issues spanning: debt, mortgages, unemployment, human rights issues, refugee rights, human trafficking and modern slavery taking place in range of countries from US, UK, Ghana, India to Syria. It is a forty-minute black and white video, in which Rhodes narrates from a manuscript on these issues.

Ambiguous Journeys opens with an ominous sound playing over abstract images; which is quickly joined by Rhodes' equally ominous voice uttering the poetic lines:

The line is shaking in the tremor
as the words are written
explosion rips the room apart
the words are burning on the page
in ashes silence will not fall
the page was blank
the message had been sent

After these lines, the poetic inscription is sharply ruptured by a sentence that reports statistical data on the displacement of people caused by wars and persecution. However, the tone of Rhodes' voice remains the same: rhythmic, plaintive, sombre, regardless of what she is uttering. This unvaried voice creates a coldness that heightens the chilling facts that Rhodes reports. It also creates an emotional distance to these facts, even though some of the sentences seem to solicit compassion. The text occasionally refers to itself or its construction in between these expressions, recalling *Light Reading*. For instance, sentences such as "Write the first line last" and "Lines cut across this fractured outline" appear on screen and voiced by Rhodes. These are not dissimilar, in their manner, to "lengthen the next frames" or "include optical print of the first section" in *Light Reading*. Rhodes also reads from statements made by victims of human trafficking, modern slavery and war. Even though Rhodes voices multiple subjects, *Ambiguous Journeys* does not achieve the sense of multiple subject positions that *Light Reading* conveys. The voice, as critical as it is, represents a single position without problematizing linguistic structures. Perhaps because of this singularity, coupled with reciting statistical data and legislations, the disembodied voice sounds affirmative and omnipotent.

The essayistic manuscript Rhodes narrates, also appears as text over the image, almost in its entirety. The text appears and disappears over all parts of the frame irregularly, while Rhodes reads it out loud. So, the viewers' experience of perceiving this text is twofold: via reading and hearing it, which creates two voices in the viewer's mind, one's own and hers. However, these two voices remain in unity except for a couple of rare moments, in which what we hear does not quite match what we read on the screen, but these inconsistencies do not suffice to create a break in our identification with the voice; the sense of unity remains dominant. The voice can be 'pivot for identification' to use Chion's phrase (1999: 89), or it can be utilised as a critical tool to subvert the dominant code and conventions of cinema and language through destabilising subject positions, and the subject/object relationship as Rhodes herself showed us in *Light Reading*. The voice possesses and conveys omnipotence when it accommodates the dominant narrative structures of language, when it speaks without challenging those structures, when it does not question its master, and when it maintains the hierarchy between the speaker and the listener. Arguably, through reciting statistical data, official accounts from institutions, such as the UN, or reciting legislations and regulations, Rhodes' voice in *Ambiguous Journeys* conveys an indisputable authority. Even though the video occasionally evokes her influential film *Light Reading*, and also at times *Running Light* (1996) and *Riff* (2004), in which the voice-over is utilised more critically through repetition and the distortion of sound, *Ambiguous Journeys* seems to employ the authority of language Rhodes was challenging in *Light Reading*.



Fig. 15. *Ambiguous Journeys* (2018, Lis Rhodes)

Often the imagery in *Ambiguous Journeys* oscillates between abstract impressionistic imagery and typographic or geometric abstractions (reminiscent of the earlier film *Amanuensis*). The impressionistic imagery could be likened to expanding cloudy sky, or a black and white infrared satellite map with the clear lines

resembling borders. These abstracted images, often in negative, are occasionally juxtaposed, or superimposed, with photographic still images of people, either protesting, under stress or dead, with reference to debt, homelessness and immigration. There are two other recognisable images that reoccur: image of wire fences in close up, recalling an earlier video *Riff*, and the shadow of raised hands (Fig. 15) or hands grabbing a fence. As is the case with the slightly earlier video *In the Kettle* (2010-12) these images represent the suffering of others —“the pain of others” to use Susan Sontag’s phrase— which is something Rhodes decisively avoided for many years. In the article titled “Flashback From A Partisan Filmmaker” (1998/99) reflecting on her filmmaking practice Rhodes writes:

The films I make do not show events. They refer to events. These events do not occur during or in the films. But the films do make use of events which have happened, do happen, and might happen again. In *Deadline* the arrests do not happen in the film. In *Running Light* you do not see the people trapped with 'no papers'. ... I do not film a person with 'no papers', someone in trouble, at risk. (1998/99)

In this context, *In the Kettle* seems to be a turning point, in which Rhodes points her camera directly to some of those ‘events’ to show ‘someone in trouble’. The film is partially about legality of bombing a flourmill in Palestine, but it is also about the protests that were taking place in London, and the police violence against the protestors.

In one segment of the video, an image of a CCTV camera, the iconic towers of HSBC and Citi Bank at Canary Wharf, graffiti that reads “the government lies, the banks steal, the rich laughs” and a police helmet, with MP Police written on it, dissolve into each other consecutively (Fig. 16 & 17).



Fig. 16. *In the Kettle* (2010-2012, Lis Rhodes)



Fig. 17. *In the Kettle* (2010-2012, Lis Rhodes)

The use of slow dissolves and superimpositions provide a platform to make for a conscious linkage in the viewer's mind, associating banks, the global rich, state surveillance and the police. While the video takes a critical position by making these connections, it is also taking advantage of conventional cinematic techniques to communicate its message. The work is perhaps prompted to question these links, but the viewer is also encouraged to perceive Rhodes' proposition as truth. In comparison to *Light Reading*, in which spoken language and film language are interrogated, *In the Kettle* to communicate a political position. Through Rhodes' camera we have a close look at the head of a protestor being smashed against the ground by the police. The protest scenes end in silence with another man on the ground pushed down by the riot police (Fig. 18). We are affected, we are emotionally manipulated, and we are not in the position of questioning our relationship with what we are looking at. While we watch this violence, are we not also implicated in it?



Fig. 18. *In the Kettle* (2010-2012, Lis Rhodes)

Ambiguous Journeys refrains from showing moving images of victims of violence. We are only presented with still photographs. Rhodes explains this in a recent interview discussing images of violence in relation to her previous video *Journal of Disbelief* (2010-2016). Rhodes says:

Why I use bodies is that we are now avoiding—or not being allowed to see—that during years of continual war, to quote from the journal of disbelief, “the US military has spent millions of dollars to prevent Western media from seeing highly accurate civilian satellite pictures of the effects of bombing” ... The problems are not of forgetting but rather of remembering, of the retrieval of the disappearing and the disappeared, of the omission and destruction of evidence. All of these are the effects of the illegalities of legality. The images in the journal of disbelief are not violent – they are the result of the inflicting of violence. (2016)

Rhodes makes an interesting and valuable distinction between “violent images” or “images of violence”. In the case of violent images, the violence is against the onlooker; the image assaults the viewer and therefore complicates the act of looking. It disturbs the voyeuristic look, and in that sense, offers a more critical approach than showing images of violence inflicted on other people: a situation in which the viewer is positioned as a passive observer. There is also another problem with the second approach: is it possible to critique a political situation, event or a phenomenon via the filmic or graphic reproduction of these events and their consequences? Rhodes in fact asked a similar question in 1998 when she wrote: “How to represent the 'as is' without imposing it again, visually and aurally? Maybe

this apparent impasse needs the precision of forensics and the flexibility of poetry to help prise it apart" (1998/99). While *Ambiguous Journeys* mostly refrains from showing us what she would call "as is", the video is keen to *tell* us about the "as is" in terms of how and why it has come about. It is an ambitious project to tell "how it is" and "why it is" considering the complexity of issues she touches upon. One could argue that it is simply an impossible task, so what does the video achieve?

I would argue that the effect of *Ambiguous Journeys* on the viewer can be so overwhelming that the viewer may well be left feeling paralysed in the face of multiplicity of atrocities taking place all around the world. Because the video cannot deal with all of its topics adequately, *Ambiguous Journeys* becomes a list of effects, accounting injustices, brutalities and suffering. It is, however, striking that Rhodes practically almost foresaw the current tendency, in contemporary artists' moving image works, towards witnessing, documenting and evidencing political events. The "precision of forensics" which she mentioned in 1998 is literally what Forensic Architecture (founded in 2010) try to utilise to demonstrate and prove state-sanctioned crimes, including murder, and human rights breaches.

Forensic Architecture: The Whole Truth?

Forensic Architecture, founded in 2010, is a research agency principally comprised of a team of architects, filmmakers, animators, game designers and law scholars, led by Eyal Weizman, based at Goldsmiths University, London. Their work is dedicated to revealing the truth behind human rights violations through uniting quite a large number of methods and tools, from data mining to 3-D modelling, machine learning to game design, animation and architecture design software, and so on. Yet they also exhibit widely in art galleries and museums. Forensic Architecture has established a multidisciplinary practice akin to investigative journalism and legal activism to reveal what is obfuscated by state powers. In the arena of international law, their "counter-forensic" investigations into state violence, which generally is swept under the carpet as closed cases, are invaluable. But how does the work function in the realm of aesthetics: in museums and art galleries, which they have been using as a platform — or "forum" in their word? How is the verbal and visual language of their work constructed? What is the efficacy of the videos? And, finally, how is the viewer addressed? While the breadth of their work calls for an in-depth survey to address these questions in full, due to the limitation of this project, I will

limit my critique to *The Killing of Tahir Elçi* (2019). I focus my attention on representation of real, violent events through computer-generated simulations that utilise cinematic codes and conventions, problematic spectatorship of such, and problems around Weizman's claim regarding "the necessity for the truth to be produced and staged" (2017: 74).



Fig. 19. *The Killing of Tahir Elçi* (2019, Forensic Architecture)

The Killing of Tahir Elçi (2019) is a video that presents Forensic Architecture's investigation of the assassination of Tahir Elçi, a well-known Kurdish lawyer and human rights activist. Elçi was shot dead in Diyarbakir, Turkey, in 2015, while giving a press conference in front of a historic minaret, which was damaged a few nights before by armed clashes in between PKK militants and the Police (Fig. 19). The video investigation opens with TV footage of Elçi speaking to the press just before the incident took place, while a narrator introduces Elçi and describes the time and the place, which gives a bit of context to the viewer. The placards Elçi and the people behind him hold present several slogans that attempt to give voice to the ancient four-legged minaret whose legs were badly damaged by the armed clashes. Tragically, the one Elçi was carrying says "I am a heritage of humanity, look after me" (my translation). This footage from the actual press conference is followed by a single video clip, which covers the 20 seconds period during which Elçi was shot, off-screen, just after his speech. We see Elçi and another man, worryingly looking behind the camera that was recording them. The camera follows their gaze, turns and records two armed men running towards them while being shot at by police officers in front. The narrator then reports that these two young PKK militants shot at two police officers (who later died) on an adjacent street and ran towards the narrow street where the press conference was, while locating the incident on a map,

showing us the city, the neighbourhood and the street from bird's-eye-view perspective. As we get to the street, the satellite map gracefully becomes a sophisticated 3D model of the two adjunct streets, reminiscent of video games aesthetics (Fig. 20 & 21).



Fig. 20. *The Killing of Tahir Elçi* (2019, Forensic Architecture)

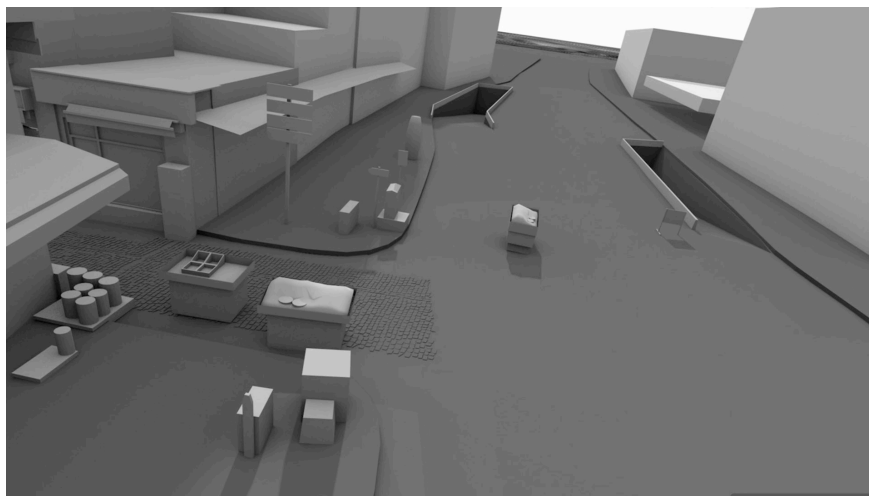


Fig. 21. *The Killing of Tahir Elçi* (2019, Forensic Architecture)

A couple of minutes into the video, the surveillance footage is superimposed on the 3D model of the street, where the militants shoot the police officers and run towards the street where Elçi is. Since there was no camera recording the street from that direction, the footage dissolves into a complete 3D simulation to follow the militants, until the virtual camera positions itself with a real camera recording from the other direction, which shows the militants running towards it. This is also the first time we see Elçi as an avatar, marked by the colour red amongst other grey avatars. The

transition between the video image of Elçi and the red avatar is often conducted with a dissolve and sometimes one image combining the two (Fig. 22 , 23 & 24).



Fig. 22. *The Killing of Tahir Elçi* (2019, Forensic Architecture)



Fig. 23. *The Killing of Tahir Elçi* (2019, Forensic Architecture)



Fig. 24. *The Killing of Tahir Elçi* (2019, Forensic Architecture)

The transitions and movement of the virtual camera merging with the real one is exceptionally precise and seamless, demonstrating significant finesse. Forensic Architecture (hereinafter FA) often utilise this kind of simulation in their investigations to “see” incidents from a perspective when there was no camera present or the video footage is insufficient. Weizman defines this construction as an “architectural image complex”. He writes:

What we refer to as the architectural image complex is a method of assembling image evidence in a spatial environment. The architectural image complex can function as an optical device that allows the viewer to see the scene of the crime as a set of relations between images in time and space” (2017: 100).

This “optical device” also allows FA to have more control over the moving image as they can place the camera anywhere in the virtual reality they create, get closer to a scene or object, or zoom out and have a wider view of the field. However, through the same method they can and do manipulate the scene, for example, cars or other objects magically disappear to make certain things visible. Or they create a particular effect, as in the emotive scene at the end of *The Killing of Tahir Elçi*, when the virtual camera zooms out, leaving Elçi (avatar) lying alone, dead on the ground (Fig. 25). In these computer-generated simulations, FA utilises cinematic techniques such as shot-reverse-shots, superimposition, dissolves, and continuity editing. I argue that the ways in which they merge the video documentation of a real crime and computer-generated simulation becomes problematic at times, when the effect blurs the line in between the real violent event and a fictionalised one.



Fig. 25. *The Killing of Tahir Elçi* (2019, Forensic Architecture)

This final scene in *The Killing of Tahir Elçi* reminds me of my first reactions to Forensic Architecture's work, when I saw them in an art gallery context at ICA London (2018). On the one hand, I was fascinated with their idea of "counter-forensics" (which was explained and mapped out spectacularly on the walls), and the technology they had access to for their investigations. On the other hand, I could not help but ask that if the works provide scientific knowledge based on material conditions, as FA claims they do, then why do these videos, which are meant to be an assembly of scientific evidence, appeal to my emotions? Is such dramatization anything other than mere rhetoric? This is part of FA's project as a whole, and is theorised as "forensic aesthetics" by Eyal Weizman (2011, 2017). When challenged by an unnamed British Barrister on this matter of incorporating "aesthetics" and "the legal conception of truth," Weizman's answer is not at all satisfactory, when he writes:

All forensic practitioners are keenly aware of that paradox: we know how essential aesthetics and the imagination are to the investigative and interpretative labor necessary to ascertain the most simple of facts, as well as to the production and presentation of a truth claim, but likewise, how important it is to refer to the truth as something much more obvious, something that is simply there. (2017: 75)

Not only am I doubtful of "the truth" being "simply there" in the visible world, I am also critical of the ways in which this "truth" is "produced and staged" (Weizman, 2017: 74) in Forensic Architecture's work. Peter Wollen, writing in his influential essay "Godard and Counter-Cinema: Vent d'Est" (1972), asserts that "the truth is not out there in the real world, waiting to be photographed" (1982: 91). With regards to Elçi's assassination, I have to agree with Wollen. In this case, the truth is more complex and beyond immediately available architectural or videographic data. In *The Killing of Tahir Elçi*, FA is looking for the killer in the visible, and suggests that the killer can only be found in the visible, found in the video recording as they do not look elsewhere. Paul Virilio quotes the famous French police officer Alphonse Bertillon and writes: "Bertillon also, in a well-known phrase, denounced the deficiency of the human eye and the aberrations of subjectivity: *You only see what you look at and you only look at what you want to see*" (1994: 42). In *The Killing of Tahir Elçi* and in other video investigations instead of acknowledging the possible deficiencies of video recordings, these deficiencies or insufficiencies are counter-

balanced by CGI design. Weizman claims: “We locate incidents in their historical contexts and pull from their microphysical details the longer threads of political and social processes—conjunctions of actors and practices, structures and technologies—and reconnect them with the world of which they are part” (2017: 9). But in *The Killing of Tahir Elçi*, FA is failing in this endeavour. Going into complexities and intricacies of Kurdish struggle in Turkey is beyond the remit of this thesis, but what perhaps suffices to say is that Weizman’s theorisation of “producing and staging the truth”, which apparently is “simply there” as “forensic aesthetics” is hugely problematic, as it gives a false sense of knowing.

On the other hand, Hal Foster claims that Weizman (along with Hito Steyerl and Trevor Paglen) “point to the urgent necessity of a science of agnotology, or the analysis of how it is we do not know or, better, how we are prevented from knowing” (2020: 123). I am not convinced that this applies to FA’s video investigations. To me, these videos focus more on the analysis of how it is that *they know* (the investigators) and that I (the viewer) should believe in their account. It is true that the video investigations not only try to illuminate a crime, but also teach the viewer about the technology that allows them to get to the truth. So in that sense, FA’s video investigations tap into our curiosity and our appetite for knowledge and fulfil our desire by providing us with epistemic pleasure. The videos presuppose that the viewer does not know, whereas the videos’ makers do know, and have the authority to convey this knowledge in detail. Thus, these works constitute a hierarchical relationship with the viewer, and consequently affirm existing power relations, which ironically resemble those of the Establishment structures they critique. Additionally, the construction simply does not apply to people who do know more than FA assumes, or whose knowledge falls outside of epistemological frameworks that FA can anticipate. If one already knows more than FA assumes about the conflicts underlying these events or murders, then they will likely be left with a fascination for technology employed, and an assured sense of ‘knowing’ conferred on them by the video. If one is a viewer who has no idea about any of these crimes, then they may be more than inclined to believe FA’s proposition, since their framing does not leave room for contradictions, and there is no questioning of the perspective offered. These videos are rhetorical, designed and constructed to convince the viewer of their truth, rather than equipping them to question the ways in which this truth is constructed and presented. So, who does the work addresses?

Rana Anani, reviewing the first FA exhibition in Ramallah, writes, “What strikes me most in the first exhibition of Forensic Architecture in Palestine, is neither the cases investigated, nor the findings, but the sophisticated technology used in the work, its aesthetic, and above all the problematic use of language” (2019). She points out how the Palestinians are represented as “helpless” “victims” with no agency and often referred to as “civilians”, and how words such as “death” and “killing” are used instead of “murder”. This could well be because of legal reasons: they have to use certain language, as these video investigations are presented in courts, UN assemblies and so on. But the visual language, such as the computer simulations described above, in which real people, real victims are represented as avatars with no identity, strengthens the effect of dehumanisation. We watch Elçi’s dead body lying on the ground; his agency is taken away from him in reality by a bullet, and then again in representation in the video footage, and even further by the CGI simulation (Fig. 26 & 27). I particularly find this problematic as Elçi was not an ordinary civilian; he was a fighter, an activist: part of a massive struggle that has been going on for half a century, cost many lives, and displaced millions. Furthermore, in this video construction, not only are the deceased represented to us without agency, but we, as viewers, are also positioned as helpless onlookers.



Fig. 26. *The Killing of Tahir Elçi* (2019, Forensic Architecture)

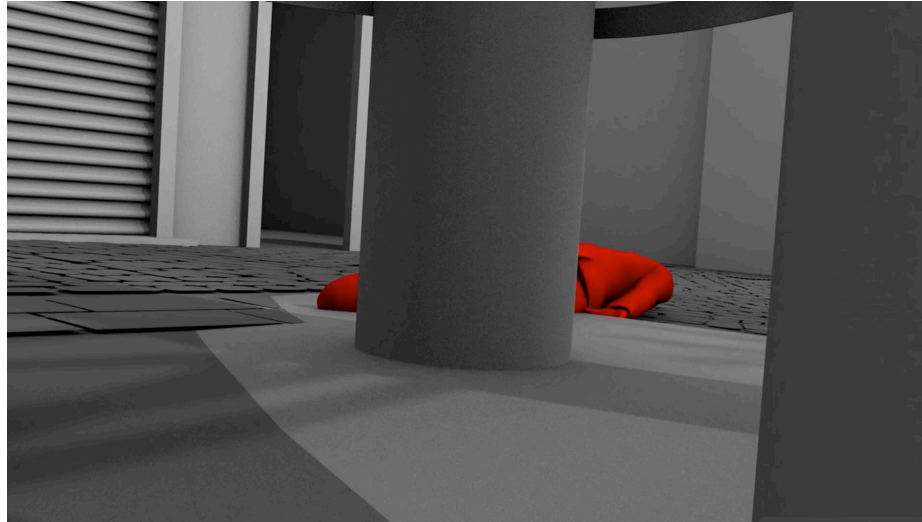


Fig. 27. *The Killing of Tahir Elçi* (2019, Forensic Architecture)

According to Henrik Gustavson, a representation of a crime scene “solicits a specific form of attention. It is a look after the deed, in the wake of the event. It interpellates the spectator not as a disinterested or complacent viewer, but as a witness or bystander” (2019: 3). I find this form of spectatorship problematical, as this witnessing as such is symbolic: in an art gallery, we are put in the strange position of witnessing a crime, but not really, because we were not really there. We did not really witness the crime, so we would have absolutely no say in the ensuing court case and hence we are absolutely powerless in intervening in the case we are presented with. The game is played, the analysing, decoding and deciphering the image and information is complete, and we do not need to do anything other than believe what we see. There is no doubt left, all the allegations made by the state are refuted. Since we do not need to decipher anything, what we are left with is a sense of satisfaction for what FA have done, and an amazement regarding the technology they have used with such finesse. Nonetheless, it would be unfair to say that FA fetishises the technology they use by mystifying it; on the contrary, they always make an effort to explain the technology they use, even though at times the tone can be quite patronising or didactic. In *The Killing of Tahir Elçi*, within 25 minutes FA demonstrates how they gathered data (sound, image, testimonies and so on); how they combined the information; correlated it; put it timeline; and corroborate what happened, concluding who could be the suspects. So by the end of the video, we are left with a fascination with technology and assured positions as knowers. So, in this sense, it is perfectly the opposite of Gidal’s films, in which the viewer is positioned as not-knower, as I have discussed earlier. The contemplative viewer constructed in Raban’s *Laki Haze* is nowhere to be found either, nor the viewer of

Light Reading, who is provoked to ask who is framed or re-framed and in whose frame.

What unites *Laki Haze*, *Ambiguous Journeys* and *The Killing of Tahir Elçi* is that they are all mostly descriptive. They assign themselves to speak the “truth” and describe how things are, which seems to be a common tendency in contemporary artists’ moving image. The reader might ask why I have engaged with these works, considering the context of this research project, and my focus being films that invite the viewer to question their construction or foreground their materiality or artifice. What made me think deeply about these particular works is that I share the humanitarian incentive and intention behind these videos. I do empathise with their political convictions and their effort to raise consciousness, but I cannot ignore the problematic ways in which these videos are constructed. As I explain in the next chapter, my criticism of these videos directly corresponds with the questions and concerns I have addressed in my own work or in the critical reflections that followed.

Chapter 5

Critical reflections on the creative outputs of this research

In this chapter, I contextualise each piece I made during the research period.

- *Media Blackout I* (2016) (4', B&W, silent, single and multiple screen)
- *Media Blackout II* (2017) (live performance, variable duration)
- *Media Blackout III* (2018) (3', colour, silent, loop monitor installation)
- *A+* (2018-20) (4'30", colour, sound)

To date, these works have been screened and performed internationally, as listed below:

Media Blackout I

6x6 Projects Online exhibition, 2021

Alternate Frames, Cineinfinito/Zumzeit Cine Cooperativa, Barcelona, 2019

Sommer Fest, Akademie Schloss Solitude, Stuttgart, 2017

Open Screenings at Whitechapel Gallery, curated and presented by Gareth Evans, London, 2016

Transgression; a programme of experimental film and video curated and presented by Karel Doing, Close-up, London, 2016

Contact A Festival of New Experimental Film and Video, Apiary Studios, London, 2016

Unseen Cinema, 27th International Ankara Film Festival, Goethe Institute, Ankara, 2016

Pseudio, Basement Project Space, Cambridge, 2016

Media Blackout II (live performance)

Low Light, BEEF, Brunswick Club, Bristol, 2019

Extending the Frame, as part of Whitstable Biennale Launch, University of Kent School of Arts, 2018

Holding Space, The Brick Cube, London, 2017

Sommer Fest, Akademie Schloss Solitude, Stuttgart, 2017

Media Blackout III

6x6 Projects Online exhibition, 2021

Resisting Expectations, The Horsebridge Arts Centre Whitstable Biennale,
Whitstable, 2018

A+

Light and Dark (Park) Lux, London 2018

I also discuss a piece that could not be made, which I titled *The Absent Project: the non-representable*. These works (as well as the account of *the Absent Project*) represent my concern with establishing a dialectical materialist practice that is minimalist and economical, but also attempts to address political issues or events. In the following critical analysis I will elaborate on what they are each about, discuss my intention, influences, and insights, and offer short discussions of other films that were influential in the making of my works, or correspond with them aesthetically or thematically.

Media Blackout Series (2015-2018)

The title Media Blackout has two reference points. Firstly, it refers to actual media blackouts. In 2015, the year I began my research, the phrase “media blackout” was ubiquitous in Turkey after a period of civil unrest and suicide attacks that had caused the loss of many lives since 2012. (In 2015 alone, over 100 people died as a result of suicide attacks). After each event, the government issued official media blackout orders through its censoring organisation Radio and the Television Supreme Council (RTÜK). Thus, it was getting harder and harder to obtain facts about these events, especially as I was located in England. Secondly, it alludes to the negation of images and the influence of Gidal’s Structural/materialist film project, as discussed in Chapters One and Two. Thinking about problems associated with representation, visibility, and the ways in which language has been utilised in experimental film and video (as discussed in Chapters Three and Four) coincided with me dealing with actual media blackouts in Turkey. Looking at this political reality from a distance foregrounded one of my concerns: how do I position myself dealing with a political issue or event in a place that I am not, but to which I am tied by language, history and culture. What language do I speak, and who do I address?

These questions were occupying me as an artist, and I wanted to consider them thoroughly in *Media Blackout I*. My concerns were originated not only from being an

artist but engaging with contemporary works in the West, as a critical viewer who is essentially an immigrant in the UK. I was particularly critical of a type of work by artists who chose to represent political issues and problems in places other than where they were located, which often tended to be underdeveloped countries, or countries under totalitarian regimes. My wariness of this tendency corresponds with the sentiments painfully articulated by an unnamed Nigerian man in Mark Boulos' *All That Is Solid Melts into Air* (2008). This piece is a two-screen video installation that addresses ecological and economic problems that oil companies cause in Nigeria and their adverse effects on local communities. In *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*, before we see guerrillas in the Niger Delta speaking of their struggle, an unnamed man, speaking directly to the camera, complains about not being able to catch any fish to feed his children. He then drops his fishing net, picks up an extremely long knife, like a sword, and threatens the man behind the camera (Fig. 28).

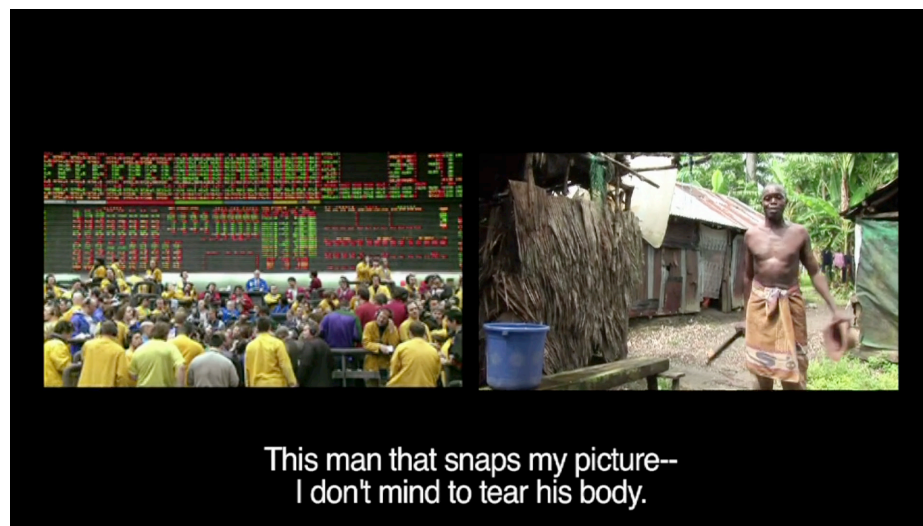


Fig. 28. *All That Is Solid Melts into Air* (2008, Mark Boulos)

He says, "with this knife I'll hold this white man that snaps my picture...this man that snaps my picture, I don't mind to tear his body" and he walks towards the camera with his knife. He is clearly extremely infuriated by the oil companies that are drilling in his area and ruining his livelihood, the government's backing of these companies, and the presence of the white man filming him. He eventually calms down, but warns: "Today is your last day. Don't come here again". Mark Boulos may have had the best of intentions to show the environmental destruction that multinational oil companies and their accomplice governments are causing. However, from the point of view of that Nigerian man, is Boulos any different to the other white men who

came to drill for oil on their land? From his point of view, one takes his oil and the other his image, and while both capitalise on that, he still cannot feed his children.

Reflecting on this concern, I could not sit in my room in Cambridge and make a video about the media blackout in Turkey, even though I am Turkish. I shared the sentiment the Lebanese architect and writer Tony Chakar expressed in his performative presentation titled “Translating Revolutions” at a workshop organised by Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW) Berlin in 2012. In the video version of this performance, titled *Speak Mouthless*, he states:

When the revolution in the Arab world started and the press introduced the term ‘The Arab Spring’ many artists from the region, including myself, were often solicited by European Cultural Institutions to speak about what was going on. This in itself, seemed harmless: “they” wanted to know, “we” wanted to speak. At least this is how it looked first. Now the debate has shifted and the interest waned (Tony Chakar in *Speak Mouthless*).

The video specifically refers to a silent demonstration that took place in the Syrian village of Kafranbel, in 2011. But more importantly, it asks the viewer “who are you and why do you want to know?” and also why they want to know about this subject, and not for example homelessness in Europe. The questions might sound unfair, perhaps, because the viewer may be interested in viewing a video that deals with homelessness in Europe as well, but Chakar is trying to highlight something that is often overlooked in artists’ moving image: who is representing whom and to whom? Who is capitalising on that representation? When invited to HKW, Chakar asks the organisers to pay him in cash at the end of his presentation, and when they do that as instructed, Chakar counts the cash in front of everyone, and then leaves. It is a symbolic gesture/performance of course, but a powerful one. It also demonstrates how not only white Western artists, but also artists native to these regions can be solicited and implicated in the cultural reproduction of the colonial gaze.

Instead of examining an issue in Turkey from England, it was important to me return that gaze and look at my immediate surroundings here, where I was. While “media blackout” was a ubiquitous phrase in Turkey at the time, in the English-speaking world, the Oxford Dictionary named “post-truth” as the word of the year for 2016 (BBC 16 November 2016). The Oxford Dictionary defines “post-truth” as “relating to

or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (2020). The term became even more common after the US presidency election campaign and the Brexit Referendum in the UK. Of course, deceiving the public or manipulating public opinion with falsehood or propaganda in politics is not a new issue; what is new is that this strategy of subordinating the truth has become a popularly recognised tactic for gaining political power. Lee C. McIntyre, reflecting on this era in his book *Post-Truth*, writes: “what is striking about the idea of post-truth is not just that truth is being challenged, *but that it is being challenged as a mechanism for asserting political dominance*” (2018: xiv). In this regard I was concerned with two related issues concerning the media and representation: the obliteration of the representation of reality in “media blackouts” and media representation that is purposefully deceptive. The videos that I discussed earlier—*Laki Haze*, *Ambiguous Journeys*, and *The Killing of Tahir Elçi*—are also concerned with these same issues to an extent. Rhodes, for example, discusses a related point in an interview and quotes from her *Journal Of Disbelief*: “the US military has spent millions of dollars to prevent Western media from seeing highly accurate civilian satellite pictures of the effects of bombing” (2016). This is why, as a countermeasure, she represents images of violence caused by war and displacement in *Journal of Disbelief* and in *Ambiguous Journeys* to a certain degree. Therefore, it was important for me to deal with the concept of Media Blackout more universally and be careful not represent it as something that happens away from “Western democracies”, as if it does not happen in the US or in the UK.

***Media Blackout I*, 2016, HD, B&W, Silent 4’**

When I began working on *Media Blackout I*, I was trying to deal with two realities: a political reality of everyday life that concerned me and the politics of representing that reality. I was caught in between wanting to deal with the current politics that led to media blackouts in Turkey and being hesitant of trying to represent the reality “as is”, to refer back to Rhodes’ phrase. I was hesitant, not only because I did not want to simply show “as is”, but also because I was doubtful if film or video can actually show “as is”. I was also concerned as to whether the truth is representable despite of Weizman’s claim “how important it is to refer to the truth as something much more obvious, something that is simply there.” (2017: 75). I was more inclined to agree with Peter Wollen, who wrote: “the truth is not out there in the real world, waiting to

be photographed” (1982: 91). In retrospect, the point of departure for this work was influenced by Gidal's anti-representation theory, along with Rhodes' and Raban's early films, which challenge and problematise representation. There is a consistent attempt in these filmmakers' works to resist the representational image by abstraction, utilising different filmic devices. Rhodes, for example, often uses photographs and freeze frames; Gidal often utilises defocusing, or frantic camera movement; and Raban often utilises time-lapse shooting or double exposure, which interrupt the illusionistic representation of time and space. While Gidal completely avoids any direct political reference point, (except in *Close Up*, in which Nicaraguan revolutionaries' voices can be heard), Rhodes and Raban do often address political content. My intention with *Media Blackout I* was akin to the practice of the latter two: to address the political issue without ignoring the problems regarding the politics of representation.

Media Blackout I follows a simple strategy: letters in white on black background spell out “MEDIA BLACKOUT,” letter by letter, each flashing up for a fraction of a second and gradually but rapidly growing in size, from invisibly small to illegibly large. Each “frame” is created within the video editing software, using the title settings, and subsequently following a strict algorithm. First each letter is created on a separate frame spelling MEDIA BLACKOUT, with a black frame replacing the space in between the two words, so that a total of 14 frames are produced. This sequence is repeated as a loop, with each repetition, the letters growing in scale by a certain degree. The process and the structure thus not only determine the duration (the video ends when the screen goes black), but also the aesthetic qualities of the work. While *Media Blackout I* is computer-generated, and not a film, it mimics film frames, treating each letter as a single frame with a fixed duration of 1/25th of a second. Although Nicky Hamlyn quite rightly suggests that film frames and video frames are not the same, as a “video frame is not isolable in the way film frame is” (2003: 57), in *Media Blackout I* it becomes possible to isolate the frames as discrete units, because each letter is positioned separately in single rectangular “frame” (Fig. 29).



Fig. 29. *Media Blackout I* (2016, Deniz Johns)

Formally, because of the flicker caused by rapid alternation of white letters pulsing on a black frame, and the fact that the recognisable letters are abstracted into light shapes, *Media Blackout I* is reminiscent of the flicker film aesthetic of the 1960s, in particular Peter Kubelka's *Arnulf Rainer* (1960) and Tony Conrad's *The Flicker* (1966). While *Media Blackout I* recalls flicker film aesthetics, and perhaps can be identified as structural, in the sense that it follows a system and allows that system to construct the form of the video, it is not about the formal or structural aspects of its medium (as *Arnulf Rainer* and *The Flicker* are about the rectangular film frame). *Media Blackout I* could also be likened to *Word Movie* (1966) by Paul Sharits, which contains flicker aesthetics, but essentially this film is about limitations of language and our cognitive capacity. *Word Movie*—made in same year as Conrad's *The Flicker*—utilises the difficulty that the flicker creates and voices two texts, word-by-word in alternation to problematise the cognition of their meaning.

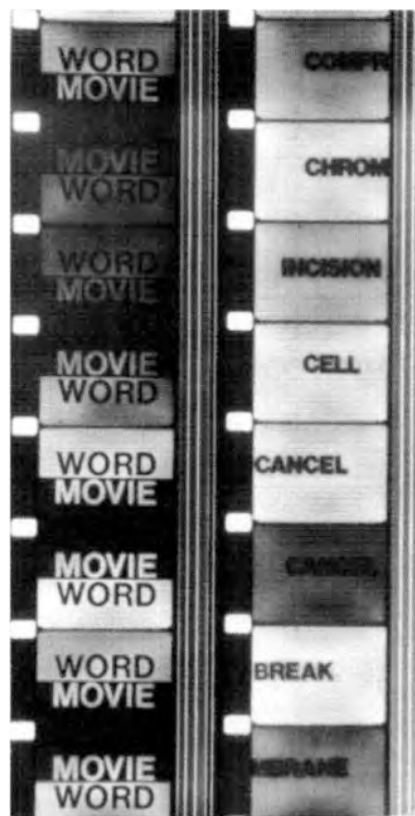


Fig. 30. *Word Movie* (1966, Paul Sharits)

Word Movie begins with its title flickering in black and white, resulting from two different frames alternating in quick succession (Fig. 30). Then, very quickly, the film cuts to a rapid edit of 50 words, one word per frame, positioned on the same line but aligned in varying ways, a strategy that merges words into each other (Fig. 30). Words are always in black on white background, except that the tone of the white

changes regularly, adding to the flicker effect. Words change so quickly that it is almost impossible to read; all that can be read is mostly the letter in the centre of the frame, which changes less frequently. Just as the words begin flashing up, the voices of a man and a woman (Barbara and Robert Forth) are heard reading two separate texts, word by word, in alternation. It is impossible for the viewer to listen to only one of them and to understand what the voice is saying, as the other voice and the visual interference of other words flashing up completely muddles one's perception to comprehend. As Gidal writes, the film "elegantly and powerfully problematizes language and image illusion" (1989: 15). The viewer is confronted with seeing images of words that they cannot read, and hearing words that cannot put together to make any meaning. So it is not that they cannot see or cannot hear, it is that their linguistic faculties fail when confronted with the structure that Sharits composed.

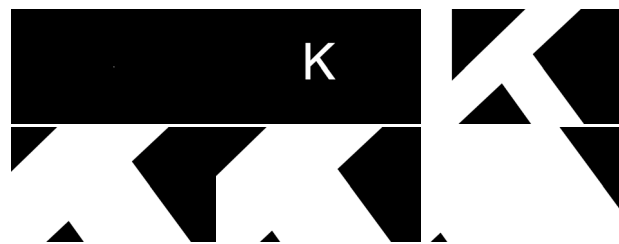


Fig. 31. *Media Blackout I* (2016, Deniz Johns)

Similarly, *Media Blackout I* presents letters in such a way that one cannot form a word in one's mind. The piece begins with a tiny light flashing in the centre of the frame. As the miniscule dot grows, it becomes apparent that these white lights are actually letters spelling something, except that it is impossible to read what they constitute as a whole (Fig. 31). Each letter momentarily becomes legible, but as they move so quickly, they look like they are entrapped in one another. Rather than blurring into each other, T is entrapped in U, for example, or I in D. The viewer cannot restrain themselves from trying to read, until almost the second minute into the video, and by that point it becomes almost impossible to keep looking at the screen, never mind reading. As the letters grow bigger, they gradually become abstracted shapes, pulsing out of the screen aggressively, coming at the viewer until the black swallows them all up. By that point, the letters lose their linguistic and semantic properties to become flickering white shapes that are so bright that at times it feels like a violent attack on one's eyesight that forces the viewer to look away. In comparison to *Word Movie*, *Media Blackout I* is agitating rather than meditative. Sharits fixes the viewer's look on one spot in the middle of the frame by

keeping the same letter in the centre while words change rapidly. I try to direct the viewer's attention away from the screen and representation, towards reality, to use Le Grice's term the "Real TIME/SPACE", which I will discuss further in relation to *Media Blackout II*.

While the video was prompted by actual media blackouts, mass media obfuscation and the dissemination of 'alternative truths', its critique is not explicit and nor is the connection to Turkish politics. I did not want to present the political process associated with these media blackouts as something that happens elsewhere, to other people. On the contrary, I wanted this piece to address its viewer impartially. I wanted to foster an aesthetic experience, which the Turkish viewer would not respond particularly differently to in comparison with an English, Spanish or Chinese viewer. The video does not create a hierarchical relation, nor does it give the sense of consolation to one viewer and horror to the other. In that sense, I think the video creates a collective language that speaks to its viewer on equal terms.

***Media Blackout II*, (2017) live performance, variable duration**

Media Blackout II (2017) is a live performance, inspired by various examples of British 'Expanded Cinema' from the 1970s, particularly the works of Annabel Nicolson, Gill Eatherley, William Raban, and Malcolm Le Grice (often known as the Filmaktion group). The term Expanded Cinema is perhaps most associated with Gene Youngblood's book *Expanded Cinema* (1970) the terms of which have been revisited by the American scholar Jonathan Walley, turning the phrase around with his new book *Cinema Expanded* (2020). However, Malcolm Le Grice's essay "Real TIME/SPACE" (1972), Deke Dusinberre's essay "On Expanding Cinema" (1975) and the more recent publication *Expanded Cinema: Art Performance Film* (2011, edited by A. L. Rees, David Curtis, Duncan White, and Steven Ball) are more relevant to British experiments of that decade. As Raban points out, when he and other artists began to make work in this vein at the London Filmmakers' Co-op they did not call what they were doing "Expanded Cinema". He writes: "it was the idea that you could introduce an element of performance into the film event" (Raban in White 2008). And one can observe upon examining the variety of works made in this milieu that the "film event", which Raban refers to, is understood differently by each filmmaker. For example, Nicolson's *Doorway* (1974) was not so much about "introducing an element of performance" but reducing or deducting elements from

“the film event”, so that only light is left, leaking through the doorway every time a viewer walked in the room, where a performer tries to read a text out loud with the sporadic shaft of light leaks in (Nicolson).

As many of the contributors to *Expanded Cinema. Art, Performance and Film* confirm it is impossible to define Expanded Cinema as one single phenomenon. A.L. Rees for instance, writes:

‘Expanded Cinema’ is an elastic name for many sorts of film and projection event. It is notoriously difficult to pin down or define. At full stretch, it embraces the most contradictory dimensions of film and video art, from the vividly spectacular to the starkly materialist. Stan Vanderbeek’s synthetic multimedia Movie-Drome of the 1960s, for example, is in high contrast to the analytic and primal cinema of 1970s Filmaktion screenings in the UK (2011: 12).

The works that influenced *Media Blackout II* are those “starkly materialist” ones in terms of their anti-illusionist intentions and minimalist aesthetics. *Media Blackout II* is a live, performative work that avoids film and its machinery altogether. In that sense, the piece could be identified as “paracinematic”, as explained by A.L. Rees: “in paracinema’, the notion of the film medium is itself questioned, and the cinematic is sought outside or beyond the film machine” (2011: 12). Annabel Nicolson’s *Doorway* and *Matches* (1975) are key examples of such works, in which a precarious light source and a performative act create the work.

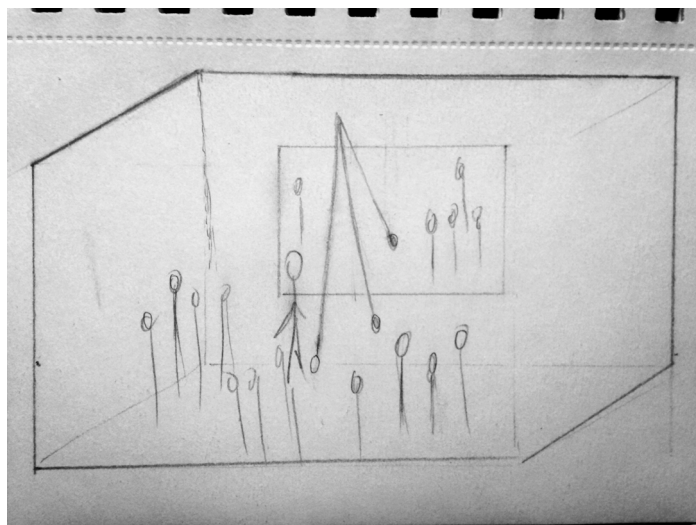


Fig. 32. Sketch for *Media Blackout II* (2016, Deniz Johns)

Media Blackout II is performed in a dark space in which a lit lightbulb hangs from the ceiling several meters away from a large mirror, which is positioned like a surrogate cinema screen on the wall (Fig. 32 & 33). The performance begins with me swinging the lightbulb towards the mirror in measured intervals and force like a pendulum in a dark room. The lightbulb gradually swings closer and closer to the mirror, building up the tension in the room as it begins to brush the mirror. The quality, direction and radius of illumination changes as the lightbulb swing back and forth. When it swings towards the mirror, the audience can momentarily see their reflection and/or that of others in the space, but only until the bulb comes close to the mirror, obliterating the reflection (So far, in each performance of the piece, the audience has chosen to locate themselves mostly behind me and the swinging lightbulb). And as the lightbulb swings back, the approaching light throws shadows of the audience onto the walls and ceiling behind them. Shadows pulse around the room, growing in scale and then shrinking as the lightbulb swings back and forth. The room looks like it is breathing.



Fig. 33. *Media Blackout II* (2017, Deniz Johns) London

The lightbulb hanging of the ceiling unavoidably makes *Media Blackout II* associated with Malcolm Le Grice's seminal *Castle 1* (1966). What connects the two is function of the lightbulb as something that illuminates as well as obscures. *Castle I* is an expanded cinema event that involves projection of a 16mm film and a bare lightbulb that is positioned in front of the screen. It flashes on and off during the projection (Fig. 34). The film is a montage of found footage, mainly what seems to be newsreel footage of political events, demonstrations and an image of a suspended lightbulb, which also periodically flashes. The sound is composed of cut-up speeches from television newsreels, documentaries and classical music. In this work there are three lightbulbs in action: one inside the projector; one suspended in front of the

screen, and one in the film footage. The one inside the projector makes the film visible, while the one in front of the screen obliterates the film when it flashes on, while illuminating the projection space and the audience.

Le Grice, in his “Real TIME/SPACE” essay, elucidates commercial cinema’s relation to and treatment of what he calls Real TIME/SPACE which “is *now* and *here*” and writes: “First of all the whole history of the commercial cinema has been dominated by the aim of creating convincing illusory time/space, and eliminating all traces of the actual physical state of affairs at any stage of the film, from scripting, through shooting, editing, printing, promotion to projection” (2009: 155). *Castle 1* disrupts illusory construction of time/space by literally illuminating the real space with the lightbulb flashing and obliterating the film image. The event pulls the attention of the viewer from the film’s image and locates it within the projection space. Thus the work is not only “an emblematic attack on audience passivity” as Nicky Hamlyn writes (2003: 44), it also reveals the space in which the film is being shown.



Fig. 34. *Castle 1* (1966, Malcolm Le Grice)

While both *Media Blackout II* and *Castle I* share aspects that challenge and attempt to change the conventional passive spectatorship and draw attention to the “Real TIME/SPACE” of the work’s experience, they also differ in other ways. My mode of investigation involves my presence as performer and that being central to the piece and exclusion of film and all film apparatuses. But in each piece the audience’s experience expands, from the limited ocular-centric to the more broadly experiential. The same goes for Nicolson’s *Doorway* and *Matches*.

Given that *Media Blackout II* involves the placement of a mirror where the screen might ordinarily be, the audience naturally orient themselves towards it, only to be confronted with their own image and their act of looking (Fig. 33). Their reflected image in the mirror is transient: they appear and disappear as the bulb swings back and forth, while their shadows, expanding on to the walls, make them look like giant beings momentarily before diminishing. The same goes for any other objects around and my own mirror image and shadow. Thus, the work foregrounds the ephemeral and unreliable quality of images. It conveys a meaning that has only retrospectively occurred to me: metaphorically speaking, the representation of reality is distorted by whoever is swinging the lightbulb. In this sense *Media Blackout II* attempts to question the subjectivity and the vision of the individual maker and the viewer, by drawing attention to the viewing process.



Fig.35. Audience at of *Media Blackout II* Brick Cube event, London, 2017.

Having made and performed this piece on several occasions, I think the work is a modest but powerful act against spectacle. While *Media Blackout II* was conceived as an idea at the same time as *Media Blackout I*, the opportunity to perform first came in 2017 in London, and then followed by Stuttgart (2017), Canterbury (2018) and Bristol (2019). Although the mode and medium of the two pieces are very different, they share several common elements and concerns along with their minimalist approach. *Media Blackout II* is a further investigation of the degree to which I could remove the mechanically reproduced image and still produce a cinematic experience in which a critique of representation to some degree constitutes a political aesthetic. The swinging lightbulb can be read as an aggressive and even violent act against vision, like in *Media Blackout I*, but what happens during the live event is self-effacing. Discussing Guy Debord's understanding of spectacle, Jacques Rancière states that the essence of spectacle

for Debord is its exteriority, he writes: “The spectacle is the reign of vision, and vision is exteriority – that is, self-dispossession” (2009: 24). I think *Media Blackout II* is subtle critique of the “reign of vision” and structures of representation.

***Media Blackout III* (2018) DV, colour, silent 3’**

Media Blackout III is the third and final piece of the Media Blackout Series. It is a video that constructed out of 2402 still images created on a smartphone, and is meant to be screened on a flat screen monitor in portrait orientation to resemble a smartphone screen. Each image is produced by taking a screenshot of the previous version starting with the “original” digital photograph of my reflection in a bathroom mirror. The image is taken with a yellow iPhone 5C, which is also visible in the mirror (Fig. 36) Also visible are the icons that appear on the edges of the frame on a mobile phone device or the interface of a communication application such as WhatsApp: a “do not disturb” icon on the screen’s edge, alongside the Wi-Fi signal indicator, battery status, reception status, and system time. On the left-hand top corner of the screen the words “You / Just now” are visible, referring to the fact that I have just sent this image to someone/another device. The second frame is a screenshot of this image, opened in the photo application on another phone, a Motorola G4 Play, where some new icons appear: share, edit, info and delete.

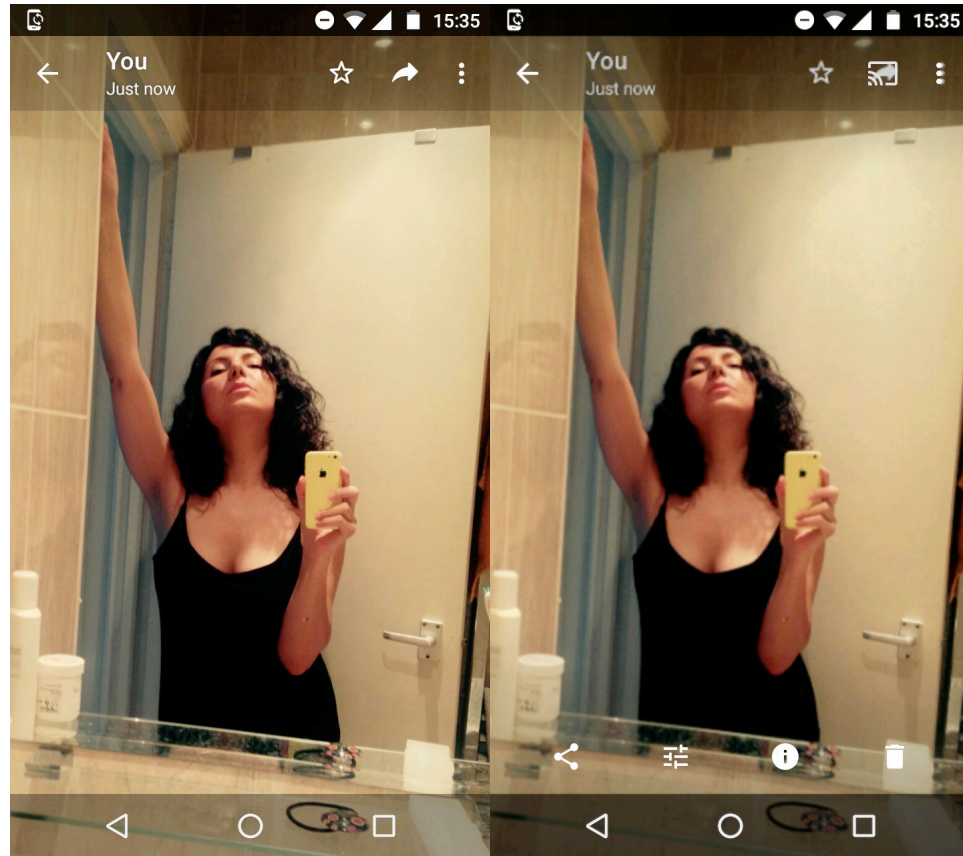


Fig. 36. *Media Blackout III* (2018, Deniz Johns)

This is followed by another screenshot of the previous frame, and so on until the image completely deteriorates into black in the final screenshot. Within 15 seconds the image degenerates to a point where it would be unrecognisable without the memory of the preceding, more sharply defined images (Fig. 37). Like *Media Blackout I*, *Media Blackout III* follows a diligent predetermined process that is repeated until the image degenerates into black. Again similarly, the duration is based on that process: *Media Blackout III* ends when the image has completely sunk into the growing black square pixels.

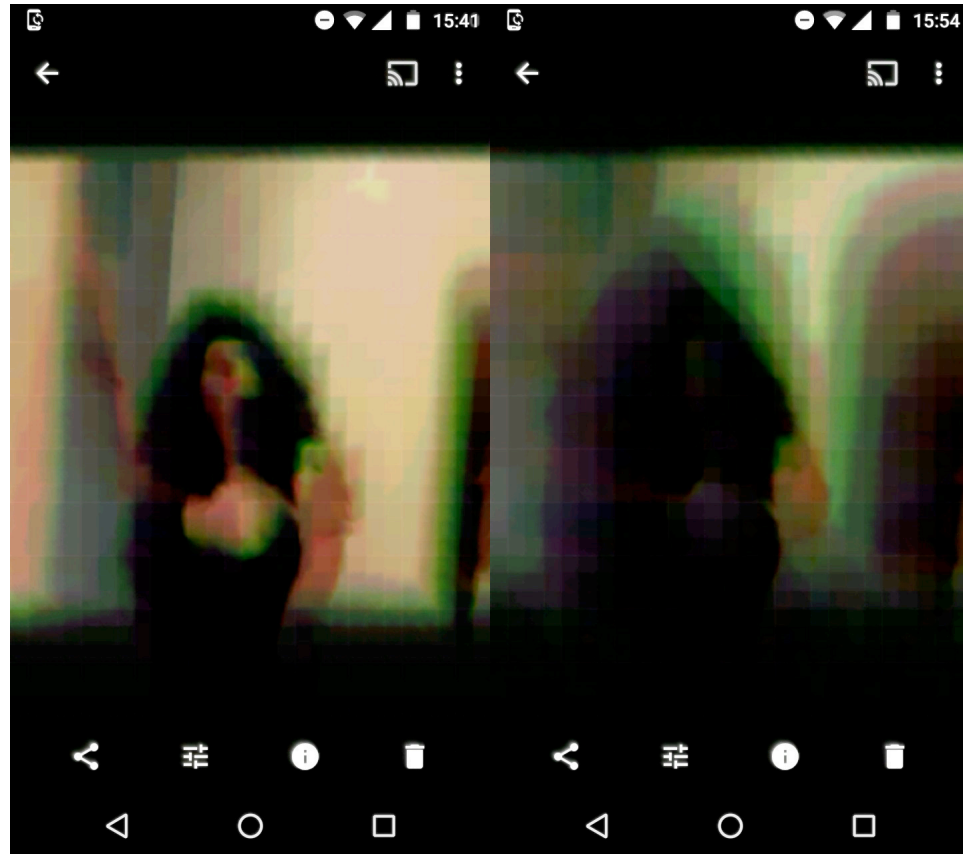


Fig. 37. *Media Blackout III* (2018, Deniz Johns)

The processual degradation of the image is a result of image data compression: in each screenshot, light and colour data for each on-screen pixel is captured as a new image; this results in a digital image that is of considerably lower resolution than the actual image file that is shown. Consequently, the image file becomes smaller and smaller: the first screenshot is 807KB in size; the last one is merely 53 KB. What remains recognizable, however, are the on-screen icons of the capture device, and the time indicated at the top right corner, which keeps changing since it is freshly overlaid in each screenshot. Retaining this visual information was a conscious decision, as I wanted to keep the changing time and the “battery running low” message visible, as a marker of the process, and to signal the time it takes to create the screenshots.

I see *Media Blackout III* as making a statement that corresponds with some aspects of Lis Rhodes’ *Light Reading*. The disappearing image of the woman in *Media Blackout III* resonates with Rhodes’ idea of refusing to be framed, refusing to be looked at in *Light Reading*. In a brief moment in *Light Reading* we see a photograph of Rhodes’ reflection on a small hand mirror and her voice declares: “She was seen and she saw / She was seen as an object / She saw as subject / But what she saw

as subject / Was modified / By how she was seen as object / She objected / She refused to be framed" (*Light Reading*). It also resonates with Annabel Nicolson's expanded cinema piece *Reel Time* (1973), in which she loops her film in a way that it goes through her sewing machine on each cycle until she destroys the film by punching holes without the thread (the film that is projected and gradually destroyed was a film of Nicolson sewing). Furthermore, *Media Blackout III* demonstrates my attempt at adopting and translating some of the ideas *Reel Time* and *Light Reading* inspired for a new social context. *Media Blackout III* utilises ubiquitous smart phone technology and aims to politicise the social media phenomenon of the "mirror selfie" by challenging the online construction of the idealised self, through the copying process, which degenerates the image, rather than "improving" it with filters, colour corrections, soft focus and so on. One could read the work as a critique of avalanche of selfies, and the contagion of self-importance in social and personal digital platforms.

While *Reel Time*, *Light Reading* and *Media Blackout III* are very different works aesthetically, there is a clear correlation in terms of the ways in which the filmmaker rejects their visibility as an image. Rhodes asserts her real self through her voice, as Felicity Sparrow writes, "she will not be looked at but she will be listened to" (2019: 90), and Nicolson is actually there in the real event, actively destroying her film image, asserting her presence. Similarly, in *Media Blackout III* the self-image disintegrates into black pixel squares via duplicating the digital photograph to abstraction. In *Light Reading*, we see several photographs of Rhodes' reflection in mirrors (a small and a large one) and *Reel Time* a different kind of duplication is in process. In *Reel Time*, Nicolson is sewing her film in the real event, her back to the audience, facing two screens: one projector was beaming her film and another one with no film, just beaming light and throwing her framed shadow on the wall (Fig. 38), thus the viewer is present with Nicolson herself, her film image and her shadow simultaneously. All three works present a contradiction concerning a desire to be visible, be present and at the same time a desire to obliterate the self-image and to refuse to be the seen as an object.



Fig. 38. *Reel Time* (1973), Annabel Nicolson performing *Reel Time* at The London Filmmakers' Co-op, 1973.

Considering the art historical context of *Light Reading* and *Reel Time* in relation to the subject and the subjectivity, it is hard not to think of Barthes's well-known text *The Death of the Author* (1967) and other post-structuralist tendencies, which shifted attention from the "genius" artist or author to the text (or art work) itself in terms of its structure and relation to culture. Barthes critiques the tendency in bourgeois culture that gives prominence to the author as an individual, and writes: "The image of literature to be found in ordinary culture is tyrannically centred on the author, his person, his life, his tastes, his passions" (1977: 143). This is not untrue, but what about "her"? Both the "ordinary culture" and Barthes assumes the author as male. Thus, this contradiction in between concealing and revealing the subject and undermining subjectivity, or Gidal's concepts of de-subjectivising or non-identity, is complicated for women filmmakers. First of all, the desired visibility is not a synthetic or symbolic visibility: it is a desire to have a presence with agency. As Rhodes speaks in *Light Reading*: "She watched herself being looked at / She looked at herself being watched / But she could not perceive herself as a subject of the sentence / As it was written as it was read / The context defined her as the object of the explanation". Hence it is necessary to claim that subject position which has been denied to women for centuries, in real life as well as in the wide world of representation. For the male artist/author, de-subjectivising or undermining subjectivity could be perceived as a positive, progressive move, but it is not the same for women.

Structural tendencies are apparent in both of the works and *Media Blackout III*, especially if we consider Barthes' elucidation of "structural activity": "The goal of the structuralist activity, whether reflexive or poetic, is to reconstruct an "object" in such a way to manifest thereby the rules of functioning (the "functions") of this object" (1972: 214). There is, however, also very strong tendency and determination to investigate *her* person, *her* life, *her* taste, *her* passions (to refer back to Barthes), which is also manifested in these works. While the aesthetics, the medium, the mode and context of Rhodes' and Nicolson's work I discussed here and *Media Blackout III* are very different, I associate with this conflicting position: to write a dialectical sentence and be the subject of that sentence at the same time.

A+ (2018-2020)

When I began my research in 2015, worldwide protests and expressions of disapproval and resistance had been preoccupying me in everyday life for many years. Some of these protests went on for months and some methods spread from one country to the other, like the Occupy Movement. Some toppled governments, as in Egypt, and some ignited international intervention, starting a war like in Syria. Across these years, I have observed how these protests were articulated and represented by artists, journalists and the media. As discussed in the previous chapters, I have problems with certain modes of representing protests in which protestors are shown as helpless victims of police violence. I opposed this mode on three grounds: one, because it strips away the protestor's agency and dignity in the eyes of the beholder; secondly, I argue that every image of a victim is also the image of the victimiser/victor (for the other side). And thirdly, I find the mode of spectatorship whereby the viewer is positioned as symbolic witness of a real violent event problematic. While I wanted to deal with imagery and sound from a political protest, that I have attended, I did not want to make a video of a civil disobedience but a disobedient video. And I wanted to test if this was possible without obliterating the image, especially and specifically a political image.

What do I mean by disobedient video? A good example of this is William Raban's *Civil Disobedience* (2004), in which his collaborator David Cunningham takes a party conference speech by Thatcher and annihilates the content of it through a process of turning the continuous flow of the speech on and off, "in fast rhythmic patterns" (e-mail correspondence with Cunningham). Cunningham's rapid musical

score accompanies Raban's equally rapid time-lapse journey from the Houses of Parliament to the seashore, shot from a travelling car. Time-lapse shooting coupled with filming from a moving vehicle, complicates the 'realistic' representation time and space. Both image and sound challenge the conventional viewing and listening experience: the sound construction annihilates the speech content, yet the voice is still recognisable, and while the film disrupts the "naturalistic" representation of time/space, the action of leaving the Houses of Parliament behind is perceptible and significant. This rhythmic rapid escape from the Houses of Parliament could be interpreted as disapproval of the government. With Cunningham's sound work, in particular, it can be considered a potent attack on Thatcher's politics, a civil disobedience. Inspired by this work, I wanted to make a video not of, or about a protest, but a protest video.

A+ is the final video of this research project, and while it was developed separately to the Media Blackout Series, it is directly linked to the research questions I have dealt with in the works that form that series and the issues have I addressed throughout the thesis, particularly in my critique of Lis Rhodes' later works and some of Forensic Architecture's video investigations. A+ addresses one particular research question around ethics and politics about representing civil disobedience, which often involves images of violence: What are the ethical and political implications of filming/recording people in political protests or people in struggles, war zones? In my discussion of *In the Kettle* I touched upon these questions in relation to the scene, in which the police smash a protestor's head against the ground. Forensic Architecture's *The Killing of Tahir Elçi* also involves a recording of a rally, where Elçi declared his disapproval of armed clashes in the historic part of the city, during which he was later shot dead. My critique of these two pieces was centred on the questions regarding who is represented and for whom they are represented? Who is the person who is dying or wounded, how are they represented, who is looking, and how is the look constructed?

A+ takes an image from the Gezi protests, a photograph that appeared in many newspapers and online media outlets without credit. There are many images from the Gezi protests that became symbols of the protests, which lasted over three months across the country and were attended by millions of people. Many of them show police violence, such as the most widely known image of a young woman in red dress, being pepper sprayed by the riot police in close proximity. A+ is

constructed with a single photograph of another woman; a grey haired, retired woman: Emine Cansever, hurling a small stone with a catapult, hence known in Turkey as “Sapanlı Teyze” (auntie with a catapult or slingshot auntie). I was most struck with the photograph of Emine Cansever as it shows the apprehension and anticipation of violence, particularly as it depicts Cansever’s arm on which she wrote her blood type in case she was hospitalised (Fig. 39). To me this photograph presented a possibility of representing, recording and remembering violent events, without graphically showing the effect of the violence. To me, this single image conveys so many meanings, not only about the spirit of the protests but the concrete conditions of protesting. Furthermore, this image was used in her court case, against her, as an evidence of her disobedience.

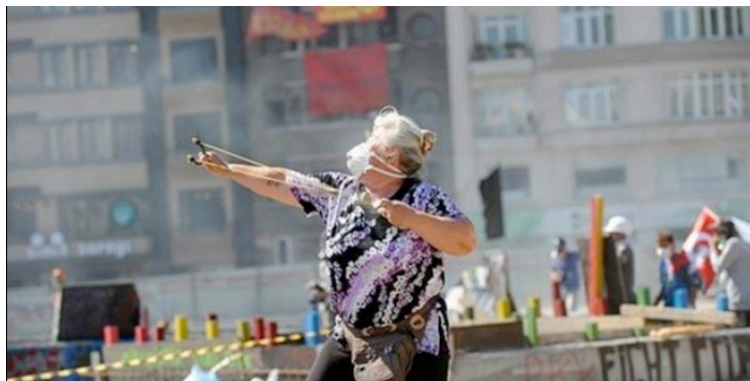


Fig. 39. A+ (2018-2020, Deniz Johns)

The video begins with the passionate sound of protestors over black: drumming alternating with the repeated chanting of a slogan, except second half of the slogan appears to be cut out. Then, an unfocused image appears for one second, when the drumming is heard. The video then cuts to black when the protestors chant a slogan “murderer” (in Turkish). This pattern of the image over drumming and the chanting over black repeats. With each cut, the abstracted image becomes sharper and more recognisable, as the framing changes gradually from extreme close-up to medium long-shot. While the image steadily reveals itself, the slogan chanting is cut down to complete silence. The first image is an out-of-focus extreme close-up of a scribble, a barely visible letter in the form of a line of shadow over a rather light, pale pink surface. After several appearances, the image becomes more focused and reveals “A+” scribbled by a marker pen on a pale pinkish surface (Fig. 40). Gradually it becomes apparent that “A+” is written on a stretched out arm and the arm belongs to a grey-haired woman, hurling a stone with a sling.



Fig. 40. A+ (2018-2020, Deniz Johns)

The process of gradually revealing the image and curtailing the slogan takes around one minute fifty seconds, and then the rhythmic drumming continues over black for a brief moment before silence. A Turkish and English text appear in white over black on each side of the frame:

it is evident from the A positive sign scribbled on your arm
that these were not the early days of the protests

it is evident that it is later
some got shot, some got killed

it is evident that you left your house prepared
you wore a mask

scribbled your blood type on your arm
took your life in your hands

Initially, in the first edit of the piece I had a different text that appeared at the end of the video, which was more informative, giving the dates of the protest, information about its scale and some statistical data about how many died and were injured. While it contained important historical information, something about it bothered me. There was no Turkish version of the text because my assumption was that everyone in Turkey knows who the woman is, what this protest was, how many died and so on. But I realised later it was more to do with the fact that I was in England at the time of making the video. I was thinking

in English when I wrote the text, and was addressing English-speaking people. What I have to note here is that my critical analysis of Gidal's work (and his notion of non-identity in particular) and *Light Reading* had a crucial part in that realisation. Subsequently, when I attempted to modify the piece in 2020, I asked myself what I would say if I thought in Turkish; if I spoke in Turkish, my native language. Then I wrote the text that appears in the video in Turkish (with the English translation), which addresses the woman in the image, using the second person pronoun "you". But "you" could also be addressing the viewer: an attempt to position the viewer as a protestor rather than an onlooker, a witness.

When the text disappears, the image returns, this time starting from the full image and running backwards. I complicated the image by overlaying the same clip in five different opacities, and slightly shifted on timeline, so that each clip begins a few second after preceding one. This structure operates as a distancing effect but also adds a sense of movement. Within a few seconds, the women's image is multiplied and gently animated (Fig. 41). This sequence is accompanied by the same sound recording of the protestors' chant, which also runs backwards, but this time without any exclusion. By the time this segment runs through, the viewer has a greater knowledge of the situation, and the role of the woman. By running backwards, the slogan loses its semantic properties, but still carries the characteristics of the chanting: the passion, the anger. In fact, one could claim that the chant sounds more powerful this way, as its meaning expands from one single slogan: perhaps the sound of voices speaks louder than the language. In this section, at the end of the piece, I intended to create a moment for the viewer to contemplate once more on the meaning of A+, to reconfigure what is seen, what is heard for themselves.



Fig. 41. A+ (2018-2020, Deniz Johns)

One could suggest that *A+* is reminiscent of Godard's video *Je Vous Salue, Sarajevo* (1993), which is also constructed using a single photograph. In his two-minute video, Godard studies photojournalist Ron Haviv's renowned photograph from the Bosnian War (1992-1995) (Fig. 42) by reframing the photograph several times, focusing on certain details in close up before revealing the image entirely. The photograph shows three paramilitary Serbian soldiers, one of whom is smoking a cigarette and casually kicking Bosnian civilians, who are face down on the ground and seem already dead or badly injured. Along with an emotive musical score by Arvo Pärt, *Silouans Song* (1991), Godard's alluring voice accompanies the image. His voice, as mournful as the score utters a short philosophical and poetic rumination about life, death, art and culture, which proposes art and culture in opposition: culture being the rule and art being the exception. The words are a combination of his own and quotes taken from George Bernanos and Louis Aragon: a curious pairing of "A deeply conservative Catholic quasi-monarchist" (Des O'Rawe 2016: 122) and a communist poet. While this could pose an interesting contradiction, both quotes correspond in this context, without presenting any opposing ideas.



Fig. 42. The Bosnian War (1992-1995, Ron Haviv)

In contrast to the voiceover, Godard uses an image from mainstream media, which appeared in *Time* magazine first and many more media outlets afterwards. The voice classifies “cigarette, computer, t-shirt, television, tourism, war” as culture and the enemy of art. Godard narrates: “Culture is the rule, and art is the exception” and continues later “It is the rule to want the death of the exception”. Ironically this photograph is part of that culture of “television, war” as Godard himself declares. How does this irony operate? Isn’t *Je Vous Salue, Sarajevo* also doing the exact thing that Godard accuses culture of? According to the text Godard reads, art (the exception to culture), “isn’t spoken, it is written: Flaubert, Dostoyevsky. It is composed: Gershwin, Mozart. It is painted: Cézanne, Vermeer. It is filmed: Antonioni, Vigo” Where does *Je Vous Salue* fit in? Is *it* the rule or the exception? If we follow Godard’s own dictum from the video, we would have to say it is the rule, as the image is part of that culture he is accusing. One could also argue that all the men of art he lists could be identified as part of that ‘cultural Europe’ too.



Fig. 43. *Je Vous Salue, Sarajevo* (1993, Jean-Luc Godard) (detail)

Des O'Rawe argues that *Je Vous* “is a protest film; a political pamphlet; an intervention designed to draw its viewers’ attention to the horrors of what was happening elsewhere in Europe; a Europe that had recently ratified an EU treaty designed to expedite further unification and enlargement, and to promote greater social equality” (2016:122). However, I maintain that it is not a protest film, if it is, it is a failing one. In an interview, when Godard was asked about the reoccurrence of Sarajevo in his films, he also states that it is his “way of protesting” (2005). But considering the notion I iterated earlier about every image of suffering victims of war, police violence spontaneously being images of victors, I struggle to see this video as a protest (Fig. 43). If this is intended to be Godard’s way of objecting to the violence against Bosnians, why reproduce it so graphically? The video ends with a cut to a black and white photograph of an unrecognisable person in distress, hunched over what looks like a frame (Fig. 44). The photograph itself is a vignette: the edges of the frame is darker and blurry, further emphasising framing. I could not find any information about the context of this photograph is, but the image seems to highlight the sense of Godard’s disappointment with Europe, which one gathers from the first part. The intention of this juxtaposition is not clear. Is this image, which could be read as someone crying over a frame meant to represent us, the viewer, who just has been studying the frame, or Godard himself? What does watching the images of horror of wars do other than make one cry over those frames? And that is only if you side with the victims, and not the oppressors.



Fig. 44. *Je Vous Salue, Sarajevo* (1993, Jean-Luc Godard)

In *Distant Suffering* Luc Boltanski is convinced that “having knowledge of suffering points to an obligation to give assistance” (2004: 20) and suggests that the spectator of others’ suffering, when put in a powerless position can regain their agency through talking about what they have seen (2004: 20). Mieke Bal, on the other hand, warns us against a problematic spectatorship of such graphic representations. In her essay “Imaging Pain”, she writes: “representing pain entails tenacious problems—of voyeurism, of facile equations, of caricature, of the potential for sadistic viewing and masochistic identification, and an erasing generalization” (2012: 115). Hence to me it was important not to show the effects of violence explicitly for this reason as well as my concern over the represented person’s dignity and agency. I am also aware that my position may come across as quite dogmatic in its opposition to the representation of violence. Mieke Bal describes the difficulty of taking such position when she writes: “endorsing this caution also risks collusion with censorship and forgetting what needs to be remembered in order to keep present the horror of inflicting horror” (2012: 115). Similarly, she seeks to find out if and how such censorship can be eliminated as well as the problematic forms of spectatorship that she lists (as I discuss above). With *A+* my practice-based endeavour in video is akin to Bal’s theoretical exploration. Nevertheless, part of me (and that part remains inflexible) still sides with Adorno, who wrote, with regard to images of pain:

For these victims are used to create something, works of art, that are thrown to the consumption of a world which destroyed them. The so-called artistic representation of the sheer physical pain of people beaten to the ground by rifle-butts contains, however remotely, the power to elicit enjoyment out of it. The moral of this art, not to forget for

a single instant, slithers into the abyss of its opposite. The aesthetic principle of stylization, and even the solemn prayer of the chorus, make an unthinkable fate appear to have had some meaning; it is transfigured, something of its horror is removed. This alone does an injustice to the victims; yet no art which tried to evade them could confront the claims of justice. (1980: 189)

Having been a victim of such violence, as briefly touched upon in the introduction, I cannot find any grounds to argue against Adorno. On the other hand, I do not want to avoid images of political struggles but find a way to represent them in the aesthetic sphere, in a challenging way that is specific to that sphere without sliding “into the abyss of its opposite” (Adorno, 1980: 189). *A+* can be read as that effort.

The absent project: the non-representable

In July 2016, while I was spending the summer in Turkey, a faction of the Turkish military attempted and failed a coup d'état, which consequently brought back a lot of memories of the last successful one in 1980, which coincides with my earliest childhood memories. The traces of psychological, social and political effects from the events of pre- and post-coup era can still be located in individuals' minds to political formations such as the Turkish Constitution. Years of political assassinations, death penalties, torture and blacklisting were followed by long periods of the oppression of civil rights, prison sentences for political beliefs, party and union closures and the privatisation of national assets. As I mentioned in the Introduction, my family, family friends and relatives were adversely affected by these events. My father was subjected to systematic torturing for months, imprisoned for over a year, and then released with no charge. He was not one unfortunate individual, a victim of an unfortunate event, but one of many. This experience was part of a long socio-political struggle that had continued since the 1960s. I had wanted to find a way to deal with these events that was divorced from my own personal and emotional relationship to them, because I did not want to make a video about one individual's perception or wisdom, whether mine or anyone else's. I was not interested in representing what happened to my family, but what caused this brutal coup, who was complicit in it, and how fascism and capitalism walked hand in hand in “developing” countries. So in this sense my intention was to make an experimental essayistic documentary.

I began working on this video in the end of 2016, which involved a lot of historical research into this era, looking through documents and chronologies of significant events that led to the coup. At the same time, I began digging my own memory about the 1980's coup, and I realised that I did not remember certain things too clearly, as I had been very young. So I interviewed people in my family from different generations to compare and contrast our personal memory of events, to try to see if there was a collective memory. I wondered how much of my memory was accurate, I suspected that my memory of events was sometimes mixed with stories I was told and visualised as a child. For me, this was another good reason not to make this project about my subjective retelling of events, however I could not help but reflect on how I remember, visualise, construct, select and forget memories. I was intrigued with the inaccuracies or contradictions between different accounts within the family. But meanwhile, the more I researched and the more I dug into my own memories, the more buried I felt in pain. I realised that I could not make this work objectively, because I was unable to detach my feelings from it. I was not sure why — yet.

Then I tried the opposite approach, and started off with my own insights and those of my parents. I interviewed them for this purpose, with the idea that perhaps, from these three perspectives (and maybe include my older brothers), I could achieve a multiple, more fluid subject position from which incidents could be told. During my talk with my father, I heard details of the torture he received for the first time, along with recollections of his friends, some of whom did not survive. While my father described situations, methods, sounds, and how he conducted himself and managed to come through, my mind visualised everything he told me, and it was unbearable even as an image. I then realised that this film could not be about my parents, because I could not figure out a way that would not show them as victims. I could not see them as victims, and they certainly would not see themselves as victims. They knew the way they chose to live and chose to think would have consequences, and they struggled against the powers that imposed these consequences. Perhaps they have repaired their broken sense of agency in the years followed the brutal oppression, in a way that is similar to what American philosopher Kelly Oliver explains:

Being othered, oppressed, subordinated, or tortured affects a person at the level of her subjectivity, her sense of herself as a subject and agent.

Oppression and subordination render individuals or groups of people as other by objectifying them. Objectification undermines subjectivity: to put it simply, objects are not subjects. Through the process of bearing witness to oppression and subordination, those othered can begin to repair damaged subjectivity by taking up a position as speaking subjects' (Oliver, 2001: 7).

For my parents, accepting to be a victim would be equal to surrender to those powers that oppressed them. Then I realised it was I (along with my brothers and many other children from this era) who was the actual victim. Because unlike my parents, I had not chosen to be in the situation: as a small child, I had no agency. In retrospect, perhaps the absent project was all about repairing my sense of subjectivity and claiming my agency. But at the time, I could not figure this out, as I had never seen myself as a victim before—perhaps because I identified with my parents' position—and when it was revealed to me that I was, I could not immediately come out of myself and look at the events from outside. It was not possible to be a victim and a witness at the same time. While struggling with these revelations and questions I made the disappearing self-portrait piece, *Media Blackout III*, followed by *A+* in 2018, and paused the absent project. So there is an intense connection between those videos and the one I did not make. Perhaps a psychoanalytical reading would suggest that I made my self-image disappear into black pixels only to be reborn as the woman with a sling, symbolically regaining my agency and subjectivity through her. Or perhaps I saw my mother in her, carrying the same type of blood A RhD positive, which is also mine. In a sense, *Media Blackout III* and *A+* are manifestations of thinking with images about subjectivity, identity, violence and the non-representable. While the absent project never materialised as a video, the process of researching and thinking informed my position, theorisation, and the avenues of criticism throughout the thesis.

In retrospect, my sensitivity about representation of real violent events that explicitly shows others in pain, and my critique of the positioning the viewer as symbolic witness could well stem from this very personal lived experience. But that should not disqualify the knowledge this experience produces. In fact, it could make valuable contribution to knowledge because this position is often “spoken for” from the privileged positions. In that sense, this sentence by the editors of *Framing Excessive Violence Discourse and Dynamics* (Daniel Ziegler, Marco Gerster and Steffen Krämer) is telling: “Although we do not expect to be victims of violence in our

daily routines—at least in pacified, Western societies—we are not in principle surprised by any acts of violence that happen to others” (2015: 1). Who is “we” in their sentence? Is it them: the three white male university professors in Germany who apparently do not “expect to be victims of violence” in their everyday life? And who are the “others” they refer to, to whom “acts of violence happen”? Many of those others, who are often victim of racist attacks, do in fact live in “pacified” Germany. This is not to dismiss their book or intellectual work and effort; it is only to acknowledge the often-privileged perspective of discourse around representation of violence and how it can be improved with introducing more diverse perspectives.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research project was to formulate an experimental film/video practice that constitutes a political aesthetic. I set myself this task because, on the one hand, I had a lot to say about the world around me and I wanted to comment on political events, atrocities and injustice I encountered (in Turkey or England). On the other hand, I was not convinced that doing so in a normative narrative form would have any power to change the socio-political formations or structures that produced them. Furthermore, I did not want to represent the brutalities or injustices by way of reproducing them visually/aurally as I maintained that this could possibly make me complicit in maintaining the conditions that created them. I also felt an affinity with the victims of such violence and responsibility not to objectify them or their pain. I was occupied with the question of how to politicise aesthetics in my own work, rather than aestheticizing political events such as protests or state violence, which are often the subjects of contemporary political moving image works.

The experimental films from the 1970s and the co-op filmmakers who influenced my practice, such as Gidal, Nicolson, Raban and Rhodes (and others that I could not include in this thesis, such as Gill Eatherley, Nicky Hamlyn, Guy Sherwin and John Smith) made me think critically about filmmaking, representation and narrative. Perhaps ironically, it is with their work that I began to think about what it means to make film politically (as opposed to Godard's often quoted aphorism). Numerous films and expanded cinema events in that decade comment on the politics of the relations and conditions of filmmaking, revealing the problematics of their own domain in the arts, rather than using filmmaking tools as medium to make a statement about politics or political events. In the works that I discuss throughout this thesis—and others besides—filmmaking is the political event. In this respect, it was crucial for this project to revisit some of the theories and films of that decade to see how the formal strategies in these films—involving negation, the use of voiceover, and different manifestations of verbal and visual language—have been deployed, and also to explore what lessons one can learn from these works regarding the conception of a political film practice.

Gidal was one of the main theorists of such practices, and I was most influenced by his challenging writing. While Gidal's Structural/materialist film theory helped me to scrutinise problems around politics of representation, and while I largely agree with

the Marxist principles that underpin his theory, I was not fully convinced with his aesthetic strategies and his decisive exclusion of political content in practice. That said, I was also dissatisfied with contemporary political “moving image” works that represented political events or subjects, often involving real incidents, real people, as framed and interpreted by artists. My problem with many of these works was mostly to do with their mode of operation rather than their intentions. Although I am mostly critical of the outcomes of these works, I am sympathetic to their incentive and the determination to deal with political events and problems that have an impact on our everyday lives. Having organised, recorded and participated in political activities, I cannot help but ask what we do with political and historical events and the images of them that haunt us and keep us awake at night? While I maintain that it is necessary to interrogate the politics of the medium, and that itself is a political act, I also strongly believe in the necessity of asking such questions.

I formulated my research questions to help me establish the terms and strategies of a critical aesthetic for a contemporary moving image practice. These questions were addressed and tackled in practice (as a series of videos and an expanded cinema piece) and in theory (in my critique of key films and videos). The creative works are essentially experiments: testing ideas, methods, and aesthetic procedures focusing on an address to my questions rather than providing a premeditated answer. The thesis examines numerous key film and video works, all of which offer different modes of critical practice and aesthetic strategies that are relevant to the concerns of this research.

In Chapter One, I examined Structural/materialist film theory’s existing link with Marxist political and aesthetic theory, particularly with Althusser’s as a starting point. Since Althusser is one particular Marxist theorist, that Gidal cites most regularly, exploring Althusser’s theories was unavoidable to better understand Gidal’s position but it also had another function in my research. His definition of ideology as “a system of representations” (1969: 231) not only strikes a chord amongst filmmakers and theorists in the 1970s, but his influence also exceeded that decade and still noticeable in contemporary philosophy, as Nicolas Bourriaud writes in his recent book *The Exform*: “If one seeks to problematize relations between aesthetics and politics, form and theory, and ideology and praxis, engagement with Althusser’s writings prove inescapable” (2015: xii). Even though I mostly referred to Althusser in relation to Gidal’s materialist film project, I found his theories useful not only to

clarify my understanding of ideology and materialism but also in my critique of the contemporary works I discuss in Chapter Four, particularly in relation to the ways in which the viewer is addressed. Thus, what is learnt in this chapter highly influenced my thinking in the succeeding chapters.

In Chapter Two, I analysed three specific concepts that Gidal established, the “construction of non-identity in the filmic process” (Gidal, 1989: 12); “de-subjectivization” (1989: 36) and “the emptying-out of potent signifiers, of meaning” (1989: 54), which I identified as potential roots of the shortcomings of Structural/materialist film theory and practice. Structural/materialist terms strictly negate representational image making and narrative and, on that note, I have established a new relation with Gidal’s strategies and Adorno’s aesthetic theories. The conclusion I derive from my analysis is that Gidal’s interpretation of Marxism is that it is rigidly based on Western Marxist tradition, particularly in Althusserian terms. Thus, unsurprisingly his materialist film theory shares similar problems with Western Marxism more broadly, one of which is its pessimism, as Anderson describes in his *Considerations of Western Marxism* (1976). I see this particular phase or division of Marxism as counter-productive in terms of the Marxist politics.

As I argued in Chapter Two, Gidal’s theoretical pessimism becomes overt in many of his films after 1980, becoming nihilistic in *Denials*. When this is coupled with Althusser’s theory of the Subject (as it is in Gidal’s writing), which ascribes very little agency—if any—to the individual, the problem is exacerbated. Nevertheless, through my critical analysis of *Room Film 1973* and *Denials* I came to the conclusion that Gidal’s concepts of “de-subjectivization” and “non-identity” can still be relevant to contemporary practices. And it can still be contextualised in the framework of Marxist anti-individualism if their manifestations also contain their opposites (the subject and identity), and if the film/video presents that contradiction. If there is no “I” then there must be “we”, otherwise, one is left with nothing, a non-being, which can only lead to a nihilistic conclusion and not a Marxist materialist one. Marx and Engels explicitly write that they do not “set out from what men say, imagine, conceive, nor from men as narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived in order to arrive at men in the flesh”. Instead, they “set out from real, active men and on the basis of their real life-process” (1999: 47). For me, this plural sense of being, the “we”, is a firm basis of potential for future practices. “We” could signify a collective “we”, as in group of individuals, but it could also signify fluidity of one

single identity, outside of the binary oppositions: man/woman, black/white, self/other.

In Chapter Three, I suggested that Rhodes' *Light Reading* achieves that sense of anti-individualism, without sacrificing the female subject/identity, and therefore its agency. *Light Reading* proposes another mode, which, instead of negating the representational image, subject and meaning making, it tests and interrogates the construction of film and language, turning the narrative and filmic devices against themselves. I formulated a new reading of the film, to consider how its feminist critique of language and representation can create an alternative Marxist formulation of subjectivity. This new formulation not only constructively problematises Gidal's notion of "constructing non-identity" and the viewer as "not-knower," but also its opposite: the dominant forms and construction of subjectivity in commercial cinema. One conclusion that can be drawn from my reading of *Light Reading* is that Rhodes' starting point is the historically and systematically oppressed subjectivity of women, including her own position as a woman filmmaker. This is why it was necessary to revisit/reread *Light Reading*. One of the most significant outcomes of my critical reading of the film is that it presents a point of departure that surpasses Structural/materialist theory, presenting a new dialectical materialist position for future practices.

In Chapter Four, I provided a critical examination of aesthetic strategies and tendencies in contemporary works through close analysis of three recent videos: *Laki Haze* by William Raban, *Ambiguous Journeys* by Lis Rhodes, and *The Killing of Tahir Elçi* by Forensic Architecture. Through my analysis of these videos I unpacked the problems around affirmative use of language in terms of the way the viewer is addressed; around the use of images of people in struggle or pain, and the ethical and political implications of such methods. There are several conclusions that can be drawn from my critique of these contemporary works. One of them is that when language is used authoritatively, embracing the power of speech that comes from institutional, patriarchal positions, the work loses its chance to create a dialectical space for the viewer. The viewer is told and shown what the maker deems they need to know. Raban's *Laki Haze* offers an approach in which the political critique resides in commentary, while the image invites the viewer to contemplate. Similarly, Rhodes' *Ambiguous Journeys* contains its critique in its narration. However, while in *Laki Haze* the catastrophic images are only evoked by the commentary, in

Ambiguous Journeys the viewer is exposed to images of tragic events. A very different kind of model is established by Forensic Architecture's work, in which this kind of exposure finds its extreme form. The outcome of my analysis of *Killing of Tahir Elçi* is that Weizman's simplification of truth, as something "simply there" (2017: 75), and more problematically something *visible*, does not hold. Going into complexities and intricacies of Kurdish struggle in Turkey and the Middle East is beyond the remit of this thesis, but perhaps it suffices to say that the complexities around Elçi's murder are vast; pointing at the finger that pulled the trigger does not tell us who really is behind the murder. And this is exactly why it is absolutely crucial that a film and video must refer to its own mode of construction (in terms of the framing and editing of events) in order to acknowledge the limitations of any medium to represent the truth.

The works I produced through the course of the research explore various methods and modes of critical practice that I have established and experimented with. In the Media Blackout series I examined aesthetic strategies that are akin to Gidal's negation of the image, except I did not strive for meaninglessness. Instead, in *Media Blackout I*, I wanted to use signifiers—inspired by *Light Reading*—such as letters and words, but put them through a process in which their meanings are questioned. *Media Blackout II* was an attempt to push the idea of erasing the image to its limits by reducing the elements of film event to a single lightbulb and a mirror. With this piece, I wanted to see if could still produce a reflexive cinematic experience that to some degree constitutes a political aesthetic without an image, and image-making apparatuses.

With *Media Blackout III*, I introduced a figurative image, and put it through a process that deconstructed that image. With this series I wanted to investigate to what degree the negation of imagery constitutes a method by which to politicise aesthetics. *A+*, comparable to several contemporary works I discussed in the thesis, takes a politically loaded media image and investigates the possibilities of problematising the image and language that are explicitly political. All the works I made during the research period address my concern with establishing a political aesthetic that reflects the specificities of the medium and at the same time subtly confront a political issue or event.

Contribution to Knowledge

The outcomes of my research project provide an original contribution to knowledge in the thesis by way of the evaluation and critique of various models of critical film practice alongside the account of four works that evidence aesthetic strategies of my own. A list of the contributions to knowledge that the thesis provides includes:

1. an analysis and critique of Structural/materialist film theory in light of the question of what constitutes a contemporary political practice; new analyses of Peter Gidal's theory and practice in the Western Marxist tradition.

The examination of Structural/materialist film theory and Peter Gidal's film practice in relation to Marxist political theory, and expounding their links with Althusser's theories around ideology and materialism, fills a significant gap in the existing knowledge about Gidal's project. There have hardly been any publications in the last two decades that fully engage with politics of Gidal's films and theory. The film analysis that the thesis provides also establishes new connections with the aesthetic theories of Adorno and contributes to the slim list of publications on Gidal's films. The theoretical exploration and the film analysis together work towards another objective, which is to establish new materialist aesthetic strategies, and to determine if and how Structural/materialist film theory can contribute to this effort. My thesis also provides a discussion on the shortcomings of Structural/materialist film, and an account of its relevance to contemporary times, which is also original.

2. a new analysis of Lis Rhodes' *Light Reading*, focusing on the ways in which the film attempts to formulate a collective female subjectivity through challenging language and disrupting its signification processes.

The critical exploration of *Light Reading*, which includes references to several other significant works of Rhodes, adds to the existing literature on her work, which is also quite limited. My analysis situates *Light Reading* in feminist dialectical materialist context and demonstrates how it presents a starting point to develop a future, non-binary, post-structural/materialist film project by exploring the ways in which the voice becomes a critical tool to dismantle the fixed identity and the dominant narrative constructions in language. In this sense, this new analysis makes the film relevant to contemporary discussions of political aesthetics.

3. a critical examination of aesthetic strategies and tendencies in three contemporary works, through close analysis of *Laki Haze* by William Raban, *Ambiguous Journeys* by Lis Rhodes and *The Killing of Tahir Elçi* by Forensic Architecture, which establishes unanticipated links between film- and video-makers who comes from very different backgrounds.

All three analyses are quite possibly the only in-depth studies of these videos to date. My examination of these works demonstrates the shortcomings of some of the aesthetic strategies and tendencies in contemporary videos and invites readers to reflect on aspects of political criticism in film. Furthermore, the critiques provide a point of departure to think critically about political expression, activism and investigative journalism in the context of contemporary art.

In terms of further research that stems from these projects, there are two immediate steps I would like to take. Based on my examination of how language can be utilised to interrogate its own structure and following *Light Readings*' footsteps, I would like to further investigate the relationship between women's voice and language, and explore what other ways voice can be utilised to destabilise patriarchal language and representation. Secondly, a longer-term effort will be to tackle the issues in *The Absent Project: the non-representable* once again, based on the lessons learnt from this research as a whole. Only in retrospect do I realise that I was trying to approach a deeply personal subject impersonally in order to avoid a single subjective view. This was due to the influence of Gidal's de-subjectivisation method, but also because of my own anti-individualistic political position. Furthermore, I was also uncertain about the use, potentially, of my own voice, and which language I would use to think, speak, and address the viewer. Writing in great depth about the experience of being a foreigner in *Strangers to Ourselves*, Julia Kristeva wrote: "Between two languages, your realm is silence" (1991: 15), and for many years this thought resonated with me. But my analysis of *Light Reading*, and making A+ showed me that by starting from my subjective position, my identity could constitute a critical position. A multiplicity of identities and languages can in fact be emancipating for the maker and the viewer as long as the work is not constructed in an authoritative way, but offers a position of questioning. *The Absent Project* should let many voices speak and interrogate the forms of representation, instead of residing in silence and the non-representable.

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Film/videography

2'45" (1972) William Raban
A13 (1994) William Raban
A+ (2018-2020) Deniz Johns
All That Is Solid Melts into Air (2008) Mark Boulos
Amanuensis (1973) Lis Rhodes
Ambiguous Journeys (2018) Lis Rhodes
Angles of Incidence (1973) William Raban
Arnulf Rainer (1960) Peter Kubelka
Art Class (2020) Andrea Luka Zimmerman
Autumn Scenes (1978) William Raban
Available Light (2016) William Raban
Back and Forth (1969) Michael Snow
Blight (1996) John Smith
Blow Job (1964) Andy Warhol
Basement Window (1970) William Raban
Castle 1 (1966) Malcolm le Grice
Civil Disobedience (2004) William Raban
Civil Rites (2017) Andrea Luka Zimmerman
Clouds (1968) Peter Gidal
Close up (1983) Peter Gidal
Condition of Illusion (1975) Peter Gidal
Contempt (1963) Jean-Luc Godard
Conversation Between Blacklisted Construction Workers (2015) Lucy Parker
Denials (1986) Peter Gidal
Diagonal (1973) William Raban
Dirty Pictures (Hotel Diaries 7) (2007) John Smith
Doorway (1974) Annabel Nicolson
Dresden Dynamo (1971) Lis Rhodes
Estate, a Reverie (2015) Andrea Luka Zimmerman
Epilogue (1978) Peter Gidal
Erase and Forget (2017) Andrea Luka Zimmerman
Film in which there appear sprocket holes, edge lettering, dirt particles, etc. (1966)
George Landow
Fatima's Letter (1992) Alia Syed

The Flicker (1966) Tony Conrad
Focus (1971) Peter Gidal
Frozen War (Hotel Diaries 1) (2001) John Smith
The Girl Chewing Gum (1976) John Smith
Guilt (1988) Peter Gidal
Hall (1969) Peter Gidal
Handsworth Songs (1985) Black-Audio-Visual-Collective
The Host (2015) Miranda Pennell
The Houseless Shadow (2011) William Raban
In the Kettle (2010-2012) Lis Rhodes
Island Race (1996) William Raban
Je Vous Salue, Sarajevo (1993) Jean-Luc Godard
Journal of Disbelief (2010-2016) Lis Rhodes
Key (1968) Peter Gidal
The Killing of Tahir Elçi (2019) Forensic Architecture
The Killing of Nadeem Nawara and Mohammed Abu Daher (2015) Forensic
 Architecture
Laki Haze (2019) William Raban
Leading Light (1975) John Smith
Lemon (1969) Hollis Frampton
Love is the Message, the Message is Death (2016) Arthur Jafa,
Light Reading (1978) Lis Rhodes
London Republic (2016) William Raban
Long Duration of the Split Second (2018) Forensic Architecture
Matches (1975) Annabel Nicolson
Measures of Distance (1980) Mona Hatoum
Media Blackout I (2016) Deniz Johns
Media Blackout II (2017) Deniz Johns
Media Blackout III (2018) Deniz Johns
MM (2002) William Raban
Museum Piece (Hotel Diaries 2) (2004) John Smith
Not Resting (1999), Nicky Hamlyn
No Night No Day (1997) Peter Gidal
Print Slip (1975) Lis Rhodes
Reel Time (1973) Annabel Nicolson
Riff (2004) Lis Rhodes

Rip It Up (1975) Lis Rhodes
Room (Double Take) (1967) Peter Gidal
Room Film 1973 (1973) Peter Gidal
Running Light (1996) Lis Rhodes
Solidarity (2019) Lucy Parker
Speak Mouthless (2013 – 2017) Tony Chakar
The Smiling Madame Beudet (1922) Germain Dulac
Thames Film (1986) William Raban
Time Stepping (1974) William Raban
Time and the Wave (2013) William Raban
Trees in Autumn (1960) Kurt Kren
Quartet (2007) Nicky Hamlyn
Yes No Maybe Not (1967) Malcolm Le Grice
View (1970) William Raban
Volcano (2005) Peter Gidal
Wavelength (1967) Michael Snow
Word Movie (1966) Paul Sharits
Zorns Lemma (1970) Hollis Frampton

Postscript

In this postscript I respond to two questions that were posed during my viva. The first concerns the difference between the 'dialogic' and the 'dialectic' and was put to me by William Raban, who asked me to concisely explain why I favour using "dialectic" rather than "dialogic". He suggested that I could refer to Richard Sennet's distinction between these two terms.

There are several reasons as to why the terms 'dialectic' or 'dialectical' surface in this thesis. Before explaining the rationale behind this, I would like to first reiterate my understanding of the concept of dialectic and its relevance to my discussion (especially considering the diversity of usages in philosophy). In this research, my understanding of the terms 'dialectic' or 'dialectical' stemmed from Marxist materialist dialectics. This PhD project has set out to examine the political aesthetics of Structural/ Materialist film to help me formulate a new political experimental filmmaking practice, and my critique is mapped out in the context of Marxist political philosophy and aesthetic discourse. This is partly because of my own political position, but also the ways in which Gidal situates his materialist film theory and practice in this discourse. Within this Marxist framework, the notion of a dialectical materialist practice surfaced as one of the most critical terms. Surveying the history of Marxist approaches in film theory and practice I found particular emphasis on dialectics, and dialectical thinking, starting with Eisenstein's writing from 1920s. Elaborating on his unfinished film project *Capital* Eisenstein writes: 'the content of CAPITAL (its aim) is now formulated: to teach the worker to *think dialectically*. To show *the method of dialectics*' (1976:10, emphasis mine). Correspondingly, Marxist theorists such as Adorno and Jameson write extensively on dialectical thinking, some of which I discussed in relation to experimental film theory and practice in Chapters 2, 3 and 4. While I don't oppose the concept of the 'dialogic' as a form or method of artistic inquiry, for me it lacks something critical that Marxist dialectical thinking holds, which is its potential to make us think outside of ideology and our identity, even if this happens momentarily and even if not fully. As I quoted in the thesis, Fredric Jameson explains this perfectly:

The dialectic is designed to eject us from its illusory order, to project us in spite of ourselves out of our concepts into the world of genuine realities to which those concepts were supposed to apply. We cannot, of

course, ever really get outside our own subjectivities: to think so is the illusion of positivism; but, every time they begin to freeze over, to spring us outside our own hardened ideas into a new and more vivid apprehension of reality itself is the task of genuine dialectical thinking (1974: 372).

This understanding of dialectics is the complete opposite of Sennett's idea of dialectics, which is constrained and aims at "a definite idea" (2012:26) in a closed-ended way. Sennett writes: 'Dialectic and dialogic procedures offer two ways of practising a conversation, the one by a play of contraries leading to agreement, the other by bouncing off views and experiences in an open-ended way' (2012:24). His understanding of dialectics follows the Hegelian thesis-antithesis-synthesis schema that leads to a fixed, closed-ended agreement. Jameson, on the other hand, thinks of dialectics as a dynamic concept. This was my starting point for the definition of dialectics in the thesis. Interestingly, Sennett's understanding of 'dialogic' is similar to Jameson's definition of 'dialectic' but only with regards open-endedness. Sennett's idea of dialogic conversation is often based on identification with, or recognition of, the other. As I explored in my thesis, a Marxist materialist dialectics involves a move away from identification and ideology (Althusser, Jameson) and a move towards 'non-identity thinking' (Adorno). This brief explanation about my use of the term 'dialectic' rather than 'dialogic' is also linked to Andrea Luka Zimmerman's question, which I will respond next.

In my viva, the second question was posed by Andrea Luka Zimmerman, who asked 'how the knowledge gained might be part of a radical (new) image / politics as proposed by, for example, Saidiya Hartman, Tina Campt, or present in works of Arthur Jafa, especially their ideas on "practicing refusal", in particular in relation to work around violence and the image'. My response to this question is rather brief, as Jafa's work and Hartman and Campt's theories all fall outside of my research framework, for reasons that I will explain.

I can see how one could make correlations between the works and discourse of The Practicing Refusal Collective (the FR collective), formed by Tina Campt and Saidiya Hartman (2015), and my intentions of formulating a new radical practice that constitutes political aesthetics, as well as my critical position in relation to what kind of 'look' is constructed in a film/video (as elaborated in Chapters 2, 3 and 4).

However, I genuinely am not sure if and how the knowledge gained in my project could contribute to their discourse or context, which seems mostly race-specific and situated in the USA. While it may be possible to translate their theorisation into less racial-specific and transnational frameworks, I find their work very much imbedded in North American culture, and very much about a celebration of blackness. That is not to say I am not interested in their work, in fact in the chapter where I discuss contemporary works, I momentarily considered including an analysis of *Love is the Message, the Message is Death* (2016) by Arthur Jafa, who is a member of the FR collective. However, I excluded it as I thought that the work was not relevant to my practice and the context I work in, partly because of its framework, but partly because I found it too sensational and spectacular, because of the accompanying Kanye West song, *Ultralight Beam* (2016), which is a hip-hop song with gospel musical tones with quite emotive, religious lyrics. I found that the video appeals to emotions, rather than offering us a new way of looking or thinking. As discussed throughout my thesis, my focus has always been on dialectical materialist thinking and utilising it to form new ways of filmmaking and viewing.

Tina Campt writes about *Love is the Message* in her latest book *A Black Gaze: Artists Changing How We See* (2021) and has a completely different take on the video. Campt argues that *Love is the Message* changes the way the audience perceives images and how the video creates a feeling of 'kinship' by juxtaposing images of joyous and vibrant blackness and the pain and suffering of it. But I am not fully convinced that this juxtaposition of images of joyous singing and dancing Black Americans and the images of violence inflicted on them undermines the problematic nature of representation. On the other hand, I think the video does celebrate blackness, which I appreciate very much. Discussing this work further is beyond the limits of this postscript, but I would like to end my response by reiterating what I mentioned in the conclusion: for the purposes of my practice in the future, I would like to think further on the gaze of the oppressed, but with a strong emphasis on "we" that could signify a group of individuals or a fluid single identity, beyond the binary oppositions: man/women, black/white, self/other, because oppression is not limited to power relations in these terms. On that note, I will quote bell hooks, who I am likely to study further and draw from for future works. She writes:

Class is still often kept separate from race. And while race is often linked with gender, we still lack an ongoing collective public discourse that puts

the three together in ways that illuminate for everyone how our nation is organized and what our class politics really are. Women of all races and black people of both genders are fast filling up the ranks of the poor and disenfranchised. It is in our interest to face the issue of class, to become more conscious, to know better so that we can know how best to struggle for economic justice (2000:8).

Like hooks, I don't think we can talk about ending racism in a meaningful way or even fighting against it, 'without talking about class' (hooks, 2010:7). And for me, to speak about class and oppression in any meaningful way makes me return to Marxist materialist thought and thinking dialectically about the material conditions and relations in life and in art, which includes all class (economic), social, racial and gender relations.

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Filmography:

Love is the Message, the Message is Death. 2016. [video] Arthur Jafa, USA

Song:

West, K., 2016. Ultralight Beam *The Life of Pablo*. Kanya West. Good Music: USA