

# The Light of the Eye

Simon Field

The current outburst of 'underground' or 'avant-garde' film making is without precedent in this country. The 'movement', for want of a better word, centred around the Film-makers Co-op has no history behind it, historical roots lie, if anywhere, in the United States. But if this kind of English film making has no history, it does already have a monument: David Larcher's *Mare's Tail*, completed in 1969, over two-and-a-half hours in length, 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. For reasons that I hope will become clear I have kept my discussion largely to the first section of this long and intricate work.

It's as if it were the first film in the world. The sound is a harsh, steady drone, the screen is absolutely black; that sound wipes

out past images and past sounds, the blackness the same but it heightens too our expectation and familiarises our eyes. Continuing for the first five minutes it turns the eyes back in on themselves, to the graininess of vision and to those spots 'before our eyes' that come from looking hard in a darkened room. Finally silence and those grains are in the first image - all over - tiny and frenzied, as if we were watching atoms; in a way it's true for these are the 'atoms' of film, dancing grains of emulsion. After a while a line: it sways to and fro, flowing through the screen from top to bottom, in fact a long line scratched into the emulsion, across the frames on the film surface, drawing our attention to the film as a stream of celluloid which can be marked directly (you don't after all need a camera to make a film). Behind the line appears a small mobile

screen within the screen, back in space, a device that is to recur throughout a film in which original material has been repeatedly re-shot from the screen. That small screen is at once a making present of that fact and a play on the illusion of the screen surface, for it bobs back and forth, rising forward to take up the whole screen then receding back into space again. Now a mass of richly coloured triangles hovering in space and a voice echoes the film maker's act and the mythical Genesis nature of this opening reel with the first line from the Zohar: 'When the will of the King began to take effect he engraved signs into the heavenly spheres that surrounded him.'

Several shots of a projector, the 'source' of light for the cinematic image . . . . .

... extract only

recess a dark flame issued forth . . . . 'A bulb flashes elusively in a mirror then a series of small coloured flames . . . 'only after this flame began to assume size and dimension did it produce radiant colours . . . .'

Then a honeycomb grid of colours, followed by a wave like spectrum twisting and turning against black, a shot in black and white of an incoming wave: 'think of the wave on the sea . . . the wave then goes on'. There is more, almost inaudible, on light theory, virtual images, the corpuscular and wave nature of light, more from the Zohar on the very birth of light and the world being brought into being. The light that gives form to the world, gives form to the film, images of light made possible by light. The corpuscular and wave nature of light is given form in film, Larcher goes beyond the frame as corpuscle to the emulsion grain, the strip of film is the on-going wave. He gives form to energies: modern and mystical, like Ezra Pound's 'medieval "natural philosopher" (who) would find this modern world full of enchantments, not only the light in the electric bulb, but the thought of the current hidden in the air and in wire would give him a mind full of forms, "fuor di color", or having their hyper-colours. The medieval philosopher would probably have been unable to think the electric world, and *not* think of it as a world of forms'.

A few images later: six turning points of spectral colour made with a defraction grating, a making present of the normally invisible, in a film devoted to such a task; accompanied by a meteorological report with its own peculiar poetry and sense of place, carried on radio waves; reminding us of how little is visible to the human eye on the total electromagnetic scale of which radio and light waves are both part. The report with its definition in terms of space and direction leading us into a sequence around Stonehenge, that ancient crucible of space, time and light whose knowledge is still not totally fathomed by 20th century man. There follows a section of many moons, then the sun source of light whose circular form, abstracted into white reminds us of that earlier mirror. Then the cut that typifies the scale within the film and within our world. The circular white shape of the sun cuts to another round white form, the camera zooms in, it's a round white table, in and down onto the surface until we can see its bumps and scratches, then a fly. Its death agony fills the whole screen where a second before was the sun.

The first appearance of the seabirds, flying, filling the sky, with their extraordinary screechings. They move, the frame freezes, they move again, then turn into texture. The screen within a screen, twisting and turning to reveal the flickering source of light. A long piece of abstract, rough surface, almost like a Clyfford Still. Larcher's face framed within the frame, re-shot, jerking and flickering, covered with scratch and texture, a floating eye superimposed. . . . 'Am I a man . . . or am I a butterfly.' And so the film moves into its second portion.

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. For as I hope I have made a little clearer by my description *Mare's Tail* is not only about vision but in line with much recent work 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 his only film released, but contains lots of old footage that *might* have been earlier works. They are here incorporated and 're-made' in the light of the film maker's current ideas. So *Mare's Tail* is at once a kind of autobiography and a film about making that autobiography. It has interesting similarities with *Tom, Tom, the Piper's son* (made at about the same time) both are potentially endless in their re-examinations, both clearly focus on the processes of making, but whereas the American Ken Jacobs examined a silent 1905 film, Larcher is looking at his own work and life, attempting to grasp an elusive self.

*Mare's Tail* is available from the London Film Makers Co-operative and from The Other Cinema who kindly made their print available during preparation for this article.