

Animated 'Worlds'

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35. Gilles Deleuze, *Fourcaille* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000): 96–97.
36. Though the characters of Tuckett and the Quays' *The Sardinian* are not identified in the credits by name, I call the film's automaton character Olympia after the Hoffmann character on which she is obviously based.
37. Quoted in Giannalberto Bendazzi, *Cartoons: One Hundred Years of Cinema Animation* (London: John Libbey, 1994): 35.
38. Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (5th edn.) (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1998): 206, 209.
39. Connor, Steve, 'The Shakes: Conditions of Tremor', Available from: <http://www.bbk.ac.uk/eh/eng/skc/shakes/> Accessed 24 October 2004.

Chapter 5

Literary Len: Trade Tattoo and Len Lye's link with the Literary Avant-Garde

Miriam Harris

Len Lye's interests and creative output are an embodiment of the multifarious disciplines that may inspire the independent animator working within the fine arts realm. Sculpture, dance, jazz, tribal rhythms, Oceanic and African art, and modernist painting all played a vital role in Lye's ebullient animations. The media theorist Söke Dinkla has pointed out that certain literary innovations, such as the writings of James Joyce, have shaped narrative structures within contemporary digital interactive media.¹ Similarly, Lye's close connection with avant-garde literature – as a writer, admirer of the work of James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, and Arthur Rimbaud, and as a close friend of Laura Riding and Robert Graves – manifests itself within his animation, and is particularly evident in his film *Trade Tattoo* (1937).

At the end of 1926, after eight turbulent weeks crossing the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans, the New Zealand artist Len Lye disembarked in London. His joyful, off-beat personality, uniquely egg-shaped bald pate and the striking originality of his work quickly endeared him to a lively community

Abstract: This essay explores the multidisciplinary world of Len Lye's animated film *Trade Tattoo*, which was created in 1937 from rejected documentary takes from the General Post Office Film Unit in Great Britain, and merged with stencil patterns, direct animation and Cuban dance music. The essay begins by foregrounding the permeable boundaries between avant-garde literature and the visual arts in the 1920s and 30s, as outlined by modernist poetry theorist Charles Altieri, and goes on to examine the influence of writers such as Laura Riding, Robert Graves, Gertrude Stein, and James Joyce upon Len Lye's writing. Having established the unique characteristics of Lye's aesthetic and symbolic literary innovations, the essay closely examines these elements in relation to *Trade Tattoo*.

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of artists and writers in Hammersmith who were in thrall to the creative possibilities of Modernism. Lye's passage from Sydney to London had been paid by stoking the ship's furnaces, and the motifs of journeying, motion, and manual labour repeatedly reverberate ten years later in his 1937 film *Trade Tattoo*.

Trade Tattoo is a multidisciplinary explosion of ideas and approaches created from rejected documentary takes from the General Post Office Film Unit and merged with stencil patterns, direct animation and Cuban dance music. From a technical perspective, it is a virtuoso mastery of colour film printing processes, but the most resounding innovations reside in the relationship between text and images. Constantly animated, in a perpetual state of flux, Lye's words and visuals, together with their rhythmic structure, can be traced to an avant-garde interest in disciplinary permeability and a departure from realism. His text and images endow the film with a poetic cohesiveness, allowing for the emergence of rich symbolic allusions, that would otherwise be stymied by a conservative approach to narrative.

This essay explores the poetic structure of *Trade Tattoo*, and its relationship with modernist poetry and painting of the 1920s and 1930s, and with Lye's own writing. Music is another vital strand in Lye's animated film, and cannot be ignored. Music, words, and pictures all contribute to Lye's overriding concern with rhythm, movement, and an exhilarating bodily energy. It is impossible to discuss his treatment of words and form without considering their relationship to sound and movement, and this was a concern shared by modernist writers. Text and image are intertwined in *Trade Tattoo* in a manner that differs from Lye's previous animations, and it is the implications of this dynamic coupling that I wish to focus upon.

In Lye's earlier animated films, such as *A Colour Box* (1935), *Kaleidoscope* (1935), and *Rainbow Dance* (1936), text introduces the film and then makes a surprise reappearance at the end in the form of a commercial advertisement. While Lye integrates the text stylistically with the preceding visuals and exhibits a textual playfulness that echoes modernist concerns, these segments can still be perceived as a comical, incongruous addition. Lye seems to wink at us, laughingly acknowledging the forces that made the film financially viable, with this leap into the prosaic. In *Trade Tattoo* however, image and text dance, chase each other, and attain sublime levels for the entire duration of the film. The rhythm is informed not only by the music, but also the movement of textual and imagistic passages, which may be compared to the structure of Lye's own poetry (Fig. 1).

It is useful to refer to the writings of the modernist poetry theorist Charles Altieri, in which he explores the work of poets such as Gertrude Stein and Ezra Pound, and their incorporation of the groundbreaking innovations of Paul Cézanne and Pablo Picasso. Altieri analyses Stein's writing, such as



Fig. 1. Len Lye at Work. [Courtesy of the Len Lye Foundation.]

Portrait of Picasso', from a Cubist perspective, in which she translates into literature Cubism's attention to multiple spatial planes.² Through slight shifts in the structure of sentences, Stein created multifaceted modes of meaning:

One who some were certainly following was one who was completely charming. One whom some were certainly following was one who was charming. One whom some were following was one who was completely charming. One whom some were following was one who was certainly completely charming.³

Such an approach was a radical departure from literature's previous efforts to differentiate itself from the visual arts. As the text and image theoretician, W.J.T. Mitchell, observes in connection to these earlier attitudes:

Painting sees itself as uniquely fitted for the representation of the visible world, whereas poetry is primarily concerned with the invisible realm of ideas and feelings. Poetry is an art of time, motion, and action; painting an art of space, stasis, and arrested action.⁴

Altieri's analyses foreground the osmotic relationship between the visual arts and literature during the early heady days of modernism. The earlier attitudes toward painting and poetry, as outlined by Mitchell, were regarded as suspect by avant-garde circles enraged by Victorian hypocrisy, and the inadequacies of the ideals of Romanticism and the Enlightenment amidst the carnage of war. Altieri writes that the modernist poets 'sought alternative models of agency in the study of literary history, in the new ways of looking at the psyche being developed in their own time, and in the countercultural gestures elaborated by the visual arts'.⁵ The visual arts had

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been moving away from 'mimetic values' and avant-garde literature followed suit.

This interflowing of ideas between the visual and literary arts is reflected in both Len Lye's life and his work. Isolated in New Zealand from the creative ferment and galleries of Europe, he latched on to the potentialities of Modernism through a book by Ezra Pound, about a young sculptor killed during the First World War. The book was named after the artist, *Gaudier-Brzeska*, and contained his manifesto attacking the Western art tradition, proffering in its stead a celebration of cave art and the tribal arts of Africa and the Pacific. Len Lye had already begun to venture into this alternative territory, finding the Maori and Pacific carvings in the Canterbury museum in Christchurch an irresistible lure. Lye valued their close link with kinetic sensation and the unconscious, or what he termed the 'Old Brain', as a refreshing contrast to Western rationalism.⁶

The composition of Len Lye's social milieu in Hammersmith also reflects the intermingling of visual artists and writers, together with the subversion of social conventions that Altieri has outlined. Lye became a member of the 'Seven and Five Society', a hotbed of Modernist visual innovation, which included the painter Ben Nicholson and the sculptors Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth. Amongst Lye's closest friends were the writers Laura Riding, Robert Graves, and Norman Cameron. Riding had been involved in the United States with an influential modernist group known as the 'Fugitives' – one of her published poems caught the eye of Robert Graves, who invited her to visit. Riding wound up living with Graves as his lover, while his wife Nancy Nicholson (the sister of Ben Nicholson) lived in a barge on the Thames with their children. The arrangement was regarded as a 'trinity', and for a time at least, was successful.⁷ It certainly illustrates the questioning of conventions that was a strong feature of the circle.

Graves and Riding were pivotal figures of the London Modernist scene, their flat in St Peter's Square a lively magnet for writers and artists, and their ideas an alternative to those of the Bloomsbury set. Robert Graves had been deeply traumatised by his experience of trench warfare from 1914–16, and was searching for alternatives to the Western society that had fostered such a catastrophe. He read Freud, and researched into myth and early civilisations. Lye's passion for tribal or 'Old Brain' art ignited Graves' interest and prompted a close connection; in 1978 Lye reminisced that Graves had told him 'we're the only two myth men I know'.⁸

Lye's writer friends introduced him to a new world of literature. In an interview with WYSTAN CURNOW, Lye described the jolt he received upon reading Norman Cameron's translation of Rimbaud's poetry: 'I woke up'.⁹ The writing was profoundly visual and sensuous, and 'each word was as if it was cut out of marble. Not cut out, incised.'¹⁰ Lye had initially thought

poetry 'was a lot of romanticised junk. I'd got this feeling as a kid, coming across Ella Wheeler Wilcox, and that level of maudlin stuff'.¹¹ It was only when he met Graves and Riding that his interest in poetry was sparked as there were these two sensible people immersed in poetry.¹² Riding introduced Lye to further writers, and recognising talent in Lye's own writing, she encouraged his literary output. Her literary experience was considerable – in 1927 Riding and Graves co-authored a book, *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*, which had a huge impact on the way poetry was written and read. Her literary taste extended to the works of Gertrude Stein and James Joyce rather than Virginia Woolf and T.S. Eliot. Riding had a close association with Gertrude Stein, and Lye designed a frontispiece for one of Stein's works; Stein in turn admired the freshness of Lye's writing. In Riding's own poetry, she shared Stein's and Joyce's concern with alternatives to a description of linear time. She wrote that poetry 'must make the present period not so much the next one of a series as a resume of periods'.¹³

Altieri writes of the Modernist quest to develop new modes of thinking; boundaries between artists and writers were consequently lowered and revolutionary ideas shared around. Laura Riding and Gertrude Stein, for example, both sought textual equivalents to Cubism's evocation of simultaneous realities. In Lye's case, the concept driving the work was also the essential ingredient – issues such as energy, temporality, and tapping into the 'Old Brain' remained predominant concerns, whether he was using painting, sculpture, filmmaking, or writing as a vehicle for their expression.

Before embarking upon a close analysis of *Trade Tattoo*, it would be helpful to consider Lye's concerns as a writer, so that his approach to using animated text might be further illuminated. Over the next few paragraphs, comparisons will be made with the innovations of peers who influenced Lye. Since Lye was a unique spirit, chartering new territory in a largely unexplored realm, qualities that are intrinsically his own will also be foregrounded. These features will then be explored in relation to the merger of text and image in *Trade Tattoo*, and the impact of this aesthetic union upon the structure of the film.

One of Lye's dominant creative concerns was the embodiment of a kinetic energy, suffused with a 'heart quality of resonance – as distinct from your bloody skull resonance'.¹⁴ In painting and sculpture, the technique of doodling provided an access route into the 'Old Brain'; Lye wrote that 'I doodled to assuage my hunger for some hypnotic image I'd never seen before'.¹⁵ His sketchbooks, held in archives at the Len Lye Foundation in New Plymouth, New Zealand, are filled with pulsating lines and symbols, sometimes transforming into shapes that resemble wobbly amoebas, stars, or an exotic alphabet. Similarly, in writing, Lye valued a doodling style that bypassed rational logic and collapsed conventions of punctuation and

grammar. The following segment appears in the book *No Trouble*, a compilation of Lye's letters to friends and family that was edited by Laura Riding in 1930, and published by Graves' and Riding's Seizin Press. The lack of punctuation hastens the stream of consciousness flow, from which markers intermittently appear that the reader might start to shape into images and narratives. This excerpt comes from a letter addressed to Ben Nicholson:

Only just the weather now A? Outside in the sun buy a yacht and go for a swim around the world easy jazz all sunburnt to working in the shade to mean nothing to do the most kind of work in the world this is the most important world to me so after nothing follows important work.¹⁶

This passage transports the reader in a fashion that is freewheeling, and it constantly takes one by surprise. Stylistically, there are echoes in Lye's letter of the subconscious meanderings and rapid changes in register that permeate Joyce's prose. Lye enthusiastically described James Joyce's language in *Finnegans Wake* as being 'beautifully intactly lifted right from spontaneous mind-level first thought'.¹⁷ *Finnegans Wake* was published in 1939, two years after *Trade Tattoo*'s completion, but instalments appeared prior to publication in *Transition*, a Parisian avant-garde magazine with which Laura Riding was closely connected. In this excerpt from Joyce's *Ulysses*, the flow of consciousness parallels Lye's unfettered prose: 'Two sheets cream vellum paper on reserve two envelopes when I was in Wisdom Hely's wise Bloom in Daly's Henry Flower bought'.¹⁸

Lye and Joyce both discard traditional devices of punctuation, and grammatical subversions and ambiguities draw attention to words as images and sounds, and as slippery agents of meaning. This self-reflexivity and assertion of the visual in the textual was an aspect of modernist literary experimentation, and a result of a closer relationship with developments in the visual arts. In the excerpt from his letter, Lye playfully transforms the colloquial expression 'eh' into both a letter ('A') and an image, a polymorphous representation evinced also in the work of e.e. cummings, Guillaume Apollinaire, the concrete poets, and the painter Joan Miro.

One can draw parallels between Joyce and Lye's subversion of grammatical conventions and the exuberant suspension of traditional modes of editing in *Trade Tattoo*. Links between the two artists' approaches were also made by reviewers in the 1930s; a review of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* in the Glasgow Herald lamented the writing's lack of clarity and that 'one has to submit to Mr Joyce's flow of words as one submits to Len Lye's films of abstract motion, to Shelley's play with celestial images, and to counterpoint in Bach'.¹⁹ Lye was disinterested in conventional literary narratives, and *Trade Tattoo* combines a wild melange of approaches, ranging from rapid jump cuts to motifs that creep along at a snail's pace. In an essay entitled 'Film-Making' that he co-wrote with Riding in 1935, Lye proclaimed that:

The language of the cinema is movement. When it attempts to make of movement a literary language the result is a physical-intellectual caricature-language which furnishes stories of life as something half-true, half-ridiculous (the result of such films as *Henry VIII*, *Catherine the Great*, *Christina of Sweden*).²⁰

In his drive to privilege movement over a linear literary narrative, Lye created startling twists and changes in register. Meaning is established in *Trade Tattoo* through the juxtaposition of colours, lines, forms, and sounds, and the speed at which elements travel or the length of their duration on the screen. Here comparisons can again be made with Joyce and Stein. Through the use of juxtaposition, puns, onomatopoeia and the repetition of words, Stein drew attention to language's formal features, rhythm, and unconscious associations. Meaning is generated through neighbouring words and the context of elements, rather than narrative description. For instance, in the collection *Tender Buttons*, under the heading 'Eating', Stein enlists repetition, alliteration, and truncation to suggest masticating jaws and chopped up food:

Eel us eel us with no pea no pea cool, no pea cool cooler, no pea cooler with a land a land cost in, with a land cost in stretches.

Eating he heat eating he heat it eating, he heat it heat eating. He heat eating.²¹

In a prose piece called 'Grass Clippings', Lye employed evocative words, rich in their sensory response to the writers that he admired. He described Gertrude Stein's writing as 'an oak word bank scrubbed clean and strata built pure Bach fugue stitched with buttons sewn in a big Dutch of a room full of daylight'.²² In the last line of Lye's prose poem 'Chair in Your Hair', he playfully reshapes the infamous segment from Gertrude Stein's poem 'Sacred Emily': 'Rose is a rose is a rose'. The whole poem adopts the rhythm of a nursery rhyme – Lye's writing, like Stein's, often uses rhythm and aural devices to extend the range of associations – and he refers to the father of modernist painting, Cézanne, with the affectionate colloquial 'poppa'.

Painting painting where is thy mind sting: there there under the chair: not under the chair says poppa Cézanne in the legs of the chair says poppa Cézanne: that old chair? Chair in your hair Cézanne Cézanne. A chair in the mind is worth none in the bush. A chair is a chair so leave it there.²³

There is a spirited irreverence at work here, yet also a well-intentioned homage to Cézanne's painting and his interest in subjective and objective reality. The chair is a constant motif that travels throughout the piece, taking on different incarnations depending on the context within which it is placed. Such a device can be compared to collage's interest in the multifaceted nature of signs, where elements denote different readings depending upon their representation and context. Braque, Picasso, and the Dadaists used collage to play with this semiotic flexibility, so that a torn

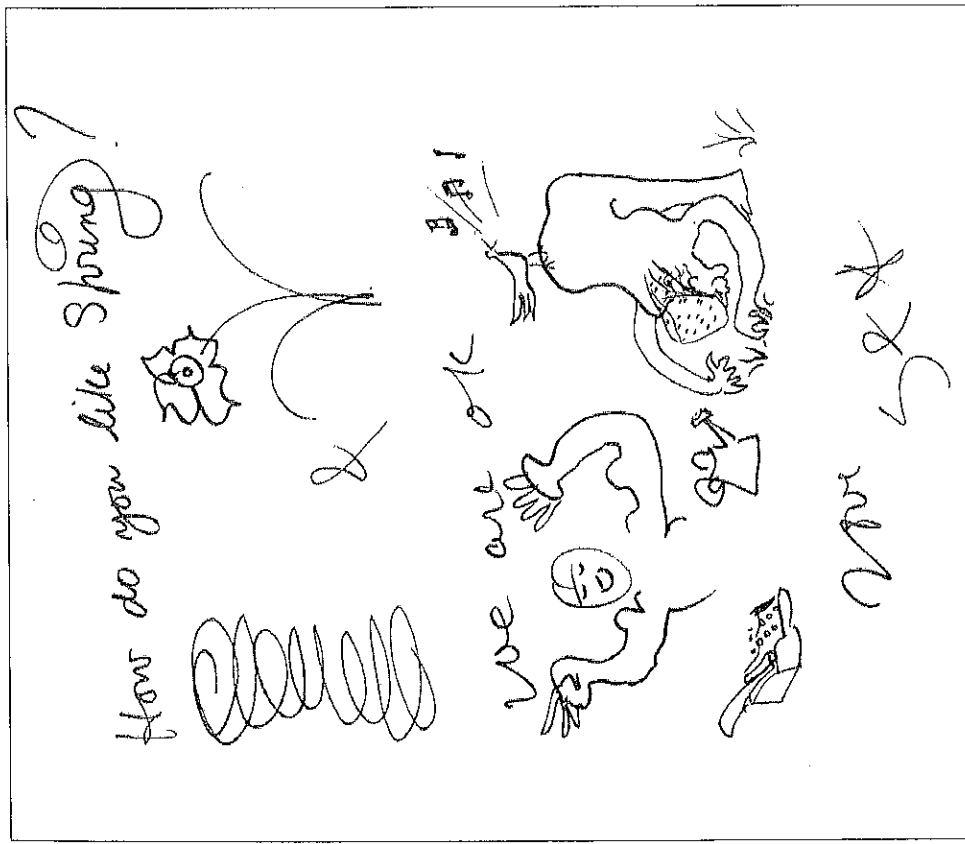


Fig. 2: Lye's Letter to Yancy. [Courtesy of the Len Lye Foundation.]

fragment with letters also stood in for a newspaper, or five lines denoted a guitar.

Trade Tattoo is awash in a variety of signs and signifiers that gleefully don different guises, avoiding categorisation. In the course of the film, written signs are also images, kinetic beats, sounds, associative streams of consciousness. Just as Joyce and Stein demonstrated that words lacked the powers of specificity with which they had been previously endowed by the tradition of narrative literature, Lye exposes their chameleon-like propensities. This fascination with the malleable nature of signs is keenly expressed in a later letter to his daughter Yancy.²⁴ Exemplifying Lye's visual/verbal

doodling proclivities, an assortment of signs represent 'spring'. There are written letters, the textual signifier for 'spring'. Below these markings one sees a rapid tangle of loops that suggest the wire bouncy object rather than the season – both signs share the same written and aural signifier. Adjacent to this swirling line is a linear daffodil, a true motif for spring (Fig. 2).

In concluding this brief appraisal of Len Lye's writing concerns, I am struck by the extent to which Lye's texts already embrace the imagistic, aural, and kinetic realms. *Trade Tattoo* embodies such plurality; it can be interpreted as a sermionic soup, a site in which disciplinary boundaries have been lowered and the visual and textual readily leak into each other. The combination of paintings, stencils, live footage, and Cuban dance music on a stretch of vibrantly edited celluloid film is a natural extension of Lye's textual innovations. Söke Dinkla has written that one of interactive digital media's unique abilities is the unfolding of multiple simultaneous narratives; if Joyce was working today, the medium would offer a superb articulation of his interests. The multisensory nature of animation is likewise an ideal medium for Len Lye.

Intrinsic to animation's properties as a medium is its ability to evoke a gamut of signs. Animation enables Lye to enlist the senses of sight and sound, and even tactility is suggested with the rapid changes from photography to drawings to cut-out shapes which stress the materiality of their composition. A vast spectrum of modes of denotation can be employed through animation; drawing, painting, collage, typography, and photography can adopt a naturalistic style of representation or veer towards the abstract. Words can be read, but also viewed as images. Similarly, because animation is not a static medium, images are imbued with temporal powers that allow them to not only be seen, but also read according to their movement and placement within a sequence, and their relationship with sound.

The remainder of this essay will discuss the implications of the mutability of signs in *Trade Tattoo*, and will make comparisons with the visual/textual fluidity in Len Lye's writing. Elements in the film will be explored in chronological order, despite Lye's challenging of naturalistic narrative conventions. Superficially, the momentum of *Trade Tattoo* is steered by a conventional narrative, in which words and images create an industrious picture of Britain at work, thanks to the indispensable presence of the postal service. Biographer and Len Lye authority Roger Horrocks believes that Lye was given the script by the General Post Office: 'The rhythm of work-a-day Britain / The furnaces are fired / Cargoes are loaded / Markets are found / By the power of correspondence / The rhythm of trade is maintained by the mails / Keep in rhythm by posting early / You must post early to keep in rhythm / Before 2 p.m.'²⁵

Trade Tattoo commences with a title, opening credits and the pulsating

rhythms of the Cuban Lecuona band. The viewer is subsequently taken on a journey that echoes the chronology of the script, in which words, drawing, painting, and cut-outs are interspersed with processed live footage of welders, ship loaders, and mail sorters. Lye wrote in a letter that he wanted to express 'a romanticism about the work of the everyday', and the film translates mundane, repetitive activities into stretches of vibrant kineticism.²⁶ In the opening sequence, for instance, a mood of vitality is introduced with a series of rapid shifts and explosions of colour, pulsing stencil patterns and darting dots that move in tandem with the music, but also twitch and bounce, due to some striking jump cuts. A graphic of a piece of film enters from the sidelines and is subject to the same kind of spasmodic motion. Just as the writing of Lye, Joyce and Stein exposes the physicality of language through the subversion of grammar and the use of repetition, the sprocket edges of the film graphic expose the material basis of what we otherwise perceive as animated forms.

The title 'Trade Tattoo by Len Lye' jumps and abruptly jerks as if it had got caught in a film projector. In contrast to the German experimental animators Hans Richter and Oskar Fischinger, who strove for a seamless animation of abstract forms, Lye delighted in the energetic jitter that arose as a consequence of each frame being manually painted, scratched, or stencilled. This feature can again be compared to the willingness of Lye and other modernist writers to revel in the intrinsic properties of their chosen medium, rather than create a smooth veneer governed by naturalistic representation.

The issue of textual and visual interchangeability is established early on in *Trade Tattoo*. Words take on the properties of images due to variations in size, font, and colour. Letters and their backgrounds change their chromatic and proportional dimensions with the same rapidity as the abstract patterns whizzing behind them. In his writing, Lye draws attention to words as images and sounds by abandoning traditional grammar and punctuation, and a similar effect is achieved in the film by feeding us the sentence 'the rhythm of work-a-day Britain' in increments, so that meaning is postponed and our attention is focused upon aspects such as shape and colour. The words gracefully swerve and pulsate in response to the percussive rhythm of the dance music, which imbues them with a kinetic energy that further enhances the connotations of the words 'rhythm of work-a-day Britain'.

A dynamic coupling between image and text occurs in the next sentence that appears: 'the furnaces are fired'. Flickering lines, painted at great speed, suggest flames but also become fiery text. This is also reminiscent of Lye's paintings and later animations such as *Free Radicals*, in which he reaches into what he called his 'Old Brain' or primordial collective consciousness, and relinquishes himself to the lines and shapes that emerge. There are lines

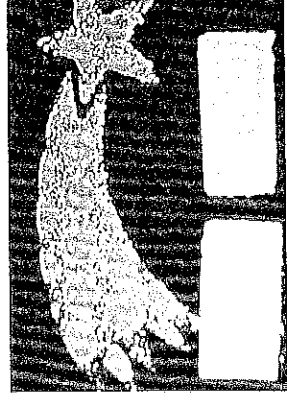
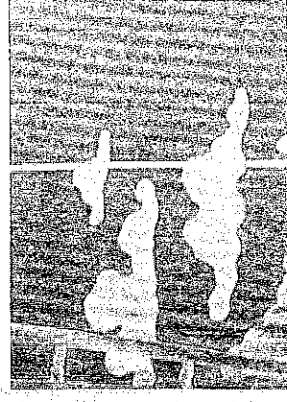
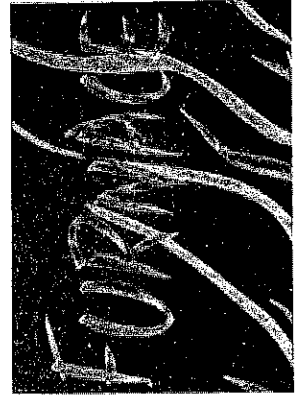
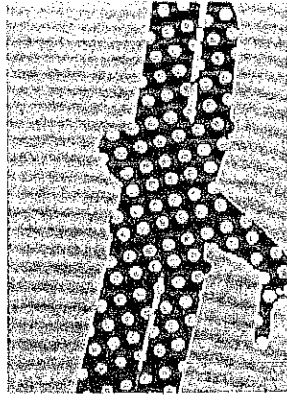
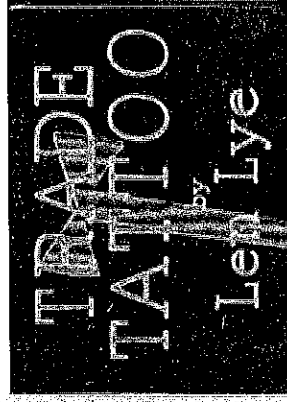


Fig. 3: Trade Tattoo images. [Courtesy of the Len Lye Foundation.]

that teeter on the edge of bursting into the symbolic with the suggestion of letters, and lines forming vibrant motifs that seem intent on communication, but to which we need to respond intuitively as we lack the conventional decoders. This alternation between the semiotic and the symbolic, and abstraction and representation echoes the fluid moment between image and text. Subsequent to the sentence 'the furnaces are fired', Lye introduces processed documentary footage of searingly hot furnaces and welders producing sparks. However, these images of 'reality' are intertwined with abstraction because they are processed with a technique that creates vivid, surreal colorations. The grids of diamonds, dots, and lozenge shapes that whirl over the documentary footage therefore bear a resemblance to the photographic imagery in terms of colour and form (Fig. 3).

An important issue is raised here concerning signs and the immense consequence of context in conveying meaning. Gertrude Stein demonstrated how meaning shifts through the rearrangement of sentence structures, and Lye's chair in 'Chair in Your Hair' absorbs different qualities according to its neighbouring elements. Similarly, in *Trade Tattoo*, abstract symbols acquire further resonance through their juxtaposition with other motifs. For instance, the dancing circles, dots and rectangles, that can be initially read as purely abstract pattern, develop different associations in the course of the film due to their formal similarities with adjacent motifs. When juxtaposed with photographic images of clock faces, circles turn into timepieces. Diagonal lines are intercut with footage of ropes lowering cargo onto a ship, and thereby acquire a new reading. Rectangles and lozenge shapes transmute into the sprocket holes of a film strip, and later a swarm of painted envelopes heading towards their destination.

This method of juxtaposition can be related to Sergei Eisenstein's montage technique, but there is also a significant difference. Eisenstein's use of interrelationships, for example in the classic 'Odessa Steps' sequence in *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), employs purely live footage, and formal and rhythmic juxtapositions serve to add deeper resonance to the narrative's momentum, rather than expose the materiality of the medium of film. Lye's metamorphosing forms reflect movement and the multifaceted nature of visual and textual communication. Lye emphasises semiotic flexibility; disciplinary boundaries are lowered and there is a promotion of fluid travel between all the signifying camps. This strategy lends weight to an overarching theme that permeates the film – a relishing of self-reflexivity, movement, and communication.

Both Eisenstein and Len Lye published their theories about filmmaking, and it is intriguing to absorb Lye's ideas about linking colour, speech, text and sound. His interest in poetry led to the film *Full Fathom Five* (1935) which has unfortunately been lost, in which John Gielgud's voice, eloquently reading from Shakespeare's 'The Tempest', is accompanied by 'a pouring out of image and association which leaves a feeling of magic, an underlit, underwater quality, which the verse has ...'.²⁷ Lye's interest in the interchangeability of signs, where a word can also be a number, is clearly apparent in this description of *Full Fathom Five* by Robert Herring: 'It is not true to say that it is an illustration of Shakespeare – unless you are willing to concede that a figure five floating across the screen is an illustration of the opening line ...'.²⁸ The original approaches required for the interaction of a variety of media compelled Lye to articulate his theories in an essay written the following year, 'Voice and Colour'. This essay is a profound testimony to Lye's concern with the associative layers of signs, and lays the groundwork for *Trade Tattoo* in 1937. An excerpt illustrates these issues: 'If

simple colour variations followed the grammatical pattern of speech, they could help the descriptive or significant sense of the words. Nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc, even punctuation, each could have their pictorial treatment'.²⁹

In returning to an analysis of *Trade Tattoo*, in accordance with its sequential order, one observes a continued exploration of the many-sided nature of signs. The live footage of fiery furnaces is followed by a series of documentary clips featuring ship workers. A representation of a ship that is stylistically unexpected – cartoon-like ropes gliding past goofy cut-out clouds – is inserted at this point, and enlarges the semiotic repertoire.³⁰ The sentence 'Cargoes are loaded' appears in typewritten capitals, one word at a time. The typewriter font adds further weight to the developing theme of postal correspondence, and this notion of travel is supported by the subsequent footage of ships being loaded, and the panning motion of the camera.

Typewritten capitals also convey the next sentence, 'Markets are found'. The words appear jerkily and 'markets' is repeated several times, in the fashion of Joyce and Stein. Rapidly cut, chromatically varied footage of mail sorters is then interspersed with images of a darting painted envelope, and the hand-drawn words 'By the power of correspondence'. 'Correspondence' is playfully fed to the viewer in hyphenated portions, 'Correspondence', enticing the viewer to employ both reading and looking, in the act of piecing together each visual fragment. Typewritten words, illegible, but denoting written communication, swoop in from the sidelines and circle over footage of exotic locations. This sequence accentuates how animation enables Lye to evoke an extraordinarily rich range of associations. Whereas Joyce and Stein are confined to black typeset words on a white page, Lye enlists colour, typography, drawing, painting, movement, and sound to explore the materiality of communication and motion.

The next passage also epitomises the richness of Lye's semiotic approach. The music becomes resoundingly percussive, and the editing features rapid cutting between a variety of aesthetic modes; the omnipresent grids of whirring stencil patterns are cut with footage of transportation. Railway tracks are echoed by diagonal rectangles, while white rectangles suggesting envelopes find their live footage equivalent in the lights of a train shooting through the night. The typewritten words, 'The rhythm of trade is maintained by the mails', are repeated three times. Just as the rhythm of Stein's words in her poem 'Eating' reflects the concept of chewing, Lye's use of repetition literally reinforces the words 'The rhythm of trade'.

Lye's semiotic soup becomes brimful in the last segment of *Trade Tattoo* with an outpouring of signs denoting temporality and rhythm. These motifs range from the photographically realistic to cartoon-like representations and abstract mark-making. Footage of real clocks, cartoon

sketches of frantic pendulums, marks in a circle representing minutes, ticking drawn clock hands, stencils of envelopes and patterns darting to and fro, all denote time. Their exuberant spontaneity and individuality however stress the importance and the freshness of the present moment, and the editing, which incorporates jump cuts together with longer stretches, further demands our immediate attention, and emphasises that time is a sequence of vital, sensory moments. At the film's conclusion, Lye focuses on a real envelope surrounded by black space, with curvilinear handwriting that announces 'The End'. It too, like all of the text and images in *Trade Tattoo*, is susceptible to transmutation, and it is transformed into a rectangular shape as it recedes into limitless space.

In an interview with Ray Thorburn that appeared in 'Art International' in 1974, Len Lye reminisced that in the 1930s, 'somebody once said that *Trade Tattoo* in one hundred years would look as fresh and frisky as anything going on then and that was nice'.³¹ It is now seventy years since *Trade Tattoo* was created, and it still looks and feels startlingly vivid and fresh. Few films can surpass it for aesthetic and conceptual richness. It represents the culmination of Len Lye's exploration of modernist writing in the 1920s and 1930s, and manifests his dexterity in intertwining images and text.

Notes

1. Soke Dinkla, 'The Art of Narrative – Towards the Floating Work of Art', Martin Reiser & Andrea Zapp, eds. *New Screen Media, Cinema/Art/Narrative* (London: British Film Institute, 2002): 27–41.
2. Charles Alinari, *Painterly-Abstraction in Modernist-American Poetry: The Contemporaneity of Modernism* (Cambridge: University Press, 1989): 240–248.
3. *Ibid.*: 241.
4. W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987): 48.
5. Altieri, 1989: 4.
6. Wýstan Curnow, 'An Interview with Len Lye' in *Art New Zealand*, vol. 17, 1980: 61.
7. Deborah Baker, *In Extrinsic: The Life of Laura Riding* (London: Hamish Hamilton Ltd, 1993): 154.
8. Wýstan Curnow, 1980: 60.
9. *Ibid.*: 61.
10. *Ibid.*: 61.
11. *Ibid.*: 61.
12. *Ibid.*: 61.
13. Baker: 183.
14. Wýstan Curnow, 1980: 61.
15. Roger Horrocks, *Len Lye* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2000): 91.
16. Wýstan Curnow and Roger Horrocks, *Figures of Motion: Len Lye. Selected Writings* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1984): 99.

17. Roger Horrocks, 'My Word My World', *Landfall* 205 (Otago: University of Otago Press, 2003): 181.
18. James Joyce, *Ulysses* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961): 263.
19. 'Reflections from Mr Joyce's Distorting Mirrors', *The Glasgow Herald* (4 May 1939), held in the Len Lye Archive, New Plymouth, New Zealand.
20. Curnow and Horrocks, 1984: 40.
21. Gertrude Stein, *Look at Me Now and Here I Am* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984): 193.
22. Roger Horrocks, 'My Word My World', *Landfall* 205 (Otago: University of Otago Press, 2003): 181.
23. Curnow and Horrocks, 1984: 114.
24. This image appears courtesy of Roger Horrocks and the Len Lye Foundation.
25. Roger Horrocks, *Len Lye* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2000): 151.
26. *Ibid.*: 151.
27. *Ibid.*: 135.
28. *Ibid.*: 135.
29. Curnow and Horrocks: 43.
30. I wish to acknowledge Roger Horrocks for this observation, in a conversation with the author, April 2003.
31. Ray Thorburn Interviews Len Lye, *Art International*, (Vol. XIX April, 1975): 66.

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