

An extended personal odyssey which, through an accumulation of visual information, builds into a treatise on the experience of seeing. Its loose, indefinable structure explores new possibilities for perception and narrative.

Reinforcing the idea of the mythopoeic discourse and the historically romantic view of the artist-filmmaker, *Mare's Tail* is a legend, consisting of layers of sounds and images that reveal each other over an extended period. It's a personal vision, an aggregation of experience, memories and moments overlaid with indecipherable intonations and altered musics. The collected footage is extensively manipulated, through refilming, superimposition or direct chemical treatment. The observer may slip in and out of the film as it runs its course; it does not demand constant attention, though persistence is rewarded by experience after the full projection has been endured. While studying at the Royal College of Art, David Larcher made a first film *KO* (1964-65, with soundtrack composed by Philip Glass), which was subsequently disassembled and small sections incorporated in *Mare's Tail* (a recurrent practise that continues through his later works).

Encouraged by contact with true independent filmmakers like Peter Whitehead and Conrad Rooks, Larcher set out on to document his own life in a quasi-autobiographical manner. Though financed by wealthy patron Alan Power, *Mare's Tail* was, in its technical fabrication, a self-sufficient project made before the Co-op had any significant workshop equipment. At times, Larcher was living in a truck, and stories of films processed in public lavatories in the Scottish Highlands do not seem far from the truth.

His relationship to the Co-op has always been slightly distanced, though his lifestyle impressed and influenced many of the younger, more marginal figures. His next film, *Monkey's Birthday* (1975, six hours long), was shot over several years' travels across the world with his entourage, and this time made full use of the Co-op processor to achieve its psychedelic effect.



*"From one flick of the mare's tail came an unending stream of images out of which was crystalised the milky way. Primitive, picaresque cinema."* (David Larcher)

*"Now you see it, now you don't. Waiting room cinema from the mountain top to the car park, an alternative to television. The good, the bad and the indifferent. Some consider it self-indulgent but me has a duty to itself. Bring what you expect to find. Not structural but starting in the beginning from the beginning...organic...prima materia...impressionable massa confusa...out of which some original naming and ordering processes spring...they are not named, but rather nailed into the celluloid. "Please don't expect me to answer the question I'm having a hard time not falling out of this chair" syndrome."*

(David Larcher, Arts Council Film-Makers on Tour catalogue, 1980)

*"Mare's Tail is an epic flight into inner space. It is a 2 and 3/4 hour visual accumulation in colour, the film-maker's personal odyssey, which becomes the odyssey of each of us. It is a man's life transposed into a visual realm, a realm of spirits and demons, which unravel as mystical totalities until reality fragments. Every movement begins a journey. There are spots before your eyes, as when you look at the sun that flames and burns. We look at distant moving forms and flash through them. We drift through suns; a piece of earth phases over the moon. A face, your face, his face, a face that looks and splits into shapes that form new shapes that we rediscover as tiny monolithic*

monuments. A profile as a full face. The moon again, the flesh, the child, the room and the waves become part of a hieroglyphic language... *Mare's Tail* is an important film because it expresses life. It follows Paul Klee's idea that a visually expressive piece adds "more spirit to the seen" and also "makes secret visions visible". Like other serious films and works of art, it keeps on seeking and seeing, as the film-maker does, as the artist does. It follows the transience of life and nature, studying things closely, moving into vast space, coming in close again. The course it follows is profoundly real and profoundly personal: Larcher's trip becomes our trip to experience. It cannot be watched impatiently, with expectation; it is no good looking for generalization, condensation, complication or implication."

(Stephen Dwoskin, *Film Is: The International Free Cinema*, 1975)

"A film that is almost a life style. Long enough and big enough in scope to be able to safely include boredom, blank-screens, bad footage. The kind of film that is analogous in a symbolic way to something like the 'stream of life' - no one would ever criticize looking out of the window as being boring sometimes. It's not a film - more like an event composed of the collective ideas and attempts in film of several years. Like a personal diary: humorous, wry, sad, ecstatic. Concerned with texture, with seeing and not seeing, light and darkness, even life and death. Monumental not in size alone, but in its breadth of concept. Relaxed enough to be able to let one idea run on for twenty minutes before switching to another. The exact opposite of most film-making which attempts to keep the audience 'interested' by rapidly changing from one form or idea to another, to exclude boredom and participation. A 'super-Le Grice' in that it has inherent sensitivity and humanity, as well as superlative and highly inventive technique. It opens up film-making by including such self-conscious ethics as those propounded by Warhol etc. as a natural part of the film ethic as a whole."

(Mike Dunford, *Cinemantics No. 1*, January 1970)

"*Mare's Tail* is one of the finest achievements in cinema. It is a masterpiece that everyone in the country should get to see. To write about it is about as difficult as conveying the essence of magic, the meaning of existence, the quality of love or the shadows of a receding dream. For the film is pure myth, a living organism in its own right, a creation whose infinite complexity makes criticism of it a shallow irrelevancy (or at best a crude mythology). The achievement is that the film never looks like a mere catalogue of special effects - the vision is integrated, relaxed, spontaneous and too fluid for there to be any sense of contrivance in this staggering display of inventive curiosity. The immense diversity of technique runs hand-in-hand with a sustained simplicity of treatment. You're aware of a mind that is open and loving toward everything; and this loving openness of response transfigures every image in the film, as it eventually transfigures the viewer too..."

(John Du Cane, *Time Out*, 1972)

"A film that is undoubtedly one of the most important produced in this country and that stands comparison with the best from the United States. It's as if it were the first film in the world. When *Mare's Tail* first appeared it was compared to Brakhage's *Art of Vision*, as an examination of ways of seeing. The comparison can be taken further: as Brakhage is to the New American Cinema, it seems to me, so Larcher should be considered to the New English Cinema... *Mare's Tail* is not only about vision but proposes an epistemology of film, particularly in its first reel: revealing basic elements of film in an almost didactic fashion: grain, frame, strip, projector, light. We see a film in perpetual process, being put together, being formed out of these attitudes. The first reel is a 'lexicon' to the whole film - to film in general - holding together what is essentially an open-ended structure to which pieces could be continually added and offering us a way to read that film. It is at once a kind of autobiography and a film about making that autobiography."

(Simon Field, "The Light of the Eyes", *Art and Artists*, December 1972)

"Pierre Boulez came to a screening of *Mare's Tail* at Robert Street once. Simon Hartog said, "Oh, I sent my father to see *Mare's Tail*", his father was an impresario for people like Joan Sutherland and Pierre Boulez, and it turned out that Boulez came and was sat behind us. I'd been living in trucks and I'd just come up and it happened to be the same day. I went along and found this old tramp called Eric - this famous character who was around in those days, early '70s - and took him along. We were sitting there and then I suddenly realised Boulez was behind. After half an hour he said, "C'est le perfection," and walked out with Simon's father!"

(David Larcher, interview with Mark Webber, 2001)