Peter Gidal

When you say experimental film is about trying to understand the relationship between an object (in this case an image) and its name, how we come to know what we see, questioning the division of reality into discrete entities, what are you questioning about images? Images are not concepts, so how does one go about questioning them? - Christine Delphy, Interview with Lisa Cartwright, *Undercut,* as quoted in *Materialist Film.*

Peter Gidal's **Volcano** follows upon the concerns that he has had for over thirty years, namely the problems of representation in a representational medium. A British-based filmmaker and theorist, Gidal has been one of the main proponents of the Structural/Materialist Film, which is not to be confused with the North American tendency that P. Adams Sitney labeled Structural filmmaking around the same time. Unlike Sitney's Structuralism, where the formal "shape [is] the primal impression of the film" (ie. the zoom or the pan), Structural/Material-

ism relied on a hybrid of European post-structural theory (à la Roland Barthes) and Marxist dialectical materialism. Rather than films that were formally streamlined, Structural/Materialist films were models of interrogation, engaging the viewer in the process of deciphering experience by analytically taking apart and recomposing vision.

Both Structuralist film and Structural/Materialism privileged the materiality of film, but while Structuralist Film often looked at material aspects of filmmaking as metaphors of a larger whole (most (in)famously in Annette Michelson's description of Michael Snow's zoom in **Wavelength** as a "a grand metaphor for narrative action" and thus, consciousness), Structural/Materialism tended to reflect upon the larger cinematic apparatus (the trappings of ideology as reflected in the "construction" of a viewer through narrative and representation) by creating process-oriented work that questioned the coherence of cinematic practice.

Although **Volcano**'s "shape" is evident early into the experience of the film—hand-held shots of
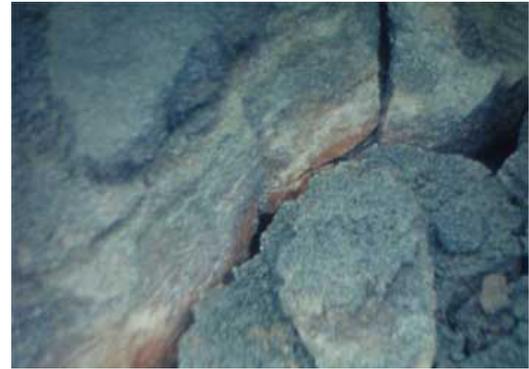

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cooled and fissured lava are evenly intercut with clear leader—the description does not quite match the process of watching the film. Gidal's restless, hand-held camerawork zooms in and out of the rock face, at times losing focus. There is a stumbling quality to the filming and any embodied rhythm that Gidal possibly establishes is undercut by the systematic inclusion of clear leader, which creates an arbitrary collision between the natural rhythm of vision and the metric rhythm of the filmstrip. Further disrupting our ability to "see", the clear leader allows for the full light of the projector to momentarily erase the image, so that

we constantly have to piece together an erratic and impermanent picture into a semblance of a coherent form. The fact that Gidal also withholds from us any sense of scale (conventionally delivered by the establishing shot) further complicates the development of any visual bearings.

At the midway point of the film, the image transforms almost imperceptibly. The contrast of the image darkens, as if the previous footage was being re-photographed and further analyzed through an optical printer. It seems we are being asked to look even closer. The same erratic camerawork as before keeps the image in motion, at first concealing what we are actually seeing. Eventually, we begin to see edges of frames, revealing the images to be photographs of the volcanic rock strewn across a table as Gidal's camera hovers over top. The filmstrip is no longer the primary mediation between the volcano and us; we are now looking at representations of representations—a secondary remove from the object of study.

In addition, the leader that continues to interrupt the image changes from clear to black,

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further adjusting our perceptions. Whereas the clear leader seemed to invoke the sky, opening up and flooding the image with light, the black leader seems to close things down, working as a secondary frame for the photographs we see by further delineating their place is space and time through a visible (black) boundary. We are reminded, again, that what we are seeing is bounded by its nature as a film—created by framing, by editing, by aesthetic choices—all a series of image-making processes of which our participation is the final step.

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"...the film attempts to deal with those questions of representation that persist as problematic, for me, for the basic questions of aesthetics, what it is to view, how to view the unknown as to view the known is not possibly a viewing". – Peter Gidal

A volcanic setting seems to be an appropriate place for Gidal's attempt to reinvest viewing. Volcanoes, with their eruptions and lava flows, are some of the few sites where you can map geomorphic change—what we normally understand as immovable (rock) is constantly in a state of flux. Only earthquakes do more to undermine our sense of solid ground. Thus, Gidal finds himself in the volcano, but

delivers us a series of visual ellipses, drawing us into the constant questioning and interrogating of representation. We find ourselves visually grasping—assured of what we're seeing only by the title—moving somewhere between confusion and visual coherence.

For all the polemics that Gidal is famous for in writing, in the film there is no grand gesture, no final statement of fact. It is filled with the desire to free the image from the hold of realism, to constantly ask what it means to create coherence and to free the viewer from the bounds of received ideas. If we constantly question what we see—even if it is just a volcano—we can begin to question "seeing", and the way that is structurally and culturally formulated. In the poetic quote from the *Inferno* that ends the film—and also prefaces Gidal's polemical Materialist Film—Dante beholds volcanic fissures "marvellously dark". By finding ourselves in the dark, we are asked to question what illumination is, to look at other aesthetic possibilities beyond identification and narrative pleasure and to rethink what else there may be to an image.

Peter Gidal Filmography

Volcano 2002
Assumption 1997
No Night No Day 1997
Flare Out 1992
Guilt 1988
Close Up 1983
Action At A Distance 1980
4th Wall 1978
Epilogue 1978
Untitled 1978
Kopenhagen 1930 1977
Silent Partner 1977
Conditions Of Illusion 1975
C/O/N/S/T/R/U/C/T 1974
Film Print 1973-1974
Photo/Graph/Film 1973
Room Film 1973 1973
Movie No.1 1972
Upside Down Feature 1967-197 2
8 mm Film Notes On 16 mm 1971

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