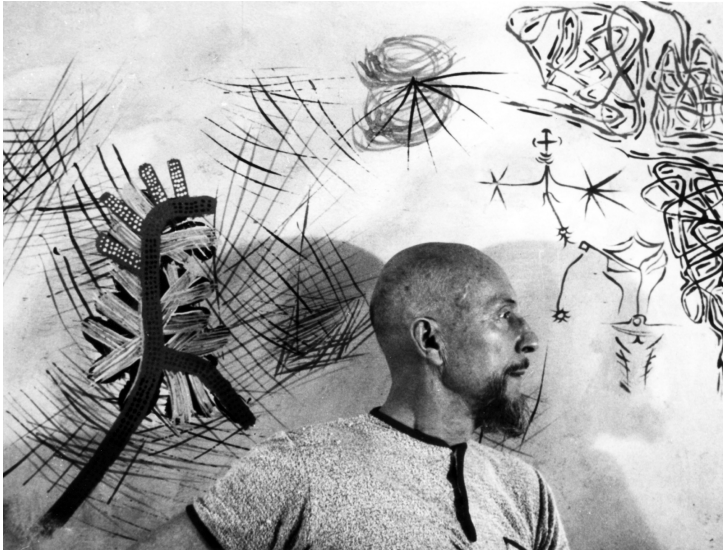


Free Radical: The Films of Len Lye

Compiled by Roger Horrocks for the New Zealand Film Archive & The Len Lye Foundation.



Friday 19th October, 7pm.

**NSCAD University,
Bell Auditorium, 4th Floor,
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Free Radical: The Films of Len Lye

'Every film [I made], I tried to interest myself in it by doing something not previously done in film technique' (Len Lye).

Len Lye (1901-1980) pursued his passion for experiment throughout his career. He was a pioneer of direct (camera-less) film-making, starting in 1935 with the classic *A Colour Box*. He went on to expand his direct techniques from painting the images of his films to scratching, stenciling and photogramming them. In the words of Hilary Harris, "Lye's films are outstanding in terms of kinetic rhythm, integrity, and what I call aliveness". When *Free Radicals* won an international award in 1958, John Adams of *Film Quarterly* wrote: 'If proof has ever been needed that Lye, the pioneer in this field [of direct film], is the real – and for some the only – master, here it is.'

Lye was also a pioneer of colour film in the 1930s, taking black and white footage and transforming it (in *Rainbow Dance* and *Trade Tattoo*) into brilliantly coloured Cubist textures. He also strove constantly to 'escape from Griffith' by seeking to create a new language of editing in extraordinary live-action films such as *N or NW*.

Lye's first film, *Tusalava*, was a unique combination of Australian Aboriginal and modernist imagery. During his early years in New Zealand, Australia and Samoa he was deeply involved with the indigenous art forms of the region. Pacific tapa designs influenced his later painting of direct films. He was also a highly innovative photographer, painter, and poet, and one of the most important figures in kinetic sculpture (another aspect of the 'art of motion' to which he devoted his life). Lye completed his last great experimental film, *Particles in Space*, just before his death in 1980. Stan Brakhage, amazed that Lye's work was not better known, remarked at that time: 'We must now fight very hard to get Len Lye's work anchored in the EYES of this society (as distinct from simply shelved in the institutes of Art or somesuch'.

The programme is presented on 16mm. 67 minutes.

TUSALAVA

1929, 10.00, 35mm

This early experimental film was premiered by the London Film Society. It imagines the beginnings of life on earth. Single-cell creatures evolve into species with distinct identities. Evolution leads to conflict, and two species struggle for supremacy. Lye's animation was influenced by Australian Aboriginal art and myths of the Dreamtime. Jack Ellitt's percussive piano score has unfortunately been lost and the film is now screened silent.

A COLOUR BOX

1935, 4.00, 35mm

Lye's first direct film, which combined popular Cuban dance music with hand-painted abstract designs, created a wave of public debate because it polarized cinema audiences. This controversy helped to attract millions of viewers. Color was still a novelty, and Lye's direct painting on celluloid created exceptionally vibrant effects. The film won major awards, though some festivals had to invent a special category for it. In Venice, the Fascists disrupted screenings because they saw it as 'degenerate' modern art. The film was funded and distributed by John Grierson's GPO Film Unit on the condition that Lye included some postal messages at the end. Presented courtesy of The British Post Office.

KALEIDOSCOPE

1935, 4.00, 35mm

Lye's second direct film was sponsored by Churchman Cigarettes. His friend Oskar Fischinger was financing his experimental film work at the same time in Germany by making cigarette commercials. In *Kaleidoscope* Lye animated stencilled cigarette shapes and is said to have experimented with cutting out some of the shapes so that the light of the projector hit the screen directly. He developed a number of other stencils - such as 'a yin-yang, a diamond shape, a wheel, a star' - to complement his hand-painted images. As in *Colour Box* he used music by Don Baretto and his Cuban Orchestra.

THE BIRTH OF THE ROBOT

1936, 7.00, 35mm

This experiment with the single-frame animation of puppets was a 'prestige advertisement' for Shell Motor Oil. Because conventional animation was now dominated by Walt Disney, many European film-makers turned to puppets as an alternative. Lye enlisted the help of several avant-garde friends - such as Humphrey Jennings and John Banting - to make the amusing puppets. After using Dufaycolor for his previous two films, Lye now turned to Gasparcolor. Color film was still a complex process (involving the combination of three separate images), but Lye was able to create such a vivid storm scene that reviewers hailed it as 'proof that the color film has entered a new stage'. The music was Holst's *The Planets*.

RAINBOW DANCE

1936, 5.00, 35mm

This live-action film exploited the triple images of the Gasparcolor system in an unprecedented way. Lye filmed dancer Rupert Doone in black and white, then colored the footage during the

development and printing of the film. He also added painted and stenciled development and printing of the film. He also added painted and stenciled patterns. Rainbow Dance is packed with new filmic ideas such as moving figures that leave behind a trail of coloured silhouettes (like Duchamp's Nude Descending a Staircase). Lye disliked naturalism and relished mixing live action with cartoon symbols or juxtaposing positive and negative images. This experiment was sponsored by the GPO Film Unit on the proviso that Lye included a Savings Bank advertisement. Presented courtesy of The British Post Office.

TRADE TATTOO

1937, 5.00, 35mm

Trade Tattoo went even further than Rainbow Dance in its manipulation of the three-colour Gasparcolor process. The original black and white footage consisted of offcuts from GPO Film Unit documentaries (such as Night Mail). Lye transformed them in what has been described as the most intricate job of film printing and color grading ever attempted. Animated words and patterns were combined with the live-action footage to create images as complex and multi-layered as a Cubist painting. Music was provided by the Lecuona Band, another Cuban group. With its dynamic rhythms, the film sought (in Lye's words) to convey 'a romanticism about the work of the everyday in all walks of life.' Presented courtesy of The British Post Office.

N. OR N.W.

1937, 7.00, 35mm

When Lye was commissioned by the GPO Film Unit to make a live-action film about the need to be careful in addressing letters, he decided to make it an experiment in subverting the orthodox language of film editing (which he described contemptuously as 'the Griffith technique'). The film turned a simple story about a lovers' quarrel into a montage of bizarre camera angles and point-of-view shots, accompanied by lively jazz music. Lye's favourite sequence (showing the young woman getting dressed and going for a walk) was so extreme that the Film Unit removed it and it has since been lost (though Lye documented it in the Summer 1939 issue of Sight and Sound). The surviving seven minutes of the film are still astonishing. N. or N.W. ends with a very tongue-in-cheek treatment of the sponsor's message. Presented courtesy of The British Post Office.

COLOUR FLIGHT

1938, 4.00, 35mm

This riot of colour was a showcase for Lye's hand-painted and stenciled imagery. Sponsored by Imperial Airways (the forerunner of British Airways), it incorporated the airline's 'speedbird' symbol. The music consisted of 'Honolulu Blues' by Red Nichols and a rumba by the Lecuona Cuban Boys. Time Magazine enthused about the film in its 12 December 1938 issue, describing Lye as England's alternative to Walt Disney, a David-and-Goliath comparison because Disney's films were 'the product of a big corporation' whereas Lye was a one-man band who 'paints or stencils his designs by hand.' Unfortunately, like Lye's other films, Colour Flight was not eligible for cinema distribution in the USA because it was viewed as an overseas advertising film.

SWINGING THE LAMBETH WALK

1939, 4.00, 35mm

The Lambeth Walk was a popular dance of the period with a characteristic hand gesture (the Yiddish 'Oil!'). Lye edited together a number of 'swing' versions of the music (including Django Reinhardt on guitar and Stephane Grapelli on violin), and combined them with a particularly diverse range of direct film images, scratched as well as painted. Lye was particularly pleased with a final guitar solo (with a vibrating horizontal line) and double bass solo (with a stomping vertical line). This time Lye did not have to include any advertising slogans. Friends at the Tourist and Industrial Development Association, shocked to learn that Lye and his family had become destitute, arranged for TIDA to sponsor the film – to the horror of government bureaucrats who could not understand why a popular dance was being treated as a tourist attraction.

MUSICAL POSTER #1

1940, 3.00, 35mm

During World War Two, Lye made a number of films to assist the war effort. Musical Poster #1 (part of a long tradition of British 'poster' films) was not only screened in cinemas but taken around to factories and village halls by the Ministry of Information's travelling film units. The film alerted the public to the risk that German sympathizers might overhear information about the war effort in everyday conversation. Lye was adamant that wartime films did not have to be gloomy. Variety described this film as 'a fantastic but effective blending of colour and sound to draw audience interest.'

COLOR CRY

1952-3, 3.00, 16mm

In 1944 Lye moved to New York, initially to direct for The March of Time and to make a series on Basic English. He settled in the West Village and mixed with the artists who later became the Abstract Expressionists. He encouraged New York's emerging film-makers such as Francis Lee, taught with Hans Richter, and assisted Ian Hugo on Bells of Atlantis. Lye's own film Color Cry was based on a development of the 'rayogram' or 'shadow cast' process, using fabrics as stencils. Lye synchronised his film to a haunting blues by Sonny Terry which he imagined to be the anguished cry of a runaway slave. His American films used the 16mm format.

TAL FARLOW

1950s, revised 1980, 2.00, 16mm

Lye created a series of scratched images in the 1950s - more regular or geometric than his usual style - to accompany 'Rock 'n' Rye,' a track by jazz guitarist Tal Farlow, but he did not get far with the editing. He returned to this direct film in 1980 but died before he could complete it. His assistant Steven Jones finished cutting and synchronizing the film under the supervision of Lye's widow Ann (who had been closely involved with all of his American films).

RHYTHM

1957) 1.00, 16mm

Intended as a publicity film for Chrysler, Lye used rapid editing to speed up the assembly of a car, and synchronized it to African drum music. Chrysler was horrified by the music and suspicious of the way a worker was shown winking at the camera. Rhythm won first prize at a New York advertising festival but was then disqualified because its sponsor had never given it a television screening. P. Adams Sitney wrote: 'Although his reputation has been sustained by the invention of direct painting on film, Lye deserves equal credit as one of the great masters of montage.' And in Film Culture, Jonas Mekas said to Peter Kubelka: 'Have you seen Len Lye's 50-second automobile commercial? Nothing happens there...except that it's filled with some kind of secret action of cinema.'

FREE RADICALS

1958, revised 1979, 4.00, 35mm

In arguably his greatest film, Lye reduced the medium to its most basic elements – light in darkness – by scratching designs on black film. His scratches were as energetic as lightning in the night sky. He used a variety of scribes ranging from dental tools to an ancient Native American arrow-head, and synchronized the images to traditional African music ('a field tape of the Bagirmi tribe'). The film won second prize out of 400 entries in an International Experimental Film Competition judged by Man Ray, Norman McLaren, Alexander Alexeiff and others, at the 1958 World's Fair in Brussels. In 1979 Lye further condensed this already very concentrated film by dropping a minute of footage. Stan Brakhage described the final version as 'an almost unbelievably immense masterpiece (a brief epic)'.

PARTICLES IN SPACE

1979, 4.00, 16mm

In his last great film, completed a few months before his death at the age of 78, Lye returned to the black-and-white techniques of Free Radicals and his 'white ziggle-zag-splutter scratches in quite doodling fashion'. Particles in Space explored some 'particularly vibrant, ziggy little images,' reminiscent of the freest and most vigorous forms of Abstract Expressionism. The soundtrack combined 'Jumping Dance Drums' from the Bahamas, with drum music by the Yoruba of Nigeria, and the sounds of Lye's metal kinetic sculptures. The opening titles illustrated Lye's mastery of the scratching of words on film.

Free Radical: The Films of Len Lye was compiled by Roger Horrocks for the New Zealand Film Archive and The Len Lye Foundation. Notes on the films by Horrocks, author of Len Lye: A Biography (Auckland University Press).