Coda

Interlude: Animation’s Dance
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by Erin Manning

1. Animation is not the art of DRAWINGS- that- move but the art of MOVEMENTS-that -are- drawn.
2. What happens between each frame is much more important than what exists on each frame.
3. Animation is therefore the art of manipulating the invisible interstices that lie between frames.

—Norman McLaren, qtd. in Pierre Hébert’s Corps, Langage, Technologie

The art of movements that are drawn is animation’s dance of the between. When animation dances, it foregrounds incipient movement rather than actual displacement. Norman McLaren works with movement’s incipience, creating techniques to animate this virtual quality of the in-between. His techniques are many, including those he invented: the pastel method, which he first used while creating Lâ-haut sur ces montagnes (1945), and the stereoscopic three-dimensional technique used in Around is Around (1951). Each of the techniques for animation McLaren invented or used involves making the virtual interval of movement’s preacceleration felt.

Like Étienne- Jules Marey before him, McLaren’s experimentation with the incipience of movement involves creating new techniques to catch movement in its passing. His interest in technique is an exploration with the technicity of the “how” of movement moving: “How it moves is as important as what moves” (McLaren 2006). The how of movement moving is movement’s virtual becoming, its preacceleration. Movement’s preacceleration is expressed in animation through the active interval between frames. Thanks to the persistence of vision, the interval between frames remains imperceptible as such, the moving-image apparently a seamless unity across the cuts of the frames. Yet the interval is nonetheless active in the watching: it is a virtual event in which the spectator unwittingly participates. We do not actually see the interval, but we do feel its force as it infolds into the perception of movement moving.

In his work, McLaren explores the feeling of movement moving. He asks: How do we activate this feeling, and keep it active in perception? To make incipieny appear, McLaren privileges movement over “content”: “For me, the ‘purest’
cinema is that which communicates the essential of information, thought, and sentiment by movement itself, and allows no other factor or almost to intervene” (qtd. in McWilliams 1990, 17; my translation). To allow no other factor to interfere ensures that movement remains the subject of animation.

The interval is never neutral. It holds in abeyance the traces of movement- passing and prepares movement- coming. That we do not see movement as such in the interval suggests that to experience the feeling of movement is not to view a displacement. It is to sense the force of a movement taking form through its preacceleration. This is what McLaren means when he says he seeks to “film the essence of movement” (qtd. in Bastiancich 1997, 102; my translation).

McLaren draws movement such that it takes consistency not on the frame itself but across frames. Thus, movement is felt not in a pose but in its experiential taking form across time and space. Keeping such a complex process of animating alive involves creating different techniques for different animating scenarios. McLaren was very pliable in this regard, creating forms of animation that evoked the complexity of the kinds of movement he sought to create. Sometimes he drew directly on the film stock; sometimes he filmed the prosesal traits of a painting in progress; sometimes he filmed with stereoscopic techniques; sometimes he used an optical printer. Each of these and many other techniques were used to explore the consistency of the virtual interval—movement’s preacceleration—as it expressed itself through the experiment of the “how” of movement moving.

Animating movement is not restricted to drawing in McLaren’s work. For McLaren, sound plays an equally important role, often providing the rhythm for the moving intervals he draws. “For myself, indeed, with an abstract film the most pleasing forms are those which come closest to the music.

There must be visual equivalence” (McLaren 2006). Begone Dull Care (McLaren 1949) Works this way, its sound animating the surface of the film. In this eight- minute short, the music of the Oscar Peterson Trio carries the becoming- forms of the images shifting across frames, themselves folding into the musicality of the sound. The visual forms are resonances of color and line more than they are figures. In one particularly evocative section, the colorful screen shift s to black and white, the complex colors morphing into the simplicity of a line. It is as though the consistency of the image were reshaped by the quietening of the sound. The minimalism of the foregrounded line is felt as an animation of the music’s affective tonality. The line is perceived through the sound more than it is seen visually, shading into a dot, then reappearing as a line dancing with another line, melding into a musical singularity, then decomposing into the traces of its passing, the piano dancing its formation, the activity of the line appearing and dispersing over a black background with slight traces of color that momentarily dot the screen, only to disappear almost as soon as we’ve felt a change in tone.

This dance of the line’s transformation evokes a
quality in McLaren’s work that resonates with his desire to make animation dance. His focus is
never on the completed image but on the ways its transformation alters the process of experience.
“It’s constantly changing,” he writes of the process of animation’s dance, “You’re repeating a
drawing with change and it’s the change that’s the interesting part” (qtd. in Richard 1982, 32).
Drawing-with, McLaren plays with the potential for animation to become animate form.

Greg Lynn defines animate form as the activity of force within movement’s animation,
distinguishing it from the action of movement's displacement. For Lynn, animate form “implies
the evolution of a form and its shaping forces; it suggests animalism, animism, growth,
actualisation, vitality, and virtuality” (1999, 9). The process of animating form involves working
with the force of the incipiency of movement’s preacceleration rather than with the addition of

Marey’s later work on movement, in Pas de deux McLaren uses a chronophotographic apparatus to
focus not on movement’s poses but on the activity of the interval through which movement’s
preacceleration can be felt. “I had always been interested in the ballet in its purest form, stripped
of narrative and anecdotal conventions. I like movement for movement’s sake. Abstract ballet”
(McLaren 2006).

Abstract ballet divests ballet of its fixity, foregrounding the experience of movement’s
taking form as accompanied by the techniques implicit in movement’s execution. Abstract ballet
does not devise a movement that negates ballet’s precision. Rather, it foregrounds the quality of the
interval that emerges between the rehearsed, ordered, precise techniques of balance, strength,
and extension that define ballet. In this regard, McLaren’s exploration of the affective potential
of balletic precision is close to the work of the Frankfurt Ballet as choreographed by William
Forsythe, where what is foregrounded is not the hold ballet has on movement, but its potential to
use techniques to transduce the precision of pose into the qualitative open-endedness of force
taking form. Foregrounding the affective tonality of ballet’s technicity gives McLaren’s film its
grace. Pas de deux is an experience of grace taking form.

A few sequences stand out. In the first, a solo woman dancer is lit up against the black screen.
Her body is outlined by the darkness of the background, the light almost piercing through her,
lending to her form the quality of an evanescence. She moves alone at first. Then, her alone is met
with the trace of her movements evaporating. Movement emanates from the poses of her
movement stilling, traces of her becoming-movement left behind. And then she leaves the
pose of her stilled body to move somewhere else. At different time intervals, the posing body
follows her continuing movement, creating a refrain of past movement in future becoming. Soon these traces of the surplus of movement passing begin to take over the apparent stillness, folding through the animation’s dance, landing not into the next pose, but into the surfacing of its disappearance.

The solo dancer in Pas de deux dancer her own form- taking, her displacements soon no longer discernable as such. Foregrounding the virtual event of movement moving as animate form, McLaren makes the process of force’s contribution to form felt. Incipiency is perceived not in the execution of a movement per se, but in the elastic force of movement’s decomposition, allowing “form to occupy a multiplicity of possible positions continuously within the same form” (Lynn 1999, 10).

For Lynn, the most important factor of animate design is the “co- presence of motion and force at the moment of formal conception” (1999, 11). Animate form is not about adding force to the already- thought or to the already- executed. It involves working with the force of potential that is co- constitutive of animation’s dance. This is how McLaren works in Pas de deux. Rather than off ering a filmed version of the ballet dancers’ performance of the pas de deux, he opens the force of movement moving to perception.

Pas de deux animates movement’s virtual preacceleration as it takes form. The pas de deux itself—a dance choreographed for two in which the male dancer supports the ballerina in slow movements, a dance that involves a solo for each and a final coda in which the couple dance apart and together—traditionally represents relation through the choreography of the partner’s coupling. The history of relation’s role in the pas de deux is key to McLaren’s exploration of the intensive passage from incipiency to displacement. Rather than foregrounding the representation of coupling in the dance, McLaren uses the relation between the dancers to make felt the rhythms of passage from the virtual to the actual and back. He plays with the beyond of coupling, making felt the way movement moves the relation. By the end of the film, the feeling of relation has become so intensive that the separateness of the bodies no longer stands out. The individual dancers have melted into the interval, relation itself foregrounded.

In traditional ballet the coupling often feels choreographed and standardized. What McLaren achieves in Pas de deux is the transduction of the coupling into the force of individuation taking form through the quality of movement tracing its future- anteriority. This individuation is not the taking- form of a single individual. It is the essence of movement felt as the becoming- body of dance.

In the last section of the short film, after the coupling has disintegrated into the intensity of relation, the incipiency of movement becomes so intensified that what is foregrounded is no longer dancers dancing, but the interval itself. We watch as becoming- bodies of force taking form individuate, emerging through the traces of blurring movement meeting movement. Animation’s dance becomes crowded with preaccelerations, intervals of movement forming not held to the precision of the balletic pose, but fl
uid in the transformation of the actual into the virtual. In a steady rhythm of transformation, the choreographed pas de deux morphs from an ordered geometry into a fluid topology, the becoming- spiral taking over the shape of the dancers’ bodies, proposing an individuating curvature poised on the cusp of becoming.

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Reference:
Cher Maurice,

j’ai pu regarder à l’O.N.F. des traveux récents, Sphère, Synchrony, pas de deux et Baller Adagio ; j’ai été émerveillé en sens inverse ; ce que vous fait est unique au monde, unique dans l’histoire du cinéma, j’aurais les larmes aux yeux en regardant vos films et je ne sentais un cinéaste bien fou qu’en voyant vos danseurs en slow motion sous une strong é motion.

Mlle Hempling m’a fait la joie de m’offrir un tirage d’un dessin de vous, 3 beaux oiseaux. Je voudrais vous souhaiter bien courage mais vous êtes le, mettre en scène le plus courageux, je voudrais vous souhaiter de la chance en de la joie mais vous ayez vous même la chance en la joie.
Je peux seulement vous souhaiter une bonne santé, un bon retour au travail et vous dire, avec humilité mais aussi avec force, que je vais admirer pour ce que vous faites et pour ce que vous êtes,

nous nous sommes rencontrés il y a une dizaine d'années au Festival de Montréal,
c'est pourquoi je suis venu,

fidèlement votre

Lettre de François Truffaut à Norman McLaren (octobre 1973).
McLaren's Negatives

by Marie-Josée Saint-Pierre
2006 | 10 min. | Color, 35mm. Film

https://www.onf.ca/film/negatifs_de_mclaren
Hambre | espacio cine experimental

Florencia Incarbone
Geraldine Salles Koblanski
Sebastian Wiedemann

Norman McLaren
Um dossier | Un dossier | A dossier

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