NARCISSUS

photos: R. S. Diamond

Norman McLaren
Reflections on a life

"So I'm for Norman McLaren. I don't think we can appreciate him enough"

– British artist and filmmaker Len Lye

McLaren perspectives

The task of the filmmaker

"I always have the audience in the back of my mind. Very often an ill-defined audience. (Sometimes) as a more clearly defined audience. When making Rythmetic *I thought about children and hoped it would help children be interested in numbers. But even in any film, no matter how abstract it is, or concrete, I have an audience in mind. I think, I keep thinking, of a group of people watching that film and I keep looking out for the possibility of them getting bored. I think this is the task of the filmmaker – you're given this amount of time, and you've got a captured audience and you must keep them interested throughout that whole space of time and not let their interest flag. I'm terrified of letting an audience get bored."*
– Norman McLaren (1969)

The qualities of tragedy

"McLaren says a weakness of animated films is their inability to express tragedy. But many people find qualities of tragedy in his films ; in his use of comedy to stave off conflict, in the suppressed terror behind the beauty of such films as A Phantasy *and* C'est l'aviron, *in the lonely search through space, for what ? 'Space to me is a kinetic experience,' he says, and watching his films, one often feels oneself being drawn into that great infinity against one's will. Struggles between his characters never end in the kind of fights that are a cliché of U.S.-made cartoons ; their aggression at the point of crisis is turned back upon themselves through metamorphosis, perhaps as he turns his own aggressive tendencies back upon himself.* Neighbours *is the significant exception to this ; in it the violence became so strong that both Italian and U.S. distributors asked that it be edited.*

So complex is McLaren that people who have worked with him for decades say frankly they don't understand him. The symbolism of his movies offers a fertile field for psychoanalytic interpretations. His humanitarianism, which led one writer to call him 'a saint,' has a touching child-like quality to it, of one reaching out to be loved as well as to love. He dresses like a college boy, looks twenty years younger than his age, and has kept the youthful innocence and enthusiasm common to great artists. Far from taking seriously any thought he might express about giving up filmmaking, one shudders to think of what life would be for him without it; the necessity brings him in to work sometimes when he is so mentally depressed and physically ill that he frightens those around him."
– May Ebbitt Cutler

The McLaren process

"When I see a painting on the wall, I don't think of all the stages that led up to that. No, it's a complete work in itself, but in my own experience of doing paintings, I've been very conscious of the fact that they slowly evolve. That process seemed to me to be more important than the final result. When I do a painting – I'm not a good painter at all, I don't know when to stop. The whole thing is a process of chopping and changing around. I am more fascinated by the chopping and changing around than the final thing. This naturally led to trying to channel this into filmmaking."
– Norman McLaren (1969)

The modern artist

"And let there be no mistake – McLaren is a modern artist, working within the same psychic framework as Picasso, as Stockhausen, as Joyce ; it would be futile to compare him with Ford or Bunuel or Von Stroheim, for he is not a film director in the Hollywood tradition.

He is a man who, by pixillation, transforms his actors into puppets pulled by the invisible strings of the camera and then has his puppets stand in for humanity. A heightening of artistic process to enlarge the human senses.

He is a man who dares make a film using a single line (Lines Vertical, 1960). *And then, he turns the very same film sideways to produce a new and very different film* (Lines Horizontal, 1962). *With the senses still reeling from the sheer brilliance of his achievement, he then delivers a knock-out blow with* Mosaic (1965), *the combination of these two films at their points of intersection.*

He is a man who has spent his adult life in a constant attempt to communicate his love of harmony and gentleness, and his repugnance of violence and hatred."
– Maynard Collins

by Gordon Martin

Learned volumes have been written in dozens of languages about Canada's best-known filmmaker, Norman McLaren. Yet it is in the simple but elegant tribute of his friend and colleague Guy Glover, that both the most succinct and the most poetic description of the artist-animator's work is to be found :

> "Far from the talking picture – that vast province of the Cinema that borders, indeed overlaps, on the Realm of Language – there exists yet another province of the Cinema where talk is limited and which touches on the frontiers of Music and Dance.
>
> "In a corner of that province is to be found the little garden of Norman McLaren whose films talk only through image and movement."

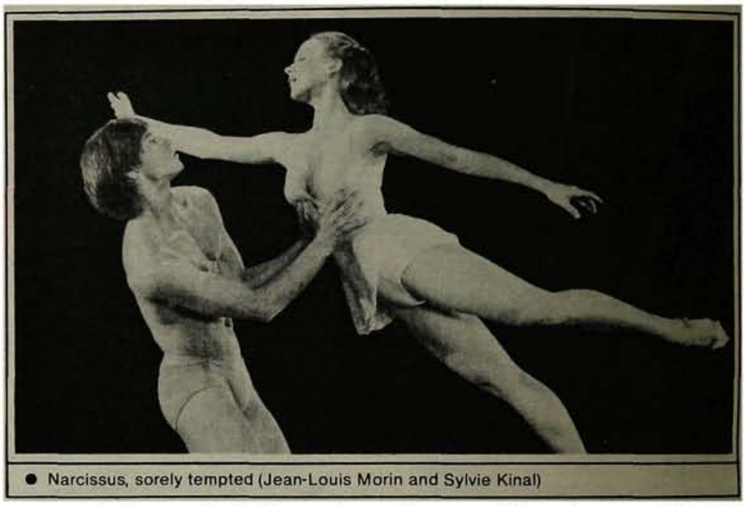
McLaren's mentor, John Grierson, once said "If there is such a thing as pure movie, be sure that McLaren has been one of its greatest exponents." Indeed it was Grierson who sensed the young Scot's genius when he saw *Colour Cocktail* in 1935 at the Scottish Amateur Film Festival. At the time McLaren was 21 years old and a student at the Glasgow School of Art. He had already completed two films as well as numerous exercises.

The Grierson connection which saw McLaren first join the General Post Office Film Unit in London in 1936, also accounted for this country's good fortune in providing a home and workplace from him for the past 42 years. In 1941, shortly after his appointment as head of the National Film Board, Grierson plucked McLaren from a short-lived yet productive period in New York, and brought him to Ottawa to inject a little fantasy into the sober images being produced by Canada's wartime propaganda film studio.

Although he had been given a free hand in this setting, McLaren, an instinctive pacifist and a gentle spirit, chose to contribute to the priorities which history demanded of Canada's filmmakers at the time. There followed a series of short films and clips, *Mail Early for Christmas, V for Victory, Hen Hop, Five for Four, Dollar Dance,* and *Keep Your Mouth Shut,* which are glorious expressions of the advertising art and definitive examples of the possible harmony between form and function. The first five of these were done without a camera and with the sparse resources of the time. They established McLaren's well-deserved reputation for economy both materially and creatively.

In 1944 McLaren formed an animation studio at NFB and worked with other young artists such as Grant Munro, René Jodoin, Evelyn Lambert, George Dunning, and Jim McKay, as well as musicians Maurice Blackburn and Louis Applebaum. It was a period during which enduring principles of animated filmmaking were established.

Chief amongst these is McLaren's preoccupation with movement rather than the slick static imagery and story line which characterize popular cartoons. Perhaps because he has created directly with pen and ink on film stock, his total grasp of the essence of cinema, or "movies" as he prefers to say, is uncluttered with sophistication and armchair reasoning. Writing for *Sequences* in 1975 he said, "The animator, more than any other filmmaker, realizes most that what lies *on* each frame is never as important as what *has happened* between each frame." For McLaren every film, or almost every film, was a kind of dance.



● Narcissus, sorely tempted (Jean-Louis Morin and Sylvie Kinal)

There were exceptions of course, but these occurred early in his career and only serve to illustrate his amazing versatility and his continuing role as teacher. In 1937 while working for the post office film unit, he made *Book Bargain,* a straightforward documentation of the production of the London telephone directory. In the role of cameraman, he shot Ivor Montagu's *Defence of Madrid* which was a front-line documentation of the struggle against fascism during the Spanish Civil War.

McLaren's absorbing interest in the form has allowed him to move freely from drawing directly on film stock, to creating cutouts and pastel drawings, to using the live-action image at varying speeds ranging from single-frame pixillation in *Neighbours* to a mix of slow motion and standard speed filming in his most recent film, *Narcissus.*

Ever-present in his work is technical challenge. "It triggers me off," he has said. "Often I have to investigate the technique first and then find the subject matter afterwards." Yet he refuses to leave his technical trials as unfinished exercises. Discussing the difference between experiment and art he says "an experimenter will get interested in a technique, shoot a lot of material using it, and assemble it in some kind of order which may be interesting to look at – bits of it will be interesting to look at – but for an artist, shooting the material is just the first stage. He has to weld it into a unity so that it is a complete experience with consistency as well as variety.

Montreal writer/producer Gordon Martin is directing an animated documentary about British animator Lotte Reiniger.

What distinguishes a film as a work of art is that source of unity and single aim and purpose of mind."

McLaren has often described how he sets technical and artistic limits for himself which become the challenge and direct his efforts and energy. In the words of author Peter Drucker, "Every problem can be seen as an opportunity."

Unity of form despite diversity of technique is not the only search for oneness in McLaren's work. *C'est l'aviron*, one of several films which he made based on French-Canadian folksongs, is a magic journey which draws the viewer inexorably into a union with the infinite. The Oscar-winning *Neighbours* with its powerful personal/social message concludes with unity, albeit in death. Whether the movement is animal as in *Pas de deux*, or geometric as in *Spheres*, there is always a yearning for unification, a kind of magnetic and orgasmic attraction of one object or body for another. This is offset always by the elusive dance of separation, perhaps best seen in *Chairy Tale*, which is a subtle and artist form of the chase sequence.

McLaren has also been a teacher of great talent. His imprint is to be found throughout the world and particularly in the National Film Board's two main animation studios. Here, especially in the French-language studio, animation is pursued in the style of the studio artist. No trace and paint sections are to be found here, in antithesis to Disney or Hanna-Barbera. Emphasis is on form, movement, and exploration of technique rather than story line. Although much of McLaren's influence as a teacher has come through his relationship with colleagues such as René Jodoin, he has also written articles, patiently submitted to countless interviews, and shared his techniques and vision in very deliberate ways.

In 1949 he was sent by UNESCO to China to instruct artists in the preparation of simple audio-visual images which were used to encourage tree-planting, improve community sanitation, and instruct villagers in health care. During this period he witnessed the change of political regimes and felt personally the stressful times which it brought for the ordinary people with whom he lived and worked. No doubt that experience was the stimulus for *Neighbours*, completed in 1952.

In order to create even greater access to his basic understanding of animation, McLaren made five didactic yet beautiful films, *Animated Motion*, during the years 1976-78. These have been followed by *Narcissus*, just completed, which is purported to be his final work in cinema. Perhaps the most autobiographical of all his films, it harmonizes art with personal and social statement. In it, the eternal dance of *Blinkity Blank*, *Lines Vertical*, and *Ballet Adagio* comes to an abrupt end. The metamorphosis and impressionistic imagery which are the hallmarks of McLaren films resolve into a cold external reality.

Whether *Narcissus* is his swan song or not, McLaren has spawned too many "children", inspired too many colleagues, shared his vision with too many viewers, for there ever to be an end. In his 59 films one finds the entire history of motion picture experiences, a delicate quest for the Holy Grail and one senses a reverence for the living and a respect for the inanimate.

So thank you, Norman! And, with a touch of nationalistic self-interest, thanks too to John Grierson for the phone call to New York in 1941.

Norman McLaren's

Narcissus

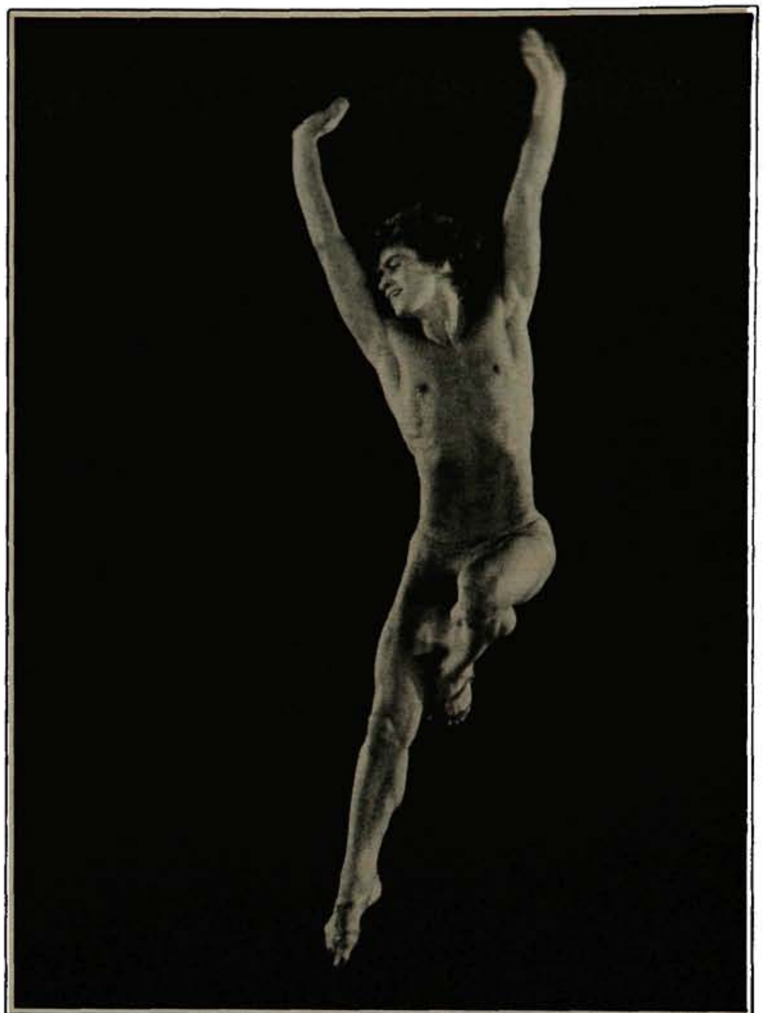
After screening Norman McLaren's 59th film, *Narcissus*, a small group of us met over coffee in the NFB cafeteria with producer David Verrall and assistant director Don McWilliams. Our discussion centred on the film's aesthetic impact, and how various techniques were employed to achieve certain modulations of motion, timing or colour density. McWilliams, who had been up all night cutting the test prints for this almost-but-not-quite final picture version, explained to us largely technique-ignorant critics the painstaking technical process involved in the composition of the film. We were duly impressed. But I was (secretly) delighted that I had just viewed a McLaren film in which the strength of its narrative content overwhelms its own devices. Not that this is the first of his films to achieve this: *Neighbours* (1952) and *A Chairy Tale* (1957) also carry clear moral messages. But most assessments of McLaren's work have (understandably) tended to concentrate on his technical innovations and achievements to the exclusion of his ideas. Maurice Yacowar pointed to this regrettable bias in his 1977 paper, "Norman McLaren: the Narrative and Contemplative Modes," saying how McLaren works seems to have generated more interest than what he is trying to express.

Narcissus is perhaps McLaren's most significant film in that it is a catalogue of his previous work, both technically and thematically. Like many of his previous films, it is concerned with human relationships – both personal (self-to-self) and interpersonal (self-to-others). The first of McLaren's "relationship" films had him establishing a one-to-one rapport with the medium, drawing, painting and scratching directly onto film stock. In his later films, he allowed himself the use of a camera, and experimented with a variety of optical effects to portray the fragile, mutable permutations of human relationships. His most obviously narrative film, *Neighbours*, employs the process of pixilation (figures are "animated" into movement by filming one frame at a time, then moving the objects between frames) to tell the tale of two neighbours who come to wholesale mutual destruction over the possession of one delicate flower. The pixilation process allowed for a limitless range of human movement, carrying the characters to deliberately exaggerated lengths in order to drive home the film's strong anti-war statement. *A Chairy Tale* is a live-action parable employing some pixilation techniques and manipulation of a chair (by invisible threads) to explore the arbitrary nature of interpersonal roles. But the film which most closely resembles *Narcissus* in both form and narrative content is *Pas-de-Deux* (1967).

Both ballet films use a variety of optical effects, such as multiple exposure, to extend and emphasize the dance movements and create a new choreography based on film time. The stunning, sensual effect gives the dance even more beauty than it would have if performed live on stage, and draws us closer to the dancer-character's inner conflict. Both films tell a similar story, with the same moral implications. Both portray the relationship of self-to-image and self-to-others. Each film opens with the dancer-character slowly arising from a prone position, awakening, as if to first consciousness of their own bodies. And for each, the first dawning of image-consciousness comes from seeing a reflection of their separate images in a pool. Each dances alone for a while, fascinated with the beauty and grace of their limbs. The young woman in *Pas-de-Deux* learns to project her image outward, gradually allowing it to embrace another person. Although she thrice retreats from the image of herself, and thrice from the male, ultimately the man's attraction prevails and her life is enriched through harmonizing with him. But the male youth in *Narcissus* (Jean-Louis Morin) projects his image outward, only to reflect and dance with himself. He is, at first, perplexedly compelled by the joyous, playful nymph (Sylvie Kinal), then the unself-conscious hunting companion (Sylvain Lafortune). But he ends up spurning each in favour of dancing alone. As in *Pas-de-Deux*, the blur-sequences of flurried limbs suggest wings. This occurs when he dances with his companions, implying that harmony with others frees one from the prison of the self. In the end, Narcissus finds himself imprisoned behind red-brick walls and bars, where he will pine away for love of himself.

Texturally, Narcissus is the more seductive film. Its technical wizardry is less pronounced than that of *Pas-de-Deux*, but it has a "prettier" surface, basked in golden glows and rich, deep blue tones. It is, after all, the story of surfaces, of a youth who failed to distinguish effect from content, and who mistook the superficial for reality. As a dance film, it succeeds in capturing the magic of motion, while, at the same time, transmitting a strange, conflictual tension and sterility. The ancient Greek Narcissus myth is probably more poignant today than it ever was. In an era where people are turning in droves toward ritualistic self-improvement as a means of staying their underlying profound sense of despair, this "image perfecting" only intensifies the isolation of the self. The warning implicit in the myth, and in much of McLaren's later work, is that a sense of community is essential to one's well-being. Norman McLaren has chosen to end his artistic career with a bleak prognosis for humanity.

Lyn Martin ●



● Jean-Louis Morin of the Martha Graham Dance Company as Narcissus

NARCISSUS conceived and directed by: Norman McLaren **asst. d.** Don McWilliams **choreography** Fernand Nault **music comp.** Maurice Blackburn **dancers** Jean-Louis Morin (Narcissus), Sylvie Kinal (Nymph) Sylvain Lafortune (A friend) **soloists** Margot Morris (harp), John Newmark (piano), Robert Langevin (flute), Maureen Forester (voice) **asst. to d.** Lorna Brown **cinematography** David De Volpi, Jacques Fogel **cam. assts.** Andrew Kitzanuk, Nash Read **optical cam.** Jimmy Chin **sp. cam. des.** Eric Miller **elect.** Guy Remillard, Walter Klymkiw, Claude Derasp, Roger Martin **music rec.** Louis Hone **sound mixing** Jean-Pierre Joutel **artistic cons.** Grant Munro, Vincent Warren, Tom Daly **make-up** Brigitte McCaughry **set const.** Jean Parisien **loc. man.** Marcel Malacket **unit admin.** Diane Bergeron **p.** David Verrall **exec. p.** Derek Lamb, Douglas MacDonald **p.c.** National Film Board of Canada, 1983 **running time:** 22 min. 8 sec., 35mm, color.