

VIDEO/VOID

- an ongoing experimental video project -
by David Larcher

The mental features discoursed as analytical are, in themselves, but little susceptible of analysis: we appreciate them only in their effects. - Edgar Allen Poe

Occasionally an aesthetic experience comes along that matters. Already four years old, David Larcher's VIDEO/VOID project is the best experimental video this writer has experienced to date. Immersed in a world of communications, encryption and ceaseless signification. In our increasingly technological lives, certain states or emotions remain incompatible with the format. Though, in rare instances, their effects can be detected in some of its products. The use of sound, image and voice as a series of parallel and interconnecting texts, provides us with a rigorous puzzle. Its structure is enigmatic, elliptically incomplete. The viewer experiences the film like an hallucination. No characters, no dialogue, no plot... A work of art in the age of digital reproduction.

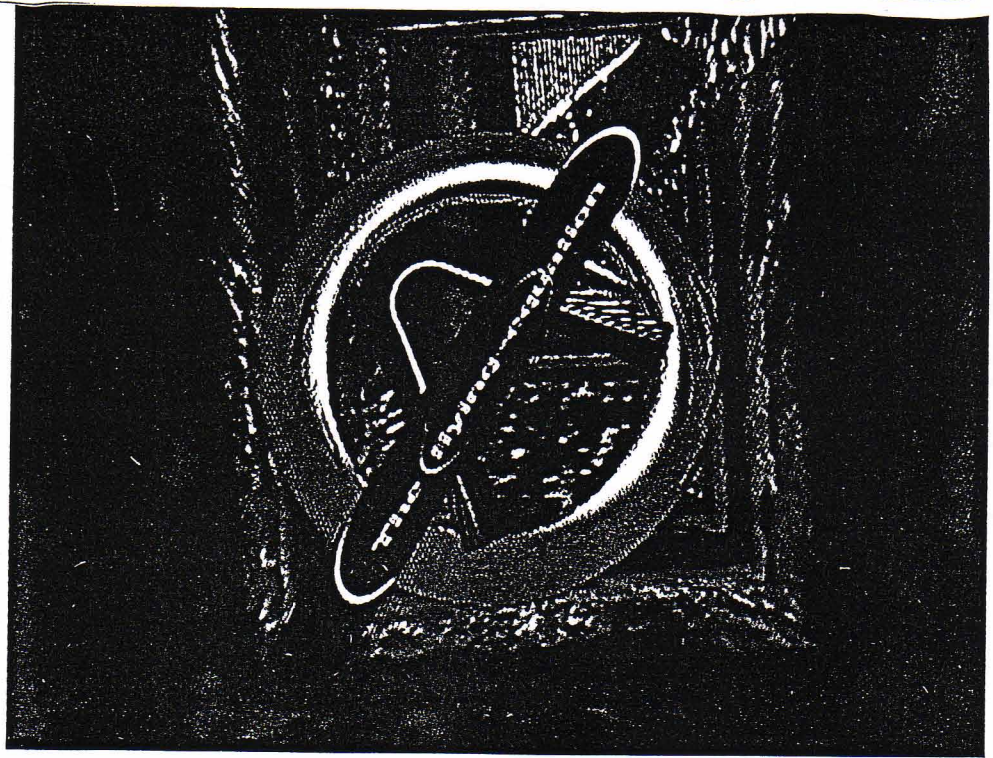
"...The mathematical object with which quantum mechanics represents the states of physical systems is referred to as the wave function... Particle wave functions have nonzero values in those areas of space in which a position measurement might ultimately find the particle... , the observation 'collapses' the wave function into either region A or region B."

In other words, we trace the dragon... subject/object dissolving, one to another... endlessly. VIDEO/VOID presents us with a plethora of abstract and shifting concepts, koans and calculus, accompanied by the drift of a dissociative monologue. Science has also reappraised fixed notions of truth/falsity. Quantum mechanics introduces uncertainty to science's major truth claim, objectivity. The activity of whatever is observed will to some degree be determined by the act of observation. Pre-existing factors, established elsewhere, define the conclusions we can draw in a given situation.

Walter Benjamin wrote that a medium was not truly radical unless it calls its own existence into question. After all, new media haven't always existed. Nor should they necessarily continue to exist.

Being one with the "O"... The basis of much Western thought rests upon such oppositional, hierarchical distinctions. Binary oppositions are a way of seeing - like ideologies. We know that ideologies draw sharp distinctions between conceptual opposites (such as truth and falsity, cause and effect, centre and periphery, mind and body). The primary concept among these is that between presence and absence (life and death). Are these ideas really drawn together through opposition, or are they simply equal terms in a system of differences? Daisetz Suzuki pointed out that Zen's non-duality arose in China, because of problems encountered in translating India's Buddhist texts. Indian words which defined opposing concepts did not exist in Chinese. Looking for an Indian precedent, Chinese patriarchs chose the Flower Sermon of the Buddha, a sermon in which no word was spoken.

In this way, VIDEO/VOID is an incredible experience. The first issue, or 'trailer', examines the televisual medium by digitally isolating and re-presenting video's little deaths... its apparent absences... Interference, dropout, raw signal; the



stuff that's normally excluded.

The zero... Constructing with holes fascinated early 20th Century mathematicians. One such structure is the Sierpinski carpet. Made by removing the central ninth of a square, then cutting out the centres of the eight smaller squares remaining - ad infinitum. Its three-dimensional analogue is the Menger sponge, a solid-looking lattice that has infinite surface area, yet zero volume. Always there but never in place, nothing is ever fully present. Digital technology, based upon binary on/off, oppositional distinctions, reflects wider cultural concerns.

Contiguously the soundtrack echoes the same concerns - the roar and crunch of the processor, memory extended and switching. The void in the video is perhaps like Koestler's Ghost in the Machine. With this material Larcher constructs elaborate virtual tableaux. The viewer journeys through increasingly fragmented scapes. Zeno's paradoxes refuting motion are hinted at by arrows and signposts marked 'VOID'. [The paradox proposes that a flying arrow is at rest, because at any one moment it occupies no more space than its physical dimensions, as objects at rest do]. We are assured that 'It is the signposts that move.' Referents diminish, we are free floating, adrift.

The drug numbs the entire surface area of the body... Profoundly altered spatial and temporal awareness is the result. The effects confirm certain models of perception. The picture one 'sees' does not exist as a complete representation somewhere, it is an emergent property of the system. The system runs in realtime. This picture results from the interaction of densely populated neurological communities. As the sense of physical perimeter dissolves, the dynamic process that disperses our sense of the world across vast cortical areas is attenuated, made extensive. The user experiences this effect as the creation of a vacuum in the psyche through which s/he is propelled. Saturated in the burn-out of unprioritised data, are we seeing the hole picture yet?

Lacan suggests however, there are anchoring points... And suddenly nothing happened... Hand-held camera, the aural bruisse of wind on microphone, the natural sign... Where are we? Larcher has found a town, somewhere in France, called Void. [A drugfucked pilgrimage?] The video ruptures and we are in

a Void, one of many maybe.

A friend scored ketamine from a bent vet... So the first time we shot it up it was pure... And strong... Immediate inability to remove the syringe... The K-hole (as it's known) is a place of accelerated impedance. Symbol; Z [zzzzzz...]

This film is also [so Anna Thew informs me] a meditation on the Buddhist concepts of the void - a mental space free from association but in which the consideration of objects can be projected. Though conversations with others have resulted in endless interpretations: a simulation of the collapsing wave-packet... the testcard on acid... the discovery of the Videodrome signal! This is in part the film's strength and also its seductive allure. By foregrounding the absences, aporia is introduced - spaces through which meaning can emerge and escape us. The medium is the subject and object of enquiry.

Someone keeps making sense no matter what you don't.

Televised in 1994, VIDEO/VOID caused quite a stink with Channel 4's technicians. An added strategy of the piece is its flagrant waiving of the technical regulations defining broadcast quality. Exceeding brightness, contrast, colour and every other unimaginable standard, VIDEO/VOID presents a break in its relationship with all other programmes broadcast, and highlights the subtler levels of control at work in the televisual field.

Thirty spokes share one hub. Adapt the nothing therein to the purpose in hand, and you will have the use of the cart. Knead clay in order to make a vessel. Adapt the nothing therein to the process in hand, and you will have the use of the vessel. Cut out doors and windows in order to make a room. Adapt the nothing therein to the purpose in hand and you will have the use of the room. - Lao Tzu

David Larcher's work is not given the recognition, in this country, it deserves. I am reluctant to write anything more about this, as to describe is also to limit. VIDEO/VOID displays an outstanding ability to juggle the abstruse and the popular. Its constellation of sound and image is worthy of lengthy individual appraisal. However, enquiry at the Arts Council reveals there are no articles or features on the subject. Here's to nothing.

Foxy Gifford.

Profile: DAVID LARCHER

by Anna Thew

93. David is standing dazed and dishevelled and barefoot in shabby stretch/leopard skin leggings, mesmerised by the outline of his own shadow on the video projection of an unfinished work in progress: *Videovoid*. Clutching a microphone into which he speaks in a low whisper, half to himself, "What I was going to do here erm, it's funny seeing it projected for the first time." Shadow artifice. The audience gurgles adoringly.

Osnabrück European Media Festival 1990. David's film *EETC*, 5 monitors. Various versions brought along, so he talks and drinks with the five versions running simultaneously. People clamouring to squeeze into the large room, no standing room, no space on the stairway... In Germany Larcher is hailed as the phenomenon that he is. Have you ever heard of him?

Jackson's Lane, Archway, London (before it became a lo-brow chi-chi dance space). David is in a pair of stripy pyjamas in a makeshift bed with a bedside lamp just like in *Granny's flat*. The 'ish-tank film is floating on a TV screen at the foot of the bed. Multi-projections from *Monkey's birthday* (excerpts from the epic double screen *Monkey's Birthday*. A bottle of whisky on the small round table echoing *Granny's*... His *amour* at the time, the filmmaker young Julie Osborne with dark glasses, a tight leopard skin cocktail number and a long white stick... Larcher curses the acolytes, critic O'Pray and Curtis from the Arts Council who show up nervously and then lurk in the wings. "Get out I don't want you, what good have you ever done? You never gave me a penny so you can shove off. Make sure they paid to get in. Playful acrimony. Huh."

Larcher made a film called *Mare's Tail*, 4 hours, 16mm, which Berlioz saw at the old Arts Lab and rated as a work of genius, when David was only a young man. His next epic was *Monkey's Birthday*, 6 hours, two screens, colour. An exotic travelogue with two separate optical sound tracks. They could run completely in synch but they never do. *Monkey's Birthday* outstrips Warhol's *Chelsea Girls* in assemblage terms with its complex hand matting, superimposition, colour tinting, solarization and other optical effects and devices, the kind of which have never been produced or reproduced on video and which are not the premise of words. *Monkey's Birthday* is alchemical.

1991. David is lying on his back with one foot in the air to demonstrate to the appalling Film Co-op administrators the division between two screens in a twin screen film, in case they were too blind to notice, adding for which as an artist he ought to get paid double, even if it's only to pay for the repair. David Dawson of KD Digital is slewed projecting. The film shreds. David yells that he wishes the admin' bitch Wieland would croak.

With two films together that makes twelve hours of celluloid... now someone somewhere must have believed in David otherwise even then, it really wouldn't have been possible to produce such an extravaganza.

There is a group of overwhelmed Viennese art students sitting on the bench at the back of the cinema, spell-bound as whirling dervishes *solàrise*, change colour and swirl against fast moving clouds. *Monkey's Birthday* is an epic. It was made 25 years ago and it has been shown about 7 times in Britain. Of those 7 I've seen the full thing twice. The first time there was an audience of me, a member of the public and the Co-op Cinema projectionist.

Larcher is one of many who fell foul of the mainstream avant-garde because of his hybridity, his collage, his use of all media, his tendency to synthesise, to take the medium for what it was, stretch it to where it would go. There is no-one else - and with this number, age doesn't enter into the equation - working in Britain who has taken film printing and video to such limits.

Granny's flat in Gloucester Road.

It's the middle of winter. David comes in starkers, wagging his dick. Cerith Wyn Evans, my daughter Rachel and I are sprawled on the bed in the back room at *Granny's*, gawping at yet another version of *EETC*. Ra tells him to act his age.

The music boys for *Cling Film* have all got a big crush on David's mind and copy as much of his oeuvre as they're able whilst he's away. They probably made off with his double dildo too.

In excited 'round the fire and I'll tell you a tale or

two' mode. David turns on a tape he can't think what to do with. Sarah his new found *amour* (David has an insatiable penchant for lush ladies), is lying naked on the couch. David, goat-like and 20 some years her elder/senior cavorts, hairy and unshaven, like an evil satyr round his prize, brandishing a heavy leather belt, thwacking her with a nod in the direction of S & M. He's making more noise than doing harm. He peers disgracefully and myopically into the lens, his face distorts. He takes the camera, the new video toy, and tunnels between her legs to arrive at a hairy mound. He's discovered a cave OK, a crevice. The tape goes frizzy. The camera swoops round and hones in on her face. She's out for the count. He lifts an eyelid. Her eyes roll white. David pops into frame and turns to face the lens: "And what are you doing now Malcolm LeGrice and Peter Gidal and the little Arts Council, tee hee..." David chips in live, "Can you imagine, on my great night of passion? How could they have got so deep into my subconscious... It's appalling... I'll have to do something about this tape some time." "The guilt!", I thought. Guilt for not having played their game, joined their club... Guilt for showering your seed recklessly across Europe, when they had the knot tied in the vasectomy vogue, one of them at the age of 23 because he didn't believe in reproduction in any form... Guilt for your wavering sexual preferences, when they had none.

1994. I take *Videovoid* in a programme, on tour to East Germany, Leipzig, Halle and Dresden. I'm worried the work may be too abstract for an uninitiated audience. East Germans haven't had much exposure to the avant-garde as you can imagine. In Leipzig after the films the discussion is thronged. And one after the other people try to explain to themselves and to others why they sat mesmerised, mouths open, almost hypnotised for half an hour, when there was no narrative, no story line, not really any kind of a line, save allusions to the 18 Buddhist states of the VOID encircling the earth. In fact they'd spent half an hour mesmerised by travelling images of drop out, the bits you usually don't want or reject... the holes in the tape. So this is an electronic manifestation of aspects of the void.

But wait, don't you sit for half an hour listening to Bach, abstract even by musical standards, does Bach always have a melody (the musical equivalent of a story line) or does he drop it and pick it up again? David is a trickster and magician. He works with Anthony who used to work with Pink Floyd. Seeing the two of them putting the finishing touches to the tracks on *EETC* (bravely shown by Rod Stoneman on Channel 4)... A line of coke. A fat joint. Cans of lager. What a state! 4 a.m. the two stood in front of banks of equipment like two loony magicians or improvising musicians - their musical tools also consisting of image tracks, dealt with as tracks... Now! Bring it in now... One, two, three, four... Get it! Start! accompanied by agitated foot tapping and finger clicking etc.

There is a difference between the way a film will perform with an audience when the artist is adept at manipulating sound levels and tone, at introducing a sound, an interruptive breath, even spontaneously, playing the image and sound as two hands on a piano, and when they are not. By this I don't mean they can't assemble adequate and meaningful chunks of text on paper, but they can send the audience rushing for their ear plugs, like if I opened my mouth and tried trilling that aria from the Magic Flute. The difference is between those who are musicians (even amateur musicians) and those who are not, those who can act/use their voices (yes, like in the theatre or at least in public) with the presence to hold the audience, and those who can do no such thing; natural born story tellers, singers, charmers - and those who are not. So the films fall into two categories for me, the ones where the sound is conscious and real, the second where the sound is a mess. It may be the tenor of the voice that's wrong, as in Liz Rhodes' insistent use of the plump alienating variety. Slowing it fractionally to lower the pitch doesn't take away the sign value, the meaning of this sound. For miners, workers, thickos from the regions, this accent and tone is the epitome of the coloniers. Cut. OK. Redo it out of courtesy for the dead. Change your fucking accent. Cut the squawky edge from the voice. Think about the theatre of voices, whispers, shouts. How

to captivate, or alienate the audience on purpose.

Larcher the amateur clarinet player. No coincidence that it is a blowing instrument which requires him to control his breathing when he is speaking and it is this, above everything else, which holds and captivates his audience. He would probably loathe my guts for picking up on this, but you can comb through his soundtracks and find an abundance of electric sound moments, but his voice is shifting pitch, faltering, finding its pitch, musing... Waffling on the sound track is real close up work, but he chooses to take the philosophy of others, the authority of the philosophy of others, the scientific handbook or text, backed up with secondary texture - tap tap tap on the mike, contrasted with a casual but conscious familiarity, "hello, hello" set against the deep rasping tobacco cracked old wise philosophers' rhythmic formal enunciations: "*Quand est la trace, quand est le vol, quand est l'oiseau...*" Accentuated by the rhythmic white flash underlining the image, the single or double line of white subtitles.

Granny's Is (1989, 46 mins)

Originated on low-grade video. Unusually a BFI NEW DIRECTORS film, and so blown up to film for distribution by the BFI. A few prints sold at cost price. The BFI almost immediately lose theirs and don't bother to replace it. The *Freunde der Deutschen Kinemathek's* is either lost or stolen. There are two versions - the TV one at 58mins and a longer one on the international circuit at 70-80mins. Whereas 58mins is too cramped, the longer version has a tedious 10mins. As usual it would be better somewhere inbetween.

In 1988 or was it 1987 Larcher's *Granny* died. This was a terrible blow. *Granny* had painted, was cultured I assume and exceedingly tolerant of David's eccentricity, perhaps because of her own. She was eccentric herself we soon gather, quite proper, of her era. David lived in *Granny's flat* near Gloucester Road, whenever he was in England and not France. (It's important not to forget that Larcher is from old colonialist blonde stock. Mauritian. Bilingual: French/English and he could also speak Mauritian Creole which absolves him from some of the sins of his Fathers (but not many). Everyone thought this an eccentric arrangement, for a grown man to live at *Granny's flat*. The warmest shot of the intended film was *Granny* in bed on her birthday in a pink bolero with one tit exposed, snorting coke with great abandon and opening presents - Christmas. David's kids were distraught when Channel 4 insisted this scene be cut since it might shock and offend the general public: a scene which'd make us all wish we'd had a real dame, a game *Granny* like that.

Granny's Is is an affectionate and exacting portrayal of losing someone who has been there so long; who is still lingering in film cans and on videos and in photographs like a ghost, and realising that now that she is dead how much she meant to him, how much his own life was formulated by her. David only manages to say this through Proust's words. Proust gives him the back-up to grieve over a thing a grown man ain't supposed to sniffle about - an old woman. Proust gives him the authority, the permission even, to grieve publically through this film.

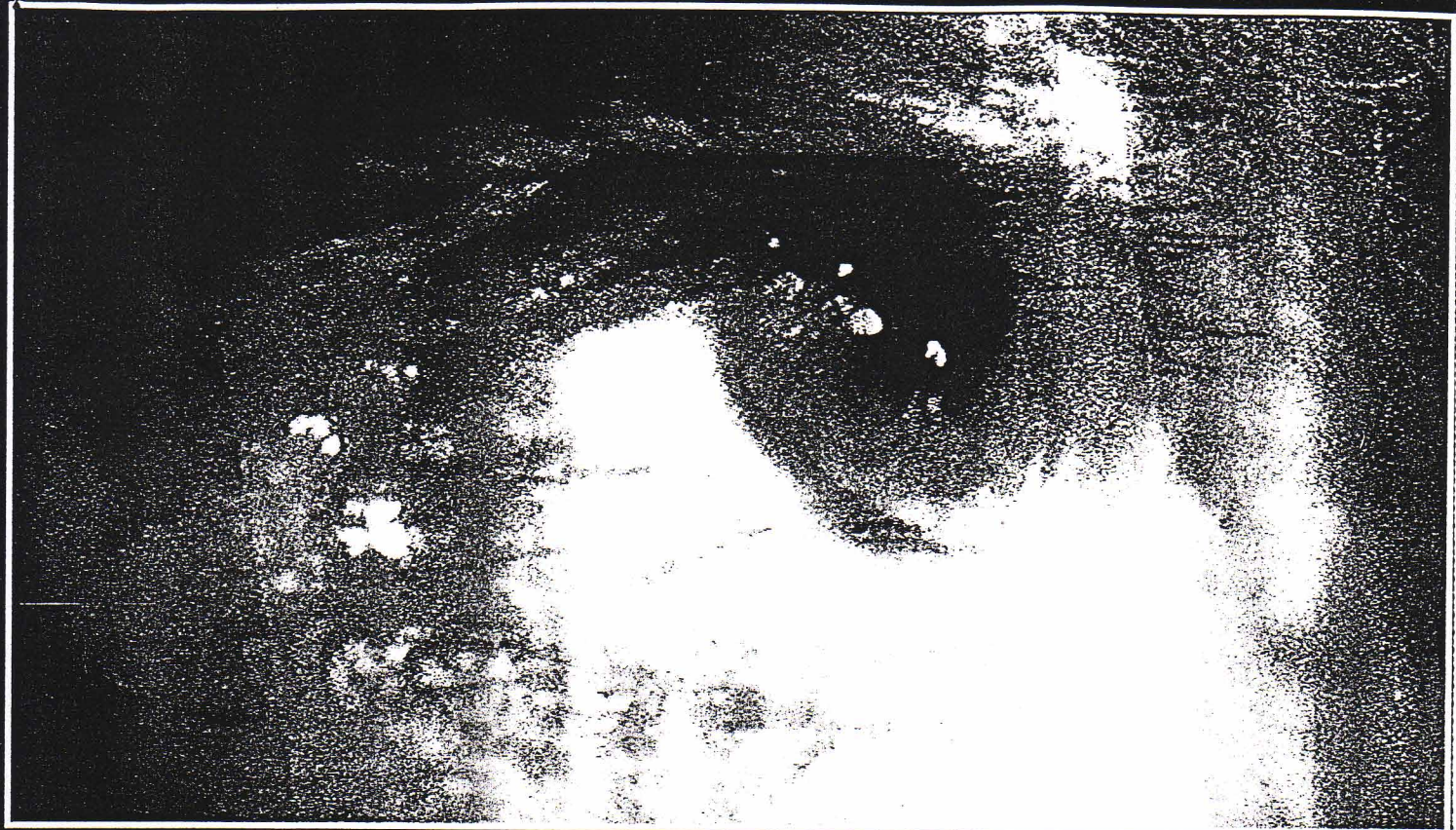
A clock ticking - a still image of *Granny* in bed - an image of *Granny* on a park bench. The sound of traffic near Gloucester Road, near *Granny's flat*. *Granny* is very old now - in bed - her faint voice - a video image distorted. *Granny's* eye beams out lurid video lines. *Granny* is no longer - (are we viewing a horror film from the underworld?)

Granny's eye, in close-up: "Could you come and sleep near me" "You know, I feel really jumpy..."

(we catch the word "ghosts") - aeroplane sound. Cut to *Granny's* foot in a dainty brown leather shoe with a leather bow. She hums and taps her stick. This stick tapping is repeated like *Don't Look Now*. Now over and over. *Granny* is only a trace - is distorted. Titles spin like crazy. *Granny: "I used to go to church and my tummy used to rumble - awful thought"*

David busy with his camera. *SHE WHO SLEEPS* - Title over image. Matting out *Granny*. David in the photographic studio. The crystal ball from *Monkey's Birthday* and *EETC*.

"She married George Elsworth... At some point he made circular saws in Sheffield..." The image rotates, and puns: "Circular saws are quite interesting." A room. *Granny's flat*. David twists the lens



in front of the camera. The image changes magically. Granny and her friends scoff biscuits. *'I don't drink coffee Granny.'*

A refrain from the funeral. Voice *"she died..."* The voices of the old ladies. David gathering together the photos in the room....

"Logi Baird" David unscrews the diopter. The image physically rotates, becomes circular, becomes rectangular. *"I know how difficult it is to stay alive... It's not the weight of years you know"*, David says to Granny.

David vacuuming the empty flat. Granny's room. Exaggerated clock ticking.

WHAT IS SPOKEN REMAINS IN THE WAITING ROOM FOR THE FUTURE TO HEAR IT

David faffing with leads in his leopard skin leggings. Scraps of domestic chatter. Meanwhile, an image of David left alone in the flat. The stuff of diary or autobiography. Within the frame of an old plate camera - a ship on an ocean - wavering - the edge old Granny's face. Quiet. Peacefully she sleeps.

David whispering sotto voce - words from Proust as Granny slumbers:

"I became conscious that she was dead..."

but behind my thoughts was a callous and cruel young man

...the memory of what she had been. (only phrases, isolated words, can be captured)

'shocked by the certainty of that annihilation... a mere stranger...

before and after those years I was and would be nothing

"waiting for the kettle to boil" "I was wondering whether to have coffee or chocolate" Kettle whistles. Clock ticks. Gloucester Road traffic rumbles. Kitchen sounds. Granny is very old. *"I'll leave you to go to bed"* The light goes out. Blackness. Granny: *"What are you thinking?"* David: *"Nothing special..."*

TAP TAP THE BLIND NIGHT'S WHITE STICK (appears on the screen).

Granny's having a sherry watching TV. Granny's painting of her room. Silhouette of Granny as an old woman, like the ageing Adam in Piero della Francesca's Arezzo fresco. The silhouette appears like a shroud. The family group photo. David plays with obliterating and re-appearing members of the family group, so delicately done, *and she's your daughter!* Daughter and child sail into the plate camera frame. Granny's video image rotates across the image of the room. In the background like a

refrain *Don't cry Granny... Don't cry Granny* whispering gently, voices as texture.

"Suddenly called into being by her voice" "very upset I don't know why, alas, it was this fact" "I found her there reading. She wasn't aware of my presence. She was absorbed in thoughts which were never allowed to be seen... to become the spectator of one's own absence..."

Granny by the sea in Mauritius

"The delicate quality of her mind... smacked of necromancy... each face that we love... a mirror of the past... seeing the most trivial aspects of our daily life..."

Granny's faint image like a ghost. She stumbles elderly, clad in a dressing gown, across the room. Faint voice in the background *"beloved person..."*

Close up of Granny's ageing watery eye, whitening, pallid, clouding over, translucent.

"A transparency of contiguous and overlapping memories..." "Since she vanished very quickly" "crazed eyes" "a dejected old woman".... Silence. Dripping sounds. The ticking clock. Some faint music. A kind of electronic buzz. A disturbance. It falters, fades like a radio wave.

Granny is snoozing. Radio 3. The image is carefully placed and changed.

Abrupt cut. Granny with a neighbour. *"Oh darling!"*

Granny is now matted electronically into the arm chair - into the plate camera... David to old lady neighbours *"I've got her picking her nose. Would you like to see that ?"*

Granny is everywhere, in the pictures, in the dresser - on the wall.

"That's fantastic..." "Extra-ordinary" Posho voices pipe in.

David stands in the doorway contemplating the empty grannyless room.

Banalities. The neighbours conversation, *"...and she got gastric flu"*

"I'll murder him" "He only does it because he loves you" The neighbour cuts in. The image flips. A Proust text in French appears in granny's armchair. Granny:

"You're interested in the solar system aren't you?" Granny varnishing her nails. Granny on the phone. The word **UNHINGED** appears prominently across the image

(this seems to refer to David's lostness after Granny's death). Parts of Granny's diaries. The word **DAVID** in handwriting. Granny as a child. The image floats in - a hymn is vaguely heard in the background. Perhaps from a funeral. The image is highly distorted. The return of the little chant *"Don't cry Granny..."* A subtle mix of rhythm -

voice - hymn.

David examining photos under the eyeglass, endless albums.

"The invisible shadow" "mirror" "in other words her double"

"see no image" "suffering mourning is preferable..." Granny's room reflected in a convex mirror or the curve of a lens. A wide angle... fish eye lens.

David puts out the light. Puts out the light and then puts out the light. Creaks and more creaks. Fab titles to the tap tap tapping of granny's stick heard like a thousand woodpeckers, like a litany, like a literal army of Granny's sticks, relinquished to the sound of creaks as the titles rotate pivoted on an invisible axis, fly into reverse and swivel back-again - forward reverse forward... occasionally wind shooshing in the trees or simply the hiss of tape noise... The film ends.

Now I would go on to talk about the use of momentum and speed and rhythm, the choreography of video effects, which begins quite crudely in **EETC** but this is definitely the thing to watch for and wonder about the function of in **Granny's Is** (as well as in **Videovoid**, **Voidtext** and the upcoming **Ish Tank**, which he is currently working on). It wasn't until he was allowed to use the video artists' monastery/play school at Montbéliard in France that the Nijinsky of celluloid became the Nijinsky of electronic art.

There is not enough space here to give more than a few leads or hints. What is important to stress is that in the UK we the potential audience are given restricted access, via the structures that exist, to see and enjoy the cutting edge of media art, which incidentally has not issued from the gallery system but from the laboratories and workshops. Clearly such artists made the big philosophical and tactical art market mistake of calling themselves makers. David Larcher was last year invited to become Professor at the New Media Centre in Cologne in Germany. He's never held a job down in his life before, but he's been lured by the financial and other appreciation that he is receiving outside this ungrateful, uncultured quick art buck country. The sad fact is that Larcher is only part of a massive UK media art drain. We are left wondering not very much about the outbreak of easy-come easy-go, Emperor's New Clothes, thin-on-the-intellectual-ground installation work that remains.

Several of David Larcher's films and video pieces are available through London Film-makers' Co-op distribution. Contact them for details. Colleges, film societies etc - Arrange screenings where possible - great work! (ed.)