Scholarly article

In search of lost time: Cordelia Swann, the 1980s and the use of history

Claire M. Holdsworth

Biography

Dr Claire M. Holdsworth is an archivist and researcher specialising in British artists' moving image with a particular focus on the 1970s and 1980s. She completed an AHRC funded PhD, based in the British Artists' Film and Video Study Collection at Central Saint Martins (UAL) and prior to that worked in exhibitions curating events for technology-based arts organisations. Currently an Early Career Research Fellow at Kingston School of Art (Kingston University London), her projects and writings investigate sound and experimental music alongside archives and historiography of the moving image.

Abstract

This scholarly article undertakes close readings of two works by Cordelia Swann as a means of reappraising some cultural touchstones, in particular, discussion of 'New Romantic' filmmaking in British film and video during the 1980s. It examines how notions of the old and the new are displaced within Swann's practice, altering understanding of much earlier, more distant times. By foregrounding her use of multi-source imagery and in later analysis, sound and the 'voice' – her personal, striking subjects create shifting conceptions of time and selfhood that affect perspective of this decade and encourage critical engagement with historiography within the moving image.

Keywords

Cordelia Swann, New Romantic, avant-garde, retro-grade, periodisation, 1980s

Introduction – Old and *New* Romanticism[1]

Moments of transition are used to chart history, but these markers can be problematic when mapping histories of the moving image, particularly the complex context of 1980s Britain, when phrases that described experimental film and video as 'new' increasingly entered vocabularies. This era is often described as one characterised by a *New Pluralism*, after the title of a series of survey screenings at the Tate in 1985.[2] The term encompasses both the multitude of technologies, aesthetics, narrative techniques and more broadly, the differing critical attitudes that co-existed towards experimental film and video. As in the phrasing '*New* Romanticism' – which is explored here – the 'new' prefix carries a sense of linear time, a lexical slippage that still echoes in historical writings on the performances and mediums used during the period. Contrary to the implications of these later agendas, there is an alternative sense of history – of even earlier times – embedded in many works made during this decade. Looking back from 1989, Michael Mazière's aptly titled article 'Avant-Garde or Retro-Grade?' (*Independent Media*, Issue 91) reiterates how retrospection can seem to be the antithesis of the many avant-gardes used to punctuate histories of the moving image. However, the question mark in Maziere's title indicates that a sense of 'the past' – of history as a catalyst for the new – is characteristic of moving image as a divergent practice, understood as 'experimental' by definition.

The revival of Romanticism in the culture of Britain in the 1980s represents a problematic and somewhat dissolute framework for understanding the experimental film and video works that have been ascribed to it. The 'Romantic Movement' or 'Romantic Revival' had previously occurred within German and British literature during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Use of the term in experimental film and video is signalled at the very start of the 1980s by the exhibition *New Romantic Cinema or A Certain Sensibility: The Super-8 films of John Maybury and Cerith Wyn Evans* (held at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, ICA, London in June 1981).[3] Instead of being associated with the subjective sensibilities of

these individual artists, the New Romantic phrasing has largely been used as a catchall idiom for this specific moment. The currency of the term is ascribed to Michael O'Pray, who established its use in film and video through his writing and programming, for instance in the *New Pluralism* screenings mentioned earlier and the season *Synchronisation of the Senses – The New Romantics: A Summary*, which took place later that same year.[4] His critical alignment of the term with the times is tempered by his acknowledgement that there was indeed no 'formal' grouping, but he nevertheless insists that it constituted a coherent avant-garde – albeit a disparate, often disavowed one.[5] A resistant inclination accounts for its alignment with punk music, which fostered a nonchalant defiance and anarchic individuality that broke conventions and resonated long after the 1976 year-zero of the early London music scene. According to journalist Andy McSmith, the 'post-punk generation had no collective name until an article in the *Evening Standard* used the term "New Romantic" to describe the strangely dressed clientele of a new club in Covent Garden, called the Blitz' (2011: 80). Paradoxically, such abrasive rejections of convention had a notable influence upon wider pop-culture during this decade, when Conservative politics increasingly – after Margaret Thatcher's election to Prime Minister in 1979 – emphasised history, tradition and nationalism.[6]

Although described as 'post punk', many film and video makers took relatively little interest in this musical or cultural zeitgeist.[7] New Romantic film practitioners of the 1980s looked backwards to narratives and fictions pre-dating twentieth century movements in painting, cinema and fine art. The New Romanticism of the age and the New Romantic in film and video making are decidedly different notions, but as a result of the 'new' and 'post' (punk) prefix, the *now* of this shared pop-cultural reference means that both concepts are situated relative to a historical continuum of before and after. This provides an intriguing framework for historical excavation in this article, which considers the rich and complex use of history in works made by Cordelia Swann, a filmmaker who is often misleadingly attributed with naming this grouping.[8] As I shall argue, her films weave together multiple components that effect the

concatenation of linear time, history and experience. In the mythic fables woven by Swann, visible traces of the past are revisited and historical subjects are mined to create a complex conversation that shifts beyond the immediate contexts in which she worked, whilst still sharing some of the characteristics of wider punk culture. As will be explored, her practice displaces the binary implications of Mazière's eponymous question 'Avant-Garde or Retro-Grade?' by reconfiguring a reciprocity between the old and the new[9], which Simon Reynolds identifies in relation to punk:

> [t]he avant-garde and the "retro-grade" (Elizabeth Guffey's term) actually shared a similar temperament: absolutist, fanatical, questing. Motivated by dissatisfaction with the present, they both pursued the impossible, mirages destined always to recede from their grasp: further into the future, deeper into the past. Just as the avant-gardist had to push forwards to new extremes, the retro-gardist must always hunt holy grails secreted in ever more remote recesses of antiquity. The shared quest for an elsewhere/elsewhen explains why some people could jump so easily between avant and retro modes, or even operate in both zones simultaneously. (Reynolds citing Guffey, 2011: 262-263).

According to Reynolds, 1970s punk 'started out as the ultimate time-warp cult' fixated upon music of the 1950s, before this 'restoration escalated, almost inadvertently into a revolution' (2011: 257-8). 'Post-punk' or 'New Romantic' wording follows on from this restorative escalation in that these phrases connote revivals of past revivals. The shared temperament, the quest for an 'elsewhere/elsewhen,' channels a simultaneity shared by Hal Foster's axes of history, which describe how both the past and present intersect in artistic innovation (1996).[10] It is at this intersection that Swann's work channels the retro-grade (the study of more distant histories) in order to generate new accounts in, whilst also extending beyond, fixed moments in time.

Swann's way

Originally from America, Swann studied in New York, The Hague and at the North East London Polytechnic (1974–77) before working as Cinema Organiser at the London Film-makers' Co-operative (1983–85) and later as Programmer and Co-ordinator at Film and Video Umbrella and also programming in the Art and Experiment section at the London Film

Festival. These roles in many ways account for her association with a New Romantic grouping – through her work as a programmer and curator as opposed to as a filmmaker – for instance in the influential 'Salon' shows she curated at the ICA in 1983 and 1984. As can be seen from the promotional materials for the Salon of 1984, which were designed by Swann (and pictured in figures 1 and 2)[11], these events used classical, art historical associations – simultaneously drawing upon, whilst diverging from, the traditional artistic and literary Salon cultures of old.

Historical references are important components in Swann's dense, evocative films. Her 1986 work *Phantoms* exemplifies this through its use of art historical tropes and literary devices to render evocative, theatrically staged settings.[12] This silent film depicts hazy but carefully lit still-life scenes, in which the camera scans over tables, 'tableaux vivants', statues and paintings. Seen fleetingly, paced cuts intersperse close-up scrutiny of these objects with scenic landscapes and buildings – images of rose-hued carved stone doorways, the faces of gargoyle statues and Egyptian busts appear between the furrowed forms of clouds in the sky, sweeping shots moving over trees, the Herefordshire countryside or mountainous landscapes. We see a leather tome and view its brightly illuminated pictures of the countryside offset by a long plait of (Swann's own) hair, which is draped over its pages. At other moments we see still more tangibly layered references, such as swathes of golden fabric artfully arranged over painted depictions of the Virgin Mary. These art historical and religious ciphers are not only theatrically staged using overlapping textured elements, props or objects within the frame, the pace and variety with which they burn over one another, conjures an abstracted trance-like reverie, a near sacred encounter with juxtaposing artefacts from ancient cultures, which appear and dissolve in de-chronologised succession.

On top of these already multi-layered allusions, Swann's silent montage incorporates other influences, namely early cinema. She uses visual contrasts, cuts and cues that recall surrealist films, as superimpositions merge visual antecedents associated with the canons of art, architecture, cinema, religion or movements in literature such as Russian

Formalism.[13] Where Swann's reference to illuminated manuscripts and ecclesiastic architecture channel the religious past, performing the retro-grade questing described by Reynolds, the intimate narrative underlying these references pitches *Phantoms* into the mysterious 'elsewhere' he identities. Swann indicates myriad 'other stories' via her dense visual track, in loaded frames that recall Jacques Rancière's description of Jean Luc Godard's montage (in the film series *Histoire(s) de Cinema* of 1998): Swann is dissociating 'things that are indissociable' (2006: 172) and associating the previously unconnected, 'units caught up in a double relationship' of separation and transformation (2006: 173/174).

Phantoms' intimate narrative of yearning and unrequited love parallels those of older literary romanticism – which according to the historian Chris Baldick, 'turned to the emotional directness of personal experience and to the boundlessness of individual imagination and aspiration' (2004: 223). As he notes, in eighteenth century Romanticism: 'the restrained balance valued in culture was abandoned in favour of emotional intensity, often taken to the extremes of rapture, nostalgia (for childhood or the past), horror, melancholy or sentimentality […] the exotic, the bizarre or the macabre' (Baldick, 2004: 223). These extremes parallel the provocative celebration of the subjective in *Phantom's* underlying narrative, as well as the occult exoticism of the religious talismans and fetishised objects that appear. The film depicts a male and a female protagonist, who are each seen but never heard; their thoughts and experiences obliquely demonstrated by their presence. Swann plays the female character, generating autobiographical undertones as we see her standing alone in dark rooms, always separated from the male character (who is equally enveloped in shadows). When reflected through the oblique mirror of Swann's own image, her allusions to artistic, literary and cinematic histories go beyond associations to her New Romantic contemporaries, to allude to internal emotions, rendered through the abstracted patterns of thought suggested by these images. Comprised of micro-details, this subtly mutable narrative is abstracted, fleeting and uncertain, told as it is through silence, glimpses and punctuated by fragmented text. Using

literary inter-titles that resemble those of earlier silent films, collaged elements are interrupted by the interspersed words 'turning leaves', 'snow', 'moonlight', 'dust', 'the fall', 'lighting' and finally 'water under the bridge'. The unspoken poetic language and mysterious, indexical image-traces in *Phantoms* force the viewer to re-construct the connective and emotional grammar as a narrative form.

Very 80s binarisms

Phantoms' transformative montage verges on what Catherine Russell later termed the 'autoethnographic' – a mode of personal inflection that was facilitated by easy to use, affordable mediums like the Super 8 format favoured by Swann, and which has come to be associated with New Romantic aesthetics.[14] Russell observes how during this decade, new wide-ranging autobiographical modes emanated 'from queer culture, from film and video makers whose personal histories unfold within a specifically public sphere' (1999: 278). The saturated colours of Super 8 reversal stock – which became easier to use and more affordable in the early 1980s – gave the medium a painterly quality that soon seeped into wider pop-culture, particularly the music videos which developed as an art form during this period (MTV was founded in 1980). Within this context of constantly expanding media – in both a technological and cultural sense[15] – the ways in which works could be made and shown altered dramatically.

As O'Pray outlines, many of those designated as New Romantic worked at 'the forefront of the cross-over between video and film' and further to Super 8 or video, 16mm was often used for distribution (2003: 109). This technological invention is evident in *Phantoms*, which was created using a laborious and far from straightforward editing process – patiently rewinding, fast-forwarding and re-recording, transferring film onto video and so forth. Due to the popularity of silent cameras, many Super 8 screenings also employed other technologies, including audio cassettes, which allowed different soundtracks to be integrated, performed, played over the same piece of film. Another type of technology unique to this period was

slide/tape, a method favoured by Swann, which used recorded sound and vocal recitation in conjunction with still image projection in live performance. Often articulated as a more 'do-it-yourself' culture (and contrary to the 'amateur' inferences of this DIY description), the technical innovations of this context were highly accomplished. As indicated in Swann's earlier multi-screen works and slide/tapes – such as *All Kinds of Torture* (figure 3)[16] – this invention extended beyond the cinematic frame, bringing a layered sense of time and artistic reference via the multiple technological media incorporated into live performance and resourceful approaches to display.

Technology-based, medium-specific dialogues – namely those that misleadingly position Super 8 versus 16mm – are symptomatic of broader tensions perpetuated in later accounts of New Romanticism, which tend to situate structural film theories and 16mm aesthetics as a binary counterpoint, and antithetical opposite to 'newer' practices thereafter. For example A.L. Rees writes of how debates about Super 8/16mm at this time did not constitute 'a war of words, except in the sense that anti-structural film-makers rebelled against theory and language' (1999: 97). According to Rees, the 'new' practitioners of the 1980s 'did not write critiques and manifestos as their predecessors did, especially not for [publications like] *Undercut* let alone *Screen*' (ibid). However, numerous practices (including those of Swann) *were* discussed at length in the pages of these influential magazines – particularly *Undercut*, the magazine of the London Film-makers' Co-op (LFMC) – in articles discussing DIY aesthetics, mediums (like Super 8 and video), other short-lived groupings (such as 'Scratch Video' in the mid-1980s) or theories, for instance the rising influence of Cultural Studies during the decade.[17] Whether practitioners identified with a category or not, they are often critically situated in opposition to structuralist practices, particularly the theorised 'anti-illusion' position of Malcolm Le Grice or the differing 'anti-narrative' techniques of Peter Gidal.[18] Yet in works such as *Phantoms*, there is a hyper-reality to the details of its visual citations, creating a fast-paced dream world that is both illusory and illustrative in ways that call attention to these

processes. *Phantoms* has a different kind of anti-narrative emphasis, which is created by indexical (art historical) images but centred upon the self, which subversively over-emphasises (as opposed to rejects) the hegemonies of cinematic and televisual communication critiqued by structuralism. Descriptions such as that of Rees, which misleadingly posits theory and non-theory in opposition, has led to works being separated out or pitted in 'opposition' to one another, in ways that can displace productive analysis of either, particularly when we consider how many key and rich structuralist films were made by artists in the 1980s.[19]

The structuralist debates about the nature of works, words, theory and language which had emerged during the 1970s are also often centred upon the nexus of the LFMC, where multiple movements, practices, aesthetics and politics coexisted into and throughout the 1980s. The Oedipal friction surrounding the New Romantics, as described by O'Pray, in part stems from administrative transitions within the LFMC itself, where Swann was Cinema Organiser between 1983 and 1985. She and a new set of makers (including Anna Thew) had taken up roles within the Co-op's structure, a constitutional changeover that occurred every three or four years. Furthermore, many of the filmmakers dubbed New Romantic had been students at art colleges, for instance Saint Martin's School of Art (London) where tutors included Le Grice. But, to describe each grouping according to intergenerational issues is not necessarily indicative of either. Isaac Julien, who was a student at Saint Martins between 1980 and 1984, has described his early career encounter with another influential New Romantic figure, Derek Jarman, who had been invited to speak to students (by Thew, also a tutor). The prominence of Jarman within the New Romantic movement undermines its association with a 'younger' generation, as by the early 1980s he was an established artist who had been painting, making films and designing film sets since the 1960s. Yet, as Julien has described, Jarman's 'charismatic presence was an instant winner for those of us who felt dissatisfied by the perceived dominance of Structuralist film' (2008: 29).[20] For many practitioners Jarman 'cut

through the dead-end divide that had existed between pleasure and politics – a very 80s binarism indeed' (Julien, 2008: 29).

Many works from this period dissolve further binaries separating pleasure and politics, by using narratives which emphasised personal viewpoints and sensual pleasure, eroding traditions in ways different to their structuralist peers – to bridge this seeming divide.[21] During the 1980s issues of identity, class, gender and sexuality entered the public consciousness through cultural traumas – such as the rapid spread of the HIV/AIDS immune disorder early in the decade, the Miners' Strike of 1984–85, race riots in 1985 (compounded by anxieties about nuclear attack and pollution during the then on-going Cold War).[22] To return to Russell's observations, in a historic *and* aesthetic sense filmmakers at this time looked to a multiplicity of media to explore deeply subjective cultural touchstones – as the gaps dividing the subject, the self and the body from 'the political' diminished in the face of feminist and cultural discourse, and the unfolding political events of the period. The importance of the 'maker' as the generator of dialogues about their work is intimately and differently connected to the use of the autobiographical voice, the personal inscribed into the multi-source narratives of works that emerged in the context of 1980s Britain, whether they were described as New Romantic or not. Where other experimental filmmakers, namely structuralists, moved the domain of critical reflection away from their work and towards writing, in an effort to (re)define the art form, practitioners such as Swann inscribed the autobiographic, alongside other histories and genealogies of influence, into the aesthetic qualities of the work itself.

Outposts of the interior

Our relationship to traces of the past – Swann's allusions to literature, art history and early cinema – are enhanced with her use of sound. Where silence opened out the montaged threads that converge in *Phantoms*, the sounds in *A Call to Arms* (1989)[23] incorporate a secondary level of citation, adding still more sensory layers to Swann's visually iterative, phantomatic citations.

A departure from her earlier work, this piece took several years to make. As Nicky Hamlyn wrote, the 'Super 8 grain [in *A Call to Arms*] is so coarse that it appears as a patina, almost detached from the image it bears' (1990: 71). Equally as expansive in visual sources and scope as the silent *Phantoms*, this later work incorporates sounded citations, including cello refrains composed by Stuart Jones and keening, also known as 'caoining' – an Irish custom of mournful howling lamentation, traditionally performed at a funeral or wake. We hear dramatic orchestral music from the score for Sergei Eisenstein's film *Alexander Nevsky* (1938), originally composed by Sergei Prokofiev, alongside other Russian references such as allusions to Andrei Tarkovsky (who pioneered complex soundscapes in his filmmaking) and the Siberian landscapes seen in the film.[24] These locations and citations trace Swann's life and genealogy, travelling between the LFMC, the English Channel, New York and Lake Baikal. Sound traces and places coalesce around an unnamed female character played by Tilda Swinton, who – to return to Reynold's phrasing – exists in a mysterious elsewhere/elsewhen.

> Somewhere between the Hudson River and Lake Baikal, a woman dressed in armour lies asleep on the floor of a large deserted hall illuminated by evening sunlight. As she sleeps dreams and memories unravel in her head. Before the sunlight fades the woman wakes herself and prepares for "battle"

A Call to Arms was inspired by *The Faerie Queene*, a sixteenth century allegorical poem by Edmund Spencer. It brings together multiple mythic narratives from Sleeping Beauty and Snow White to Joan of Arc, the British warrior queen Boadicea, the aforementioned Alexander Nevsky and the visions by poet William Blake (associated with earlier literary Romanticism). In Swann's detailed synopsis she refers to this work as:

> an allegory for the emotional and practical struggles of my own personal experience as well as an attempt to create a mythopoeic legend which has different purpose and ending from those one has been brought up with. Although the old myths and legends are at core almost always inaccurate; they also have elements which still ring true and are part of both our personal and collective memory. (Swann, 'A Call to Arms' synopsis).[25]

A patchwork aural narrative overlays these visualised myths with sporadic sequences of music, silence and occasional voices, which recite short passages relating to the battles this work charts. Swinton's recitations include refrains from Anne Kingsmill Finch's poem *All is Vanity* – 'rise, yea silent dejected men of war' – and Edna St. Vincent Millay's *Renascence* (1917).[26] Tatiana Tretiakova is heard reciting *Last Rose* by Anna Akhmatova in Russian, a poem written during the 'Silver Age' just before the revolution of 1917.[27] As described in the synopsis, Swann creates her own version of the literary technique of 'mythopoesis' – the making and creation of myths, a term used to express how a writer draws upon them to iterate common narratives.[28] The numerous recitations, quotations and influences as heard through many voices, indicate the circulation of myths via poetic oral utterance.[29] *A Call to Arms* progressively breaks apart male-dominated pedagogies, myths of the artist – which become silenced, echoing Kingsmill Finch's refrain. Mythologies of creation are re-characterised and our senses become re-tuned to differing conceptions of time, history, conflict; to female artists and canons that are interdependent – that do not conform to patriarchal emphasis upon individual endeavour. Kaja Silverman has discussed how perceptually, traditional Hollywood cinema 'subordinates the auditory to the visual track, non-human sounds to the human voice, and "noise" to speech' (1988: 110). Rather than subordinating vocal, musical or textual narrative elements (references) in deference to one another, Swann equalises both sonorous and visualised components, situating them within a non-hierarchical narrative formation.

Like *Phantoms*, the plot of *A Call to Arms* is punctuated by on-screen inter-titles – moving through 'sleep', 'captivity', 'uncharted waters', Swinton's 'escape', 'the challenge' and a final 'epilogue'. In *A Call to Arms*, the relocation of perspective – point of view in a locational, mythic and poetic sense – is both visual and verbal in nature, arising from a sensory perception of layers of sound (and image/location), which escalate to displace old myths via interdependent, conversational spheres of influence.[30] The human utterances we hear refract the

writings of other authors, as sources with different genealogies cleave to the present, conjuring deeply personal themes of intergenerational inheritance and loss, an emotive identification that arises from the spoken voice in itself. The sparing use of voiceovers amplifies their subjective connection to individual speakers, and the ways in which inter-generational stories accumulate in a person's memories. Through her use of keening, Swann renders a response to the recent passing of her grandmother Agnes Raphael Gahan, who is also a central figure seen in the film (played by her former mother in law, Brenda Swann). This enhances the tension between author and subject as autobiographical histories unravel and interconnect. In this way, Swann's feminist reworking of interdependent sources and canons – a sensory re-positioning of history through mythopoeic transformation – is paralleled by a differing history, a more subjective family genealogy relating to her grandmother, who was a suffragette at the turn of the twentieth century. These moving constituents call generations of women to arms in a struggle of everyday existence that is physical and psychological as well as historical, a battle emphasised by the physical burden of Swinton's gleaming armour, which weighs her down as she drags a large ancient-looking chest through rolling green Herefordshire fields before burying it.[31] The landscape in conjunction with these internalised voices recall the reveries channelled in eighteenth century Romantic writing, in which the writer described, succumbed to and was often overwhelmed by the transcendental experience of encountering the landscape.[32] The convergence of internal mournful reverie with such external settings is audibly enhanced by the collaged soundscape of voices, which act as vehicles for yet more loaded mythic traces that activate feelings, memories and histories associated to her grandmother.

As indicated by Mladen Dolar, the recorded voice occupies a 'most peculiar paradoxical position' as it exists in a state of 'simultaneous inclusion/exclusion which retains the excluded at its core', haunted 'by the impossibility of symbolising' itself (2006: 106). Music critic Ian Penman also observes that 'what we hear' when we experience the recorded voice seems to be 'plucked out of the air', sounding 'like outposts of innermost feeling' (2002:

26). This distanciation means that the voice inhabits a complex perspective that 'is always now – via recording – at a remove from itself, allowing the singer [or speaker] a certain overview or vantage they never possessed before' (Penman in Young, 2002: 27). The voices in *A Call to Arms*, speak from time frames at one remove, depicting memories as opposed to concrete experiences or factual histories. They call attention to multiple subjectivities, to numerous authors and sources, as well as accentuating the artifice employed when narrating and revisiting 'the past'.

Conclusion – Further into the future

Screenings of Swann's films have added to an understanding and appreciation of her work in recent years. When the slide/tape *Mysteries of Berlin* was restaged as part of the *Polytechnic* exhibition at Raven Row gallery, London in 2011 or her multi-screen works were shown as part of the British Film Institute's re-visitation of punk and the 1980s, *This is Now*.[33] Such re-evaluations of not-too-distant film and video histories are intimately connected to the autobiographical experiences of the practitioners who make them, whose works are re-shown, re-enacted, resurrected in future 'nows' – and who re-tell this history through talks, discussions, essays, interviews and writings. This inclination to restage problematises the 'newness' of the 1980s which I discussed at the start of this essay, particularly when we consider how these later curatorial agendas aim to explore works and contexts as historical subjects: part of cohesive periods or isolated units of time. When the protagonists in/of histories of the moving image – be they artists, critics, historians or similar – recount alternative readings, whether in works, texts or histories, their ideas travel 'further into the future, deeper into the past' (Reynolds, 2011: 262).

The importance of the maker in generating dialogues about their work not only stems from critical writing in retrospect, it is intimately connected to the autobiographical voice. In this sense, the personal inscribed in the work presents another kind of source that is

not quite primary or secondary, fact nor fiction. Swann has on several occasions eloquently spoken about her practice and to a lesser extent her experiences during the 1980s, but her works also provide expansive spaces for critical reflection, constructing unique transformative timelines that resist the confines of the 1980s. Her inclination to look to the past, to excavate complex layers of history, utilises the retro-grade in order to generate new perspectives for the present moment. The notion of revival connoted by pairing the words *New* and Romantic, create a kind of mythic dialogue within histories of British moving image, which is more about critical perspectives on the period than the works themselves, thereby displacing the autoethnographic emphasis apparent in the work, and the very different poetic, shifting 'points of view' of Swann and others. Only by dissecting tropes such as post-punk or the oppositional dichotomy of pleasure/politics, can still newer ways of approaching this recent past be developed. If we look to works as a source for establishing new methodologies, then we can articulate broader understandings of this increasingly studied decade in ways that encompass diverse practices and subjective interpretations of what happened.

The seemingly antithetical overlap of the 'avant-garde' with the 'retro-grade' as described by Reynolds, relates to the complex relationship with the past that is played out within the works explored here, and reflect the ways in which Swann uses history to subvert established models of art, music and film. Swann's films assert creative freedom, articulating new myths whilst preserving distinct artistic voices that resonate beyond the context of 1980s Britain. The elusive and allusive sounds and images channelled by Swann reconfigure our sense of linear time. Through a literary overlap of sensory time frames, myths and accounts, Swann allows the illusionism denied in earlier structural film practices to re-enter her work. Though different in form, pace, soundscape and affect, *Phantoms* and *A Call to Arms* each foreground how alternative perspectives are created by reconfiguring stories, to render entirely new terrains, where landscapes are internal as well as external. Swann's films call attention to multiple authors and to the artifice inherent to depicting and re-narrating 'the past'. Her modes

of auto-historical incorporation emphasise the importance of personal identification as a means of connecting past, presence and future – to evocatively and actively celebrate distortions within narratives of art, the self and History.

Notes

[1] In response to further research and an interview with Cordelia Swann (2016) this article extends ideas initiated in a thesis section on 'Old and New Romanticism': C.M. Holdsworth, *History has Tongues: re-evaluating historiography of the moving image through analysis of the voice and critical writing in British artists' film and video of the 1980s* (UAL, 2015: 70-84).

[2] Screening programmes, *The New Pluralism: British Film and Video 1980–85*, Tate Gallery, London (11 – 28 April 1985), curated by Tina Keane and Michael O'Pray for the Tate Education department. A.L. Rees, observes how this 'era was dubbed The New Pluralism' after this event (1999: 103).

[3] Screenings, *New Romantic Cinema or A Certain Sensibility: The Super-8 films of John Maybury and Cerith Wyn Evans*, ICA Cinematheque, London (3 – 28 June 1981).

[4] Screening/performances, *Synchronisation of the Senses – The New Romantics: A Summary*, ICA Cinematheque, London (2 – 27 October 1985). Including films by Kenneth Anger, Jean Cocteau, Maya Deren, Sergei Eisenstein (see later note), Federico Fellini and Andy Warhol amongst others, influences selected by filmmakers whose work was also shown, including Derek Jarman, Michael Kostiff, Maybury, Holly Warburton and Wyn-Evans.

[5] O'Pray is careful to say that whilst practitioners may have been called New Romantic, 'there was no formal grouping' and like many practitioners before them, they 'resisted the description' (2003: 64).

[6] The Conservative party won the British General Election in 1979 and Thatcher became Britain's first female Prime Minister (replacing Labour party leader Jim Callaghan). The Conservative party then won increasing majorities in the General Elections of 1983 and 1987.

[7] Cordelia Swann in conversation with Claire M. Holdsworth (20 December 2016).

[8] For example, Rees discusses 'Swann's "New Romantics" ' (1999: 97).

[9] The 'Old and the New' was also the title given to a screening event (and discussion) by Cordelia Swann at the British Film Institute (September 2016), part of yearlong series marking the 50th anniversary of the founding of the London Film-makers' Co-op.

[10] Hal Foster, the 'synchronic' and 'diachronic' axes of history. The diachronic axis is vertical, resembling a timeline that connects the past to the present. The synchronic axis is horizontal, exploring and considering the contextual concerns of the present. According to Foster, 'avant-garde' artistic practices engage both axes simultaneously (1996: x).

[11] The reverse side of figure 1 indicates other artists associated with the 'grouping': 'super 8, video and slide/tape works by Tim Burke, Steve Chivers, Peter Davis, Bruno de Florence, Jim Divers, Steve Farrer, Roberta Graham, Grey Organisation, Derek Jarman, John Maybury, Thomas Mutke, Julia Percy, George Saxon, Cordelia Swann, Anna Thew, Holly Warburton, Cerith Wyn Evans' (1984).

[12] Cordelia Swann, *Phantoms* (1986, Super 8/video, colour, 18 min), with George Saxon.

[13] Russian Formalism in two senses: referring to the inter-war literary movement, with which theorists such as Mikhail Bakhtin are associated, and technically formalist theories of filmmaking, influenced by Russian pioneers such as Eisenstein (see later note).

[14] The previously discussed screenings, *A Certain Sensibility* of 1981 were soon followed by other events dedicated to this format, such as 'Alle Macht der Super Acht' – a series of workshops and screenings, part of the *German Experimental Film Season* organised by the Goethe Institute, London in association with the LFMC (19 October – 9 November 1981). These and other showings gave 'amateur gauge Super 8 its strong presence in the mid-1980s' (O'Pray, 2003: 109), with a Super 8 Festival also held annually in Leicester between 1984 and 1987.

[15] The British media (newspapers and television channels) underwent large-scale reorganisation over the 1980s. This instigated changes in how politicians communicated with the public, as signalled by the development of 'spin' within the House of Commons, where it became standard practice for the government to use media consultants. It was also at this time that Rupert Murdoch and other 'moguls' established media empires. See 'Fleet Street is Unwell' (McSmith, 2011: 211-231).

[16] Swann's slide/tape series *All Kinds of Torture* (figure 3, 1984) incorporated audio recordings of arias – My Poor Heart (Welcher Wechsel herrscht in meiner Seele) and All Kinds of Torture (Martern Aller Arten) – from the opera *Il Seraglio / Die Entführung aus dem Serail* by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, first performed in 1782.

[17] For example in *Undercut* No.17 on 'Cultural Identities' (1988) or Nicky Hamlyn's review 'Recent English Super 8 at B2 Gallery' in *Undercut* No.10/11 (1983), which draws upon similar punk-based, DIY intergenerational touchstones to O'Pray.

[18] Structuralist films in a broad sense, sought to foreground and redefine the conventions associated with viewing and interpreting cinema. Such filmmakers 'paid increasing attentions to the actuality of their materials and processes' (Le Grice, 1977: 152). See also Gidal (ed.), *The Structural Film Anthology* (1976).

[19] Including works by Gidal and Le Grice as well as other artists such as Hamlyn and Mazière (whose texts are referred to in this article's notes).

[20] Isaac Julien curated the exhibition *Derek Jarman Brutal Beauty*, Serpentine Gallery, London (23 February – 13 April 2008).

[21] See also screening notes for programme (including works by Steve Chivers, Maybury and Wyn Evans) in *The New Pluralism* series (26 April 1985): 'with their gay sensibility, highly stylized tableaux and connections with the contemporary music scene they brought together elements that shocked the purists. In particular, Chivers 'align[s] to this [...] "decadent" viewpoint drawing from the literature and imagery of Romanticism and Symbolism' (Tate Education Department, 1985: 12).

[22] Reflected differently in diverse works at the time: race riots in London and Birmingham in October 1985 were re-considered by Black Audio Film Collective in *Handsworth Songs* (1986, 16mm, colour, 59 min). The first half of the Miners' Strike is considered in the *Miners' Campaign Tape Project* (Spring 1984, 6 Tapes), created collaboratively within the recently established 'workshop sector'. Artists such as Stuart Marshall addressed homophobia, activism and social engagement in installations such as *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1984, video/installation, colour, approx. 40min) as well as in documentaries.

[23] Cordelia Swann, *A Call to Arms* (1989, Super 8/video, colour, 22min), with Brenda Swann and Tilda Swinton. Camera: Cordelia Swann/George Saxon. Performance of cello and sound design: Stuart Jones.

[24] Sergei Sergeyevich Prokofiev, composer (b.1891 - d.1953). Film, *Alexander Nevsky* (1938), dir. Sergei Eisenstein (b.1898 – d.1948). Andrei Tarkovsky, director (b.1932 – d.1986).

[25] Typewritten synopsis/document (undated) on 'A CALL TO ARMS', located in 'Artists' Folders: Cordelia Swann', British Artists' Film and Video Study Collection (CSM, UAL).

[26] Poets: Anne Kingsmill Finch, Countess of Winchilsea (b.1661 – d.1720); Edna St. Vincent Millay (b.1892 – d. 1950).

[27] Poet, Anna Akhmatova (b.1889 – d.1966). Tatiana Tretiakova was chosen to recite this poem due to the aristocratic, pre-revolutionary nature of her accent. Her father was also the Russian constructivist writer Sergei Tretyakov (b.1892 – arrested and executed in 1937).

[28] 'Mythopoeia' definition from Baldick (2004: 164).

[29] Other influences include: Photographer Diane Arbus (b.1923 – d. 1971), Filmmaker and writer Susan Sontag, the novels of Edith Wharton (b.1862 – d.1937) or Henry James, Leo Tolstoy and Alexander Pushkin (spanning the nineteenth century)..

[30] Parker Tyler discussed the 'visual-verbal' nature of poetry as a medium at the 'Poetry and the Film: A Symposium' of 1953 (*Film Culture*, 1963: 55).

[31] This sequence was based on a story told to Swann an Estonian, whose grandfather had buried a huge library of books so that the Soviets would not find them.

[32] For example, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) includes a satirical example of this trope.

[33] Exhibition, *Polytechnic*, Raven Row, London (9 September – 7 November 2010), curated by Richard Grayson. Screening programmes, *This is Now* (BFI – see Fox, 2016).

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