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Norman McLaren and Jules Engel: Post-Modernists

Dr. William Moritz

Of all the great names in animation, Norman McLaren has, paradoxically, suffered most from a kind of critical neglect. Everyone acknowledges his genius, but few discuss it. Numerous books and articles chronicle his life and describe his works, usually stressing the inventiveness of his filmic techniques, but rarely do they analyse his aesthetic qualities and achievements.(1)

Most texts oriented toward animation as a Fine Art - such as the catalog for the massive *Film as Film* exhibition that toured Germany and England from 1977 until 1979 - ignore McLaren entirely, while including Len Lye, Oskar Fischinger, Harry Smith, James Whitney and other animators who are McLaren's peers.(2) Aside from Terence Dobson's splendid paper delivered at the 1989 Society for Animation Studies conference in Los Angeles, which gave a close textual reading of McLaren's film *Synchromy* in comparison with Oskar Fischinger's *Radio Dynamics*, the only other serious critical analysis of McLaren's aesthetics comparatively is David Curtis's article "Locating Norman McLaren".(3) Curtis may have written the article in response to the *Film as Film* exhibition, which excluded McLaren and of which Curtis was the British co-ordinator. Curtis dares to speak the doubts that perhaps plague other serious critics, but which they feel awkward about articulating.

According to Curtis, McLaren's "work is too orthodox, too compromised, or evades too many questions". McLaren 'rejects the concern for the integrity of process and material that one associates with Modernism in Art'. In reference to McLaren's worry whether or not *Blinkety Blank* could hold an audience's attention, Curtis declares:

This orthodoxy undermines McLaren's recognition of the legibility and iconographic strength of the single frame. His unwillingness to allow the 'blink' to free itself from narrative association denies it the reflexive relationship with the viewer associated with the avant-garde and

Modernism.

Curtis concludes:

McLaren's progress towards a Modernist position suggests that in other circumstances he might have made a substantial contribution to the dialogue of film language pursued by the avant-garde...What does disqualify [McLaren's] work from participation in the avant-garde debate is his conscious adaptation and dilution of ideas to make them accessible to some notional average audience...No Modernist film-maker could operate under such constraint: the risk of incomprehensibility is an essential ingredient of all avant-garde work.

Curtis applies the Modernist standard somewhat inconsistently. He faults McLaren for making his non-objective films "anthropomorphic rather than abstract or concrete", yet claims that Len Lye in *Colour Box* "emphatically draws one's attention to the origins of his marks in the interaction of paint, stencil and film celluloid" and excuses Lye's potentially compromising connections with the British Government's film unit by the lame phrase "The GPO slogans could be equated with the stencilled lettering in Cubist Braque or Picasso!" While Curtis avers that Lye's advertising film "admits no other meaning" except the process and material of filmmaking, he claims that "for McLaren it is the correspondence of drawn line with the linear fiddle tune which matters - not the nature of the brush that made it". Lye's *Colour Box*, which Curtis judges as "perhaps the most radical avant-garde film of the 30s", is "entirely abstract" because "all its elements confirm the flatness of the 'picture plane'". Yet Curtis insists that "McLaren's drawings imply 'real' space", although he also claims that "McLaren's oeuvre as a whole shows remarkably little interest in spatial exploration", which, given films like *Spheres*, *C'est l'aviron* and *Around is Around*, seems false.

Curtis also falls into the trap of assuming the importance of techniques lies in priority of invention and usage. He goes to some lengths to point out that Len Lye may have had priority in drawing directly on film, though he allows that McLaren and Lye "independently invented the idea". Similarly, Curtis carefully notes that in the mid-1930s, before his own experiments with drawing sound, McLaren had seen Rudolf Pfenninger's and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy's sound experiments at the Film Society (Curtis fails to note that Oskar Fischinger's ornament sound was also screened at Film Society on the same series of programs). Certainly the question should be how interestingly an artist does something, rather than whether he did it first -- and both Lye and McLaren are interesting. In fact, in 1911 and 1912 the Italian painter Arnaldo Ginna made at least nine films - some abstract some representational - painted directly on blank film surface, and about that same time the German psychologist Hans Stoltzenberg also made some "direct" film experiments, concerning which he modestly notes in his book *Pure Light Art and Its Relationship to Music* that no one who grew up

with the marvellously hand-tinted films of Méliès and Zecca could resist trying to paint on film at least once.(4)

The chief flaw in Curtis' scheme is his assumption that McLaren is or ought to be or wanted to be a 'modernist' artist. Curtis judges McLaren "extremely eclectic", "equivocal and whimsical", and notes that "McLaren connects with the 'shared language' of animation" when, like early Disney and Fleischer studio films, he manipulates "the dynamics of movement...for no other purpose than to generate pleasure through a visual sensation." These characteristics are not those of a modernist artist but rather what we have come to think of as a 'post-modernist' artist -- someone who does not reject modernism but instead recognises it as one style among many while rejecting the ideas of progress and uniqueness of the new that informed modernism; someone who loves irony and double coding, rejects the privileged status of high art as opposed to popular art, and feels free to mix elements of past and present, abstract and representational, appropriated and invented, all redefined and revealed to a new audience.

Critics weave considerable controversy and diverse specifics around post-modernism by now - as E. Ann Kaplan, for example, details in her anthology *Postmodernism and Its Discontents* - often under the false assumption that everything which happened after 1980 is automatically post-modern. I refer rather to the simpler, clearer description of Charles Jencks in his lovely little booklet *What is Post-Modernism?* - veritably a post-modernist styled text.(6) And, like Jencks, I refer to the parable of Umberto Eco, whose test case for post-modernism is the person who feels like saying "I love you madly" but knows that this is already a cliché, regardless of how true it might be, so, as a post-modern person, wisely qualifies the remark with the perspective, "As Barbara Cartland would say, 'I love you madly!'", and thus, in an unspeakable world, is able to speak honestly."

Recognizing McLaren as a post-modernist opens the way to an adequate appraisal of his work. There is no reason to fault him for working in a variety of styles, both in live action and animation; he was conscious of art history and used it in fresh ways. *Fiddle-de-Dee* and *Begone Dull Care* are not failed modernist abstractions, but are rather non-objective art and visual-music, re-contextualized. *Phantasy* and *Spheres* are not failed surrealism, but rather post-modernist variations and recollection and deconstructions of Surrealism. There need be no embarrassment - as Curtis evinces when he refers to the opening of *Mosaic* as "jokey" - in recognizing McLaren's wit, for the reflexive beginning of *Mosaic* wherein the filmmaker sets the action in motion is no less filmic, no less meaningful, and far more honest than the more aggressive and condescending Modernism of, say, Peter Kubelka, Paul Sharits and Malcolm LeGrice. McLaren's association of the abstract dot patterns with a ball that the filmmaker can pull from his pocket and set in ricochet/rebound motion, actually enriches the response of the viewer in that it suggests a type of common experience which

involves the sort of mathematical trajectories celebrated in this animation. Long after modernists have risked incomprehensibility and lost, McLaren can still say "I love you madly" with his witty perspective on abstraction.

Or *Neighbors* (which Curtis judges to have "no challenging aesthetic ideas of its own") has indeed a very challenging post-modern aesthetic idea: to harness the specific energy of animation, the crazy energy of pixillation (which references the silent comedy/cartoon), in order to render yet another anti-war parable suddenly visible, because the cartoon energy satirizes (and forces a re-evaluation of) the gravity of Politics (as Picasso did with *Guernica*), while at the same time pressing the human tragedy into fresh relief, suddenly touching in its absurdity, because of a post-modern perspective using Eco's sense.

That Norman McLaren might be a post-modernist in 1940, twenty years before Jencks dates the first flourishing of post-modernism, should not be surprising. The forces of disillusionment with the capitalist idea of progress and cumulative superiority which caused architects and artists to abandon the academic/museum money/power forces behind modernism in the 1960s had been available to McLaren two decades earlier. He had travelled to a wretched Russia and to Spain under bombardment by Nazi technology, so he had seen more of the world than most by 1939, when he found himself literally a starving artist in New York, where the eccentric modernist whims of the Baroness Hilla Rebay von Ehrenwiesen, curator of the Museum of Non-Objective Painting and the Guggenheim Foundation must have further opened his eyes.(7) And in the short history and small world of animation, it must also have been clear to McLaren that the refined modernist experiments of Walter Ruttmann, Viking Eggeling and Hans Richter - and even Oskar Fischinger - reached far fewer people than any other animation and hence lost a great deal of their potential energy: already, less than two decades after their beginnings, all four of these artists were listed as having "lost" films in the inventory of abstract animation which Hilla Rebay tried to assemble for her museum.

As further corroboration of the idea that McLaren might be a conscious post-modernist (even before that label was devised to describe it), I wish to cite the parallel examples of two other artists: Grant Wood and Jules Engel.

Grant Wood is usually dismissed as a "regionalist" - which he certainly was in his devotion to Mid-West Americana - a label that excludes him from the modernist march of the "isms" towards a more perfect future.(8) Wood suffered greatly from being stigmatized and marginalized by art critics and museums and thus, like McLaren, had good reason to doubt the validity of the academic/museum/gallery system. A careful look at his paintings shows that his reaction to modernist hegemony in the art world manifested itself by ironic stylistic tropes that closely approximate

what would later be labeled "post-modernism". Amongst his serene, abstracted Iowa landscapes, Wood also painted canvases with undeniable "post-modernist" sensibility: the 1939 *Parson Weems' Fable*, for example, directly references Charles Wilson Peale's 1822 *The Artist in His Museum* by depicting Parson Weems lifting a curtain (ironically fringed with cherries) to reveal a painting depicting the boy George Washington confessing his guilt in having cut down his father's cherry tree. Wood further deconstructs the fable by depicting George with a boy's body but the classic adult Washington head portrait rendered by Gilbert Stuart (now known from the US dollar bill), and by setting the incident not in eighteenth-century Virginia, but in contemporary Iowa, before Wood's own home with an abstracted orchard behind it. A similar multi-layered irony pervades Wood's most famous painting, the 1930 *American Gothic*, which shows the farmer and his daughter (the butt of dirty jokes at least since Chaucer) as a formidable, sinister pair: the daughter prematurely aged in her severe plainness, with her body devoid of sensuous curves, the pattern on her dress lying flat as wallpaper; the father brandishing a lethal pitchfork to repel all traveling salesmen, the grim tightness of his stare and pursed lips forbidding, daring. Wood's 1931 *Victorian Survival*, reproducing with "photographic realism" a woman's portrait from a mid-nineteenth-century tintype, but inserting a modern telephone beside her, offers another example of conceptual wit linked to bravura technical virtuosity - as we have come to appreciate from post-modern painters of the 1980s and 1990s.

Among the California color-music artists (including Oskar Fischinger, James Whitney, Jordan Belson and Harry Smith) one artist, Jules Engel, makes work that functions very differently from the others, albeit no less brilliantly. While the others share a mystical bent coupled with a modernist faith that the very forms and processes of abstract art bear a heroic power of timeless, universal expression, Engel espouses a thoroughly post-modern sensibility: witty, eclectic, versatile, literate but accessible, classical but popular.

It could indeed have been Engel's friendship with Oskar Fischinger that freed him to an urbane contemporary perspective. Engel met Fischinger in the late 1930s when they were both working at the Disney Studios on the feature *Fantasia* and they exhibited their abstract oil paintings together during the 1940s and 1950s. Fischinger, almost tragically, embodied the archetype of the modernist: he was a very witty man and even made delightfully funny animations - but he refused to consider them as part of his genuine artistic product. Today we can see Fischinger's cigarette commercials or the rollicking adventures of two drunk men in his *Spiritual Constructions*, but he himself never showed those films together with his pure non-objective films and even threw away some of his representational work! Fischinger also failed to comprehend what he might have contributed to studio films; for *Fantasia*, he would only design and animate pure non-objective shapes - and he quit in despair when these were modified to semi-representational phenomena by the Disney staff. Years later, when

the elderly Fischinger sat painting abstract oils in his front yard, a neighbor, Norman Gollin (a prominent designer) stopped by and said, "Oskar, I saw a great movie you really should see."

"Is it abstract?" Oskar asked.

"No," Norman answered, "but..."

"If it's not abstract, it couldn't be great," Oskar insisted.

The lessons implicit in Fischinger's fatal confrontations with the practical everyday world were not lost on Engel. Jules had already begun creating abstract graphics in high school and at the same time discovered George Balanchine's choreography for the Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo (which used sets and costumes by many modernist artists). Jules's ardent involvement with the world of dance led him into animation, since Disney hired him to supervise the design of choreography for the dance numbers in *Fantasia*. Engel applied all his knowledge and talent to devising witty, dynamic sequences that were used in the final film: the brightly-colored, stylized "Russian" flowers seen from a low angle against a black background, or the striking perspective shots in the "Dance of the Hours" which show distant alignments of ostriches between the close-up ankles of the prima ballerina. Engel's subsequent work with United Productions of America (UPA), defining colour and styling on classic films like *Gerald McBoing Boing* and *Madeline* (both nominated for an Academy Award) further demonstrated how he could blend the refined 'high' plastic sensibility of modernist art with the 'low' cartoon, producing a fresh, engaging experience.

In Engel's own personal animation films, elements of dance choreography (not only ballet, but also modern dance and Broadway jazz dancing) intertwine with a variety of graphic styles that often reference modernist art only to recontextualize it. Above all, Engel builds conceptual wit into many pieces that challenges their status as 'high' art even as the formal elements threaten to function as pure modernism. Engel's *Landscape*, consisting of pure color flickers, he designates as 'Color Field Painting in Time', a certain contradiction that challenges the purity of the gallery/museum system validation of the long meditative stare, the rigorous study of the canvas. *Villa Rospigliosi* and *Gallery 3* similarly posit imaginary museums that show moving images, some from Engel's own oil paintings or Cy Twombly's ascetic calligraphy - and others referencing the thaumatrope and such 'archeology of cinema' philosophical toys - forcing us to think of how we see 'high' and 'low'. Another kind of conceptual puzzle emerges in *Accident*, a film constructed after an actual dream Engel had: we see a greyhound from one of Muybridge's motion studies, which is gradually erased, seemingly by accident, but actually by painfully careful repeated animation drawings. Engel comments, "My aim is to discover problems, not to solve them. I want to find things that you didn't know existed."

Wet Paint provides a parallel instance of conceptual reflexiveness in a wholly non-objective film: the graceful liquidity of drawn animated choreography seems to be interrupted by the insinuation of accidentally spilled ink that seems to run across the paper in random, aleatory oozes - all, of course planned and executed in repeated paintings. The title is a 'readymade', an object Engel found on a park bench. A parallel in Engel's gallery art might be his small wooden sculptures of chairs, almost like toy furniture, painted in Mondrian's neo-plastic primary colors, but each slightly eccentric in its balance or angles, weight and perspective.

Like McLaren, Engel has worked in live-action and documentary film as well as a range of animation techniques, including computer graphics. His masterwork, *Coaraze*, combines several techniques to render visible elusive universal aspects of everyday life. In a small village perched among remote French mountains, Engel's cameras follow the dizzy pitch of cobbled walkways and the regimented tiles of sagging roofs, exposing the miracle of light and shade, positive and negative, with astonishing freshness recalling the luminous intensity of Vermeer and Weston. He contrasts the flowing camera with stationary viewpoints (are these still photos? or still lives?), a silent choreography that questions the nature of movement and of accomplishment. He ruthlessly pursues the savage play of school children in the street, kicking and jeering each other in an uncomfortably familiar fashion - the violence of their "choreography" redefining the serenity of passive architecture, of innocence and maturity - for this medieval environment co-exists today to be exploited by high-tech cameras, which reveal that these "primitive", quaint people are painfully like us.

These elements of what would later be called post-modernism arose in the work of McLaren, Wood and Engel by a spontaneous process that linked their natural sense of humor, their conceptual wit and insight, to their disillusionment in the absolute, sacred power of art and the perfectibility of modern art. Their work was not a doctrinaire post-modernism, not part of a movement, but it must be honored nonetheless, perhaps more so, precisely because it was personal and original for these artists.

Notes

1 This would include such volumes as: Maynard Collins, *Norman McLaren* (Ottawa: Canadian Film Institute, 1976), Valliere Richard's *Norman McLaren, Manipulator of Movement* (London:Associated University Presses, 1982), or the special issue of the journal *Sequences*, No. 82 (October 1975), devoted entirely to McLaren, in which, for example, the four-page article of Gilles Blain "The Place of Norman McLaren in the History of Animation", 122-125, speaks only of McLaren as an absolute experimenter. The best critical text about McLaren (this is written before the publication of presumably major works by Terence Dobson and Donald McWilliams) is Alfio Bastiancich's *L'Opera di Norman McLaren* (Turin: Giappichelli, 1981),

which contains, in addition to thorough biographical and filmographic information, 65 pages of texts by McLaren, and 25 pages of critical analysis by Bastiancich wherein he refers to McLaren as a "retro-garde experimenter" and relates his work to theories of Rudolf Arnheim and Noel Burch - all in Italian.

2 Wulf Herzogenrath and Birgit Hein, eds., *Film als Film* (Kölnischer Kunstverein, 1977). A very different English version is: *Film as Film: Formal Experiment in Film 1910 - 1975* (London: Hayward Gallery, 1979).

3 David Curtis, "Where Does One Put Norman McLaren", *Norman McLaren Exhibition and Films* (Scottish Arts Council, 1977), 47-53. David Curtis, "Locating McLaren", *Undercut*, no. 13 (Winter 1984-85), 1-7.

4 Hans Lorenz Stoltenberg, *Reine Farbkunst in Raum und Zeit, und ihr Verhältnis zur Tonkunst* (Leipzig: Unesma, 1920). Reprinted in 1937, in an enlarged edition, despite the Nazi ban on abstract art.

5 E. Ann Kaplan, *Postmodernism and Its Discontents* (London: Verso, 1988)

6 Charles Jencks, *What is Post-Modernism?* (New York; St. Martin's, 1987). The Umberto Eco parable appears on p. 16.

7 William Moritz, 'You Can't Get Then from Now,' *Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Arts Journal* 29 (Summer 1981): 26-40 and 70-72. Joan Lukach's *Hilla Rebay: In Search of the Spirit in Art* (New York: Braziller, 1983), produced under the auspices of the Guggenheim Museum and the Hilla Rebay Foundation, minimizes the eccentricities of Rebay by careful excerpting from documents.

8 Wanda M. Corn, *Grant Wood, The Regionalist Vision* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).

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