

SPIRAL

No. 8 / July 1986



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SPIRAL is a publication of Spiral Group, Inc., a non-profit California corporation. The magazine is published four times a year (January, April, July, and October) at: P.O. Box 5603, Pasadena, CA 91107.

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8mm

JAMES IRWIN, TONI TREADWAY, BOB BRODSKY, AND FRED CAMPER

reviewing the works of 8mm filmmakers

Richard Lerman, Scott Stark, Yasunori Yamamoto, Margaret Ahwesh,

William Scaff, Albert Gabriel Nigrin, and Gail Currey

James Irwin

Richard Lerman

Richard Lerman, who lives in Boston, has created an impressive body of work that takes advantage of Super-8's excellent sound quality. He no longer creates 16mm films for a number of reasons, he says, not the least of which is the economic cost. But primarily it is because "Super-8 sound is so good that there is a direct correspondence between the sounds and the documentation," Lerman said recently in San Francisco. "With video, you get that nebulous buzzing, and with 16mm the sound is terrible."

I was able to see Lerman's work at the San Francisco Cinematheque in March of 1986. I don't know very much of his background or his training. But by the evidence of his March program, it is obvious that sound, rather than film, is the primary interest of his life. More specifically, the various ingenious, low-tech methods of recording and presenting sound. He clearly spends a lot more time and energy thinking about his sound work than he does about his film work. There is certainly nothing wrong with that; indeed, it is refreshing to meet a film artist whose use of film is sincere yet free of the baggage of the primacy of the visual image that most experimental filmmakers carry around with them. In Lerman's case, the soundtrack is the master, the image is the slave, and it seems to be a comfortable arrangement for both parties.

The film portion of the program was comprised of selections of Lerman's "Film Transducer Series" of

1982-1985, all in Super-8, all color, all sound. "The Transducer Series is a collection of Super-8 sound films which use hand-built microphones as camera subject and audio input," Lerman wrote in the program notes. "The microphones are fashioned from everyday items such as window screens, aluminum foil, credit cards, copper strips, etc."

Some works in this series are more complex than others. The first two screened at the Cinematheque program, *No. 10* and *No. 11*, are built around the same long strip of copper suspended between two poles (one of which is a pitchfork stuck in the ground). In *No. 10 Copper Strip Alone*, the strip is snapped, and rotated by the wind. Since it is connected directly to the microphone input of the camera, the tribulations of the poor strip are recorded completely. In *No. 11 Copper Strip on Fire*, the strip's final indignity is accomplished by (surprise) setting it on fire. The sound of the strip as it burns, giving its life for art, is poetic as well as tragic.

Lerman's growing awareness of the possibilities of committing at least partially as much thought to the film documentation as to the sound generation is evident in *No. 12 On Board the SS Edgerton with Brass Screen Tube, a Blue Ribbon Microphone, and a Copper Screen*. For one thing, the immediate context of this sound-gathering is more clear, and more suggestive: at one point, with the sound-gathering device in the foreground (a brass screen tube), we see in the background a man lying on the deck of the yacht, either dead or sunbathing, completely uninterested in the filmic documentation occurring.

It sets up both a physical and a philosophical

counterpoint to the quite beautiful, later image of the blue ribbon, flapping in the wind, as we see (and certainly hear) its flapping simultaneously, an image (like the copper ribbon) separated from a full con-



Richard Lerman

text. In this single reel we find a dialectic of sorts between one kind of Lerman film, the sound documentation without evocative context, and a second kind, the thoughtful conflation of sound and image, in which the ways they go together can be surprising and even disorienting.

The high point of this series is found in *No. 15 David and Sharon with Pond Life*. In this film two people drift on a creek, or pond, for some time as we hear on the soundtrack a great variety of strange sounds. Eventually, these people come across a floater with a wire hanging from it, connected to some kind of cable traversing the creek. They splash water on it, and we discover that all the sounds we had been hearing were generated by this hanging transducer dipped into the water. Of course, it is impossible not to have a sense of narrative here, of a kind of Adam and Eve on a raft. They bite the apple of technology, dangling in front of them in the idyllic realm of a country stream. This transducer is used further in *No. 16 Drifting With Spiders*, in which the film concentrates almost entirely on the elaborate web a spider has created using the audio wire stretched across the stream as an anchor. It is an eloquent testimonial to the ability of nature to co-opt technology to its own uses. Some of the sounds we hear are of fish biting bait hung on hooks from the transducers themselves.

The other works are of this type. Lerman, under questioning from the audience, admitted that *No. 15* and *No. 16* include some editing. But he prefers to use film as performance/recording, unedited. He says he tries to do no editing at all. His sound technology is very rudimentary, using the kind of audio discs found in doctors' beepers that he buys extremely cheap at flea markets and electronic wholesalers.

These films, while interesting, were also a little frustrating. As Lerman admits, he hasn't the inclina-

Photo: Richard Ritter

tion to bring these films out of their use as straight documentation of sound performances. But in the few cases where he does experiment with the suggestive possibilities of sound and image, the films are much more interesting, and one would like to see him do this to a greater degree. Most of the works had little cinematic interest. They were saved by the strength of the soundtracks, which often featured extraordinary sounds. As I've mentioned earlier, there is nothing wrong with this, except that it would seem Lerman is overlooking an opportunity to enhance the effectiveness of his sound pieces.

Lerman's live sound performances were the highlight of the program. *Changing States* is comprised of home-made transducers made of various metals hung from an audio cord, heated with a small blowtorch. Film cans, long sheets of brass, aluminum, and different diameters of harpsichord wire provide the raw material. As Lerman heats these materials, the metals pop, jump, expand, and bend, all of which produce sound expanded by the electronic system devised by Lerman. The result is reminiscent of Kabuki music: beautiful, unsettling. It is often hard to believe that the metal sheet or wire you saw heated a second ago is truly producing the dynamic, ghostly sound you are hearing now. This is immediate, low-tech, human-scale art that creates a product equal to or better than the kind of expensive techno-music many modern composers are dabbling in. Lerman's willingness to betray his methods adds drama to the presentation, for we see a process that virtually anyone could imitate. But could they? I suspect it is both simple, and very complicated, to recreate Lerman's sounds.

Lerman's final piece was *Music For Plinky and Straw*, which uses amplified ordinary plastic straws as sound sources. He bends these straws at their ribbed sections, providing a percussive base to the elaborate

delayed tape loop constructed by Lerman using two cassette players. After creating a multi-layered sound base, he begins cutting the straws, "creating a sound like an organ pipe and plucked string," as he describes it. The melodic pop of the cut straws is played against itself through the delay of the tape loop. By the end, the odd actions of an unassuming man, snipping a few straws with scissors, has produced a densely constructed and very amusing musical improvisation.

Lerman recently presented his compositions at the 1986 New Music America Festival in Houston at the Astrodome.

Scott Stark

Since 1980, Scott Stark has completed approximately 33 films, four film installations, and three film/performances, all but ten in Super-8. Most of the films are short, from half a minute to 22 minutes. Besides this prodigious output, he also serves on the screening committee of the Cinematheque in San Francisco, where he lives, and on the board of directors of its parent organization, the Foundation for Art in Cinema. Stark's commitment to film, particularly Super-8, as an art form is considerable.

His work is most often about testing limitations, his own and the medium's. In many cases the limits are passed, so that "failure" occurs. But of course, it is not truly failure. Boundaries can only be discovered through experimentation that delineates them. It is in precisely these doomed attempts that Stark's work becomes marvelous to watch. As Ursula LeGuin once wrote about the dying city of Venice, "What is most mortal is most alive."

Sometimes the limitations are physical. In the