

## Making Mothfight

### Influences

Many people have asked me how my film *Mothfight* was made. They usually think it is stop-frame animation. In fact, it is a film made frame by frame but without a camera. No live or dead moths were involved. The films of Len Lye, Norman McLaren and of course Stan Brakhage were strong influences. The other overwhelming influence was the London Film Maker's Co-operative itself at that mad, joyous, anarchic time in the mid 1980s - all the equipment, all the films, all the people.

I was working in the London Film Makers Co-operative's film distribution library, the largest library of avant-garde film in Europe. Stan Brakhage's stunning short film [Mothlight](#) was the most frequently hired film. Brakhage pressed the wings of dead moths, flower petals and blades of grass between strips of 16mm splicing tape, then contact printed the strips to produce his film.



*Filmstrips from Brakhage's Mothlight (1963)*

The film works on multiple levels: aesthetically, literally, as metaphor and as abstract expression. Brakhage wrote:

"Here is a film that I made out of a deep grief... I said "these crazy moths are flying into the candlelight, and burning themselves to death, and that's what's happening to me."

I must have viewed, cleaned and repaired prints of *Mothlight* literally hundreds of times - We had at least four prints of the film in the library and they were hired all the time. When you check and repair a film you scrutinise it closely, pausing to examine it for scratches and to repair broken sprocket holes. Each still 16mm frame was a tiny, stunningly beautiful, fragile and ephemeral work of art.



*Mending a film print, LFMC 1984*

Brakhage visited the Film Co-op for a screening of his work around this time. I remember a large bear of a man, resembling an old Olympic god, remote and unreadable behind very dark glasses (he had recently had an eye operation), talking a lot about his attempts to represent 'hypnagogic vision' - what you see when you are awake but your eyes are shut.

In the 1980s the Canadian High Commission had a great cultural programme including regular screenings at Canada House in Trafalgar Square. I had seen most of the films of Len Lye and Norman McLaren there. Also, David Finch and I, working in the LFMC Distribution Library, were involved in negotiating the purchase of prints of three films by Len Lye from the [Len Lye Foundation](#) in New Zealand, including his black and white film [Tusalava](#) (1929). Lye wrote:

"To get the spirit of the imagery... I imagined I was myself an Australian witchetty grub who was making this animated ritual dance film".



*Tusalava (Len Lye, 1929)*

Brakhage and Lye's projections of self into the being of an insect fascinated me. I was also fascinated by the dichotomies of light and dark, reality and fantasy (real world, cinema world) and by the technical alchemy of making film.

During my first year working at the Film Co-op, Nick Gordon-Smith was making his cameraless film [Bird Xerox](#), using the Co-op's contact printer. I learned a lot from watching Nick who was happy to share his technical knowledge of film stocks and exposures.



*Bird Xerox (Nick Gordon Smith, 1983)*

Nick wrote:

"Xerox ink transferred directly onto film to create wild and deconstructed images, the grain as big as footballs and milling like thousands of Starlings flying home to roost and more...With sound of human and bird imitations."

One day in 1983 I was sitting in the sun eating cherries on the rickety metal staircase which led up to the Film Co-op entrance with Anne Rees-Mogg, who was chair of the Co-op at that time. Anne said to me:

"Don't worry if you don't make a film while you are working at the Co-op. Treat it like a three-year studentship - Just watch as much film as possible, immerse yourself in it, let it sink in and sooner or later something will come out of it."

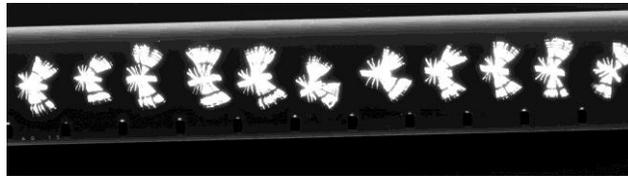
This was really good advice. I gave myself permission to watch others, soak up ideas and experiment joyfully rather than earnestly trying to make art.

### **Making the film**

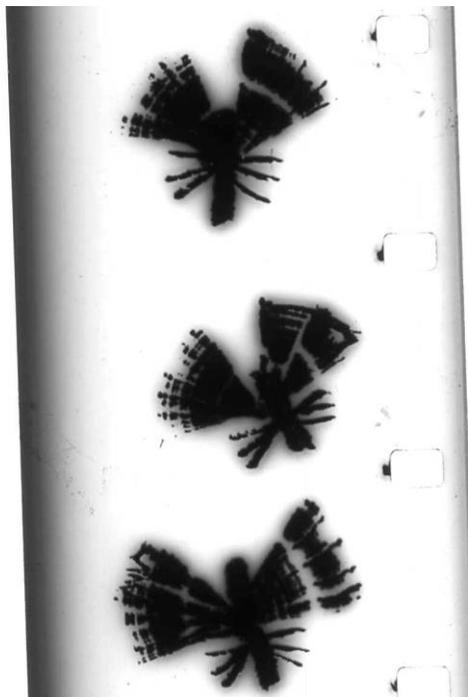
I was playing with drawing and scratching on film. I scratched images into the emulsion side of black 16mm film. (You could buy rolls of this to use as leader, or make your own by thoroughly exposing a roll of stock and processing it). The lacy effect of the moth's wings were made by scraping the flat blade of a Chinese miniature chisel sideways across the emulsion, pivoted from one end of the chisel.



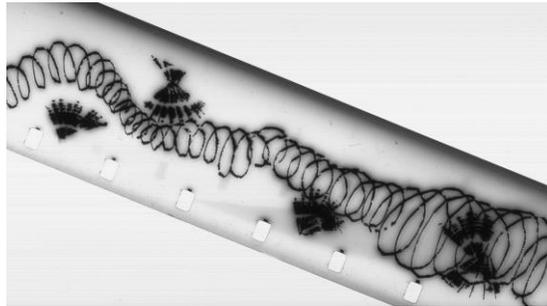
Body, legs and other lines were made with hatpins, compass points, dentists picks, needles and other sharp objects. I made half a dozen or so lengths of film in this way, ranging between about five and ten feet long.



Using the Co-op's contact printer, I made positive prints from these strips. So, the printed images produced were black lines on a clear background.



I made other loops by sticking chopped up Letraset letters onto clear 16mm film and also by drawing on the clear film with black ink.



I bi- (and sometimes tri-) packed (ie. sandwiched) these lengths of film into the LFMC contact printer and spliced together the ends of each length to make loops. The loops were loosely hung from the ceiling (or was it the wall?) with string.

I spent days, and some late nights, in the Co-op contact printer room, by the light of the orange safelight, experimenting with loop combinations and doing systematic exposure strip tests with neutral density filters.

After each printer run I loaded the exposed print stock into a magazine and went next door to develop the print. The Debie processor was an unreliable old beast, about the size of an upright piano. The exposed print stock travelled through the machine as a continuous loop over racks of rollers: from the lightproof magazine, in and out of closed tanks of developer, stop bath, fixer and final stop bath, through a drying cabinet on the other side and finally winding onto a spool.

Before you used it, the developer and the fixer fluid in the tanks had to be brought up to temperature. Unfortunately the thermostat was unreliable. It was a while before workshop organiser George Saxon discovered that people had been pouring kettles of hot water into the tanks to heat them. This, of course diluted the mixture and resulted in films being under developed and underfixed. So, to counteract this, people periodically poured jugs of developer and fixer into the tanks to beef them back up. It was not the exact science our text books said it should have been.

The processor also jammed and broke down frequently. When it jammed, it sounded an alarm which put the fear of god into you. As the film pulled tighter the rollers rose up. When they had risen as high as they could go, your film would snap, the rollers would drop, your film would unspool and the coils would sink in the tanks and scratch each other and everything would be ruined. If the jam happened when the film was in the fixer bath it could sometimes be saved. You could take the cover off, roll your sleeves up and try to slip the coils of film back on the rollers (or, as I did once, gather it all up in your arms, run into the Palm Court with it, dump it in a sink of water and then very carefully hang the coils up

to dry on a string line). But any film still in the developing bath would get an extra exposure and probably be ruined.



*Processing film at the LFMC - late 1980s*

Giving film a brief exposure before it is fully developed is a technique which can be done deliberately - producing a fabulous effect called 'solarisation', also known as the 'Sabatier effect', popular with Pop Art photographers in the 1960s. Some of the flaring of light in *Mothfight* was the result of a jam in the processor. The result was brilliant, and Anna Thew told me about solarisation, so I did it again, deliberately taking the lid off the processing tanks for a few seconds half way through developing. It was hit and miss but when it worked it was awesome.

Because my film loops were different lengths, each time they passed through the gate of the printer, a different combination of images from the two (or three) negative loops were printed together. Also, because the layer closest to the print stock was directly in contact, this image was in sharp focus. But the next layer, because it was slightly separated from the print stock, came out very slightly blurred. And the outside layer, in the tri-packed runs came out even more blurred. This created an illusion of great depth in the final complex two or three layer printed images. Sometimes I put a twist into one of the loops (ie. like a Mobius strip) - That image would be laterally reversed each time it went through the gate of the printer.

The last afternoon I spent processing loops (in June 1985), Mark Sheehan from the London Musician's Collective next door poked his head round the sliding door of the processor room. I had been printing and processing obsessively for about five hours and hadn't eaten since breakfast. I was tired and cross and drenched with sweat and developing fluid. He looked me up and down, grinned and said "I

think you'd better have my cheese sandwich." I have never, ever been so grateful to anyone.

For the printing of *Mothfight*, I think I mainly used Agfa 553 a beautiful high contrast black & white print stock on a clear acetate base. The high contrast image it produced reminded me of Hans Richter and the Dadaists, magic lantern shows and German expressionist cinema. I wanted to make films which looked like that. Or maybe I used Kodak Plus-X or Tri-X... I have forgotten.

The editing of the film was really easy. I sat at the Co-op's Steenbeck flatbed editor and spliced together all the best printed loops footage, changed the order, cut bits out and used part of the original solarised 'negative' loop for the final denouement (moth flies into candle?).

### **Making the soundtrack and finishing the film**

I wondered whether to leave the film silent or produce a soundtrack. A group of friends from the London Musician's Collective, including Alex Kolkowski (violin), Stuart Jones (cello) and Mark (Tom) Sheehan (banjo), offered to play a live improvised soundtrack to the film at a Co-op open screening.

This worked really well and I decided that the film should not remain silent. The central moth image seemed to need to be matched with a single instrument. Stuart Jones and I recorded the soundtrack in the Co-op cinema on a Sunday when no one else was about. Stuart sat on a chair in the middle of the empty cinema with his cello, a microphone and a Nagra 1/4" tape recorder. I projected the film and Stuart switched on the Nagra and improvised to the image. We did four takes.

The film soundtrack sounds as if there is more than one instrument playing, but it is only one cello. Stuart, a really extraordinary musician, played with complete, intense concentration, bowing, plucking, tapping. It was an awesome performance.

I had the sound transferred onto 16mm magnetic sound stock in a basement in Soho. Then Stuart and I sat at one of the Co-op's Steenbeck flatbed editors, played back all four takes synchronised with the image and chose the best one. I think we used Take Two.

Because of the way the film was made there was no negative. There was the positive work print (silent, spliced) and the soundtrack on 16mm magnetic stock. I got a grant from the Arts Council to make an inter-negative with an optical sound track and for the first print to be made from this.

### **But what does *Mothfight* mean?**

Someone at the time wrote about *Mothfight* and said it was post-modern. I looked up 'post-modern'. The definition I found mentioned a tendency to take existing images, artworks or iconic tropes and rework them in new ways. Yes, I thought, post-modern it is.

When I was making *Mothfight* I thought the implicit struggle was symbolic - about light & dark, chaos & order, good & evil. People asked me if there is one moth, fighting to stay alive, or two moths fighting each other. Someone said, 'It's about sex, isn't it?' Other people said, 'It's a frenetic post-modern Flight of the Bumble Bee; a homage to Stan Brakhage; a love letter to the old Co-op contact printer; it's about cinema, the fragile tiny image caught in the beam of light...'

Yes. All of that. But especially light, dark, insects and cinema. And only one moth battling the world. I'm not sure if that moth is me.

Vanda Carter  
2016