

Old Weird Materialism: Production and Distribution of Artist Film

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Catherine (Marcy Saude, 16mm, 10 min, 2018)

This talk emerges from my practice and perspective as an artist working with moving images, with an emphasis on 16mm photochemical film materials.

In an effort to find ways of sustaining my practice, I currently work as a technician at Plymouth College of Art in the Equipment Resources Centre. My work days are spent surrounded by the various objects that together comprise the apparatus of cinema. I do my best to share these resources with filmmakers unconnected to the college when my position allows, and lean on them heavily in my production process. My unwaged work occurs not always in the physical locations of, but in the larger context of participation in, the collective artist-run film labs BEEF (Bristol Experimental and Expanded Film) and the Filmwerkplaats in Rotterdam.

These labs are part of a global network of at least 35 artist-run photochemical film collectives who have claimed and re-purposed technology cast-off by the film industry, developing DIY methods and processes in order to creatively repurpose film as material beyond capitalist viability. The labs emerged in the UK with the London Filmmaker's Co-op in the late 1960s before spreading to the Netherlands and France, back to the UK with subsequent generations, and now to Mexico, Indonesia, Australia, and even very recently the United States. Genevieve Yue notes in her article on the film labs, "Kitchen Sink Cinema," that "the majority of independent labs

are in France and other parts of Europe; the fewest are in the United States. Paradoxically, the persistence of a few major American commercial labs like Deluxe or Fotokem has undermined the establishment of artist-run labs domestically.”¹

But it’s not the commercial labs that have hindered the formation of collective artist-run labs in the US so much as the lack of ability to carve out physical space for social formations and productive capacities outside the reach of market sensibilities. Europe, especially France, has a tradition of militantly defending communities operating outside the dictates of capitalist logic, and this form of organization has transferred more easily to emerging and collapsing economies than to my home country, though a few attempts seem to have recently succeeded, at least for as long as the gentrifiers can be kept at bay.

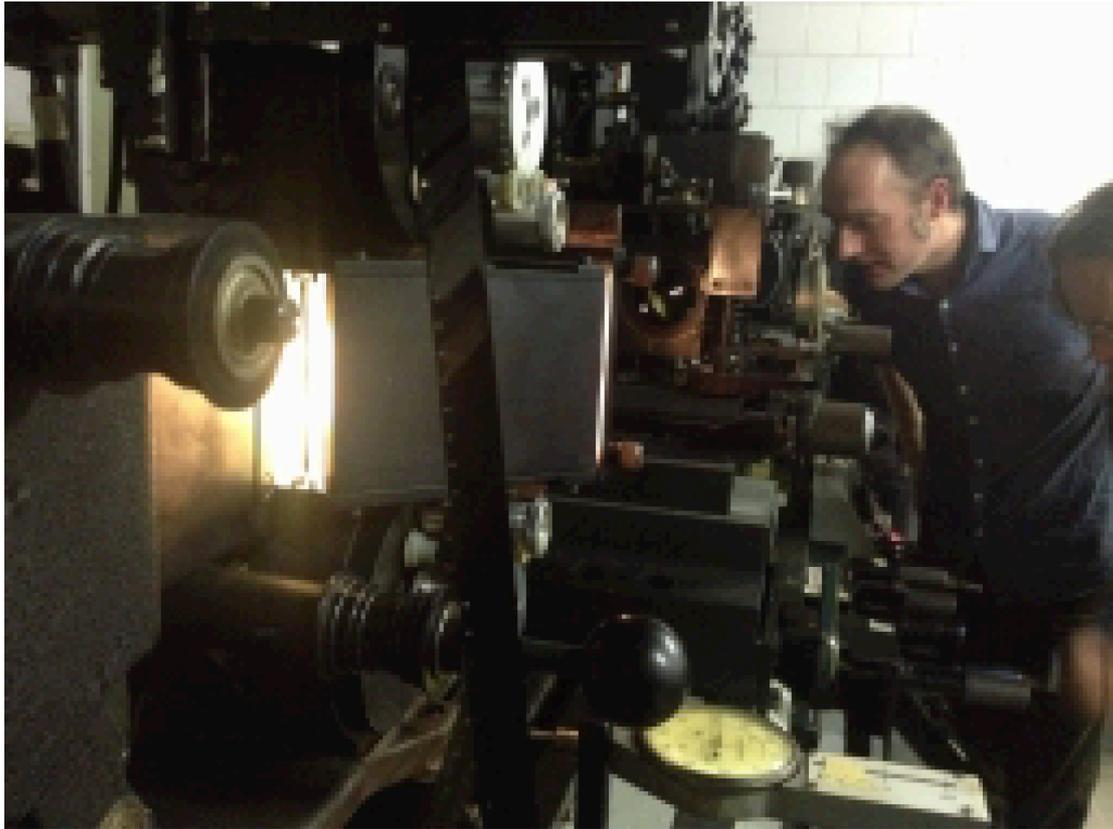
As Pip Chodorov, co-founder of L’Aboniable lab in Paris explains, “We are not in an economy but an ecology... a grassroots network, filmmakers helping each other, outside the capitalist system.” Chodorov also states that the artists creating work in the collective labs “don’t work with images, but with organic, physical material that comes from the earth: salts, silvers, minerals. We are not so much concerned with what it looks like, rather with what it is.”²

It’s the objects and materials in the film lab that create a problem for which a communal structure of access and shared space is the most successful answer. Acknowledging the way that certain filmmakers and technicians have set up optical printers in their garages, it’s nevertheless the case that banding together is the best way to address equipment like Steenbeck editing tables, continuous processing machines, contact printers, and bulk, discounted orders for film stock and chemistry. But this is not an argument for the agency of things, but rather a gesture toward the complex interaction of filmmaking materials and social organization in a particular moment in history.

Journeys of decommodification

The objects and machines that form node points around which the artist labs are organized move and have moved from the realm of commercial production into a de-commodified state where they are collectively owned and put to use making films that themselves are objects that stubbornly resist the logic of the market.

This movement is not just theoretical or metaphorical. Filmwerkplaats’ most recent acquisition is a Bell & Howell Model C contact printer, used to make release prints with optical soundtracks from 16mm negatives. From a commercial lab, most likely Hollywood Cine in Los Angeles, the printer made its way to an auction based in Atlanta. Esther Urlus from Filmwerkplaats won the auction and proceeded to have an exceedingly difficult time convincing the auctioneers that it was, indeed, possible to ship such a bulky item to Rotterdam. But it is possible, of course, by ocean freight, the network of container shipping that forms the often invisible circulatory system of contemporary global capitalism. So along with, I’ll deduce, soybeans, bourbon, and the products of big pharma, the contact printer passed through shipping routes to Filmwerkplaats, conveniently located in the busiest European port for containers arriving from and leaving to the US, to be re-purposed into a mechanism allowing for the distribution of artist film productions.



Betsy the Oxberry, Filmwerkplaats

Materialist Film

London Filmmaker's Co-op member Peter Gidal's book *Materialist Film* is striking in the explicit politics Gidal assigns to the Co-op's organisational structure. While the debates in *Materialist Film* and other writings by co-op members center around the sphere of the image, where "retrograde representational elements", non-abstract images and any resemblance to narrative were considered to be inextricably linked to the transmission of bourgeois ideology, what becomes clear is the lack of debate around the need for and explicitly "socialist" organisational structure of the cooperative. The films and writings of co-op members are consistently situated by Gidal as emerging from "an engaged political position on the left,"³ a position they contrast to the experimental "New American Cinema" of the 1960s and 70s.

The UK structuralist-materialists' engagement with film as material was not the reductive Greenbergian medium-specific modernism that it has often been caricatured as, but emerged out of a specific intersection of art practice and political praxis. Gidal writes, "Obviously an avant-garde that sees itself as separately changing things is naive. That's why avant-garde filmmakers do have to be socialists, because that cannot happen in a vacuum outside the economic."⁴

BEEF member Kim Knowles has observed that "As film shifts from a 'dominant' to a 'residual' cultural form, the materials themselves become politically charged in a way that they weren't during the 1960s and '70s...Although there may be arguments against using the word "obsolete" to describe a medium still very much in use, discourses on the processes and production of obsolescence, as well as theories of

the outmoded, rubbish and waste, open up useful critical positions from which to assess current activities in the field of photochemical film.”⁵

Thomas Elsaesser provides this discourse on the political potential of obsolescence in art in his talk *The Loop of Belatedness*:

“Obsolescence, understood as the surviving witness of past newness while renouncing once-upon-a-time utility, can therefore also harbour utopian aspirations, and even become the vehicle for preserving lost promises and unfulfilled potential. Freed from utility and market value, both the hand-crafted implement and the industrially made commodity can reveal unexpected beauty and deploy a potent charm. One of the strategic uses of obsolescence as a critical concept can be found in the fact that, being a term that inevitably associates both capitalism and technology, it is of special interest in the context of both the art world and audio-visual media, both old and new, because it implicitly acknowledges that today there is no art outside capitalism and technology.”⁶

For Elsaesser, capitalism is the “untranscendable horizon” (to borrow from Jameson) from which art practices can’t escape. I think this has something to do with a lingering Marxist tradition of discomfort with prefiguration. This discomfort and distrust certainly manifests in what Accelerationists Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams denigrate as “folk politics:” “Attempts at prefiguration, direct action, and relentless horizontalism...general assemblies and direct democracy” are “incapable of turning the tide against global capitalism.”⁷

The artist-run labs fit a definition of “folk” as emerging from voluntary collective cultural practices, and, given the political implications of their practices noted by Yue, Knowles, Chodorov, and myself in previous talks,⁸ I’d like to re-think and re-evaluate the folk politics of the film labs in light of the weird.

Old, Weird America

The American eccentric Harry Smith collected Native American artifacts and folk and blues 78s before he moved to post-WWII San Francisco, encountered the abstract films of Oskar Fischinger and Norman MacLaren, and began making experimental films infused with occult symbolism via cut out animation. His collected folk tunes and country blues, from the specific period of 1927- the point at which recording technology was able to produce recording of commercially viable quality – to 1933, at which point the Great Depression pulled the rug out from under the commercial market for folk recordings, were released in 1952 as the *Anthology of American Folk Music*, with a booklet illustrated by the same clip art that served as the basis for his film *Heaven and Earth Magic* a few years later.

In Greil Marcus’ book originally called *invisible Republic*, later republished as *Old Weird America*, the country depicted by the songs on Harry Smith’s *Anthology of American folk music* stands contra the 1950s Americanism of consumer culture and rigid conformity, making the past strange in a way that widened the scope of possible futures. Harry Smith saw the collection, with its flattening of racial hierarchies in musical categorization and with its lyrical focus on robbers, bootleggers, sexual deviants, and ghosts, as an agent of social change, precisely via the way it made the past weird. In Marcus’ interpretation, historical facts served hierarchy, while tradition

was liberating because it grew from a voluntary personal response to the repertory of the past.⁹

This notion has been criticized by academics intervening in the “otherization” of the American South and arguing against the mystifying effects of this individualist view.¹⁰ And indeed it lines up with the structural-materialist filmmakers’ criticisms of the American experimental film tradition, of which Smith was also a part of, championing a mythical, lyrical individualist perspective and focus on perception, rather than a practice engaged with terrains of socio-political struggle. But I’m going to suggest it might be possible to extract a thread of utopian possibility from the old, weird, America and connect it to what I see as the film labs material and political praxis, via the folk and the weird.

In pointing to something “weird” in old materialism I’m pointing out that neither old materials such as film or critical frameworks such as Frederic Jameson-via-Alexander Galloway’s “Old Materialism,”¹¹ or indeed Gidal’s materialism, are familiar to the point of exhaustion, but rather contain uncanny gaps, spaces full of potential for the futurity of radical artistic community.

In “Matter against Materialism,” Benjamin Noys critiques what he sees as New Materialism’s tendency towards “a haptic attention to the material surfaces of objects and a sense or defense of the rights or status of objects as sites of feeling, “ which he situates “against broadly Marxist currents that insist on the role of the economic, on the ensemble of social and historical relations.”¹² According to Noys, the result of separating matter from materialism is to underestimate the uncanny nature of objects, which circulate between the human and the nonhuman. This tendency denies, then, the weirdness of objects.

In a talk in the defense of Halloween, “New Weird” fiction author China Mieville points out that what’s made weird or monstrous is often that which stands in opposition to power, for example witches or Beowulf’s Grendel. Mieville expresses a desire to develop “a Marxist defense of the flagrantly imaginary” and he does this in part by invoking Gothic Marxism. He draws from Margaret Cohens’ book on Walter Benjamin, *Profane Illumination*, which positions Gothic Marxism as, among other things, “a valorisation of a culture’s detritus and trivia as well as its strange and marginal practices.” Gothic Marxism develops a historical materialism sensitive to the marvelous, in opposition to capitalist rationalism.¹³

In his 2009 book *Cinema Against Spectacle*, which revisits questions of the filmic apparatus from the 1970s, Jean-Louis Comolli writes of the experience of cinema: “At the speed of light, a shower of abrasions spreads out across the two dimensions of the screen, carving an imaginary depth into it. It bathes our transfixed bodies in a glimmering projection of photochemical matter, a patchwork of palpably material audiovisual vibrations, more corporeal than ghostly...”¹⁴

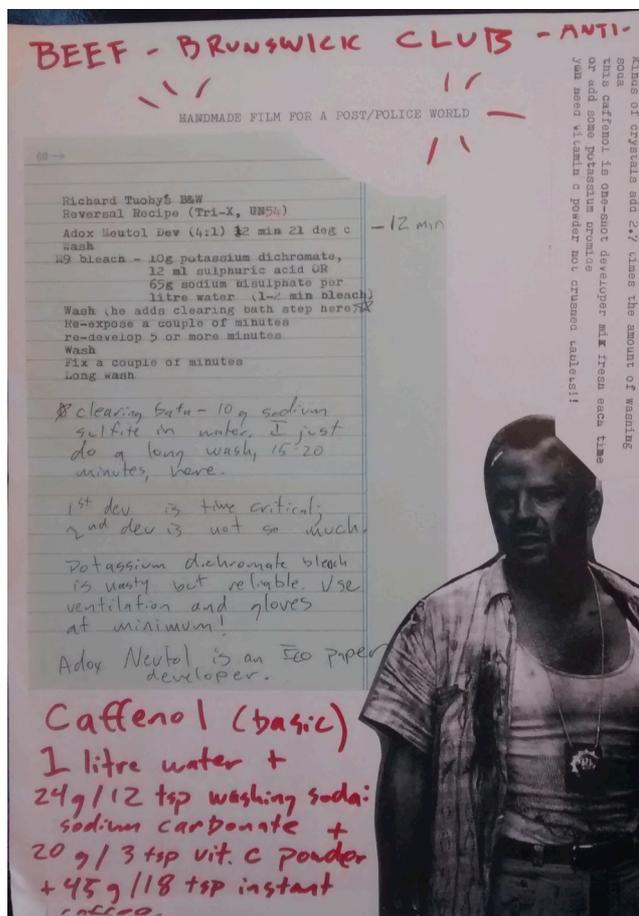
Even in the most materialist manifestations, a sensitivity to the marvelous is clearly needed in discussions of the alchemical reactions between the light, silver, developer, and the embodied viewer at the heart of photochemical film practice. But while New Materialists might push against the idea that “the political perspective [is] the absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation” to correctly cite Jameson this time,¹⁵ in the film labs a sort of delight in materials, machines, and processes is deeply intertwined with forms of horizontal control over production, with all the pitfalls

that entails. The insistence on the future possibilities of photochemical film, and refusal to separate them from contemporary technologies (for example the fact that many of the labs' contact and optical printers have been re-fitted with Arduino controllers by Dianna Barrie and Richard Tuohy of Australia's Nanolab), interrupts linear notions of progress and hyper-capitalist economies that prioritize speed, instantaneousness, and immediate obsolescence.

In contrast, 16mm is slow. It continues to be projected at 24 frames per second, or less in the case of silent, modified, or analytic projectors, whereas digital cinema is moving toward ever-higher frame rates. Photochemical film takes time- to expose correctly while filming, to process by hand in a DIY lab, to edit and print and create an optical soundtrack and combine the optical soundtrack with the negative and process the resulting release print. Participating in a member-run collective lab takes time, to have meetings, make decisions, collaborate on group projects, answer emails, induct new members, and scrape together funds- all the tasks that can't easily be delegated in structures committed to horizontality and mutual responsibility.

In the conclusion of his book *Malign Velocities*, Benjamin Noys argues for interruptions and frictions in the "fundamental accelerationist fantasy of smooth intergration"¹⁶ as a site of resistance to capitalism. These moments of friction require an attention to aesthetics. If, as Peter Gidal argues, "Each film is a record (not a representation and not a reproduction) of its own making,"¹⁷ then films produced in the film labs are a record of non-hierarchical collectively organized resource distribution embedded at the level of the aesthetic.

Handmade Film for a Post-Police World



In the summer of 2018 I facilitated a daylong workshop at BEEF as part of Antiuniversity Now, a London-based collaborative, radical, self-organised learning project. Using expired film stocks from the 1970s through the 1990s that have been given to me over the years by filmmakers unwilling to take a chance on stock that's potentially become grainy, slow, fogged, and low contrast as it aged, we re-photographed media representations of the police, from charity shop Hollywood DVDs, TV series, and YouTube videos from bystander mobiles and body-cam footage. Then we used buckets and instant coffee to process our appropriated footage. In the in-between periods inherent to the film developing process, we learned from a member of the Bristol Anarchist Federation and from each other about histories of policing and police violence in the

UK and the US, current abolitionist campaigns, and began to collate practical, local, community-based alternatives to policing in the South West UK.

Taking as a starting point a deliberate over-literalization of Ranciere's dictum that politics is that which stands in distinct opposition to the police,¹⁸ we developed our politics through developing film. The cheap and DIY materials and chemical processes we used resulted in degraded, scratched, and inverted images. This transfer of representation, the capture of popular depictions of policing onto a tactile and volatile medium, forms for me a space of possibility for a media critique through material tangibility, making images weird via old materials in order to re-evaluate the power they hold over the horizons or our political imaginaries.

¹ Yue, Genevieve. "Kitchen Sink Cinema: Artist-Run Film Laboratories." *Film Comment*, <https://www.filmcomment.com/blog/artist-run-film-laboratories/>

² Chodorov, Pip. "The Artist-Run Film Labs." *Millennium Film Journal*, no.60, Fall 2014, pp 28-37.

³ Gidal, Peter. *Materialist Film*. Routledge, 1990, p 33.

⁴ Gidal p 151.

⁵ Knowles, Kim. "Self Skilling & Home Brewing." *Millennium Film Journal*, No. 60, Fall 2014, pp 20-27.

⁶ Elsaesser, Thomas. "The Loop of Belatedness." *Senses of Cinema*, <http://sensesofcinema.com/2018/cinema-and-the-museum/cinema-contemporary-art-gallery/>

⁷ Srnicek, Nick and Alex Williams. *Inventing the Future*. Verso Books, 2015, p 85.

⁸ Saude, Marcy. "Artist Film and Photochemical Futures," Future Imperfect Cinema Symposium, Plymouth University, 2017.

⁹ Marcus, Greil. *Invisible Republic: Bob Dylan's Basement Tapes*. Macmillan, 1997, p 100.

¹⁰ See for example Smith, John. "Weird Americas Old, New, and Ongoing." *CR: The New Centennial Review*, Vol. 10, No. 1, Spring 2010, pp 101-112.

¹¹ Galloway, Alexander. "History is What Hurts: On Old Materialism." *Social Text* 127, Vol. 34, No. 2, June 2016, pp 125-141.

¹² Noy, Benjamin. "Matter Against Materialism: Bruno Latour and the Turn to Objects." In *Theory Matters* (Martin Middeke and Christoph Reinfandt, eds). Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, pp 81-94.

¹³ Miéville, China. "Marxism and Halloween," presented at the 2013 Socialism Conference, Chicago. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=paCqiY1jwqc>

¹⁴ Comolli, Jean-Louis. *Cinema Against Spectacle: Technique and Ideology Revisited*. Amsterdam University Press, 2009, p 62.

¹⁵ Jameson, Frederic. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Cornell University Press, 1981, p 17.

¹⁶ Noys, Benjamin. *Malign Velocities: Accelerationism and Capitalism*. Zero Books, 2014, p 103.

¹⁷ Gidal, Peter. "Theory and Definition of Structural/Materialist Film." *Structural Film Anthology*, British Film Institute, 1976.

¹⁸ Ranciere, Jacques. *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*. Continuum, 2010.