The Limbo of Shapes

Queer Synaesthesia, a Revolutionary Act of Affect

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by

Amanda Robusti

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Certification of Approval

I certify that I have read The Limbo of Shapes: Queer Synaesthesia, a Revolutionary Act of Affect by Amanda Robusti, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Arts in Cinema Studies at San Francisco State University.

____________________________
R.L. Rutsky, Ph.D.
Professor,
Thesis Committee Chair

____________________________
Aaron Kerner, Ph.D.
Professor
Abstract

The Limbo of Shapes: Queer Synaesthesia, a Revolutionary Act of Affect explores the experimental animations of the Scottish Canadian filmmaker Norman McLaren through a theoretical approach that here is proposed under the name *queer synaesthesia*. Indeed, McLaren’s surreal and abstract tales are examined into a plurality of meanings and sensations in a pictorial liminality and in their historical framework, the first half of the 20th century among trauma, propaganda, and fascism. Sexuality, affect, and the suspended time of possibility (the time that still has to come) are brought to fantastical life in McLaren’s whimsy and colorful animated films, in which a synaesthetic visuality challenges a pedagogical linear viewership. These experimental films express a *queer synaesthesia* that enhances a filmic experience rooted in the affect of metamorphic images, queer fairytales in a limbo of shapes that defies normativity and the masculine singular time of fascism.
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Introduction

Fantastical, metamorphic, and abstract imaginaries dance on the film stock of the Scottish Canadian filmmaker and animator Norman McLaren, in the act of playfully teasing the spectator’s bodily senses. Explosions of color and whimsical shapes arise on a monochromatic background and merge into one another in a continuous movement of mutation and creation. Imaginative images amalgamate with the puncturing and scratching sounds created directly on the film stock; analog modulations blend into the syncopated rhythm of jazz music. McLaren’s cinema envisions a liminal dimension in which dots, lines, and forms entangle in a comedic and mischievous choreography, arranged in a colorful landscape that remains dislocated from reality, but which is also a space for joyful spectatorship. Abstract tales in a phantomatic space and time: the limbo of shapes. Traditionally in Western culture, limbo is an afterlife space envisioned by the Catholic dogma that was famously represented in Dante’s canonical 14th century work the Divine Comedy. Nonetheless, limbo is a multifaceted notion and ultimately in McLaren’s animations, it is re-situated into a liminal dimension untied from canonical depictions and outside time, but at the same time linked to limbic responses. In this realm of possibilities, a visual and philosophical reinvention results in a visceral engagement that displaces norms and conventions.

The Limbo of Shapes gazes at the plurality of changing forms in McLaren’s often revolutionary creative vision, in which abstraction, experimentation, and synaesthetic affect result in what I refer to as a queer synaesthesia. This thesis uses this concept as a theoretical approach to

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McLaren’s work, through which sexuality, affect, and the suspended time of possibility (the time that still has to come) are brought to fantastical life. Indeed, McLaren’s experimental animations are at the core of this synaesthetic, liminal aesthetic, in which the historical shadows of the war, trauma, violence, and oppression are re-situated into a queer dimension. The surreal aesthetic and abstract imaginary of these films are informed by McLaren’s own sexuality, whose homosexuality made him a disobedient body inside the heteronormative ideal and hyper-masculinity of the first half of the 20th century, emphasized by dictatorships and wars.\(^2\) In this space, McLaren’s Communist and pacifist ideals provide undertones for these surreal tales that allure the viewer into a synaesthetic viewership, where sound, vision, and the haptic are encountered.\(^3\) In this frenetic game of teasing the bodily apparatuses, films such as *Spook Sport* (1940)\(^4\), *Blinkity Blank* (1955)\(^5\), and *Loops* (1940)\(^6\) defy the Western understanding that relegate animation to children’s entertainment. *The Limbo of Shapes* proposes these experimental animated films not as children’s tale, but as *queer fairytales*.

In McLaren’s magical tales, the cinematic concept of space is re-created as a shifting and often indeterminate non-space. A colorful reinvention that undermines the figural representation of the body, in which pictorial abstraction playfully deconstructs and re-creates the subject within a new synesthetic, surreal, and queer vision. Indeed, queer theory generally understands *queer* as a verb, as Michael Warner, author of *The Trouble With Normal* (1999) writes: “We queer things

\(^3\) Dobson, “Norman McLaren: Between the Frames,” 14.
\(^4\) Norman McLaren, 1940. *Spook Sport*. Film. Canada: National Film Board of Canada.
\(^6\) Norman McLaren, 1940. *Loops*. Film. National Film Board of Canada.
when we resist ‘regimes of the normal’: the ‘normative’ ideals of aspiring to be normal in identity, behaviour, appearance, relationship, etc.”

7 The filmic experience in McLaren’s short animations is queered, as it defies assumptions of normative and conventional filmmaking in its dislocation of a linear narrative and of a human figure, in its refusals of realism, and in its commitment towards a poetical evocation. These elements are evident even in his commissioned commercial works for the airmail service in the United Kingdom, in which Love on the Wing (1938) tells a surrealist love story through a cameraless approach, where conventional representations are overturned in favor of shapeshifting forms. McLaren created drawn stick figures on the film frames without a fixed existence that transmute from umbrellas, mail, to a winged character, in order to project a sentimental mood in the queering of forms of this surreal aesthetic that defies norms. Thus, the limbo of shapes enacted in McLaren’s abstract vision is embodied through, as I have noted, a queer synaesthesia, an approach that calls for a cinematic form that expresses content through abstraction rather than realism. This politically dissident act unveils the heteronormative capitalist power structure that governs the representativity of the cinematic art, which is queered in the surreal, painterly impact of his colorful and humorous production. The viewership of these experimentations is rooted in their affect, where sounds and colors merge in a synaesthetic resonance that evokes the other sensory apparatuses and the subject’s own creativity in the re-formulation of a plurality of meanings. Acoustic and visual systems merge into each other, and the filmmaker actively teases the optical apparatus, as superimposition, after image and a fast-cutting pace directly affect the viewers’ perceptions in rapid succession. The hierarchical structure that

privileges one sense over others is contested and reframed, as the ear and eye became intermingled in this synaesthetic entanglement of music and image. Lively drawings create a fluid imaginary that fuses with the soundtrack, an outcome enhanced by McLaren’s technique of creating his animation on the base of music or in the puncturing and scratching sounds made directly on the film stock, which result in the image and sound becoming corresponsive. In fact, his technical approach is based on a synaesthetic merger of music and image, as these elements intertwines and support one another. In, for example, the cameraless *Dots* (1940) McLaren engraves the soundtrack onto the film as well as the playful blue dots that enact a humorous choreography, in which the visual form is presented as a continuous perceptive stream instead of an isolated and singular element. This visuality disregards individual frame divisions and, in opposition, the film is hand-painted two or three feet at the time, resulting in the dismissal of the image-by-image effect. In the cinematic liminality of these rhythmic colors, the explosions of forms fluidly dislocate normativity and compel an enjoyment of the possible, a utopic moment of an undetermined future time in a no-place.

*Queer Synaesthesia* employs two terms that have a broad and poetical vast meaning, a concept underlined by their respective applications within various fields. Indeed, in the last decades, the term *queer* has flourished both in academia and in relation to advocacy and activism for the LGBTQIA+ Community, as it entered mainstream political discourse on sexuality and gender identity. In the political sphere, *queer* introduces a statement of fluidity into the public discourse, a notion that complicates the conventional understanding of Other in the dichotomy of

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the gay/lesbian-straight binary. Conversely, with *queer* there is an implied openness of identity and sexual orientations, which further broaden this dualistic assumption, shedding a light on many individuals whose existence is placed outside the canonical cisgender and gay/lesbian-straight binary. The term synesthesia comes from the Greek, *syn-aisthesis* a union [*Syn*] of sensations [*aesthesis*] or sensations felt together. In fact, in medical terms, it is a rare clinical condition that insurges through a hyper-stimulation of the senses, which leads to an intersection of physical perceptions. It is a multi-sensorial experience, where the patient may taste colors or experience the visual conjunction of sound and color. Synaesthesia is also a cinematic trope that has been connected to films, such as David Lynch’s surrealist tale of love and revenge in the city of dreams *Mulholland Drive* (2001). A synaesthetic approach to the film that author Jennifer Barker positions as a modality of being in space and time, rather than a metaphor, rare clinical condition, artistic device or historical trend. Indeed, *Mulholland Drive*’s hallucinatory sensual disjunction calls for a sensory excess that unveils a double system of vision and proprioception in the act of interacting and interrupting one another. In this synaesthetic experience the overflow of sensory stimulations emphasizes how visuality is interconnected to the other bodily apparatuses and how cinema is not purely a visive mean. These various theoretical possibilities implied by synaesthesia, underline the encompassing term that it potentially represents in cinema. Nonetheless, at its core synaesthesia relates to the bodily experience and to its affect, an

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12 *Mulholland Drive* (Studio Canal, 2002).
intersection of the senses that in this thesis is re-framed through McLaren’s abstract production. A synaesthetic approach that, as Barker underlines, re-places the spectator into a radically different moment in time and space, suspended from realism and unbound from human time. In fact, the cinematic experience is not centered solely on the eye and at its core there is an intersection of techniques and bodily senses, as Barker notes: “Those moments of cinematic, sensory ‘excess’ are sensual reminders of the degree to which vision is entangled with other senses. The surface reality ascertained by vision is only one layer; the big picture is more complex, and its perception and depiction are necessarily synaesthetic.”

**Norman McLaren: an existence in continuous metamorphosis**

Norman McLaren was born in 1914 in the Scottish city of Stirling, where he spent his formative years in the aftermath of the chaotic years of World War I (1914-1918). Nonetheless, his early adulthood was signaled by the oppressive establishment of the European dictatorships that inaugurated the violence of the Second World War. Indeed, the body of work of the imaginative filmmaker is grounded in his historical moment, among the war and its aftermath, a period shaken by trauma, violence, and propagandistic images. These events pivoted his life, as upon attending the Glasgow School of Art, he left in order to work under his mentor, the documentarist John Grierson at the GPO in London. This experience was followed by the beginning of a new and prolific career in Canada at the National Film Board, where he would establish its world-renowned animation department. McLaren’s eclectic and diverse life reflects

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this metamorphic century, where his artistic vision and sexual orientation constitute him as a disobedient body inside the dominant heteronormative structure. In fact, his homosexuality is well known, but it should be emphasized that this was the period before the gay liberation era and the 1969 Stonewall Riots. An historical moment where the notion of the closet, or in Michel Foucault’s terms silence, was a key element in the life of what we now know as the LGBTQIA+ community. McLaren’s films are not apolitical; instead they demand a reversal of viewership, in which the spectator is an active mediator of their surreal visuality. Indeed, the open form of these films opposes a singular pedagogical experience and in turn they challenge a polarized political view through the union of opposite colors, like red and blue, in the continuous mutation of shapes that contrast a fixed essence. In this liminal space, the emphasis on the synthetic union of sound and image reminds one of the bodily sensations stirred by the synaesthetic collision of music and image into a magical and abstract storytelling of creation, union, and metamorphosis. Furthermore, McLaren politically supported Communism, but above all else during his life he committed to a pacifist ideal, a refusal towards war and conflict that seeks a peaceful resolution. Indeed, McLaren’s anti-capitalist ideals were underlined by a trip to Russia in 1935, where the films and montage theory of director Sergei Eisenstein ultimately persuaded him to pursue the moving image. His social emphasis on a peaceful solution and unity is directly informed by the World Wars, propagandistic icons, trauma, and the Red Scare. McLaren’s films stand in antithesis with these elements, as they aim towards an open content form that challenges established artistic

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19 Dobson, “Norman McLaren: Between the Frames,” 81-82.
format and the conservative representation of an unequivocal truth. McLaren’s playful approach to the cinematic medium embodies a search for a new artistic language grounded in the experimentation of new creative forms. Indeed, McLaren expressed his surreal aesthetic in all his films, such as the 1961 short film *Opening Speech: McLaren*, in which the filmmaker is in the act to give the welcome speech at a film festival, but a mischievous microphone tricks him with a will of its own. In this surreal slapstick comedy the director is caught by his own film trickery, and it finally ends with him jumping inside the screen, where animated multi-language titles welcome the spectator.

**Figure 1: Opening Speech: McLaren**

![Figure 1 Still frames from Opening Speech: McLaren, Norman McLaren, 1961, National Film Board of Canada](image)

McLaren experiments and merges diverse styles in his productions that strive to contest artistic boundaries. Visual borders are opened in the synaesthetic experience into the possibilities of the image, a liminal threshold in opposition to the dichotomous understanding of the rational mechanization of dictatorship. Indeed, in 1936 McLaren visited Spain as a camera man for director Ivor Montague during the Civil War (1936-1939) that ravaged the country, which established the

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long-term dictatorship of Francisco Franco with the aid of Italian dictator Benito Mussolini and of the German Nazi party leader Adolf Hitler.22 McLaren’s trip in war-stricken Spain ultimately reinforced his pacifist ideals. The violence, trauma, and aftermath of the extensive bombing he witnessed fortified his anti-war stance and made him fearful of modern warfare, as he wrote in a 1938 letter to his parents: “Under the shadow of such a future, it is quite impossible to think of a career in film directing with any hope at all... I am only glad I didn’t go out to Spain again.”23

Chapter 1

Disembodiment of the human figure in the Limbo of Shapes

The experimental animations of McLaren create a surreal aesthetic in which the frames become canvases onto which his paintbrushes depict a cinematic view of a liminal space, where the human body is eliminated. The disembodiment of a human figure and the abstract imaginary challenge a conventional personification with the subject on screen, as it precludes a conventional reading of the object-gaze based on Jacques Lacan’s theories of the mirror stage. Indeed, Lacan’s mirror stage became a turning point in film theory of the 1970s, which is emphasized by Laura Mulvey’s canonical feminist essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.”24 Mulvey’s analysis of female representation and male pleasure in cinema emphasizes and uncovers the subconscious structures that represent female bodies as silent images against which the male gaze is able to project its own fantasies and fetishes. The power of the male gaze is informed by the patriarchal ideological

22 Dobson, “Norman McLaren: Between the Frames,” 83-84.
23 Dobson, “Norman McLaren: Between the Frames,” 85
foundation of oppression and the filmic screen becomes a fundamental element in how we perceive, inform, and create reality. The surreal and abstract forms enacted in the experimental animation of McLaren undermine the actualization of the male gaze, as character identification and the fetishism of the female figure are radically displaced through the large absence of female and male forms.\textsuperscript{25} Furthermore, in films like the short, cameraless \textit{Hoppity Pop} (1946),\textsuperscript{26} through their minimal and shapeshifting signs, the Scottish filmmaker disregards classical editing techniques as from the opening, he presents three minimal shapes on the pitch-black frame in a frenetic moment of mutation: a blue curvilinear doodle, a minimal red hourglass, and a green “X”. Crucially, the subjective shots and objective camera, formal elements at the core Mulvey’s argument on male pleasure in the cinematic art, are excluded from his animation. Indeed, Mulvey’s essay is grounded in Lacanian theories, especially the concept of the mirror-stage, the moment in which the concept of ego is firstly created, when the subject identifies with the reflected images and creates its own perception in relation to an-Other. Indeed, for Lacan the agency of the image is necessary for the formation of the ego that unfolds through an inter-relation.\textsuperscript{27} In this passage the object is not merely a reflection of the visual, but it has an opaque quality of hidden elements. The mirror does not simply passively reproduce these concealed components, rather it constitutes it and reduces them into a singular image-as-an-object which needs to be created through an

\textsuperscript{26} Norman McLaren, 1946. \textit{Hoppity Pop}. Film. Canada: National Film Board of Canada.
An operation that is overturned in McLaren’s experimentations, which for instance the short animation *Hoppity Pop* underlines. The film is based on multicolored shapes that transmutes at the rhythm of an organ, where these metamorphic forms coalesce at times into recognizable symbols, a green cross becomes, an “X”, or a division symbol and, on the same pictorial plane, a stylized blue flower turns into the infinity symbol. These quirky forms transform constantly into new shapes while changing their position on the film frame in a frenetic choreography of continuous transmutation, in which their bizarre forms decontextualize prior assumptions of symbolism and create another image of the absurd that subverts preconceived symbolism. McLaren’s artistic vision queers reality, in which the understanding of normativity dissolves and the hierarchical relationship created through the capitalist ideology are shattered. Similarly, it is this Lacanian image-as-an-object operation (the inscription of the One) that author Pietro Bianchi describes in his book *Jacques Lacan and Cinema: Imaginary, Gaze, Formalisation*:

> It means that something that did not exist before is created as an object but at the same time we come to believe that this “something” had always been there: it was part of an already existing reality that we just happen to perceive.  

This construction of reality and existence enacted in the inscription of the One is re-framed at in the experimental animation of Norman McLaren, where cultural productions of visual perception are repurposed into what could be called the *inscription of They*. These animations expose a plurality of perspectives, sexualities, and sensations that tease the senses through a surreal liminal space of synaesthetic pleasure, where music and image re-situate spectatorship as an active bodily

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moment. The sense of plurality represented by these experimental works re-frame the subject into a queered vision in antithesis to the polarized view of the far-right politics and of the Red Scare. Indeed, in the years of the Cold War, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) Security Service began extensive investigations in order to purge suspected Communists from the NFB, which remained under ideological attack and resulted in the layoff of three employees. 30 In light of these premises, McLaren’s experimental filmic approach subtly hints at leftist ideals in which his queered animations question the affect of the senses through the dislocation of formal elements of the cinematic tradition. The linear narrative is abandoned as well as a pedagogical meaning. In fact, McLaren’s films do not preclude a political vision; rather these are politically dissident films that alluringly recreate a world outside the repression of the dominant heteronormative ideology embedded in the male gaze. Fantastical tales in which the spectator needs to soak in the fluidity of an extratemporal space, in a liminal synaesthetic dimension of surreal storytelling, as the queer chicken dance of *Hen Hop* (1942) playfully portrays in this 35mm camereless animation. The short colorful film is centered on the extravagant choreography of a bird that is queered in its non-anatomical, non-conventional, and absurd figurative representation, in which on the blue and red background the chicken is firstly created by his legs. From the lower apparatus of the animal an egg takes shapes that evolves in a headless being, who carries on a surreal dance that intersects with the rhythm of the music in an excessive stimulation of bodily functions as impossible movement are formulated. In *Hen Hop*, McLaren plays with culture assumptions under the cross-cultural dilemma that question: which came first the chicken or the egg? This ancient folk paradox

questions the origin of existence itself, as an eloquent and convincing argument can be made on both sides of this argument, each chicken is born from an egg, and each egg comes from a chicken, in which the body of this animal represents a conflicting evidence of existence. 31 Hen Hop twists this contradictory dilemma by creating the chicken from the lower apparatus; bodyless legs run among the frames through an absurd metamorphosis of its figure as it dislocates into fine lines or in a headless being. In fact, the disembodied limbs walk up and down across the blue directionless background on a path of eggs, where the chicken is newly formed in a surreal dance of an upside body that deconstructs itself by unrolling into a black abstract line. In the alternation of the drawing style, the word “save” is illustrated on the frame alongside the eye, crest, and wattle of the queer chicken that transforms into a surreal egg.

**Figure 2. Hen Hop**

![Figure 2 Still frames from Hen Hop, Norman McLaren, 1942, National Film Board of Canada.](image)

In the abstraction and queering of representation, the filmmaker subtly and humorously hints to his sexuality through the fluid and metamorphic shape as a plurality of existence intertwines with a non-heteronormative presentation of the subject, as McLaren’s fondness for birds and, especially

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chickens, was an instrument of self-identification. The existential paradox that the chicken dance of *Hen Hop* embodies subverts the existential dilemma into a surreal vision where a binary understanding (chicken/egg) is discarded in favor of the union of these two elements, as they join together in the synaesthetic open time of possibilities. In this surreal aesthetic, *queer synaesthesia* addresses a disobedient representation of the subject, which resists the normativity of realism and in turn proposes a fantastical realm of the imaginary as the excessive shifting of these forms unveil a dimension of the possible, where the canon of the normal does not exist. McLaren’s films, such as *Hen Hop*, refuse to be defined by the Lacanian-Mulvey view of the Symbolic Father, neither through narrative as “Sadism demands a story” nor to be reduced to mere fetish objects for the male gaze, as these animations lack a linear narrative storyline and a gendered realism of bodies.

*Queer synaesthesia* re-situates the joyful limbo of Norman McLaren into a resistant approach of social and political defiance, where the trauma and propagandistic images of his time are challenged through the evocation of the comedic and mischievous abstractions that dance on the colorfully painted filmstock. These are experimental animations open in content towards a liminality of the possible, in which forms and music merges into a visual resolution in direct contrast to the polarized texts of the era of dictatorships.

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Abstract Queer Fairytale in the Limbo of Shapes

In the darkness, a hasty colorful sparkle explodes on the screen, where the abstract form creates the first frame of Blinkity Blank. The 1955 short animation won first prize for shorts at the acclaimed Cannes Film Festival.34 Blinkity Blank follows McLaren’s artistic vision of teasing, playing, and surreally drawing an abstract tale directly on the film stock. The pitch-dark background of the film becomes the canvas for volatile illustrations that explode on the screen to the rhythms of the music of Maurice Blackburn, the Canadian composer who prolifically created soundtracks for the NFB.35 Syncopated tempos entangle with the animation; drawings are rapidly edited in a game that plays with the viewer’s eyes, as it teases the spectator’s visual system through persistence of vision and the effect of the afterimage on the retina. McLaren’s liminal, synaesthetic, and fantastical films are modern queer fairytales, where abstraction becomes a magical trope into these open content films. Folktales and fairytales have a general root from the ancient Greek mythos meaning tale, the term has a parallel in English to the expression “telling stories.”36 Indeed, in their surreal and abstract foundation, McLaren’s film still have a narrative element; however, their storyline development is in opposition to a conventional linear and dramatic understanding, as they rely on evocation rather than explicit elaboration of a plot. Among the extensive filmic production of the Scottish Canadian animator, it is possible to separate between films with a more complex narrative structure (e.g., Spook Sports, Blinkity Blank, A Phantasy) and a simpler one.

(Sychromy, Dots, Loops, Scherzo). Nonetheless, these surreal films follow Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s model of the rhizome, which alludes to a non-centered plurality, an open structure whose heterogeneous elements intersect among one another, in the endless moment of becoming. McLaren’s playful animations are rhizomatic tales of fluid and open synaesthetic experience, surreal tales that become anti-fascist tropes through which the queer synaesthesia enacted in the limbo of shapes unveil a plurality of possibilities. Indeed, the world of fairytales never appears old to the reader, but always suspended in time, in a metaphorical locus outside human time. This is similar to the surreal extratemporal animation of McLaren, as the bright monochromatic frames refrain from a conventional understanding of time and space anchored to the lived world. In this endless being in time expressed through the fairytale world, McLaren’s animated shorts capture a childlike simplicity that abstract the viewer from reality and transport them into the imagination of the possible, a notion underlined throughout his production, from Blinkity Blank’s minimalist aesthetic of surreal encounters to Hen Hop’s queer chicken dance. In this synesthetic voyage the allure of the impossible is dislocated and reconstructed in the limbo of shapes, where tales are queered through the subversiveness of their representation, narrative structure, and viewership. These stories are told through the gaze of a queer man, whose identity was in direct conflict with the heteronormativity of society, whose irreverent game of forms politically challenged the system in place. Critically, queer cinema is not a genre, but an ensemble of films that subvert the heteronormative gaze through a political reclamation of representation of queer stories and

37 Byung-chul Han, Hyperculture. (Medford: Polity Press, 2022), 27.
subjects, a cinema that denounces the apparatus that suppresses and prohibits these individuals.\textsuperscript{38} McLaren had a conflictual relationship with his sexuality, which is also reflected in his historical time where his homosexuality was juridically, culturally, and politically denounced. This reserved and conflicted approach to his own sexuality is underlined in McLaren’s private letters, as he writes of his fear towards the reaction of his parents to the romantic relationship between him and his life-long partner Guy Glover.\textsuperscript{39} Nonetheless, his social involvements and a queer aesthetic that inform his artistic production, which is emphasized in his narrative films alike the 1957 short film \textit{A Chair Tale}.\textsuperscript{40} This film is a surreal short story centered on a man trying to sit on a chair that refuses this act, which leads the protagonist to dance a whimsical choreography with it. At one level, the film unveils exploitation as the chair demands the same rights as a human subject in this socialist metaphor.\textsuperscript{41} It also seems to present a wry commentary on McLaren’s own relationships.

The \textit{queer fairy tales} enacted in McLaren’s colorful productions involve a utopic storytelling that envisions the world of possibilities outside of time and still yet to come, where his gaze poses a reformulation of his Marxist ideology in a colorful world of colors, in which mutation and metamorphosis surround and welcome the disobedient body into a non-violent world. Ernst Bloch’s extensive writings on the fairytale help to explain McLaren’s reformulation of the fairytale, which in Bloch’s thought serves as an instrumental example of utopia, in its projection of possibilities for revolutionary change.\textsuperscript{42} Indeed, Bloch’s insightful rephrasing of the folk and

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{39 Dobson, “Norman McLaren: Between the Frames,” 156}
\footnote{40 Norman McLaren, 1957. \textit{A Chair Tale}. Film. Canada: National Film Board.}
}
\footnote{42 Zipes, “Breaking the Magic Spell,” 146-147.}
\end{footnotes}
fairytale as utopian projects crucially has at its core a general aesthetic theory that addresses the understanding of the utopian function of popular and high culture, which brings him to merge the folk [oral] and the fairy tale [literary].\(^43\) Bloch’s aesthetic understands art as an anticipatory-illusory formation of an accomplishment that still has to come, a notion that is in stark contrast to Hegel, who understand art as a reflection of a metaphysically determined truth.\(^44\) In its ancient tradition, folk tales persist as common people strive and dream for the possibilities of a better reality, where the utopian impulse of every human being has been represented through the imagination.\(^45\) Similarly to McLaren, Bloch is situated in his historical time of the First and Second World War and he confronts the hyperrationality promulgated in the rise and affirmation of fascist regimes. The fairytale becomes an anti-fascist trope as he underlines its enclosed utopian perspective, which is grounded in a folk understanding that subverts the arbitrary use of reason that directly repress the subject’s ability to challenge the world as autonomous creators of history.\(^46\) The whimsical subjects that reverberates in McLaren’s joyful limbo create contemporary, utopian fairytales that through a synaesthetic animation express a freedom and magic that is in direct opposition to the rationalization project of modernization of fascism. Indeed, *Blinkity Blank* presents a fast-cut montage, in which the illustrations are rapidly showcased in an extreme succession of after-images, where recognizable elements appear: umbrellas, eggs, and birds, beloved elements of McLaren’s vision. The surreal encounters simplicity in this liminal space, in which the umbrella of the opening sequence becomes a bird, a stylized animal whose everchanging

\(^{44}\) Zipes, “Breaking the Magic Spell,” 156.
body is seen as a line, dots, or as an only feather. McLaren’s storytelling evokes a story of metamorphosis, an encounter among two similar opposites that come together in one renewed subject, a reminder of a phoenix, the mythological animal signifying rebirth. The surreal aesthetic is omnipresent in *Blinkity Blank*, with heavy emphasis on metamorphic figures, where umbrellas magically become birds and then again mutate into iridescent sparkles. The colors, red and blue, of these two entities creates a sense of contrast in the plot that is also underlined in color theory, as they are understood as a hot and cold color respectively. Indeed, In *Blinkity Blank*, these two sides encounter and stride with each other, as in one instance the ‘blue bird’ tries to touch its counterpart, but is burned by it. Yet, the stretched leg line of the knocked character seeks its red mirror image and, at that moment, a moment that exemplifies merger and creation of life takes place, where their lines fuse creating an egg that allegorically introduces acceptance and fusion of sexualities.
Chapter 3

Queer Synaesthesia, a political act in the limbo of shapes

In the IV Canto of the *Divine Comedy*, the liminal space known in the Catholic tradition as Limbo makes its first literary entrance in the 14th century literature. Critically, the Limbo, as depicted in the Dantesque tradition, belongs solely to the Catholic dogma as the Papal authority established this dimension in the Medieval age. This religious space of torment sheds a light on the prejudices of the Catholic doctrine, where in this no-place tears, torment, and sighs accompany the shadows of these souls, whose only sin is the absence of the sacrament of baptism. Dante takes a compassionate view of the souls in Limbo, unlike the emotion associated with nine circles of the Inferno, underlining the paradoxical theoretical position of this dimension.\(^\text{47}\) In fact, the pain of the souls residing in limbo have an innate innocence, a reality that emphasizes the intersectionality of religion with culture and power. The liminality of this dimension does not preclude a social and political role: limbo is a site of political power, in which its representation in the *Divine Comedy* provides a compelling example. Indeed, this dimension cannot be placed either as part of Hell, Heaven, or Purgatory, as it unilaterally denies the subject salvation on the base of the doctrinal sacrament; for these reasons the existence of Limbo remains an ambivalent and ambiguous no-place. The paradoxical ambiguity contained in the Limbo is traced in McLaren’s animation where forms, time, and space are placed in an imaginative dimension where a realist translation is unattainable. The openness of forms in the uncategorized space of Limbo can be traced throughout these films, as McLaren’s 1939 cameraless animation *Scherzo* demonstrates in the playful

encounter of pink dots that choreographically move on the green background with the sound directly engraved on the film stock. The film is introduced as ‘a non-objective study’ in which its title reflects this premise and the humorous undertone of its viewership as it refers to the formal up-tempo passage in music and to Italian word ‘scherzo’ that translates in English as ‘prank’ or ‘trick’. Scherzo’s dots and the visible pink brushstrokes of McLaren create an ambiguous dimension in which these forms cannot be categorized as they do not fit into a definable space or meaning, much like Limbo. Similarly the uncategorizable quality enclosed in Limbo is parallel to Queerness, that defies categorization and a fixed existence.

Figure 3. Scherzo

Scherzo alongside all of McLaren’s animated production contains a plurality, an open form, and an open narrative that are the antithesis of a propagandistic production. The trauma and propagandistic images of his time are challenged through the evocation of the comedic and mischievous abstractions, which open content merges the image with the music into a visual resolution in direct contrast to the polarized texts of the era of dictatorships. These films are in antithesis with the propagandistic art of far-right regimes both at a formal and political level, as queerness occurs both at a political level, through its challenge towards heteronormativity and to the ideological system that informs it, and on a formal level. The conventional representation
grounded in realism, a dramatic linear narrative, a fixed subject, invisible editing, and a plot closure are formal elements that are abandoned in queer filmmaking and in experimental filmmaking. These two modes overlap and in films such as *Dots* (1940) or *Loops* apparent differences of the recurring colors used by McLaren create new surreal subjects through abstract form, in which there is a metaphorical union of sexual identity and political peaceful encounter that address the director’s inner life. Indeed, the filmmaker deemed the technical restraints of his experimental approach as minimizing the conscious input on his films, which in turn would give prominence to his subconscious processes.\(^{48}\)

*Queer* as a positive self-identification term is a re-claimed word, a term that still has a contentious history and an implied political and social understanding of resistance towards the heteronormative patriarchal dominant ideology. Capitalism, violence, and oppression are disembodied in McLaren’s production, whose pacifist and Leftist ideals pervade his vision in this liminal space. A famous example is the political surreal narrative film *Neighbours*\(^ {49}\) (1952) in which two neighboring men begun a struggle over the ownership of the land and its newly born flower that ultimately results in its destruction.\(^ {50}\) This metaphorical short is among his most explicitly political and anti-war films, in which McLaren also subtly hints at his homosexuality in its homoerotic sexual tension. The film received worldwide acclamation, although his mentor John Grierson expressed strong negative comments and incited his pupil to focus on his colorful animations. Indeed, the documentarist pioneer emphasized his enjoyment for McLaren’s

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\(^{50}\) Dobson, “Norman McLaren: Between the Frames,” 101-105.
experimental animations over their juxtaposition to what he saw as the cumbersome propaganda of the time, in which propagandistic icons permeated radios, films, and posters. Nonetheless, contrary to Grierson’s opinion of an apolitical entertainment in these animated shorts, the *queer synaesthesia* enacted in McLaren’s limbo of shapes is a political event. A revolutionary dissident act that overturns normativity and challenges its ideology in the formal disembodiment of rules and convention both at a political and at formal level. As queer is non-categorizable and it is interwoven with the experimental approach itself in their drive towards the mixture of techniques, the contestation of norms, narrative structure and their openness towards an aesthetic in opposition to a singular meaning. This plurality of forms and formal techniques is shared both at a queer and experimental level, as the cut-out short animation *A Phantasy* (1952) emphasizes. The colorful surreal tale underlines the diverse visual elements used by McLaren, where on a geographical displaced setting, a series of objects transmute and poetically vanish from the frame, an object that appears as a ferry wheel becomes a clock, which form is synthesized into translucent spheres in a continuous renewal at the rhythm of Maurice Blackburn saxophone and synthetic sound. Indeed, queer synaesthesia performs a queer revolution in the creation of an abstract world of pacifist encounter and unlimited openness that directly opposes the fascist ideology both at a formal and content level, through an evocative narrative that is devoid from a linear pedagogical meaning.

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Chapter 4

Queered abstraction in the limbo of shapes

As previously mentioned, although never publicly stated, Norman McLaren’s homosexuality is well known, and his life partner and fellow NFB director Guy Glover was an active collaborator in his artistic production. The reserved and hidden approach to their sexuality was the norm in the historical moment of the Second World War and in its aftermath, where Michel Foucault’s notion of silence was a survival strategy and everyday reality for the Community. Crucially, Foucault considers silence as almost entirely political and places it before the beginning of discourse, as it exists before the very concept of differentiated reality and, in exchange, silence becomes more fundamental than truth or identity.52 Silence enters the Foucauldian discourse of power-relations through understanding it as a form of oppression, in which emphasis is posed on who must be silent, who is able to perform speech, and the content that is been uttered.53 The limitation and suppression that give birth to Foucault’s silence underline the control performed by the State towards marginalized groups in their sexuality, social class, and ethnicity. Prior to the Stonewall riots, McLaren’s generation was especially affected by this performative silence, and it was the social condition that allowed individuals from the Community to perform in society.

Sexuality is expressed through the intertextuality of these abstract films, as Foucault underlines: “The private life of an individual, his sexual preference, and his work are interrelated not because his work translates his sexual life, but because the work includes the whole life as well as the

text.”  

McLaren’s shorts enact a poetical subversion in which his abstraction allows for a freer expression of his inner life and of the possibilities of the camereless medium, as the short 35mm experimental animation *Loops* underlines in the red cuneiform doodles that regenerate, separate, and reunite on the bright blue background. Indeed, from the interwar years, McLaren, alongside his collaborators and the avant-garde, strived towards contesting conventional representation and their indissoluble ideological connection. An attempt towards the creation of a new type of artistic awareness based on a resistant visuality, on a dislocation of the meaning of art, and on a renewed understanding of the social role of the artist. In this context, McLaren enacts a playful subversiveness in *Loops*. Vibrant colors and exuberant red shapes lead the fun viewership of this short that is emphasized by the mischievous encounter and transformation of these abstract incisions on the filmstock. The animated film was released with multi-language titles in 1949, and the sound was entirely created on the filmstock by puncturing and scratching.  

A non-realistic presentation of abstract forms, which converge and mutate in a reformulation of an animation rooted in affect and in the viewer as an engaged and active agent of the work of art. *Loops* encourages a personal reading, from a pure enjoyment to a critical understanding of the rules of representation, formal regulations that are *queered* in McLaren’s filmmaking. These elements reframe McLaren’s art as a liminal space besides the dominant ideological system of normative identity, a system that is playfully deconstructed through the metamorphic dance of shapes. In light of these premises, in the notion of *queer synaesthesia*, the term *queer* underlines a theoretical

approach which is in antithesis to the heterosexual capitalist system that operates the modern world, an intrinsically politically view that undermines the power system in place. This is an aesthetic that dislocates conventions and is apt to create a renewed artistic vision of inclusivity, of defiance of the norms that inform the modern dominant ideology, and especially of a playful subversiveness that teases the sensorial organs. McLaren’s films speak through forms rather than speech, an engraved art that poetically stimulates a collective understanding of filmic communication and affect. *Loops* has a sculptural quality, as the scratches on its filmstock reminisce the sculpture techniques where the canonical marble stone is replaced by the 35mm frame, a material aspect that is not hidden but it is showed to the observer. The tactile approach of the act of puncturing and engraving enact a haptic evocation that is not hidden to the viewer, rather it is enhanced in these animations of constant movement and reformulation, in their perpetual transmutative dance that echoes the plurality and the state of endless becoming of the term *queer* itself. McLaren’s gazes through the individual as in a relentless process of everlasting transformation, in which *Loops*’ bright red abstractions entangle in a fluid movement of self-creation that denies a fixed presentation of an undeniable truth. Instead, the lines, dots, and abstract forms emphasize a state of being in constant evolution and change: McLaren visually translates the notion of *being* rather than *be*. A concept that intertwines and reconnects to Gilles Deleuze’s grasps of the term, a perception that also underscores the similarities between the significance of *queer* and the notion of *being*.56

Among the senses in the synaesthetic limbo of shapes

Like the plurality that the term queer involves, synaesthesia is a plurality of the senses, a ramification of sensations and perceptions that collide in a simultaneous event. Queer synaesthesia draws its synaesthetic approach through the theories of the Russian painter Wassily Kandinsky, who stands as a major figure of abstract art and as a key element in McLaren’s artistic vision. The artistic connection between the two visionaries critically places the Scottish animator into the realm of art history and as part of the avant-garde movements that directly challenged the austerity of the Academy in its rules and codes of visual arts. Indeed, from an early age, McLaren was drawn towards the new European artistic movements that swept the cultural scene at the start of the century. The unconventional rhythm of revolutionary artistic movements of Dadaism, Cubism, and Fauvism dislocated the boundaries informed by traditional academic formats, in which the meaning and aesthetic of a work of art is re-framed. Furthermore, they challenged the representation of the body and the use of colors, as they became the instrument towards the realization of the subject and not satellite elements of mere symbolism or realism. Indeed, throughout the early 20th century, traditional artistic boundaries were shattered and reframed by many young artists, who stood by the belief: ‘Less is more’, a generational striving of artists and architects towards clarity and impact. McLaren’s films reflect these influences as he abandoned realistic and complex formality in favor of minimalist shapes and transformations. Indeed, there is a thread of minimalist abstraction of simple shifting geometric lines paired with music in the filmmaker’s body of work: for example, this is underlined in Dots, Loops, Synchrony, or Hoppity  

57 Janis Mink and Joan Miró, Joan Miró 1893 - 1983 (Köln u.a.: Taschen, 1999), 39.
Hop where a simple narratives and images create an open-ended filmic experience. These playful celebrations of the possibilities of a minimalist surreal aesthetic, and of open content films with a synaesthetic affect had an affective impact on the audience’s sensations and, similar to those of the avant-garde arts, they become a sensation among the art circuit. This is emphasized by his 1933 lost film that represents his first cameraless animation at the Glasgow School of Art, a film that was such a success that it was destroyed after extensive showings. This sensory impact was also partly due to the synesthetic interaction of simple forms with the rhythms of jazz. In fact, McLaren has a similar artistic view to Kandinsky, music profoundly moves him and through his animation he addresses a will to translate the auditory to the visual. This was an interest that he explored throughout his career, as he proposed a model of a multisensorial cocktail bar with color smoked fountains and sound in his student years at the Glasgow Fine Art School. The interest of Kandinsky and McLaren in synaesthesia is part of a long tradition in the humanities, as in the 18th century the Symbolist movement popularized the concept of synaesthetic art in the literary world, whose poets were majorly influenced by Charles Baudelaire’s notion of correspondence. Baudelaire considers the poet as the decipher of correspondences between the material and the spiritual world, whose role is to uncover these undisclosed relations to the reader. The French poet describes the correspondences structure as a synthetic vision of a world, famously termed a ‘forest of symbols’; a revelation that breaks out in the moment of ecstatic rapture. The notion of the artist as the medium between art and its significance is also emphasized by Kandinsky, in

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60 Temenuga Trifonova, *European Film Theory* (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2008), 240.
61 Temenuga Trifonova, *European Film Theory* (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2008), 240-241
which synaesthesia has a spiritual meaning for the painter. Indeed, he regarded the creator’s synaesthetic sensations as essential elements for the insights on the meaning and effect of their art. Spiritual connections that in the absence of the creative creator would be unreachable.62 Baudelaire’s correspondence significantly influenced Kandinsky’s thought and practice on synaesthesia, which is underlined in their shared understanding of the artist as a bridge between the artistic form and the sensorial rupture of the ecstasy of revelation. Their understanding of synaesthesia places the practitioner as a mediator between the creation of the work of art and its inner meaning (the subconscious and emotional sensibility) through which the observer is able to experience the wholeness of sensations, and artistic reverberations by means of their own subjectivity. The abstract pioneer embraced the idea of synaesthetic art early in his career, which is better exemplified and explored in On Stage Composition (1912), the manifesto that prefaced his stage composition The Yellow Sound. The play has an historically significant importance in the humanities, as it is one of the first abstract dramas and earliest modern examples of synthesis of acoustic and visual experience in the arts.63 The Yellow Sound emphasizes the synaesthetic search and experimental landscape of the beginning of the century, when Kandinsky alongside the Expressionists defined modernism in the visual arts, and the Bauhaus informed the intersectional discourse among fine arts, dance, and theatre with personalities like Oskar Schlemmer.64 For Kandinsky, spiritual evocations reverberate in his extensive artistic body, in which he understood the work of art as containing two core elements: the inner and the outer. Evocation is an essential

62 Temenuga Trifonova, European Film Theory (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2020), 245
part of his synaesthesia, where the soul of the artist bears the inner emotions. Inner vibrations that encompass the expressive ability of words in stimulating a refined and ephemeral emotion in the viewer. These inner vibrations that spread from the artist’s sensibility are known in Kandinsky’s term as sensed and they are the bridge among the materiality of the work of art and the immateriality of the emotions of the spectator. Indeed, Kandinsky’s reformulation in *The Yellow Sound* is led by a theory of internal spiritual connections among sound, movement, and color, where these inner vibrations are a metaphorical reference to a psychological reaction rooted in impact and evocation. His approach is underlined by author Kenneth Lindsay’s comment on Kandinsky’s internal necessity in relation to *Concerning The Spiritual*:

There must be a full harmony between content and form so that content equals form and form equals content; but this condition can only be arrived at when content creates form… It is necessity which creates form just as it is the necessities of an animal’s surroundings which create its bodily form.66

This approach emphasizes a co-existence among formal elements, content, and psychological affect that are mirrored in McLaren’s fantastical tales, where fluid shapes create content that metamorphically re-situate themselves through the inner vibration of the observer. The rapid patterns change of the scratches and painted abstraction of *Serenal* (1959) allows for a rhythmic viewership, in which the celebrative chases of shapes open its content to the observer that through its own subjectivity is able to draw from the abstract joyful dance and re-frame it by means of their own bodily and emotional sensations. The aim towards affective evocations is a common thread

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in the artistic movements of the 20th century when practitioners looked forward to the dismissal of realism. These artists share an emphasis on the intertwining components of movement, sound, and color, elements that should not have narrative or external connections with one another. Indeed, Kandinsky’s synaesthetic approach is rooted in these inner connections, on the inner sound of the artwork and on the inner vibrations of the audience, rather than on the narrative or on the dramatic action.  

Similarly, in *Serenal* the pink and green brushstrokes run through the film scratches upon an interchanged black and blue background without a dramatic action that sets the narrative in motion. Rather, these elements are driven by the musical score of the Grand Curacaya Trinidad Orchestra, in which the pink and green metamorphic lines recall an abstract boat that sails onto the black film frame, a motion enhanced by the rhythm of the music and by the white scratches on the filmstock that recall sea waves. Indeed, *Serenal*—alongside McLaren’s vibrant short animations—reverberate in an encounter of the visual, the abstract aesthetic of shapes of sound, directly made by scratching and puncturing on the filmstock or by the collaboration with jazz artists. The visual and acoustic apparatuses encounter the haptic in the sculptural quality of the engraving on the film stock, a synaesthetic event in which material (the aesthetic) and immaterial (the sensations) vibrations converge into an open content in the act of re-creating itself. This experience is mutually perceived in the artistic process and in the spectators’ experience. The formal elements are underlined in the creation of *Synchromy* (1971) as the soundtrack is literally translated onto the image area, where the optical techniques trace the piano rhythm in a multicolor

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geometric illustration, a visual rendition of music. In regards to the spectatorship, the abstract quality of McLaren’s production submerges the observers in a plurality of meanings where a synaesthetic experience takes place through the re-formulation of the aural and visual apparatuses that stimulate the haptic sensation via the material reverberations of the film itself. In these experimental tales the cold and hot color palette emerges through an acoustic enhancement of the mood of the work of art, in which the non-linear and open-ended narrative brings an open synaesthetic experience. Indeed, the plurality of meaning in these surreal experimental animations is enhanced through the simplicity of their aesthetic, an example can be seen in the combination of McLaren’s visual doodles and the boogie music of boogie-woogie player Albert Ammons, in Boogie-Doodle (1941). This 35mm short animation is McLaren’s first production with his long-term collaboration at the National Film Board of Canada. A fun tale of lovers takes place, a synaesthetic portrayal in which the chase of shapes explodes in an embrace that shapeshifts their form. The hand drawn animations on the film stock depict simple forms dancing on the bright painterly screen, in the act of chasing each other while their shapes transmute from dots to hearts. The spectator is invited to poetically envision a storyline, a tale of chasing lovers perhaps, but nonetheless this playful fable is expressed through a plurality of possible meanings that deny a singular view. For example, the funky narrative is directed by shapeshifting geometrical forms that in their transmutative chase resemble sperm and what can be understood as an egg. These symbols do not remain still, on the contrary they continue their transmutative choreography, which serves to queer their symbolism and the film itself. Boogie-Doodle enhances a psychological and physical

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response that is performed in its emphasis towards existence rather than essence, an understanding that is connected to the base of queer theory. In *Boogie-Doodle* the absence of human figures on the filmic stage creates a moment of introspection with the viewer’s objective and subjective responses, where a gendered representation is dismantled, and an individual viewership enacted. The entertaining dances of these shapes on the engraved film stock mock normativity and represent an ode to the recreation of the subject in defiance of the violent dichotomy of the fascist ideology that swept Europe. Queer synaesthesia is a pattern of interwoven elements, a synaesthetic political approach that re-formulates and re-situates the viewers’ perception into an evocative no-place and no-time of peaceful encounter of the plurality of subjects. The synaesthesia enacted in these fantastical tales is rooted in the two-dimensionality of the material, which is directly showed in its scratches, a haptic mode that merges with the entanglement of the visual and acoustic apparatuses. Apparatuses that open their form towards a heterogenous viewership of sensations, where these abstractions blend in the inner vibrations of the observers, who dive in the subjective whimsicality of the possible.

**Figure 4. Boogie-Doodle**

*Figure 4 Still frames from Boogie-Doodle, Norman McLaren, 1941, National Film Board of Canada.*
A Collective De-construction in the Limbo of Shapes

McLaren’s liminal space is a painterly dimension of division and encounter. The term painterly underlines the technical process of the creation of these animations, as through the brushstrokes and two-dimensionality of the image the frame becomes the artist’s canvas. This notion is underlined in McLaren’s commitment towards the refusal of cinematic realism and of a linear narrative, in which action driven storytelling is abandoned. Critically, the absence of traditional cinematic constructions in McLaren’s films emphasizes the limits of the canonical understanding of a pedagogical viewership. Instead, through these fantastical animated tales, McLaren’s explores a cinematic language that speaks through forms and liberates the viewer from these formats. McLaren calls for a shift of these patterns and plunges the viewer into the state of a pure un-guided enjoyment, in which the fluid mischievous brush strokes of the animator introduce to the viewer a re-imagined colorful dimension. Abstract animations that challenge the serious aura of experimental art through the comic approach that pervades his filmography. McLaren’s copious body of work largely fell into the realm of experimental animation, a cinematic approach that dates back to the early 20th century avant-garde. A field that is not read as a genre with recurring themes, like horrors or melodrama; on the contrary, it is understood as a general approach that aims to push artistic boundaries.70 Nonetheless, in experimental animation there are recurring drives, as author Paul Taberham underlines. For example, there are tendencies towards evocation rather than a clear assertion of ideas, an explicit showcase of the film material, a thematic individualism with a firm

aesthetic vision of the artist, or the visualization of music. All these elements are enacted in the limbo of shapes of McLaren, where a multisensorial effect transports the viewer into a liminal realm of the senses. The urge for creating experimental works vary among artists, and theoreticians have suggested two main aspects that are divided into reactive and parallel modes. The former alludes to a reactive approach: a direct opposition to commercial filmmaking and to the principles of mainstream society. This idea is further developed by Malcolm Le Grice, who writes of a reactive model, whose aesthetic has a political value as it refuses to consider the viewer as a passive element of reception, a reactionary theory understands mainstream filmmaking in antithesis to the creation of cinema. Instead, a parallel theory, as its name alludes, conceives the avant-garde and mainstream as functioning in different realms and for this reason, they do not influence one another. McLaren’s artistic vision does not strictly follow this division, instead there is a curiosity towards the creation a fun and synaesthetic viewership. Conventionally, an exciting viewership includes an appealing plot and relatable characters that incite an emotional response in the viewer rooted in realism, components that are dismantled in the experimental tales of McLaren. In the absence of these conventional elements, questions arise about how the audience perceives and ingests the filmic experience. Basic formal elements are emphasized in their own right rather than in the service of narrative action. Through these divergences from conventional cinematic structures, the boundaries of filmic receptions are expanded. The freedom of expression and experimentation of these experimental animators (e.g., Norman McLaren, Mary Ellen Bute, Len Lye etc.) is also related to the low-cost type of filmmaking that this cinematic modality represents.

72 Miriam Harris, Lilly Husbands, and Paul Taberham, Experimental Animation: From Analogue to Digital (London: Routledge, 2019),18
For instance, McLaren began his cameraless animation at the Glasgow School of Art as a result of a lack of funds for the acquisition of a camera that would allow him to shoot a conventional film. This obstacle led him to paint his final student film directly on a clear 35 mm filmstock, which gave birth to his first abstract animation, the film was such a success that it was destroyed because of extensive showings. The economic limits that McLaren experienced through his early career largely informed his future practice, as the experimental sounds made on film stock were made both as an artistic choice and as a solution to his lack of money for musician, recorder, and for purchasing copyrighted music. Indeed, the avant-garde is situated outside the realm of Hollywood and of big investments and, for filmmakers like McLaren, this position outside of commercial entertainment structures represented a fertile ground for testing new cinematic representations. These fantastical low-budget tales are led by McLaren’s vision and, especially in wartime and early in his career, he crafted them solo, e.g., *Points* (1940), a cameraless animation on 35mm, with sound and drawing directly made with normal ink and pen. As time goes by, however, the craft studio setting encourages collaborative and collective effort: the crew is limited, and a group of creative collaborators form around McLaren: usually constituted by three people: Evelyn Lambert, Grant Munro, and the music of Maurice Blackburn. His long-time collaborator Evelyn Lambert especially aided his graphic process. Lambert was a fellow NFB filmmaker, whose artistic input in McLaren’s film is undeniable and her contribution mutated and elevated his designs, as their co-direction of *Begone Dull Care* (1949) shows.

Begone Dull Care is among the most mesmerizing collaboration between McLaren and his lifelong friend, collaborator, and filmmaker Evelyn Lambert. The short pastel-tone hand-painted animation that gracefully begins with multi-lingual titles that colorfully introduce a playful entanglement between the auditory and the visual. This colorful tale incorporates various techniques, where its frenetic montage makes it one of the most remarkable films of fluid shapes and lines that merge and diverge in whimsical abstraction. Indeed, the term whimsical opposes the goal-directed linearity represented by the propaganda machine in the first half of the 20th century that overflowed with the iconography of fascist regimes. Whimsy is an erratic quality that changes in any given moment, this notion directly challenges the linear social and theoretical path enforced by fascism.

Figure 5. Begone Dull Care

The abstract animated forms rhythmically match the jazz music of the Oscar Peterson Trio, whose composition was recorded before the creation of Begone Dull Care. The preexisting song gave McLaren and Lambert the chance to paint the reactions of their abstract subjects in response to the music, resulting in a harmonious and spontaneous reaction that merges sound and image, a result that the directors strived to achieve. This effect was meticulously calculated with an oscilloscope, which allowed them to see the vibrations of the music and consequently mark them down on clear
film. This process created a visual map that McLaren and Lambert utilized to merge the syncopated rhythm to the radiant color explosion and shape shifting encounters of this synaesthetic approach to animation. The vibrant film involves geometric shapes, from the vertical white scratches on the film stock that unite and dissolve at the rhythm of the beat to dots that duplicate, encounter, and chase each other. The multitude of imaginaries of this fantasy vision teases the eye, where the excessive emphasis on the visual system enhances the other bodily sensations as they are interconnected. McLaren and Lambert’s hand-painted images give a watercolor effect of fluidity where large brushes of ink merge together and are alternated with black frames on which white scratches and curve abstract red lines appear. In the ambiguous and queer liminal dimension created by McLaren and Lambert, the flowing aesthetic involves the visual and acoustic systems in the rapid intermission of lines, merging sounds, and surreal beings, all in a liminal space that reminds the viewers of the interconnection among bodily senses in the synaesthetic experience throughout the surreal tales. This affect is underlined also by film scholar Jennifer Barker: “It is not (to borrow from Brakhage) an act of seeing with one’s own eyes, however, but a seeing with one’s own inner ear, spinal column, fingertips and other sense organs that constitute a proprioceptive, synaesthetic map, a ‘seeing so intense it falls out of sight.’” The synaesthetic experience of uniting the sensorial apparatuses through the visuals, sounds, and tactile sensations of the hand-scratched patterns are recurring elements in McLaren’s production. In fact, the technical process is cardinal to these animations, where any dust or fingerprints are magnified by

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the clear film stock, and in turn the more expensive black frames require a reversal of the color palette on its dark background or an extensive use of direct scratches, e.g., as in *Blinkity Blank*.

Apart from Lambert, McLaren also collaborated with other contemporary fellow filmmakers, such as the famous American animator Mary Ellen Bute, with McLaren contributing to her animated short *Tarantella* (1941).79 The two filmmakers also came together for the sensational *Spook Sport*, directed by Norman McLaren, Mary Ellen Bute and her partner and long-term collaborator Ted Nemeth in 1940.80 The latter film begins with the premise of being a short film novelty, where color, music, and movement combine in order to create a new type of filmic ballet. This short was animated directly on 35mm film stock by McLaren, where the traditional ballet is reframed through shapeshifting characters who dance on the notes of *Danse macabre* by the 19th century French musician and composer Camille Saint-Saens. In its opening, the film playfully inserts a program note and a character’s list, a direct reminder of the written program notes addressed to the audience at theatrical performances. Nonetheless, in the eight minutes of this short animation, conventions are dislocated as the sense of movement and the recreation of the ballet format is completely overturned. In the liminal space, ghosts are represented as curved lines that fluidly and effortlessly dance on the filmstock, shattering a realist portrayal of the body. Indeed, in *Spook Sport* there is an ephemeral sense of descent, where the ephemeral essence of the characters renders the idea of a weightless fall into the limbo of shapes. The film plunges us into a *no-place* devoid of conventional realism, as the figurative representation of a linear perspective is abandoned in favor of green fog in a nighttime and an otherworldly storyline.

79 Mary Ellen Bute, 1941. *Tarantella*. Film.
For disobedient bodies who aimed to represent their sexuality through an openness of meaning where abstraction and experimentation challenge the normativity of the mainstream visual arts. For McLaren, Lambert and Bute, animation therefore represented a favorable medium for humorous subversion. Indeed, experimental filmmaking represents a collective system of collaboration, resources, and exchange for queer, political dissident, non-white and female bodies who exist outside the male heteronormative structure. Nowadays, this field is still a fertile ground for female filmmakers, e.g. *Don’t Tell Mum* (2015, Sawako Kabuki), *Pussy* (2016, Renata Gasiorowska) *My Fat Arse and I* (2020, Yelyzaveta Pysmak). In these films, sexuality is freely portrayed through feminist and queer gazes that intermix phallic shapes, talking vaginas and carnivalesque images in animations directed towards an adult audience. These premises highlight the fluidity of experimental animation and how the fusion of fine arts and of the moving image gave rise to an eclectic field populated especially by disobedient bodies, women and queer people who existence in the film industry is contested and precarious.
Conclusion

The endless voyage in the limbo of shapes

In the last part of his career, McLaren became more about explicit towards his sexuality, as his last film *Narcissus*\(^1\) (1983) demonstrates. This dance film is a ballet version of the ancient tragical myth of the beautiful Narcissus, whose extreme self-love was punished by an entrapped existence.\(^2\) This experimental dance film shows a calmer and more meditative side of the filmmaker, who is able to directly address his sexuality in this human drama, in which the existential entrapment of this tragic figure evokes the Foucauldian *silence* imposed on the LGBTQIA+ community.\(^3\) Nonetheless, his animations already challenged heteronormativity and brought forth the queer synaesthetic approach that I have outlined, which undermines the dominant ideology of violence and repression by basing its aesthetic on McLaren’s pacifist ideals that are presented in the joyful encounter of shapes within his painterly creative world. In the midst of this metamorphic vision, the revolutionary act takes place: a *queer synesthesia*, a warm embrace among pleasure, bodily affect, and political dissidence. An impactful approach that overturns the seriousness bestowed upon experimental cinema, and in return proposes a joyful vision of bodily sensation that addresses a plural collectivity affected by the possibilities that this queered, reclaimed liminal space allows. A two-dimensional limbo, in which there is a constant emphasis on verticality, from the apparent fall of shapes to the scratches made directly on the filmstock. A verticality that ascends and descends in the liminality of the limbo of shapes, in a queer fairytale

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\(^3\) Dobson, “Norman McLaren: Between the Frames,” 157.
where resolution and ecstatic pleasure is attainable. A dimension that welcomes the disobedient bodies as there is no ‘normal’. The conventional figure is shuttered and dislocated, the limbic apparatus is now affected by colors, feathers, and dots uncontrolled by a restraining of realism, which therefore allows a queer and mischievous dance on the filmic stage. Kandinsky’s spiritual connections in his synaesthetic approach becomes a bodily and creative union in McLaren, his pacifist and leftist ideals merge into the openness of forms and dismantle of boundaries in direct opposition to a time informed by the singular polarized icons of the propaganda machine in the rationalization of the visual arts. Indeed, the 20th century is an extreme time, a time in which lasting kingdoms fell and reshaped the geo-political image of the world within newly created borders. Political, social, and cultural boundaries that reinforced McLaren’s generation into a reserved and silenced treatment of their identities were shattered. In the continuous search for a dislocation of these restrictions his colorful, comic, and dancing animated practice stands as a ray of freedom and of utopic hope, as it goes beyond borders, beyond canonical depictions, and beyond normativity. McLaren’s limbo of shapes stimulates the senses in its synaesthetic conjunction of the audio and the visual, enhanced within a haptic dimension through the artistic process itself and metaphorically in the affecting of its viewership. This queer synaesthesia challenges and creates a renewed viewership via fluid colors that merge in a queered surreal and abstract subject that open their content to the inner sphere of the viewer. Fantastical tales of queer fairytales recall Bloch’s der aufrechte gang, the “upright position”, the core stance in facing forward into the creation of a new or own history, which resists, challenges, and defies oppression and divisiveness through
courage, compassion, and integrity. A queer synaesthesia results in an ecstatic moment of revelation, where the inner vibration flows towards the observer in a revolution of the eye. Thus, McLaren’s work subverts traditional representations and shutters the figurative depiction of the human figure, where limbs and organs dissolve and transform themselves at the rhythm of music.

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