

Len Lye: The Vital Body of Cinema

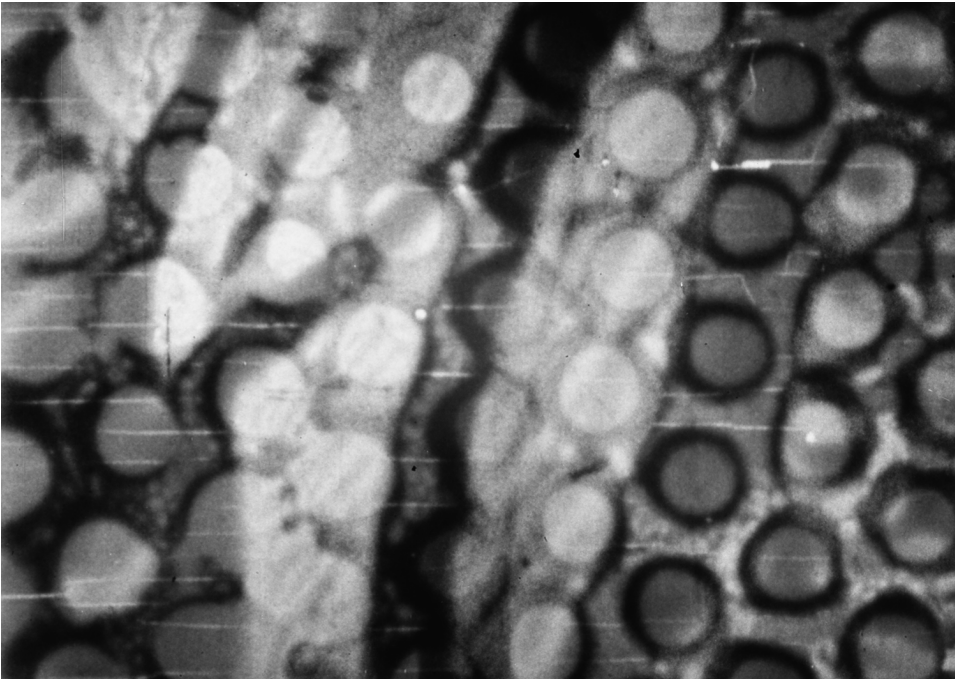
LUKE SMYTHE

In late 1936, a year after it had been awarded a Medal of Honor in the specially created category of “fantasy film” at the International Cinema Festival in Brussels, Len Lye’s first hand-painted film, *A Colour Box* (1935), was screened at the Venice Film Festival, where it met with a less than rapturous response. Consisting of little more than quivering fields of dots, eccentrically pinwheeling triangles, and trembling vertical lines, all jumping to the jaunty rhythms of a Creole jazz soundtrack, the film’s dancing sheets of color instantly aroused the ire of Nazi spectators present in the audience. As the German daily *Film-Kurier* would later report: “The English color short *A Colour Box*, which attempts the kind of abstract film composition of Fischinger but with inadequate artistic means, was met with such loud condemnatory stomping that the screening had to be stopped before the film was over.”¹ So degenerate was the film, it seems, that despite being only three minutes in length it could not be screened in its entirety.

In retrospect, of course, there is nothing startling about this turn of events. By virtue of its complete abstraction and its recourse to a “negroid” musical accompaniment, it would have been difficult in 1936 to find a film more strikingly at odds with even the most liberal canons of Nazi cinema—as the *Film-Kurier*’s rather startling invocation of Oskar Fischinger as a yardstick of comparative acceptability in this context suggests.² Moreover, when Lye’s motives for drawing on the combined resources of abstraction, jazz, and animation in his hand-painted films are taken into account, the severity of this judgment can only be compounded. For at the heart of Lye’s filmmaking practice lay an urge

1. “Erfolge und Versager am Lido: Hausschlüssel treten in Aktion,” *Film-Kurier*, Aug. 13, 1936, p. 1, cited (and incorrectly dated August 16) in William Moritz, “Len Lye’s Films in the Context of International Abstract Cinema,” in *Len Lye*, ed. Jean-Michel Bouhours and Roger Horrocks (Paris: Éditions du Centre Pompidou, 2000), p. 194.

2. That Fischinger’s name was mentioned by the *Film-Kurier* at this date is surprising for two reasons: not only because of his history as an abstract filmmaker, but because he had recently fled to the United States in an effort to escape the increasingly unwelcome attentions of the German authorities. For a summary of the race-related criticisms to which jazz was subjected under National Socialism, see Michael H. Kater, *Different Drummers: Jazz in the Culture of Nazi Germany* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 31–32.



Len Lye. A Colour Box. 1935. All images courtesy of the Len Lye Foundation and the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, New Zealand.

to use cinema as a device for enlivening viewers' bodies via a process he referred to as "bodily empathy," an impulse that placed his work in direct opposition to the stern somatic ethos of discipline, desensitization, and corporeal alienation that anchored key sectors of Nazi art production. Little wonder then that *A Colour Box* may well have been the target of a carefully choreographed propaganda attack at Venice.³

As dramatic as it was, however, Lye's hostile reception at Venice does not bring the full stakes of his cinematic agenda into view. On the contrary, when we examine the remainder of Lye's prewar cinematic output from the perspective of his lifelong fascination with the body's empathic response to sound and movement, it becomes increasingly evident that his art was ranged in opposition to something much broader than the somatically deadening terms of Fascist aesthetics, namely the forces of corporeal alienation at work in several focal domains of industrial modern life. Among these may be numbered the increasingly Taylorized conditions of the workplace, the rapidly advancing efforts of govern-

3. Moritz, "Len Lye's Films in the Context of International Abstract Cinema," p. 194.



Lye. A Colour Box. 1935.

ments worldwide to rationalize and centrally administer the entire social infrastructure, and the sedentary pleasures of the cinema itself. When war broke out, Lye then brought his heightened kinesthetic sensibilities to the battlefield, coolly demonstrating the merits of a refined somatic consciousness in the bloody confrontation with Fascism.

Movement as Muse

From the beginning of his career in the early 1920s until his death in 1980, Lye sought to use dynamic artworks to awaken sensations of motion within their onlookers. In service of this aim, he became both a pioneer filmmaker and kinetic sculptor. Working in London in the interwar period, he helped initiate the genres of hand-painted and scratch filmmaking, while also making important early forays into color processing. After moving to New York in 1944, he became a leading figure in the kinetic-sculpture movement of the 1950s and 1960s. His motion-based aesthetic, however, originated in the cities and countryside of his native New

Zealand, where he was born in 1901, far from the centers of the European and North American art worlds where it would later be implemented.⁴

Lye's sensitivities to movement first developed in the context of the "sense games" he invented as a child, in which he strove to focus on a single sensory register from dawn until dusk, later replaying his experiences as he prepared to go to sleep. While developing his senses in this way, Lye grew increasingly receptive to sensations of sound, color, and above all motion.⁵ By attending closely to the "figures of motion" inscribed by animals, water, clouds, and plants, he became aware of the phenomenon he would later refer to as "bodily empathy," whereby the echoes of observed movements could be discerned, and indeed amplified, within his own body.⁶ As he wrote in 1964,

I . . . eventually came to look at the way things moved mainly to try to feel movement, and *only* feel it. This is what dancers do; but instead, I wanted to put the feeling of a figure of motion outside of myself to see what I'd got. I came to realize that this feeling had to come out of myself, not out of streams, swaying grasses, soaring birds; so, instead of sketching lines and accents described by things in motion, I now tried to tie and plait their particular motion characteristics into my sinews—to attach an inner kind of echo of them to my bones. . . . It might seem inane to anyone else, but the way I practiced it, I could levitate with the curling smoke, scud with the wind-blown leaf, sashay with the reflections of masts on water, shimmy with the flapping flag, glide with the snake.⁷

As these remarks suggest, Lye never aspired to an asubjectival fusion with the natural world in his sense games. To the contrary, he cherished the experience of empathy for the way it heightened and refined his sense of individuality, a task he viewed as fundamental to all forms of creative expression.⁸ To observe, absorb, transcribe, and retransmit the experience of motion in ways that could assist others in acquiring a heightened sense of their own somatic capabilities became the focal concern of Lye's art as early as 1920, while he was still a student at Wellington Technical College, and sustained his practice for some sixty years thereafter. Though his first forays in this direction were static (comprising sketches of the movement patterns of waves and clouds), after relocating to Sydney in 1922 he entered the arena of moving images, scratching figures of motion generated from within his own body onto strips of black leader obtained from an anima-

4. Roger Horrocks, *Len Lye: A Biography* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2001), p. 8. Unless otherwise noted, all subsequent biographical references will be drawn from this source.

5. See Lye's reminiscences of this early period of his life in "Beginnings" (n.d.), in *Figures of Motion: Len Lye/Selected Writings* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1984), ed. Wylan Curnow and Roger Horrocks, pp. 30–32.

6. Lye introduced the term "bodily empathy" in *ibid.*, p. 25.

7. Lye, "The Art that Moves" (1964), in *Figures of Motion: Len Lye/Selected Writings*, p. 82.

8. See Lye, "Beginnings," p. 32, and "Is Film Art?" (1959), in *ibid.*, p. 53.

tion studio where he had found work. Though no finished films emerged from these experiments, he began working on an animated short, *Tusalava* (1929), following a second move to London in 1926, and completed it some three years later.

Unfolding in extreme slow motion, *Tusalava* depicts the emergence of two opposing figures from a striated matrix of dot-like configurations, most likely inspired by Australian Aboriginal art. Later in life, Lye described one of the figures, which is vaguely humanoid, as a “totem of individuality” and the other, which is wormlike, as a “witchetty grub,” an important Aboriginal food source he had never seen but was the subject of a dance he admired featuring sinuous writhing movements akin to those he made use of in his film.⁹ Throughout *Tusalava*’s ten-minute duration, the witchetty grub invades its totemic counterpart with a pair of tentacular protrusions, struggling to absorb it in its entirety before being thrust aside by the totem’s last-gasp explosive death throes. While Lye himself remained unsure of the film’s meaning, it mooted two key premises of his later cinematic efforts: his conception of the film image as a locus for the transfer of energy between bodies and his construal of cinematic movement as a brand of “vicarious” dance.¹⁰ This dance-like understanding of the film image would always hold a central place in his work, as would Primitivism, for Lye would never shed his conviction that tribal cultures remained connected to dimensions of sensory experience that had been covered over in modern Western art forms by a cognitively biased “literary” crust.¹¹ In his own art he sought to tear away this crust, beginning in the mid-1930s with the hand-painted film idiom he would come to call “direct” filmmaking.¹²

Direct Filmmaking and the Body of Leisure

During his early years in London, Lye was exposed to a much broader range of films than had been available to him in New Zealand and Australia. At the London Film Society, where *Tusalava* had first been screened, he was able to view the work of significant avant-garde filmmakers of the 1920s such as Man Ray, Hans Richter, Viking Eggeling, Fernand Léger, Fischinger, and others. Elsewhere, he was free to sample the full spectrum of narrative-driven, commercial filmmaking streaming out of Britain and Hollywood at this time, all the while seeking to develop new cinematic projects of his own.¹³ Some time around 1934, after years of

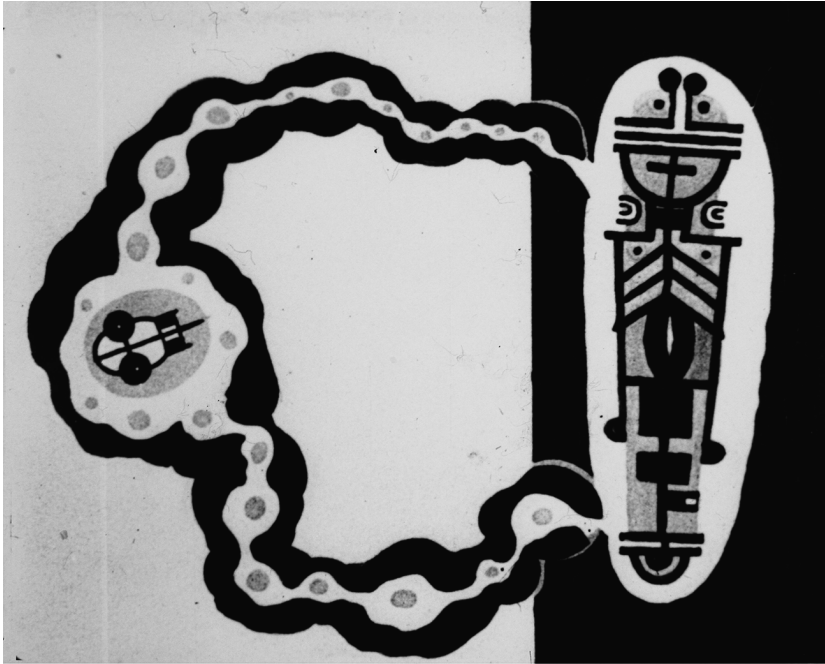
9. Lye, “Gene-Deep Myth” (1978), in *ibid.*, pp. 90–94.

10. Lye posited film movement as a kind of “vicarious dance” in “The Art that Moves,” p. 86.

11. Lye, “Notes on a Short Colour Film” (1936), in *ibid.*, p. 51. I employ the term “primitive” here in accordance with Lye’s own understanding of its meaning, which, as the foregoing comments make clear, carried no connotations of backwardness or underdevelopment and was instead aligned with a state of somatic advancement.

12. Horrocks, *Len Lye: A Biography*, p. 133.

13. On Lye’s film-going habits in London, see *ibid.*, pp. 97, 127–28.

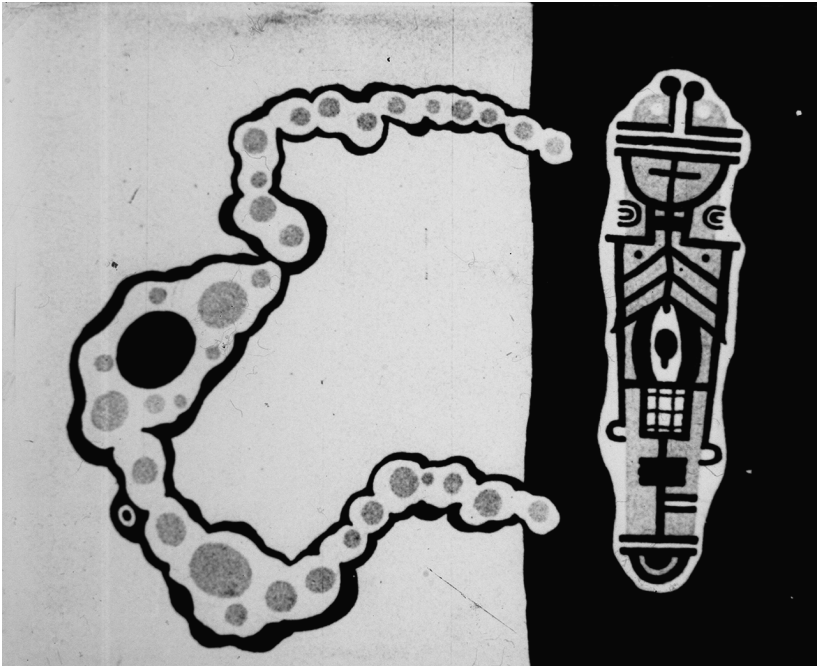


Lye. Tusalava. 1929.

fruitless attempts to obtain commercial backing for a variety of ventures, he hit upon the idea of working without the expense of a film crew, camera, or lighting equipment by painting onto and scratching into clear strips of unwanted celluloid. By 1935, he had located a brand of lacquer paint that would not crack or peel when run through a film projector and had obtained the assistance of John Gielgud in the production of his first hand-painted film, *Full Fathom Five* (1935), which featured the actor reading passages of *The Tempest* to a synchronized musical accompaniment and a medley of off-cut film sequences that Lye had hand-tinted.¹⁴ It was this now lost film that won him funding and commissions from the British Government's GPO (General Post Office) Film Unit, which would support him for the next several years.

The GPO Film Unit had been founded in 1933 and was charged with informing the British public of the post office's activities, which at that time included infrastructural projects such as the creation of a national telephone network. In the hands of its first director, John Grierson, however, the unit's informational

14. Like *Tusalava* before it, *Full Fathom Five* benefited greatly from Lye's friendship with the Australian composer Jack Ellitt, who worked closely with Lye on many early film projects.



Lye. Tusalava. 1929.

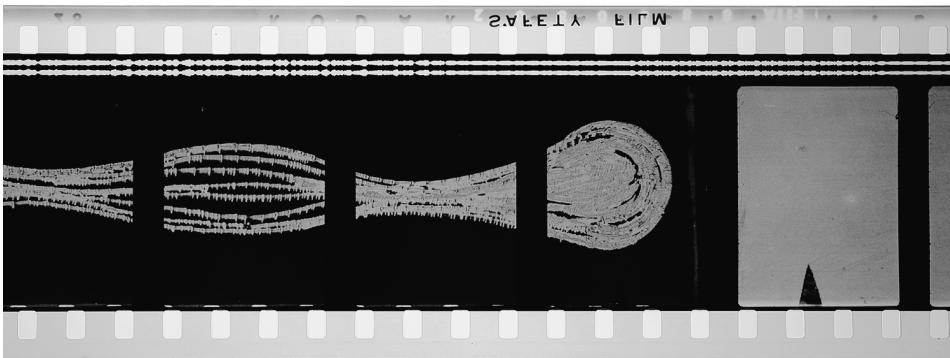
mandate was interpreted broadly, with Grierson trying to produce technically innovative and socially progressive films that would help raise the standards of British filmmaking.¹⁵ While this initiative resulted for the most part in high-quality social-realist documentaries, seeing *Full Fathom Five* inspired Grierson to expand the unit's horizons by underwriting a very different kind of filmmaking. Impressed by Lye's inventive work, Grierson asked him to produce an advertisement for new postage rates. The result was *A Colour Box*.¹⁶ With Grierson's blessing, the film does not belabor its commercial function, remaining wholly abstract until its final thirty seconds. From that point forward, a series of hand-stenciled statements appear onscreen, but make little impression on viewers amid the film's prevailing onslaught of sound and color.¹⁷

15. For a summary of the GPO's activities, see Scott Anthony, "GPO Film Unit," <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/464254/index.html> (accessed December 12, 2011).

16. For further details regarding the circumstances of this commission, see Horrocks, *Len Lye: A Biography*, pp. 135–36.

17. As a number of early newspaper reports attest, the advertorial content of Lye's early direct films was often lost on spectators. See, for example, the clippings from the *Leicester Mercury*, the *Illustrated Leicester Chronicle*, and the *Morning Post*, collected in Lye's review scrapbook of the 1930s (Len Lye Foundation Archive, ID 1789, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Zealand, pp. 31–32).

Thanks to the sheer novelty of *A Colour Box*, which earned it a great deal of notoriety in Britain, Lye was given further commissions, both by Grierson and by several commercial sponsors who were attracted to the prestige value of Lye's work.¹⁸ With this support, he produced four more direct films in the '30s: *Kaleidoscope* (1935), commissioned by Churchman's Cigarettes; *Colour Flight* (1938), commissioned by Imperial Airways; and two further GPO commissions, *Swinging the Lambeth Walk* (1939) and *Musical Poster #1* (1940). Given the same kind of leeway in his commercial films as he received in his GPO projects, Lye was able to keep their advertorial content to a minimum and instead focus on advancing his somatic concerns.



Lye. *Swinging the Lambeth Walk*. 1939.

If *Tusalava* had been the first of Lye's works to center on a dance-like exchange of energy between bodies, his direct films of the '30s took this process much further. In a freewheeling but lyrical idiom that resisted any crisp separation of media categories or firm distinction between high and low cultural forms, Lye transformed the moviegoing experience into a source of bodily *jouissance* and revitalization capable of countering the somatically alienating cultural tendencies of his day. Reversing the *enervative* vision of energy transfer that had formed the nucleus of *Tusalava*'s narrative, Lye directed its mode of address outward, across the screen's threshold. In doing so, he transformed the film image into an *inner-vating* reservoir of stored somatic impulses whose energies were capable of arcing outward into real space. These energies, Lye hoped, would invigorate the sensoria of onlookers, allowing them to recover a deeper, more enlivening sense of their individual kinesthetic capabilities within the increasingly ocular-centric and devitalizing spaces of Depression-era cinema.

18. On the relationship between Lye and his commercial sponsors, see Horrocks, *Len Lye: A Biography*, pp. 142–43.

While the cinematic culture of the 1920s and '30s had by no means been somatically inattentive, the key genres of silent comedy, with its endless series of kinesthetic pratfalls and catastrophes, and early animation, whose metamorphic chaos could (quite literally) stretch the viewer's capacity for bodily empathy to its limits, were by this stage heading into decline. It was into the space vacated by these genres that Lye inserted the innovative language of direct cinema, moving to oppose those remaining forms of narrative cinema that alternately deadened the sensoria of their viewers or fostered a pacifying mode of address, effecting the one by means of escalating and increasingly spectacularized *sensory* assaults and the other by setting aside the corporeal dimension of spectatorship. Working in this manner, Lye would distance himself decisively from all prior efforts in the field of abstract cinema, aligning his practice instead with the liberatory impulses of interwar popular culture and the Weimar-era avant-garde project to restructure the human sensorium by means of mechanical technologies—albeit on his own, highly singular terms.

Purging his films of all but the slightest narrative pretext (in the form of the opening titles and advertising slogans that they were regrettably obliged to bear), Lye developed an abstract cinematic idiom consisting of spinning, stenciled geometries, swaying linear fields, and heady assaults of pure color, all dancing in a loosely counterpointed relationship to their accompanying jazz soundtracks. Using stencils, brushes, sticks, nails, and combs to lay luminous runs of tumbling shapes across saturated fields of color, completely indifferent to the confines of individual frames, Lye sought to distance his work from cognitive preoccupations and bring it closer to what Gilles Deleuze once described as cinema's "signaletic" state. In this condition, which exists before or beyond the imposition of linguistic meanings, the film image is approached as a non-signifying, non-syntactic "signaletic material" whose "modulation features" (such as color, movement, and sound) may be used to address spectators at the level of direct sensation.¹⁹ Lye's hand-painted films of the '30s represent one of the first and most emphatic efforts to work in this manner.

In developing his direct-film idiom, Lye was operating far from the concerns of prior abstract filmmakers, who—from the abortive efforts of the Italian Futurists Arnaldo Ginna and Bruno Corra to create the first signaletic, hand-colored films in 1911 to the development of abstract cinema in Weimar Germany in the early 1920s—had worked beneath the sign of the purist and transcendental aspirations of abstract painting. Figures as diverse as Fischinger, Walter Ruttmann, and Henri Léopold Sauvage had sought to elevate painting to the pure heights of music; more ambitiously, others such as Richter and Eggeling had tried to develop a universal language of moving abstract forms. In pursuit of these objectives, the majority of these "absolute" filmmakers had come to share the synesthetic goal of

19. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), pp. 25–30.

uniting music and painting beneath the banner of film, spurred on by the prospect of attaining an ideal convergence of musical and visual form.²⁰ Lye's kinesthetic objectives were, however, largely at odds with such concerns. Having no interest in furthering the rarefying objectives of existing art forms and favoring the worldlier, more corporeally immediate cadences of jazz over the ethereal musical accompaniments of his Continental predecessors, Lye instead returned abstract cinema to the ground-level clamor of modernity, on terms closest to those of the genre's Futurist inaugurators. In doing so, however, he operated with less violence and pro-industrial zeal, more lyricism, and a much greater affinity for existing mass cultural forms.

Seeking to foster a strong somatic reaction to his hand-painted films, Lye availed himself of the mass cultural resources of jazz, together with the jittery, morphological madness of early animation—both important if contested sources of progressive popular experience during the interwar period. By loosely weaving together the eccentric rhythms of the former and the formal freedoms of the latter and fusing these in turn with the avant-garde traditions of geometric and gestural abstraction, Lye created a hybrid art form centered on the technical apparatus of cinema that sought to deploy the progressive capabilities of both halves of Theodor Adorno's incomplete dialectical whole of mass and elite cultural forms. In this way he was able to bypass Adorno's misgivings concerning the emancipatory potential of both mediums. If Adorno had harbored reservations regarding the excessive standardization of jazz, which he regarded as a cipher for the increasing standardization and administration of society at large, the musical material with which Lye worked was just one strand of a considerably more sophisticated and anarchic ensemble of color, sound, and music. By no means wholly standardized, Lye's films instead tack back and forth between extreme states of order and chaos, their imagery and music moving in and out of sync in a completely unpredictable fashion. In so doing, they serve a somatic sensory agenda that was greatly at variance with Adorno's strict, and strictly modernist, confinement of progressive musical apprehension to a purely auditory (and cognitive) plane. And if Adorno had expressed mounting concern over cartoon violence during the course of the 1930s, believing (contrary to Walter Benjamin) that the audience's laughing response to such events encouraged them to masochistically identify with the violence to which they themselves were subjected in their daily lives, Lye exchanged the depicted brutality of Mickey and Donald for a purely sensory violence of color, light, and sound presented with the hope of countering existing cultural forms of somatic alienation.²¹ In this way he was able to maneuver into a critical space

20. I examine the topics of image-music relations and the synesthetic impulse in early abstract cinema at greater length in my "Music and Image in Len Lye's Direct Films," *Journal of New Zealand Art History* 27 (2006), pp. 1–14.

21. For Adorno's reservations concerning the standardized character of jazz and other forms of popular music, see "On Jazz" (1936), reprinted in *Essays on Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), trans. Jamie Owen Daniel, pp. 470–96. Together with Max Horkheimer, Adorno voices his concerns regarding the socially submissive character of the laughter elicited by cartoon violence in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), trans. Edmund Jephcott, p. 110.

located between the contrasting stances toward mass culture assumed by the two great German critics in their exchanges of the 1930s. He achieved this by proposing a form of filmmaking that could fulfill Benjamin's hope for a revolutionary "innervation" of technology on the part of the masses, while allowing Adorno's concept of a revived mimetic relationship to nature to take center stage.

Throughout the 1930s, Benjamin grew increasingly pessimistic about humanity's capacity to forge a new and more productive relationship to technology. Nonetheless, he continued to regard an infusion of the revolutionary energies of the masses into the technical apparatus of industry and culture as a potential source of progress on two fronts: politically, as the best hope for advancing socialism, and ecologically, as a means of rebalancing the relationship between nature and technology.²² Adorno, for his part, was less sanguine about the prospect of an improved relationship to technology, yet he too was concerned to promote a rebalancing of the human relationship to nature, which had been dangerously repressed beneath a veneer of enlightened rationality and modern industrial indifference. For Adorno, the recovery of a now faded mimetic relationship between humanity and the natural realm was a *sine qua non* for the resumption of social progress. Where he broke with Benjamin, however, was over the issue of technology's ability to facilitate this process. To Adorno's way of thinking, technology was too firmly imbued with the abstracting and alienating tendencies of instrumental reason to help redirect society's attentions to the sensuous particularities of the natural world.²³

When we constellate Lye's position with the views of Benjamin and Adorno, it becomes clear that at an aspirational level he shared key aspects of each critic's outlook, fusing Benjamin's early early (and never wholly relinquished) technological optimism with Adorno's (admittedly faint and carefully qualified) faith in the recovery of certain lost powers of sensuous mimesis. Upon recovering such powers, the human subject could in theory trade its purely instrumental and rationalizing relationship to natural objects for a more balanced interaction of self and world. In his direct cinematic idiom, Lye endeavored to support such a process by

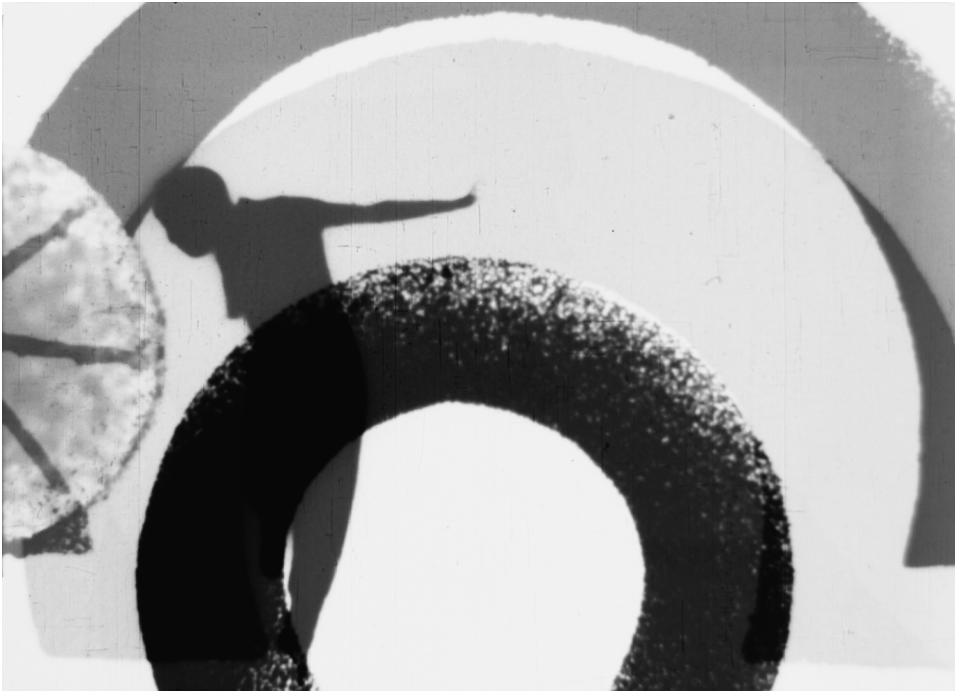
For an important survey of both thinkers' changing views on animation in connection with the broader critical reception of early animation in Europe, see Esther Leslie, *Hollywood Flattlands: Animation, Critical Theory and the Avant-Garde* (London: Verso Books, 2002), esp. pp. 115–22, 170–79.

22. In his 1929 essay on Surrealism, Benjamin somewhat cryptically described this infusion as a process of "collective innervation." See Walter Benjamin, "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia" (1929), in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2, 1927–1934*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999), ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, p. 218. For important commentaries on this strand of Benjamin's thought, see Susan Buck-Morss, "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered," *October* 62 (Autumn 1992), pp. 3–41; and Miriam Hansen's "Benjamin and Cinema: Not a One-Way Street," in *Benjamin's Ghosts: Interventions in Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), ed. Gerhard Richter, pp. 41–73.

23. On this point, see Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 32. For a lucid exposition of Adorno's concept of mimesis and its social implications, see Richard Wolin, "Utopia, Mimesis, and Reconciliation: A Redemptive Critique of Adorno's Aesthetic Theory," *Representations* 32 (Autumn 1990), pp. 33–49.

inscribing a dynamics of motion born in the body's empathic relationship to nature into the image space of cinema, thereby investing the film image with his own highly developed capacities for sensuous mimesis. Contrary to Adorno and Benjamin, however, there was no explicitly revolutionary dimension to his practice and no direct investment in Marxist cultural politics. Instead, his aesthetics were rooted in a simpler wish to use technology to enhance the sensory lives of his films' spectators. This therapeutic agenda enables us to place Lye's work in a further context, namely the efforts of avant-garde artists of the 1920s to use new technology to restructure the human sensorium.

At various moments in the 1920s, European artists had endeavored to use new technology to alter the human sensorium, by amplifying or restructuring its existing sensory capabilities. Richter and Eggeling, for example, had aspired to enhance the communicative capabilities of vision by means of their universal language. Aleksandr Rodchenko and László Moholy-Nagy, meanwhile, had sought to use photography and projected light to adapt the senses to the changing perceptual conditions of modernity. But while Lye shared the belief of these artists in the susceptibility of the senses to the acculturating influence of technology, he was interested neither in expanding the horizons of an existing sensory faculty à la Richter and Eggeling nor in modernizing perception in the manner of



Lye. Rainbow Dance. 1936.

Rodchenko and Moholy-Nagy. Instead, his aspirations were strictly therapeutic, being directed toward the restoration of an innate but socially neglected register of somatic experience. Nevertheless, Lye shared the technological optimism of his predecessors, together with their urge to fold the experience of art back into the spaces of everyday life—and it was in this spirit that he produced *Rainbow Dance* (1936), an advertisement for post-office savings accounts that rehearsed a range of possibilities for a somatically unalienated relationship to leisure activity in the world beyond the sedentary confines of the cinema.

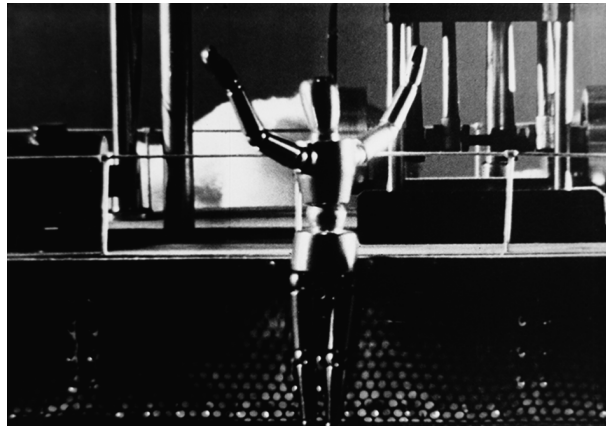
Merging several cinematic idioms and making inventive use of the new Gasparcolor printing process, *Rainbow Dance* was supposed to make the virtues of leaving money in the care of Britain's Post Office Savings Bank abundantly clear. What Lye produced, however, was a heady paean to bodily vitality, as figured by a lone silhouetted figure's jaunty and increasingly rapturous engagements with his worldly surroundings. Loosely chronicling the life and times of a Londoner who leaves the drab confines of the city for a country vacation, where he walks and dances in the hills and then plays tennis with a medley of painted balls that spin and whirl around him, Lye fed a combination of found footage and handmade imagery through the cumbersome three-negative Gasparcolor colorization process. The result is a balletic narrative in which the energies of the natural environment—in the form of ocean waves, rain, and overlaid screens of color—continue to invade and animate the body of his protagonist. In this half-drawn, half-photographic world, the sonorous forces of Creole music and pure, luminous color are repeatedly transposed from the body's exterior to its interior and back again in a free play of counterpointed exchange between the human sensorium and its enveloping milieu. In this dreamworld of unalienated bodily sensation, an emphatically kinesthetic dimension is brought to all modes of leisure activity. So captivating and immediate is Lye's imagery that the stiff voice-over by the film's sponsor during the film's final moments feels like nothing so much as a suffocating recall to the darkly silhouetted realm of featureless streets and houses with which it once more be drained away by the routinized demands of everyday existence.

The Rhythms of Labor and the Social Body

If in his direct films and *Rainbow Dance* Lye sought to recall for his viewers the pleasures and possibilities of a somatically replenished and re-sensitized approach to their leisure activities, he elsewhere broadened the scope of his socio-somatic interests to encompass the times and spaces of labor and the increasingly rationalized rhythms of the entire social body. That the social field at large could be rendered amenable to the needs and desires of an unalienated human body was an assertion that Lye formulated in two steps, the first taken rather shakily in a seven-minute publicity film for Shell Oil, entitled *Birth of the Robot* (1936), and the second more assuredly in *Trade Tattoo* (1937), Lye's major contribution to the

interwar filmic discourse of rhythm, montage, labor, and social life.

Birth of the Robot (1936), a stop-motion puppet film in which Lye presented the discovery and exploitation of oil as the latest and most liberating step in humanity's passage from myth to enlightenment, is a work that is difficult to align with the core values of Lye's empathy-based aesthetic but is significant nevertheless because of the reconciled vision of natural and technological existence it endeavors to put into play. Freely blending imagery from the ancient and modern eras, the film begins with an automobile and its driver touring the Egyptian sands in a car that runs on music beamed from a clockwork space station (symbolizing the solar system) where Venus resides. After the car and its driver succumb to a sudden and mysterious sandstorm in the desert that gradually mutates into a tumbling psychedelic time tunnel, the notes of Venus's music, which rain down from the sky, magically transform into oil droplets that soak into the desert sands. There they contribute to the magical resurrection of both car and driver alike, with the latter reborn as a dancing, hot-stepping robot, whose appearance signals the onset of combustion-driven modernity. During the film's final sequences, a



Lye. *Birth of the Robot*. 1936.

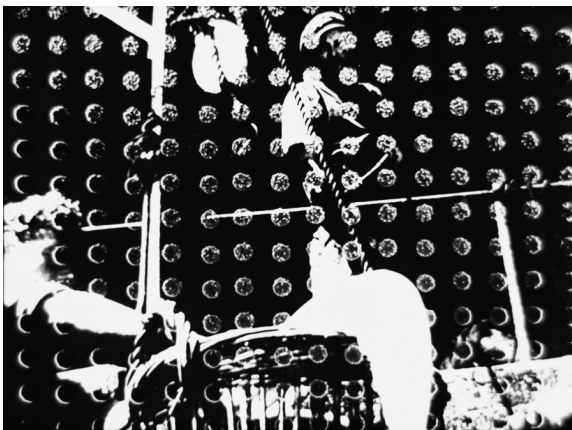
car-driven process of urban and economic expansion begins to overtake the globe, with roads and highways inching their way toward all points on the map. Yet even as this process takes hold, the sun continues to shine, the fields remain green, and the natural environment remains jubilantly intact.

For an artist whose aesthetics were rooted in the human sensorium's mimetic affinity with nature, who would later stress that he derived little "emotional satisfaction from parallels made between human and mechanical principles and processes," *Birth of the Robot* is an odd work. It seems to center on the double fantasy of a robotic apotheosis of the human soma and a utopian conception of a world to come in which the realms of first and second nature will remain in consummate accord.²⁴ While the first fantasy runs counter to the treatment of technology and

the body that prevails elsewhere in Lye's oeuvre and is therefore difficult to align with the remainder of his filmic output, the second is wholly representative of his never-to-be-abandoned aspirations to a dreamworld of total reconciliation between technology and nature. It is this dreamworld that would form the focus of *Trade Tattoo* (1937), Lye's last major GPO commission and a film in which the laboring body takes center stage.

Trade Tattoo was intended to demonstrate the centrality of the mail system to the social and economic welfare of an increasingly rationalized British society at home and across the full reach of its world-spanning trade networks. Lye himself, however, preferred to approach the film as a forum for conveying "a romanticism about the work of the everyday, in all walk/sit works of life."²⁵ Joining an established line of cinematic efforts to figure the dynamism of modern life via the rhythmic agglomerations of montage, Lye's ode to trade and society in *Trade Tattoo* presents a world in which the demands of labor and social rationalization are reconciled with the pleasures of unalienated bodily sensation.

Working with offcuts of existing GPO films and splicing together a handful



Lye. *Trade Tattoo*. 1937.

of upbeat musical sources, Lye subjected every frame of *Trade Tattoo's* imagery to the subtractive coloring processes of the three-strip Technicolor system, which allowed him to introduce thirty-two different color effects to his black-and-white footage. Alternating between entirely hand-painted sequences, luridly tinted passages of found footage, and hybrid moments in which the two are superimposed, the film as a whole comprises a powerful rhythmic aggregate of image, color, and sound, resting as usual on the loose and occasionally divergent approach to synchronization that was Lye's stock-in-trade. Opening with a flurry of color in the form of Lye's familiar fields of stenciled dots, diamonds, and other geometric

24. Lye, "The Art that Moves," p. 85.

25. Lye, cited in Horrocks, *Len Lye: A Biography*, p. 151.

forms, the film soon progresses to a smooth montage of scenes addressing differing facets of British economic life; laboring processes like the smelting and forging of metal, the shipping of goods, and the bustle of markets in far-flung geographic locales dominate proceedings. From the film's midpoint onward, the hand-stenciled intertitles that impose a minimum of narrative structure on Lye's ceaselessly mutating imagery shift from outlining the tasks of trade and industry to stressing the role of the postal system in facilitating trade. Toward the film's end, amid an increasingly far-flung montage of shipping, rail travel, and postal sorting, the viewer is reminded that "the rhythm of trade is maintained by the mails." Moments later, the viewer is exhorted to "keep in rhythm by posting early." Thus, while the film operates most immediately as a vehicle for assimilating the spectator to the routinized requirements of the mail system, at a more expansive level it concerns the role of the laboring body within an entire complex of rationalizing forces over which the British government presides. And this role, as the film suggests, is not one of docile submission; instead, the laboring body's function is to infuse the rigid rhythms of the social structure with the lively, less predictable impulses of the human soma.

Throughout *Trade Tattoo*, Lye constructs sequences in which a more balanced exchange of energies between the domains of the organic and the mechanical prevail. To this end, the blue-collar workers in the film are shown in only lightly industrialized settings, directing the movements of cranes and ropes with ease instead of having the rhythms of automated machinery imposed upon them. And when footage of a mail room appears, Lye focuses not on the sedentary and repetitive desk-bound activities of white-collar work, but instead hones in on the deft and dexterous hand movements of bustling clerks and secretaries.

The film also works to soften and contest the rhythms of automation at an abstract level, for from start to finish, Lye employs the syncopated and unpredictable rhythms of music, montage, and stenciled fields of color to further mitigate the severe and unforgiving routines of rationalized labor. Crucially, however, he never brings these rhythms to a halt, nor does he derail them completely—gestures of restraint in keeping with his energizing but not non-revolutionary aspirations in the field of leisure. In *Trade Tattoo*, Lye was by no means agitating for the inception of entirely new processes of labor and social oversight; instead, he was calling for a much-needed recalibration of the relationship between the abstracting forces of reason and the singular needs and powers of the bodies over which they reign.

Kill or Be Killed

The word "tattoo" has two meanings. In addition to referring to an image on the skin, it can also designate a form of military entertainment in which soldiers march in lockstep formation to a musical accompaniment. While the free and live-

ly rhythms of *Trade Tattoo* exhibit no such discipline, seeming if anything to mock the notion of martial uniformity, when war did come to Europe, Lye proved that he was more than capable of militarizing his practice.

In 1941, after several years of sparse freelance work, Lye began receiving commissions from a second government film agency, the Realist Film Unit, producing informational shorts for the war effort. While required in these soberly paternalistic films to adopt a blandly realist idiom, on one memorable occasion, the riveting *Kill or Be Killed* (1942), about the mutual stalking of a British and a German sniper in woodland surroundings, he was able to put his kinesthetic interests to chillingly effective use. By the standards of Lye's previous output, *Kill or Be Killed* was extremely long. In other respects, however, it marked a return to earlier interests: working to transform the film's straightforward narrative scenario into a tense evocation of the body's role in tactical combat, he found himself deploying the slower rhythms of *Tusalava*, from some fifteen years earlier.

As Roger Horrocks was the first to observe, *Kill or Be Killed* is the only film among Lye's wartime output to firmly incorporate his somatic concerns: it makes inventive use of close-ups and long, gradually unfolding sequences of movement to align the somatic experiences of spectators with those of the film's protagonist, a Scottish sniper patiently tracking and then assassinating his German counter-



Lye. *Kill or Be Killed*. 1942.

part.²⁶ Throughout the film's painstakingly relayed real-time sequences, which Lye himself directed, a variety of isolated audio and visual cues—ranging from a sudden gleam of light reflecting off a hidden pair of binoculars to the sound of hurried footsteps on the forest floor—are used to punctuate the film's incremental narrative flow. Aside from these occasional moments of audiovisual excitement, however, it is the film's unstinting concentration on the nuances of bodily movement, the gradually unfolding figures of motion inscribed by the crawling, sidling bodies of the snipers that imbue it with a slowly mounting sense of drama. Anticipating the first-person shooting techniques of later decades, Lye mounted a camera on the British soldier's waist for an early sequence in the film. Later, as the soldier moves stealthily among the undergrowth, his movements are plunged periodically into darkness, such that tracking his position becomes as much a matter of corporeal guesswork and anticipation as detached observation. The results of this artfully observed encounter are brutal: following his death, the German sniper's body is used as a decoy to attract a nearby patrol, each of whose members are in turn picked off as they move into an open clearing.

If Lye had endeavored to deploy cinema as a life-giving apparatus during the 1930s, transforming the screen image into a vital and enlivening repository of stored somatic energy, he emphatically reversed his priorities in the midst of war, returning not only to the incremental rhythms and gray tones of his first film, *Tusalava*, but also to that film's grisly scenario of life-taking. Having been forced by circumstance to relinquish the formal freedoms of abstraction, Lye was obliged to bring his somatic preoccupations to bear within the context of a purely depictive idiom. In doing so, he was at last able to proffer his deferred response to the events of Venice in 1936, exchanging the joyful energies of color, line, and syncopated rhythm for the altogether sterner regimens of military discipline and control. Not only this, but even as he consented to militarize his practice, Lye offered a second, strictly cinematic rebuke to Fascism, counterposing the sovereign individuality of his triumphant British sniper to the docile ranks of the militarized German masses, the image of whom was writ large in innumerable films and photographs of this period.

Coda: Somaesthetic Cinema

If Lye's early films are usually seen in the context of abstract cinematic paradigms, it should now be evident that he was not the last exemplar of a transcendently directed and idealizing tradition of prewar avant-garde film practice. He was instead that period's most significant exponent of an earthbound and materially inflected form of cinema, one whose rehabilitative bodily concerns would eventually be revived in the postwar period.

When the avant-garde filmmaking tradition resumed on the American West Coast in the 1950s, it initially owed much to the visual-music paradigm of the pre-

26. Horrocks, *Len Lye: A Biography*, p. 199.

war period. In the 1960s and 70s, however, the body once again became the object of a host of new moving-image practices. Employing many different formats and technologies, these ranged from the nonobjective extremes of psychedelic light shows, flicker films, and three-dimensional projections to the arch-realistic enterprises of Warholian ennui and real-time video surveillance. Though many of these practices aspired to a much less reassuring mode of bodily address than Lye sought to foster in his own work, all evinced a Lye-like urge to protect the body and its sovereign capabilities from the encroachments of socially prevalent forms of corporeal discipline and control.²⁷ Indeed, it is this protective impulse that unites such diverse phenomena as the sensory assaults of the flicker film (as shown in the work of Tony Conrad and Paul Sharits), the soothing exchange of energies between human bodies and slowly shifting beams of light (as shown in the solid-light films of Anthony McCall), and the use of video surveillance to critically restructure viewers' relationships to their own body images (as shown in the work of Bruce Nauman).²⁸

Like Lye, many of these postwar practitioners adopted an expanded and increasingly transmedial cinematic outlook, while others moved beyond the confines of film entirely. Here too, Lye remains an important precursor, for such developments were entirely in keeping with his work as a direct filmmaker where considerations of medium- and apparatus-specificity remained secondary to a reception-centered interest in somatic rejuvenation. It is for this reason that Lye's approach to kinetic sculpture in the postwar period could proceed on much the same basis as his filmmaking activities, remaining rooted in the phenomenon of bodily empathy in spite of his transition from celluloid to steel. Thus, in works ranging from his softly swaying *Fountain* (1963–76) to his violently shuddering *Blade* (1976), the transmission of somatic energy from artwork to spectator remained uppermost in Lye's mind. His ultimate allegiance was to figures of motion and their impact on the human body, *not* to cinema or sculpture per se.

27. Several publications by Branden Joseph address this phenomenon. See, in particular, his *Beyond the Dream Syndicate: Tony Conrad and the Arts after Cage* (New York: Zone Books, 2008).

28. I consider McCall's contribution to the postwar tradition of somaesthetic cinema in my "Anthony McCall and the Somaesthetics of Solid Light," in *Anthony McCall: Drawing with Light* (Wellington, N.Z.: Adam Art Gallery, 2010). See: <http://www.adamartgallery.org.nz/admin/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/lukesmytheessay2.pdf> (accessed October 24, 2010).