Your heart is beating 24 times each second to teach us how simple and beautiful an illusion of life can be. We will be listening to you forever.

— Robert Bresson,
Notes sur le cinématographe

"Your camera catches not only physical movements that are inapprehensible by pencil, brush or pen, but also certain states of soul, recognizable by indices which it alone can reveal."

— Robert Bresson,
Notes sur le cinématographe
Cont. from p. 27

Norman McLaren's films speak for themselves. For the most part they speak without words and rely on visual and aural experimental research that brings them closer to the visual brain rather than the speech brain. His films create their own meta-language. They fly in the face of form. They make use of rays that built the international reputation he built with over 200 awards including Oscars and Palme d'Or. Those films were the bricks that built the international reputation of that place and this country.

It was just like Norman to go out in such a self-effacing way. I first remember him when I came through the NFB on a tour in 1971 with my film school. I saw him in the hall. We were all awestruck. Silently he passes by... wasn't that... that was. Wow! Tucked away in a private world with private friends and feelings, he was nevertheless a real live gentle genius creator.

Once I got to graduate into this silly world, I had the opportunity to look at a lot of his early films. I was amazed to find a film he made with Helen Biggar in his Glaswegian (Glasewegian) days called Hell Unlimited (1946) which many consider to be the world's first peace film. It glowed like hot glass on the screen. It said more about disarmament and development than a thousand speeches at the United Nations. I had been watching and programming a lot of peace media and it seemed to me that this film said a lot more than any other anti-war film in a shorter amount of time.

Hell Unlimited was among a certain number of his films that displayed what we now call 'social consciousness.' It was heartening to discover that besides being a cinematist he was a political man as well. His politics were those of colour and line and synthesis and music and humanism and commitment and compassion and peace and love. Although in his early days he may have been an ardent supporter of the Left (he went to Madrid in 1936 with Ivar Montagu to make a film to raise funds for the Republican cause in the Spanish civil war), he didn't let dogma dominate.

He may have mellowed into another kind of civil servant, working with the General Post Office Film Unit in London and the NFB here, but the Griersonian influence was important to his social self. Indeed, one of his most important films was made within the framework of the NFB. The definitive Neighbours is 8 minutes and 10 seconds of absolute pacifist poetry which won him eight awards including the Oscar in 1953 and has been seen by everyone in the world except Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev. I don't know if it's coincidental but 8 minutes and 10 seconds is the amount of time that it takes for a ray of sunshine to reach the earth from the sun. McLaren was the sun and his films were rays of sunshine. They reflected his quest for new cinematic expression and the expansion of his various speeches at the United Nations. They burst upon the cinema screens of the world.

It may seem that McLaren, in the later years, allowed his political self to become subsumed by his more pure visual research. I first met Norman when I brought him down to the Cinématheque Québécoise to show Hell Unlimited at the New Cinema Festival in 1983. The overall audience applauded wildly at the end, recognizing its visionary wisdom. Norman remained quietly appreciative. I was standing outside the screening room with a big white bucket, looking for public donations so we could help another anti-war filmmaker, Peter Watkins, make his new film The Journey. Norman and Guy Glover came by and slipped what was, for us, a large sum of money into the pail and wished us good luck. We ended up producing the film with a lot of good luck.

Ironically and fortuitously, we ended up editing the film at the NFB in the same room where Norman worked after 1956. I put up a production still from Neighbours on the outside of my door. That was another good sign. After, I talked to him irregularly about Mary Ellen Bute, a wonderful pioneer animator with whom he had worked on Spook Sport in New York in 1940. I met him for the final time last year at a conference on peace and security called Illusions and Realities in the Nuclear Age.

It seems to me that Norman McLaren knew about illusion and reality in this nuclear age. He was at McGill University to receive a special award, acknowledging NFB filmmakers for their contributions to peace education, and to be honoured by the university's creation of an annual prize to be awarded to a student who "demonstrates exceptional talent in media studies and manifests
After he died, I was sad. Working late that night at the Board getting ready for our premiere at Berlin, I felt his spirit in those sacred halls. Something was there and lost and found again – a spirit of creativity, of joy and play, of social significance. That meant something to Canadian culture.

That weekend I went with my two-and-a-half year old daughter, Mira to a retrospective screening at the conservatoire, one of several that had been organized to honour a man who wished for no flowers. It seems that such tributes always come too late.

As we walked several of his films, Mira got up out of her seat and found a space on a balcony where she could stare intently at his magic in the dark, just as I had done when I was young. As C'est l'airon (1944), one of the films from the Chants populaires series, came up she began to move rhythmically to the folk song and was bathed by his flickering light show. She worked herself into a wonderful dervish dance and began to laugh, thereby disturbing most of the other serious cinéphiles in the audience who were there in respectful silence.

As she danced on, impervious to the world, I'd like to think that Norman would have been there dancing too. The shadow of his soul dances on for what we hope will be the next generation. It dances on...

Peter Wintonick
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