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*Norman McLaren: Synergist.*

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Norman McLaren - (1913-1987) eminent Canadian animator of Scottish decent. Made over 50 films utilizing remarkable variety of techniques: from painting directly on film, through pastels and cut-outs, to pixillation and optically transformed ballet. For many films he created also the soundtrack by drawing it directly on the optical track. He was no stranger to abstraction and often remarked that music was the source of his interest in film. Recipient of over one hundred awards he worked for over 40 years as a full time employee of the National Film Board of Canada.

Synergy - the cooperative action of discrete agents such that the total effect is greater than the sum of the two effects taken independently. To the basic sum the relationship BETWEEN agencies is added. This relationship is often more important then the agents themselves.

The heart of McLaren's creative interests was, as he put it, the expression of the spirit of music. Since childhood he would see forms in motion when listening to music. Once in art school, when he saw abstract films, among them *Study #7* by Oskar Fischinger animated to Johannes Brahms' *Hungarian Dance #5*, he understood that he will be an animator. He admitted that if it was not for his shyness he might have become a dancer or a choreographer.

In his youth, McLaren played the violin a bit and learned to read in the treble clef. Later he read everything that was written about music by the German composer Paul Hindemith. As mentioned, he created music for numerous films by drawing it directly on the optical track. He did not consider himself a composer, however.

The concept of syncretic art was always dear to him. In art school, he invented projects that incorporated smells, images and sounds. He was also intrigued by synesthesia. As a teenager, he wrote a science fiction novel in which sounds and colors were equivalent. Soon enough though he found that literal translation of one into another in film did not satisfy him. All quasi-scientific systems based on theories of equivalency seemed naive to him.

While searching for a visual language that could come close to the musical ideal, he became fascinated by films of Sergei Eisenstein. He was swept away by their new logic of editing, by the collisions of images and thoughts. A similar capacity to liberate film from the power of traditional narrative structure has drawn him to surrealism and mental process of dreaming. Early 20th century films by Emil Cohl that were based on continuous metamorphosis have shown to him how a similar fluidity of thought can be achieved visually. McLaren's early film *Love on the wing* (1937-39) was a sequence of visual forms in constant metamorphosis associated with letter writing - the film was promoting air mail. The chain of images was so free, surrealist and Freudian that the film was withdrawn from distribution.

Another reason why McLaren felt attracted to surrealism was his preference for improvisation and strong trust in intuition. He disliked any restrictions or recipes to follow. He claimed to

never know what was going to happen in 20 seconds. All artistic decisions were taken successively, one at a time from beginning of the work. With every frame the possibilities got limited till at some point the end was clear.

Improvisation and intuition were to protect McLaren from making a boring film. To become boring was according to him the greatest fault in an author. No surprise then that modernism never accepted him. Modernists planned (not improvised) processes that not only had to be diligently followed but were also works' *raison d'etre*. Any fear of boredom or trace of intent to entertain was out of question. *Rhythmic* (1956), maybe the only film which was a consistent realization of a process and was given praise by modernists was judged by the artist as a failure. In it he used paper cut-outs to didactically, gaily and methodically animate pyramids of algebraic operations. All permutations are accounted for. In his criticism McLaren agreed with John Grierson, his boss and the creator of National Film Board, who asked: how long is a joke?

In *Blinkity Blank* (1955) music was recorded before the animation and it was already composed by Maurice Blackburn as a controlled improvisation. The performers were given rhythm, register and dynamics but they could play freely chosen pitches. Conducted by the composer it was recorded without rehearsal and later used as the basis for the film. Like several others McLaren made it without a camera. This time the film was coated with black and McLaren improvised directly on it by scratching out forms. A particularity of this film is also that McLaren used the fact that human eye needs only a blink of a single frame separated by several blank frames to perceive a shape (thus the title). Drawings appear singularly or in sequences of few frames and forms that seem to coexist are often found on consecutive frames.

As a matter of principle McLaren avoided introduction of words. It seemed an intrusion of an alien kind and threatening to narrative freedom. The only text one can find in McLaren's work comes in the form of folklore songs and is already "tamed" by music. The text in *Le merle* (1958), must have seemed ideal for him. It is full of repeated phrases and tells a nonsense story about a bird who one by one loses parts of his body just to retrieve them in multiples.

Additional inconvenience of using text is due to the necessity of translation. Music seems to be much more immune to this problem. One may find funny that the credits for *Begone Dull Care* or *Neighbours* were animated in a dozen languages in parallel. McLaren loved his public and avoided anything that could separate him from it, either in Canada or anywhere in the world.

He was interested in art that was free from text narratives, free from traditional film drama, free from linear or material logic, but never free from the logic of emotion. Pure abstraction was insufficient. Its dryness could tire the audience.

McLaren would say that a film may appear abstract in form but the fact that it moves puts a wealth of human implications (of suggestion) into the mobile shape. To animate a form, whether it is a hen in *Hen-hop* (1942), or a line in *Lines vertical* (1960), McLaren tried to imagine himself moving as that form. When working on *Lines vertical* he found that even when working with a single line one can simulate and provoke the spectator's emotions with a whole gamut of movements - rapid, calm, precipitous or majestic. To displace a single line can astonish. For McLaren lines lived in a world of gravity. He got interested to turn *Lines vertical* on its side to create *Lines horizontal* (1962), because he was convinced that the result was to be completely different for gravity no longer existed when the lines were horizontal and one no

longer knew what animated them. At the beginning of *Mosaic* a film that was made by showing only points of intersection between *Lines vertical* and *Lines horizontal*, McLaren appears on stage bringing the first point, positioning it manually on the screen and setting it motion by blowing on it. This creates a friendly bridge between abstract movement of points and the world of everyday experience. Little houses, birds and other representational object that appear in *Begone Dull Care* (1949) serve the same purpose. They created a point of reference for those viewers who do not understand abstraction. McLaren would jokingly say that they are the dot in the "i" or an olive in a Martini. He did not attach great importance to them even if they jump out with a strength of signs. They were never meant symbolically and no esoteric message was ever intended.

For McLaren the most important was movement. He is famous for saying that animation is not the art of drawings-that-move but the art of movements-that-are-drawn.. When animating he would see movement rather than specific images. He would add that movement was his basic language and it was movement in music that captured his imagination first. In this way he liberated animated film from the laws of painting according to which every frame demanded stable balance of elements, visual depth and background. It was acknowledged by Picasso who after seeing *Hen hop*, exclaimed: "finally something new in the art of drawing". McLaren could not be bothered with the beauty of each frame. It went well with his favorite technique of cameraless animation. When one draws on an area that is 35mm wide there is hardly any space for refined detail. Everything must be achieved through motion, change of color and form. McLaren's virtuosity was in movement. As a graphic artist he was without pretension, simple and on verge of naiveté.

According to McLaren what makes film such a powerful medium is that motion can be spoken of as separate from the form that moves. Motion is independent and can be freely manipulated through difference between frames. In his films it is hard to find realistic movement of representational forms or abstract movement of abstract forms. The latter purely abstract approach we would often find in the work of his masters: Richter, Eggeling or Fishinger.

For a film without traditional narrative it is difficult to build a form. McLaren saw two dangers: excessive limitation of material leading to monotonous permutations or continuous appearance of new material which brings chaos and dullness. At the outset *Lines Vertical* was going to be a film done with a single line and no sound. During the experimental stage he found that he could not keep the attention of spectators for more than a minute. In consequence more lines and soundtrack were added and the animation was structured to a musical arch form (ABA).

Music has dealt with these issues for centuries and it is to music that McLaren gave credit for teaching him how to create variations in uniformity or unity in variety. Musical structures were often interesting to him as complex formal guidelines. In a didactic film *Canon* (1964) three canons are presented. They can be experienced in parallel visually and aurally. First canon uses the *Frere Jacques* tune but the other two were first created as visual canons and only later got their musical counterparts.

The unique close relationship between image and sound was possible among else due to the fact that from early on McLaren worked directly on film where he could almost jointly create image and music. It was a little like being a painter or sculptor - almost nothing stood between the artist and his medium. What seems to be a privilege of contemporary computer artist was

McLaren's every day's bread. He treasured this extremely close, intimate relationship with audiovisual material. To some extent it was a fortuitous circumstance. In 1940, when he landed as a penniless immigrant in New York he was invited by the curator in the Museum of Non-Objective Painting of the Guggenheim Foundation baroness Hilla Rebay von Ehrenweisen to show her some new films in view of possible purchase. Without delay he produced them at home by drawing directly on film. Having no money for music he painted it directly on the optical track. The films were *Dots* (originally with a musical title *Scherzo*) and *Loops*. To make them he would take strips of film, 60 frames in length, one at a time, and draw images and immediately after sounds. He thought in single visual events with single sound events associated with them. He would say later with a synesthetic kind of humor that the sounds had resonance of kisses with a shade of raspberry. The sound gives the abstract imagery a "representational" ground. Loops and dots are given mass and physical expression. Already then he found his world of "abstraction with gravity".

In *Begone Dull Care* (1949), possibly the most prominent example of his audiovisual virtuosity, the relationship between image and sound were not any more only on the level of single event correspondences but simultaneously on several formal levels. Motives, phrases and whole movements create audiovisual synergy. To achieve it he first very closely collaborated with Oscar Peterson. The famous jazz musician improvised on the piano while McLaren made comments, chose fragments and gave suggestions. The music that resulted was perfectly tailored for the film that he imagined. With the recording in hand McLaren created in collaboration with Evelyn Lambart 5-6 visual counterparts for each 4-5 second phrase of music. In several "fitting" sessions they selected those that worked best.

In *Begone Dull Care* McLaren created a true audiovisual counterpoint. Music and animation enter in strong relationships while retaining a lot of independent development as well. Nothing can be easily predicted but when it happens it seems convincing and logical. As an example McLaren seems to thoroughly understand musical experience when he does not associate the same variant of visual images each time a musical theme returns. He knew that such a reprise is not perceived as an exact repetition as it is recognized by the listener and heard differently. In similar ways visual and musical phrases cross each other paths, tease each other, come closer and part. When asked about the art of achieving such audiovisual cohesiveness McLaren would say that it is instinct and there are no rules. When pressed he would naturally mention movement as the common denominator of music and image. He would admit that being sensitive to musical dynamics for softer music fragments he would draw sequences with less contrasting colors and less movement and the opposite for loud ones. He would also associate darker colors with lower pitches and brighter with higher ones.

The principle of McLaren's audiovisual thinking was temporal coincidence of musical and visual events. Even in films where animation was done before the music he would consciously structure the timing of events over a regular underlying pulse. As an example in *Lines Vertical* he was drawing on stripes of film of equal length (48cm). It was meant to facilitate later the composition of music which would share the pulse.

The most extreme example of synchronic sound and image was *Synchromy* (1971). McLaren first composed for it a Boogie-Woogie. It was recorded directly on the optical track with the aid of a camera that could expose the soundtrack area and with specially prepared cards, one for each pitch. Then he copied the resulting images to the visible part of the frame. He multiplied

them horizontally to fill the field and added color to enrich the experience. It resulted with a quasi-didactic film which shows how almost literally music and sound is notated on film. Both music and image are putting each other in quotation marks. Unfortunately neither music nor image or even the relationship between them have shown anything truly interesting. It is not a synesthetic experience nor an interpretation of the spirit of music. It is more of a Narcissistic look of music into its mirror image. It is probably also the only film of McLaren that is purely abstract. After making it McLaren decided that if he did one more abstract film it would have been to the detriment of his spirit.

Was McLaren a synergist? He deeply cared about what was BETWEEN elements and in result he often achieved more than their simple sum. He was fascinated by movement, which meant a preoccupation with what was happening BETWEEN images not what was on each of them. He was interested in presenting correspondences BETWEEN music and animation. In his non-abstract films such as *Chairy Tale*, *Neighbours*, *Pas de deux*, or *Narcissus*, he would deal with relations BETWEEN people and their need for synergy. People who worked with him agree that he seemed to have a unique capacity to get the best results out of contributions of all involved in a production, and rare for an artist, one could hardly feel his ego. In personal life he created with Guy Glover a relationship which lasted over 50 years (till McLaren's death). The work of McLaren was a conscious attempt to enter into a relationship with people, to be with them. Of all his films he was most satisfied with three which can be considered synergistic masterpieces: *Begone Dull Care*, *Neighbours* and *Pas de deux*.

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