

Perspectives on
British Avant-Garde
Film
Hayward Gallery

Arts Council
of Great Britain



SHEEPMAN AND THE SHEARED

-Mike Leggett, 1970 - 76

-A film in seven parts for continuous single screen projection with a running time of two hours and fifteen minutes. The order of each part's showing is approximately chronological though each of its parts may be seen separately and in a varying order.

The intention of the project emerges from both personal concerns in filmwork evident in earlier films (SHEPHERD'S BUSH and TENDER KISSES) and the larger context of independent film-making activity in Europe in general and England in particular. The filmwork--practical, theoretical, and critical--which has centred on the London Film-makers' Co-op during the last ten years has formed the mainstay of the context for my own pursuit and researches. This, broadly speaking, has been motivated by a critique of dominant film as manifest in the cinema and on television. Thus this film concentrates on an attempt to interrogate the medium and its various tools and machines (differently in each part though with some overlapping) and more particularly its handling of that interrogation by the film-maker: decision making as evidence, as intent.

SHEEPMAN AND THE SHEARED takes Landscape as Object in front of the film-maker and the medium; it is not about rural life or the mythology of The Land, neither does it seek to present a personalised impression, visual or otherwise of the state of residing in a rural district of the South-west of England. The coincidence of flora, fauna, and human-made object, processes and activities, within the film is in no way paramount to an inspection of the total process by which an observation of this kind is made possible--specific conditions to do with both Nature (phenomena of the material world) and human activity with it are recorded but such that the relationship is essentially one of coincidence; pre-determined approach guides (for instance) the camera's function, though its operation at the time of shooting is subject to the observation and reaction of its operator (refer to Part 3). The subsequent control of assembly and printing processes is also important; besides being able to make projection prints, more important are its particular functions evident in the duplication and controlled superimposition of material (refer to Parts 3 & 6).

The film demands of an audience not the identificatory and passive outlook, but the reflexive response intent upon the clarification of the projection process and, as extension of it, the pre-projection process.

Inventory

Part 1: 'Sheep' - remains of a cut roll of rushes, images of sheep, splices, grease pencil marks, flash frames, marker boards and man talking to camera without sound. 3 minutes, silent.

Part 2: 'Sheepman' - assembly of the same found-footage plus additional images of humans, motor cars and other machines. Governed by a constant 12 frame ($\frac{1}{2}$ second) linear measurement of acetate which functions as the durational basis for the selection and re-ordering of material originally destined to be ordered according to the dictates of an explanatory script. 15 minutes, silent.

Part 3: 'Window' - the camera and operator record 40 seconds of film each week throughout a period of twelve months from the same vantage point; each period

finishes with the camera framing the area in front of the window in the same way as the shot commenced. Selection of the part of the area with the use of a zoom lens and camera movement or decision about the time of day (or even day itself) and precise length of run were not pre-determined. The footage obtained is assembled in the order of shooting (April 1973-74). A twenty minute continuous sound recording made at the same window is printed twice onto the ungraded final print with a five minute gap before the repeat. 45 minutes, sound.

Part 4: 'Film Lane' - film is shot from a moving vehicle; from its roof pointing forward, from its rear pointing backwards. This occurs on two occasions, the summer of 1973 and the winter of 1974. The camera runs at either 24 frames per second or 12 fps. The film is assembled according to pre-determined factors: (i) the 12 frame basis observed in the 'Sheepman' section; (ii) a double binary--alternating apparent movement away from and toward the surface of the screen (a function relying on the perception of successive frames), and alternation between opposing seasonal periods (a function relying on the perception of but one frame); (iii) combinations of one or other of these. 18 minutes, silent.

Part 5: 'Farm' - an assembly of seven rolls of film, each in their different ways examining spatial relationships--object/camerafilm/projector film planes--the walls of a barn, the surface of a tilled field, the surface of a screen bearing the image of a wall in movement, the screen with an image of movement towards moving animals, movement of tractor on which a moving camera is mounted. 19 minutes, sound.

Part 6: 'Blue plus Green plus Red' - colour originating from the sky, the grass, and berries printed through a system of graphic loops designed to permute the mixing of these three colours basic to the maintenance of the illusion of colour in film emulsion. The primaries blue, green and red produce magenta, cyan and yellow, and white as a hue shift. 12 minutes, silent.

Part 7: ('Sheepwoman' - returns to the camera image of Sheepman together with control of camera and then examines through systematic application the image resultant in conjunction with synchronous/non-synchronous sound and written word image. 20 minutes, sound.

Mike Leggett, July 1976

One is immediately struck by both the disparateness of the seven parts of Mike Leggett's SHEEPMAN AND THE SHEARED and by the ambitiousness of the film when seen in its entirety. The apparent discontinuity may lead to initial frustration resulting from incomprehension, but the very ambitiousness of the work ultimately enables one to see the continuity of ideas and unity of thought behind it. (In a long, multi-section film such as this, spectators who find the going difficult in any one section are encouraged to sit it out until the next section refocusses attention or--less fruitfully--to drift out and return at a later point in the film.) The scope of the film merits critical attention of a similar scope; but these brief notes, limited in length and insight, merely point to two of the directions in which an overall continuity can be traced.

The first direction leads to an appreciation of the formal strategies employed in each part and an awareness that the sum of those strategies serves as a compendium of approaches to Landscape as Filmed Image. The essential qualities of repetition/rhythm, light/colour, texture, and movement recur in differing ways and through differing material. The found-images of the first two sections are irregularly repeated within a rigid metre, yielding a rhythm certainly alien to the film-makers who actually shot--and finally discarded--the footage Leggett reworks to his pleasure. The visual pulse which lends a certain fascination to the banal images eventually gives way to a concentration on the texture of those images as revealed by closer and constantly repetitive scrutiny. The eyes are then prepared for Part 3 ('Window'), in which the irregular pattern and vague metre can be recognised as strategies designed to shift attention to light and colour as dictated by the changing seasons and to the opening out of space provided by the zooming lens (and the introduction of ambient sound which lends resonance to that space).

Though radically different in impact, the deliberate pace and length of Part 3 act as the other side of the issue coined by Parts 1 & 2; the similarity of concerns is directly addressed in Part 4 ('Film Lane') which combines the rigid editing structure of the first parts with the seasonal recording of local landscape imagery in Part 3. But yet another element comes to the fore--that of movement. The original movement of the car up and down the lane and the apparent movement imparted by editing complicate the sense of movement on the screen and effectively reflaten the deep space established in the previous section. Part 5 ('Farm') can be seen as a refinement on the critiques of movement offered by Parts 3 & 4. As in the latter, the sense of screen depth is related to the movement of camera, but like the former, that movement is appreciated as movement of framing and reframing (either of the original camera, or of the rephotographing camera with its extended possibilities of reframing). At this point the interrogation of cinema as a medium of apparent motion becomes strongest. Part 6 ('Blue plus Green plus Red') recentres the issue of light and colour in landscape imagery, again offering a diametric contrast to the initial presentation of the issue: here a mathematically precise formulation replaces the casual approach of Part 3. The final section ('Sheepwoman') offers itself as a summation--incorporating repetition of shots, shift in light/colour, play on texture (especially word-on-image), and movement within and without the frame--yet this section opens out (rather than rounding off the film) by raising more complex issues of synchronous sound and text and meaning. Though Leggett insists that the sections of the film are not strictly ordered, it is hard not to see a progression in the parts (as numbered by Leggett) towards greater complexity within reiteration of those images raised separately in each section. So that the simplicity of the final landscape image can be understood as extremely complex as implied by the critique of landscape representation catalogued in the preceding two hours.

The second direction of continuity leads toward autobiography. It may seem strange that a film discussed in such a formalist vocabulary above can also be described as autobiographical in intent. But it is hard not to perceive personal threads in a work which spans six years of a man's life; when that work concerns landscape and those six years include a significant move from urban to rural life, the connexions become more explicit. And one begins to appreciate SHEEPMAN... for its shifting personal perspectives on environment. The images utilised in the opening sections take on an aspect of repressed violence in their content (the shearing, the hospital equipment, the ominously-equipped automobile) and in their obsessive presentation. It is a closed, tense vision, and Leggett worked on those sequences while still living in London. His move to a Devon farm prompted the radical change of Part 3--his working notes make explicit one source of this change: 'In moving away from a city to a rural area one's sense of 'natural' time alters. Not only do bodily rhythms change if so allowed but one's ability to interpret natural information (by which is meant the phenomena of the material world) into structures superimposed for the necessities of order; such that the time of day is told by combining information about the position of the sun and the season of the year.' Part 4, despite its rigour, is an homage to the innumerable times Leggett travelled up and down the lane leading to his house, and an attempt to order his insight about seasonal change (as a metaphor for perception of aging/regeneration) in terms of his urban incarnation. Part 5 is almost diaristic, but the seven rolls shot in Leggett's immediate environment are not simple and affectionately presented, but are critically rephotographed and re-presented from a distant perspective. Part 6 represents the most rigorous correction of the excess of initial indulgence in a new environment (cf. Part 3), and aspires to a thoroughly controlled and mastered vision. Part 7 admits the inadequacy of that aspiration and reanimates our protagonist through the agency not of a silent sheepman but of a most fluent sheepwoman. Such an analysis is not meant to be glib; it operates best on the level of intuition, and such flagrant formulation renders it somewhat ludicrous. But on a visual level--on the level of the visual organisation of the material--it is easy to trace the change and growth of the film-maker's eye and mind.