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Norman McLaren: The Narrative and Contemplative Modes

"I try not to be just an experimenter," Norman McLaren has often said. Yet, most assessments of McLaren's work deal principally with his technical innovations — synthetic music, electronic and optional sound tracks, cameraless film-making, pixillation. Precisely because of his brilliance as an experimental film-maker, McLaren's devices have been discussed to the exclusion of his ideas. Except for such obviously didactic works as *Neighbors* and *A Chairy Tale*, the themes of McLaren's work have been neglected; how he works seems to have generated more interest than what he is trying to express. This regrettable bias persists even in Maynard Collins' recent book on McLaren, published by the Canadian Film Institute.¹

Of course, the brief, packed entertainments which McLaren has produced over the years do have meaning. A varied thematic consistency underlies the variety of his experimental effects. Briefly, it seems to me that much of McLaren's work is creatively concerned with the distinction between the narrative impulse and the contemplative. Two different frames of mind are expressed here. To the narrative impulse, the world is composed of tractable material which responds to the author's control. The storyteller asserts himself over his material, shaping it to express his vision. But in the contemplative stance, the author does not presume to shape the image of his world. Rather he takes delight in recording (often with awe and humility) the material as he finds it. The critical tradition that has focused exclusively upon McLaren's machinery would limit his work to the contemplative type. But often McLaren works within the context of traditional narration, with all the aggressive shaping that the type implies.

This distinction might perhaps be best demonstrated by comparing the two ballet films that he made within a five-year period. *Pas de Deux* (1967) is a narrative that uses the form of ballet. In contrast, *Ballet Adagio* (1972) is a contemplation of ballet, and its implications as a metaphor for human achievement and aspiration.

Pas de Deux is considered McLaren's masterpiece both for its technical wizardry and for its aesthetic impact. Margaret Mercier and Vincent Warren of Les Grands Ballets Canadiens dance a *pas de deux*, to some haunting, melancholy Roumanian music on the Pan-pipes, adapted by Maurice Blackburn. McLaren exposes individual frames of the dancers up to eleven times for a stunning, sensual effect of multiple imagery.

But the film basically tells a story. In the beginning (i.e., pre-credits) is *The Note*. From the darkness emerges the rim-lit black-costumed figure of a woman, lying on her back. She rises, as if awakening to first consciousness. She sees her reflection as if in water and thus becomes aware of her own body. She tries it out, admiring her limbs and their substance. Then she strikes a pose. In the first of McLaren's superimpositions, the girl detaches herself from her body, steps out of her pose and examines it. Then she steps back from her position as self-examiner and examines that *image*. From her first awareness of her self as body, she has grown to an awareness of her self as an image.

The next stage in her increasing self-awareness occurs when she projects an image of herself which she then proceeds to fill. Her first projection appears on the right side of the screen, framed by her arms on the left as she crouches, as if she were reaching into the darkness for a self to realize. From self-consciousness she moves to self-conception, then to self-direction. These changes in the quality of her experience are attended by a refinement in the music; the full orchestra is sharpened down to the Pan-pipes.

Then the lady dances with her own image. This sequence suggests that the first stage of her harmony is narcissistic (or even onanistic, if one recalls McLaren's playful 1944 drawing of a "Chair for One or Two (Sex if two, masturbation if one)").² The image of identical selves dancing together is unsettling, especially when the illusion of symmetry is violated by the eventual crossing of limbs.

Now a man enters on the left foreground and watches her dance with herself. As he enters from the front, from the position of the film's audience, as it were, he is a reminder of community, of human otherness. With his appearance, the woman must choose between dancing with herself and dancing with the other. Thrice she retreats from the image of herself, and thrice from the man.

Ultimately, however, the man's attraction prevails. In a process of courtship he approaches her, follows her, and eventually kneels before her. At that point she splits into a series of selves which he spins around him. The self-image with which she had earlier danced was detached

from her; here she has a multiplicity of selves that are connected. The man has discovered in her a fluid and lively unity. Through him, her previous choice between selves has become a composition of many shades of self in continuity, where formerly there had been division.

The multiple exposure of their dance sustains numerous interpretations. For example, the flurry of their limbs may suggest wings. Or it may suggest the tingle of the lovers' skins to each other's touch, for their flesh is made to seem layered with feeling and responsiveness. McLaren's drawings, "Longing" and "Memory of the Kiss," are based on analogous imagery.³ Or the technique may suggest the suspension of time by the lovers' emotion and sensation, for the overlay of image enables the past experience to persist. Moments climax, as each position is shown to be the sum of the moments which led up to it. When the multiple limbs gather into one, there is a deep peace which suggests the emotional charge that even a moment of stasis can bear.

For a brief instant of separation the dancers/ lovers leave the screen black, to return in a climactic reunion. Where the girl earlier reached for herself, now the lovers reach across the dark screen to each other. They seem to pour into each other. When he spins her around again there is a vertical dimension as well as the circular. It is an image of — one is reluctant to say, for fear of violating the high feeling of the scene — a screw, as the woman makes a spiraling descent in the man's arms. Certainly the fluidity of the lovers' movements suggests the blending of their bodies. The film ends on the image of the tender and dominant man, a head taller than his lady.

A note of fullest and simplest harmony concludes the film, both visually and musically. The dance between two images of the same self was a false appearance of harmony; the dance between the two separate characters is true concord. The point of the film is that the unity of separates is richer than the separation of unity. The one is complement, the other duplication. Or, the one is fulfilling, the other fragmenting.

The phrase *pas de deux*, of course, is a ballet term for "dance between two." But it can also mean, literally, "not of two." This is the paradox at the heart of the film. The dance of the two female figures early in the film is not of two but of one, a delusion of harmony and of self-fulfilment. The dance of the two lovers at the end is not of two but of one, for they are lovers.

In *Pas de Deux*, then, McLaren told a little story. It had a moral: love, like the dance, like film, like any art, like life, fulfills the self by bringing it into an enriching harmony with another. Of course, the

genius of this work is that its moral is *done* without having been *taught*; it need not be spoken or directly brought to the viewer's shallow awareness.

Ballet Adagio is the opposite kind of film. There is no story-line, just the dance of David and Anna Marie Holmes in an adaptation of *Spring Water*. Nor is there any of the striking technique that characterized *Pas de Deux*. Indeed it is as if McLaren were deliberately minimizing his own artistry in *Ballet Adagio* to concentrate our attention on the dance itself. What stylistic intervention he makes serves that function. The camera remains in a level, frontal perspective, occasionally moving forward or back to vary its distance from the dance but not to ruffle our perspective. McLaren shot the ten-minute film at one-quarter the normal speed. As a result, the viewer notices the smallest element in each movement by the dancers, rather than absorbing the effect of the movement as a whole. The hair and muscles and individual steps are strikingly individuated. Instead of telling a story, the technique serves to anatomize the performance. Here the ballet is the subject, not the language, of McLaren's communication.

The results of this stark anatomy are striking. For one thing, much of the film is actually comical, given the grotesqueness of some of the motions when so slowed down for our scrutiny. And yet there remains the over-riding sense of the beauty of the dance.

Two basic paradoxes emerge from this film. One is the beauty that can result from the ludicrous flesh of man, with his bulging muscles and immutable bulk. For to have the delicacy of the dancer one needs pronounced sinews and firmly visible muscles. The film demonstrates that one must cultivate the flesh in order to transcend it, to dance beyond it. The second paradox is the vision of art as an extremely rigorous discipline, in contrast to the essential fluidity of human nature. So much of the dancer seems to be sprawling out of control — the strands of hair, the individual gestures. Yet the overall effect of the dance is to express the most concentrated degree of control, just as the effect of the ludicrous motions was beauty. The organ accompaniment seems to sanctify this transformation of man by his art and by his discipline. In the last image of the film, the woman seems to be flying off, but of course, she is carried by the quite earthbound male. The last image sustains the paradox of the artist's transcendence.

A survey of McLaren's other works will confirm the distinction drawn between the two ballet films: sometimes he tells a story, and sometimes he serves his subject with a more passive contemplation.

A Chairy Tale (1957) is clearly a narrative. A man (Claude Jutra) enters reading a book and attempts to sit on a plain white kitchen chair. The chair repulses him. At first he treats it as if it were a child; he plays hop-sotch with it. That failing, he tries to impress it by striking a military pose, again to no avail. He eventually wins the chair by addressing it/ her as an equal, by embracing her in the ardour of a Latin-American dance. Even then, he may not sit on the chair until the chair has sat on him.

On one level, this film is a parable about courtship and seduction ("A Chary Tail," "A Cherry Tale," etc.). But the chair is always still a chair. McLaren's technique of pixillation accords equal and continuous life to man and to object, as if to say that there is spirit and vitality in all things, if we but attend to them. In this sense it is the man who is the virgin, experiencing his first insight into fuller life. Ravi Shankar's score from *Scheherezade* support the romantic allegory but also recalls the instructive woman of its title.

On the other hand, *Rhythmic* (1956), McLaren's previous film, is a meditation upon the finitude of human power and the infinity of man's surrounding. In his parade of numerals McLaren personalizes the digits. For example, 3 marches like a guardsman, 4 epitomizes stability and sobriety, and 1 — well, 1 is the start of it all. He has humble origins in the alphabet; he is an "i" with a flea. Alone of the numbers, 1 has the respectability of the alphabet behind him so he may be something of a fallen angel. For language is a system of conventions that makes no claim to physical existence, until a Lyly or a concrete poet goes to work on it, that is! But numbers presume to embody a world beyond their own existence. The numbers' quantification assumes an authority beyond the signifying function of the alphabet. So *Rhythmic* portrays man's futile attempt through numbers to impose a sense of order on his chaotic and massive world.

The numbers march out to pose with their equation marks as a truthful statement of being. Their first collective assertion has the unstable shape of a diamond. Not until the end do the numbers achieve a stable shape, and for that they must call upon the alphabet to spell out "The End." The life of the film records disorder; only the conclusion can provide order.

The villain of the piece is zero. Zero is the void which the numbers strive to avoid by asserting their existence, by declaring an equation. But zero refuses to go where ordered or to stay where he must for the others' statement to be true, for their fabricated world to remain stable. Zero invalidates the other numbers' pretense to order, to control, to a stable

existence. To put zero back in his place, the "equals" sign is continually summoned, like two constables required to enforce equality. But the spirit of the void is not to be so easily controlled. The numbers march out their statement but zero continues to thwart them. Even when under arrest by the "equals," zero has the last laugh, for the 0 and the = form \cos , the cosine of calculus. Under arrest, zero refers to a higher order of mathematics (or existence) than that of the numbers who are trying to reduce him to conformity. Similarly, two zeroes join to form the sign of infinity, which further diminishes the universe of numbers 1 to 9. Finally, such is the power of zero that all the figures in his column contact his contagious wildness and incorrigibility; the other figures within the pattern show no personality. In the context of infinity and void, all human attempts at order and control are trivial. At the same time, the plucky spirit of zero makes *Rhythmic* one of McLaren's key statements about the indomitable quality of the human spirit in the face of conformist pressures.

Canon (1964) is a similar meditation, ostensibly about the structure of a musical form, but also about the tension between order and chaos, between regimentation and individuality. First, alphabet blocks perform a pattern of movement, then humans do, then a cat and butterflies. Again, "canon" is a musical term, but it also refers to the laws and regulations that restrict human conduct. In the world of canons, man, cat and butterfly are restricted to the motions of alphabet blocks, though man in his stubbornness and ingenuity may contrive to play variations within the forms imposed upon him (e.g., doing the number backwards, or upside down). The film is one of the great, playful expressions of the ironic spirit, that which says "No" in a silent subversion, thunder being forbidden.

Like his ballet films, too, McLaren's two "Phantasies" are of opposite types. In *A Little Phantasy of a 19th Century Painting* (1946) McLaren records a free-ranging process of association with a Gothic painting by Arnold Böcklin. It is as if a still picture were being brought to life. The basic image is the branch, variously embodied as plant life (growth), as a crack (disintegration), as fire (destroying or regenerating), as lightning (firing but illuminating), or as the webbed wings of a bird (the free, animating fancy). In any case, the branch motif makes it clear that this film is an exercise of the imaginative response to the picture. For example, a pillar grows out of some ruins, glows, then cracks into branch-like veins. Or a coffin bursts into flames which become an eagle. Even the images of death and disintegration express the creative power of man's associational mind. This film is one of McLaren's contemplations; the subject is man's imagination.

But in *Phantasy* (1952) there is a definite narrative line in the metamorphoses that record the processes of creation, regeneration and free-ranging fancy. A cross changes into a brain which becomes an egg-shaped cluster of feathers and flowers, from which is hatched a skyscape. Where the earlier "Phantasy" was a response to a painting, and a meditation on the process by which it evokes responses, this "Phantasy" is a narrative, albeit with the same theme, the fertility of man's fantasy.

Distinguishing between McLaren's narrative and meditative modes is most difficult where his technique and theme involve metamorphosis. In the first *Phantasy*, for example, his decision to metamorphose his shapes instead of using cuts or dissolves asserts a continuing life between the painting and the viewer's being. Similarly, *Hen Hop* (1942) might be considered a meditation on the continuity between egg and chicken, as the two shapes pass in and out of each other; in broader terms, we are invited to contemplate the individual's responsibilities to the fertility cycle.

As usual, McLaren's technique expresses the spiritual unity between dissimilar things. The chicken is the once and future egg. But *Hen Hop* is also a story about a hen who refuses to mate. The first stage is a dance between two words, "on" and "no", which are a sexual proposition and its rejection. The 'o' changes into an egg, which two chicken-feet pass as they search for a body.

There follows a dance between two pink (female?) and two black (male?) legs, in which the pink reject the black. Eventually the egg turns into a V, which in turn changes into "Save." At this level, *Hen Hop* is a commercial for war-bonds. But as Eisenstein proved in *The General Line*, there is nothing like a bawdy parable to fire up community spirit and patriotism. So in a tale about a spinster hen, McLaren conducts a debate between the white of virginity and the red of experience, between the spinster's "saving herself" and her communal responsibility to be generous in her use. A simple commercial explodes into witty paradox. Private saving is found inferior to generous communal savings. The square dance accompaniment makes no mention of partners, one must note, but it does spur the ladies on to relate to their "corners," their unattached neighbors, in the spirit of avoiding isolation ("Hurry up girls or you'll never get around").

McLaren's musical visualizations frequently take the form of bawdy or romantic parables, as the artist luxuriates in the fertility of his creation. For instance, in *Loops* (1940) the first red loop changes into a heart, then a triangle, then a square. An egg-shape courts the loop,

dances with it, even enters it before it sprouts a child. The last frame has two small squares, a heart, and a column — as a kind of geometrical family living happily ever after. There are similar kinds of courtship in *Boogie Doodle* (1940) and *Short and Suite* (1959). In all these cases, McLaren seems to be contemplating the interplay between music and abstract shapes, but his cartoons are straining towards little erotic narratives. The parable is most obvious in *Blinkety Blank* (1954), where two etched birds brawl, threaten cannibalism, and eventually metamorphose into other states of being. A divided screen is eventually crossed by an egg-shape that brings the warring birds together in a kiss, then in two hearts which in turn become an egg and a flurry of feathers. Here McLaren establishes the generic antagonism in nature, but overrides it with his spirit of harmony and fertility. Both by its technique and its spirit, the film declares the birdness of worms and the wormness of birds.

A corollary to his flowing images of metamorphosis can be found in the technique of pixillation in his Oscar-winning *Neighbors* (1952). Wholesale destruction ensues when two neighbors feud over possession of a flower growing between their properties. The pixillation gives the flower human attributes; it bows to the men when it arrives, it cowers under their blows. On the other hand, the men are further brutalized by McLaren's technique, by the roughness of their motions and by their horrifying conversion of face into mask. McLaren shrewdly resists individuating the men's characters, because his point is the essential brotherhood of man that wars violate. Thus radical differences between people are shown to conceal an even more basic kinship. One man reads a paper with the headline, "Peace Certain if No War"; the other, ostensibly of a different party, reads one headlined "War Certain if No Peace."

At the end of the film, both men are dead and buried. The pickets around the graves part to admit new flowers to grow; boards form a cross on each of the graves. Thus in their burial the war-crazed brutes are given Christian heroism and — in a touch of stinging irony — given the emblems (flowers) which they trampled to espouse. The irony recalls his 1943 drawing, "Liberty arms herself," where "I felt resentful at many of the things that were being done in the name of 'Liberty.'"⁴

Neighbors is McLaren's most obvious narrative film. But its techniques of metamorphosis and pixillation give it a contemplative quality. In the brutish, unflowing motions of the characters one finds McLaren contemplating the nature of man's martial instincts. The worst of man can be evoked by the finest of values (e.g., love of a delicate flower). For

war perverts the best in man. In *A Chairy Tale* McLaren reversed the negative for the scene where the man poses as a soldier to impress the chair. To McLaren, war is a reversal and a perversion of normal human nature.

McLaren's most obvious contemplative works are the abstract visuals offered as responses to musical works. In *Begone Dull Care* (1949) Oscar Peterson's jazz score evokes a prodigal array of visual styles, which may serve as a history of art, from primitivism through to the minimal art of a beam playing across darkness. The topic of this film is its very synesthesia and the joy of its invention. In *Dots* (1940), *Lines Vertical* (1960), and *Lines Horizontal* (1962), McLaren provides meditations on movement, color, and optical illusions. But the *Lines Vertical* begin to seem like doors and the *Lines Horizontal* like horizons, both of which beckon the viewer's imagination to exult in the creative powers of his senses.

Mosaic (1965) may seem like an op art combination of the *Lines* and *Dots* films, but this film is cast in an important narrative frame. It opens with a man whistling and casually juggling a white ball. As in *A Chairy Tale*, a thoughtless fellow is about to find his world teeming with unexpected and demanding liveliness. When he blows the ball into the air it assumes an independent career. It splits into expanding and contracting patterns of dots or balls. The body of the film is this fascinating scene of the changing balls. At the peak the balls seem to be an even grid, no longer individual balls, and they enjoy a variety of color that is in marked contrast to the dull black-and-white of the man's world. Eventually the ball settles down in its quiet unity and its neutral whiteness. The man returns, picks up the ball and starts off-screen with it, whistling and carefree again. But he explodes. He is replaced by "End." The suggestion is that his end came as punishment for not having recognized the power or the personality of the ball.

This fable that frames *Mosaic* makes the two basic points of McLaren's work. First, man can be destroyed by the powers that he unwittingly unleashes. This interpretation would take the ball as an emblem of military force, obviously an atomic explosive. But the ball can also be read like the chair in *A Chairy Tale* or the painting in *Phantasy*, as an item in our inanimate world that teems with imaginative and exploratory potential. In this reading the man's explosion would anticipate Tom's disappearance in the last shot of Antonioni's *Blow Up*: it is the end of the man because it marks the end of his sensory and moral commitment to life around him.

The different modes that we defined in the ballet films and in the two Phantasies occur together in *Mosaic*. The body of the film is the kind of abstract contemplation of form and movement for which McLaren is best known. But the narrative of the frame shows a more aggressive McLaren, an artist conscious of shaping his materials into a narrative line that will make his point about life and sensitivity.

Norman McLaren's films alert us to the life in balls and chairs, the heaven in a grain of sand and the eternity in the three-minute traffic of his animation table. McLaren is entranced by life and rhythm. But for all its technical inventiveness and its aesthetic delight, McLaren's work is the expression of an articulate and committed humanist. Whether he tells a story or he contemplates shifting shapes and hues, McLaren's objective is to reawaken his viewer's eye and heart. His universal following is due to the emotional and sensory impact of his films, but they are also amenable to the processes of critical analysis. Indeed, they are rich enough to demand such investigation.

Finally, one might suggest that the tension here described between the narrative and the contemplative modes may be the most distinctly Canadian aspect of this transplanted Scot's work. For Canadian film has never been comfortable in the kind of assertive narrative myths that characterize American films. The Canadian tradition has emphasized documentaries instead of heroic fictions. And even in its best story films, the Canadian experience records awe at the vast setting, not the American's heady conquest of it. Joyce Weiland's *The Far Shore* disappoints its audience because it is so Canadian in its space and meditative tempo. And in Michael Snow's *Wave Length*, there is the deliberate decision to ignore the murder-mystery story, which seems briefly to happen in the foreground, in preference for the continuation of the contemplative thrust onward through the picture and to the still open space of the sea. But uniquely among Canadian artists, Norman McLaren is the exultant explorer and awed worshipper of inner space, where the mind's eye scans unfathomable riches.

Notes

1. *Norman McLaren*, by Maynard Collins. Canadian Film Institute, Ottawa, 1976. The bibliography (possibly the most useful part of Collins's book) confirms the paucity of critical analysis of McLaren's work.
2. *The Drawings of Norman McLaren*. Tundra Books, Montreal, 1975, p.10.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 28, 29.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 17.