Eyewitnessing the World of the 16 mm Motion Picture

## ANIMATION: ABSTRACT \& CONCRETE

WITH animation and abstraction the announced topic for this month, what could be more timely and unexpected than the news that Walt Disney Productions has just announced its entry into the 16 mm . business; that the versatile Canadian abstractionist Norman McLaren has just gone to India to teach film-making as part of a UNESCO project there; and that a relatively, unknown animation "independent" named Mary Ellen Bute has had two of her short films presented during the past few months at the Radio City Music Hall, no less!
It is no surprise that animation films have been making marked inroads into the 16 mm . field, which for so long prided itself on its photographic realism and its outspoken comments on reality. Times do change. People weary of one approach and must try something else. Audiences are people too. The current trend of animated and abstract 16 mm . films is doubtless part of an effort to get away from literal reality, but this is by no means undesirable. It is much to be desired, mainly because it is in the nature of things. Sometimes we enjoy looking seriously at things as they are; sometimes we enjoy looking and laughing; and sometimes we enjoy just looking.
Many of the film-makers who do not have the basic animation techniques and do not care about bothering to learn them have done the next best thing by animating other people's art work. Examples can be found in serious semi-documentaries like "Lincoln Speaks at Gettysburg" and " 1848 "-in fine arts films like "Images Médiévales," "'The Titan," and "The

Loon's Necklace"-in historical scenesetters like "Mount Vernon in Virginia" and "FDR-Hyde Park"-in photographic abstractions like "Bop Scotch" and "Zigzag." How long the trend will last does not merit prediction. But already these films have begun repeating themselves, have been imitated almost beyond recognition, and have become techniques rather than films. The cycle of ups-and-downs in film-making will always be with us, for its root is in human restlessness, magnified now by modern methods of mass production and mass consumption.

Walt Disney is one great name in motion picture history who knows what it means to get bogged down in stereotypes, techniques, and imitations. But the freshness of spirit that was responsible for the early Mickey Mouse cartoons, and "Three Little Pigs," and the Silly Symphonies can be seen today in his superb nature films. "Beaver Valley," "Seal Island," and "Nature's Half Acre." Something of that same spirit must be responsible for Disney's new venture into the 16 mm . field. Four technicolor shorts are announced for 16 mm . release after January 1, 1953-unfortunately preview prints are not available at the time of this writing. The films are "History of Aviation," from Kitty Hawk to the present; "Behind the Scenes of Walt Disney Studio," a tour featuring Robert Benchley, which dates it quite a few years back; "The Alaskan Eskimo," a 16 mm . exclusive, the first of a projected series on people and places; and "Disney Cartoon Parade \#1," made up of three cartoons featuring Mickey Mouse, Pluto, and

Donald Duck. All four are to be released through a number of 16 mm . distributors.
Disney is not new to 16 mm . audiences. Among the most popular of the wartime government productions were a series of educational subjects made for the Office of Inter-American Affairs, including "The Grain That Built a Hemisphere," "Winged Scourge," "Water, Friend or Enemy," and others, most of which are still available from non-commercial film libraries. Some generally inferior black-and-white Mickey Mouse cartoons have also been sold in camera and film stores, mainly for home audiences. Sponsored films like "How to Catch a Cold" (produced for the makers of Kleenex) and 'The ABC's of Hand Tools" (produced for General Motors) have brought Disney to many other non-theatrical screens. But these have always been incidental activities, and the fact that Disney is now engaged in planned 16 mm . distribution can only be taken as a sign of longrange interest in this still enigmatic field.

$I^{\mathrm{F}}$Fit is news that Disney is now turning out 16 mm . films, then it is certainly noteworthy that a virtually unknown independent animator has had two of her "seeing sound" abstractions shown this year at the Radio City Music Hall, the largest motion picture theatre in the world. Mary Ellen Bute is an energetic painter from Texas who began making her hand-drawn films nearly twenty years ago with a short abstraction set to the strains of "Anitra's Dance." When wifely and motherly duties permitted, she concentrated on work (in her husband's commercial animation studio), and has come up with an impressive number of items. This year her "Spook Sport" and "Color Rhapsodie" were shown at the Music Hall, while a third film "Polka Graph" won mention at the Venice. Film Festival. Granted that the familiar acceptability of the music (Lizst, Grieg, etc.) is a good basis for audience and theatre approval, still

this is no minor triumph for Miss Bute, her work, and the experimentalists who follow hopefully.

When abstract animation films are mentioned the name of Norman McLaren cannot be far behind. McLaren, unlike many others who have made experimental films a lifelong occupation, has pursued his work without being persistent and laborious. He is quick to acknowledge that he was not the "first" to put abstract picture to music or to create synthetic sound directly on film, or to do a lot of the things he often gets credit for. As part of a long list of predecessors, inspirations, and sine qua nons he names Cohl, Melies, Fischinger, Len Lye, Grierson, Jack Ellit, Alexeieff, Pfenniger, and perhaps a dozen others. McLaren's importance does not rest upon his historical value as an innovator, but rather upon the feeling of warmth and playfulness he has injected into all his films.

Norman McLaren began making films at art school in Scotland, with second-hand film and a borrowed camera. His independent efforts won him a place in John Grierson's GPO Film Unit in London, where he directed "live" photography films and made several animation shorts-about the London telephone directory, airmail postal services, and the like. In 1940 he came to New York and took several odd jobs, among them assisting the above-mentioned Miss Bute in putting her "Spook Sport" onto film (McLaren's name is mentioned on the credit titles), as well as creating an abstract Christmas greeting for NBC's baby television. On his own, and with the financial help of the Guggenheim Museum of Non-Objective Art, he made several abstract color shorts, more recently released as "Stars and Stripes," "Boogie Doodle," and "Loops." Then, not a minute too soon, the National Film Board of Canada began its production program, and McLaren found what has proved to be an ideal base of operations. In Ottawa he has had an enviable amount of freedom-but freedom for McLaren does not mean retiring into an ivory tower. He has trained and set up an entire animation department for the Canadian Film Board. He has made films for popular consumption-most outstandingly an entire series of animated shorts based on Canadian folk songs. He has talked and demonstrated the technical aspects of his experiments before professional groups in the United States, Canada, and Europe. His three-dimensional abstractions were a vital part of the Telecinema show at last year's Festival of Britain, and it is planned that this program will be shown in this country as soon as a theatre can be properly

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equipped with the new sound and picture machinery. He has traveled to China to teach simplified animation and sound techniques, and right now he is in India on a similar mission. In his newest film, "Neighbors," McLaren has abandoned the drawingboard apparatus he invented and has taken up the camera again, using stopmotion techniques to show how real people would look if they looked like cartoon characters.
The influence of McLaren's busy and happy film-making career can be felt all over the map. Among his outspoken admirers are the UPA group, whose "Gerald McBoing-Boing," "Rootie-Toot-Toot," and brand-new "Madeline" have in turn made McLaren an ardent UPA fan. More onesided is the case of the bulk of student groups and individual experimenters who show decided influence and stimulation from McLaren's work. Fortunately, no one objects to the McLarenish films that are being turned out these days-least of all McLaren himself. By the time his admirers catch up with him and attempt to pigeon-hole and thus imitate him, he is off on some new venture to the tune of "Catch me if you can!"

The McLaren works are released in this country through the National Film Board of Canada, and are offered for 16 mm . rental and sale by the International Film Bureau, 57 East Jackson Blvd., Chicago 4, Illinois. Mary Ellen Bute's "seeing sound" films are available for 16 mm . rental from Ted Nemeth Studios, 729 Seventh Avenue, New York 19, N. Y. The new Disney 16 mm . releases will be reviewed in these columns as soon as prints are available.
-Cectle Starr.

## K I N E S I S Annozneces <br> three new films

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# The Film Forum 

## CARTOON <br> CONGLOMERATION

The Saturday Review's Guide to Selected 16 mm . Sound Films.

A PHANTASY. Produced by the National Film Board of Canada, and distributed by the International Film Bureau, 57 E. Jackson Blvd., Chicago 4, Ill. ( $8 \mathrm{~min} .$, color).

Norman McLaren's latest 16 mm . release goes back to the pastel and cutout techniques he used in the earlier "Poulette Grise" and some of the Chants Populaires series. "Phantasy" has a touch of surrealism to add distinctiveness, and something of a message is to be discerned in the nuclearstructured white balls, the garden in the desert, and the symbolic love which it is to be hoped triumphs over all.
The musical score combines synthetic sound (McLaren's contribution) with saxophone trio (composed by Maurice Blackburn). Tenor, alto, and soprano saxophones were used, each portion recorded separately as performed by Bert Niose, and all blended into one compact and fascinating sound-track. "Phantasy" is also available in black-and-white.

M A M B O. Produced by Jordan Belson. Distributed by Kinesis, Inc., 566 Commercial St., San Francisco 11, Calif. (5 min., color).
Unlike its creator's "Bop Scotch" [SR Nov. 22], the substance a: i technique of this film cannot easily be identified. The distributor's word is that these are photographed paintings, but my impressions were that a far more complex machinery was involved in "Mambo" than in the ordinary animation film. By whatever means it was accomplished, the final product is totally diverting and attractive. The high rhythms of South American dance music accentuate the richness of the picture patterns and designs-first, chalky-looking black-and-white on browns, then the addition of loud and violent colors. There is commendable compatibility between picture and sound, and the film comes off more finished than experimental. Just the right length too.

DIVERTISSEMENT ROCOCO. Produced by Hy Hirsh. Rentals may be arranged through the producer, 4104 25th St., San Francisco, Calif. (10 min., color).

There are lots of fascinating designs, wild and pretty colors, and schematic motion patterns in this abstraction which combines symmetry with harpsichord music. The sound track would seem to have been an afterthought, for some of the motion was definitely out of tempo. This one is a bit too long, and more sedate than surprising.

MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE. Produced for CBS Radio by United Productions of America, Distributed by Movies, U.S.A., 729 Seventh Ave., New York 19, N.Y. (15 min., color).

How nice that a major radio net-
work should use a motion picture to show and tell the story of the importance of sound, the special values of sound carried by radio, and the special advantages advertisers get through CBS radio in particular! UPA is as clever as the situation allows: the animation is delightful, and it abstracts reality down to barest substantive elements.

THREEAMERICANBALLADS. Produced by the Motion Picture Division of the University of California; distributed by the Education Film Sales Dept., UCLA, Los Angeles 24, Calif. (7 min., color).
Three short folk songs are illustrated with moving camera over still drawings. In "Acres of Clams," the song is well sung by Cisco Houston, the chalky drawing is only so-so. "Old Dan Tucker" seems more like sketches for a stage design than a film. "John Henry," on the other hand, is intricately edited, rhythmically paced, and boldly drawn, but the singing voice and the recording are so poor as to render the whole thing pretty meaningless. Too bad, for it was a good try and a very worthwhile idea.

JOHN GILPIN. Produced by John Halas. Distributed by the British Information Services, 30 Rockefeller Plaza, New York 20, N.Y. (10 min., animation).

New British experiments in film animation bring us this version of Cowper's narrative poem, with drawings by Ronald Searle and narration by Cecil Trouncer. The still drawings themselves were devised especially for the film, and limited motion is obtained in camera work and editing. The film should be thoroughly appropriate and enlivening to literature classes in high schools and colleges-as well as an interesting oddity for general entertainment programs.

This is one of a series of films in the Painter and Poet Series, produced by John Halas in association with Joan Maude and Michael Warre. The films were shown first at last year's Festival of Britain. Three other senarate reels in the series are also available, each containing two short films. Reel \#1 combines "Twa Corbies" ( $21 / 2 \mathrm{~min}$.) with Shakespeare's "Spring and Winter" ( $61 / 2 \mathrm{~min}$.) Reel \#2 includes David Gascoigne's "Winter Garden" and eighteenth-century Thomas Dibden's "Sailor's Consolation," each about 21/2 minutes long. On Reel \#3 there are Thomas Nashe's "In Time of Pestilence" and Kathleen Raine's "The Pythoness," each about three minutes long, the latter with drawings by Henry Moore. "John Gilpin" takes up the entire fourth reel. In all it was an impressive undertaking, but not nearly as well carried out as it should have been. -Cecile Starr.

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WRITING? RECUPERATING? Rent sunshiny, quiet omfortable house; automatic oil furnace, fireplace Address Russell Harris, Sandwich Village, Cape Cod

## TRAVEL

TAHITI WITH HORACE SUTTON, Travel Editor of The Saturday Review, can be yours plus Fiii Isles, Hawaii, New Zealand, Australia, Hong Kong, Philippines and Japan. Write for this unique 42 -day air
tour itinerary departing April 6 . $\$ 3.437$ REDDY TRAVEL SERVICE, 1006 Grand, Kansas City, Missouri.

## VACATIONS

COLONIAL CHARM amidst wooded Litchfield Hills: uscious food, casual and intimate. SKI TOW. Blazing fires for relaxation. LEWIS \& MARY FISHER, Bantam, Conn.

NAIDNI-ON-DUNMORE Brandon, Vermont. Always home for holidays. How about joining us? Extro good food. No planned entertainment.

CHRISTMAS AT BLUEBERRY HILL! Lucullan food. Roaring fires. Skiing. Snowshoeing through crystal woodland. Good talk. Brandon, Vermont.

CHRISTMAS-NEW YEAR'S at SEVEN HILLS. Winter sports . . records . . hot drinks round the fireplace. THE HOWITTS, Seven Hills, Lenox, Mass.

MERRIEBROOK, Poughquag, N.Y. Tempting meals. Quiet. Adults only. North Cliove 2421 .

GREEN SHADOWS. Old Lyme, Conn., quiet, informal country life; good food, comfortable beds.

COLONIAL INN, Fairhope, Alabama. Charming, delightful and home-like. Write for folder.

SECLUDED, modern, 2-bedroom housekeeping cottage near Oak Creek Canyon. Privacy ideal for writing, painting, rest. Reasonable. BUBBLING writing, $\begin{aligned} & \text { painting, rest. Reasona } \\ & \text { POND }\end{aligned}$ RANCH, Cornville, Arizona.

SEA GRAPE ISLAND LODGE, Bokeelia, Fiorida. TROPICAL island, LUXURIOUS' Pot-belliving food. INACTIVITIES galore. Excruciatingly INFORMAL.
December through April. American Plan from $\$ 15$ daily person.

FESTIVAL HOUSE-Inexpensive Holiday Special. In formal relaxation. Good food, music, country. Cozy fireplaces. Bruno, Claire Aron, Lenox, Mass. Telephone 367 W .

## KINGSLEY DOUBIE-CROSTIC NO. 977 NHIN

Bog. C.S. Patuntoffa
By Doris Nash Wortman


## DEFINITIONS

N. Locale of the source of King Solomon's treasure.
O. Hand-made lace edge.
P. With Word $Z$, the two impor. tant words in title of a popular Christmas carol.
Q. To hold spellbound.
R. Small sailboats developed for local use at Martha's Vineyard.
S. Easy to speak to.
T. A kind of plane.
U. Sine qua non of the "'spinster from choice.'
V. From side to side, esp. in an oblique direction.
W. Race of handsome cave men, whose relics were discovered at Dordogne, France (comp.).
X. Unlikely to be true.
Y. To put out leaves.
Z. See Word P.
$Z^{\prime}$. White cloth thrown over a bap tized infant, as sign of inno-
$70 \overline{67} \overline{151} \overline{86} \overline{7}$
$\overline{15} \overline{195} \overline{128} \overline{6} \overline{142} \overline{123} \overline{58}$
$26 \overline{106} \overline{100} \overline{73} \overline{111}$
$\overline{39} \overline{196} \overline{63} \overline{129} \overline{115} \overline{32} \overline{172}$
$\overline{173} \overline{19} \overline{119} \overline{28} \overline{163} \overline{168} \overline{40} \overline{80}$
$\overline{44} \overline{188} \overline{170} \overline{110} \overline{132} \overline{76} \overline{143}$
$\overline{64} \overline{60} \overline{185} \overline{139} \overline{190} \overline{81}$
$\overline{96} \overline{175} \overline{179} \overline{194} \overline{135} \overline{112} \overline{130} \overline{127}$
$\overline{17} \overline{35} \overline{92} \overline{59} \overline{8} \overline{154} \overline{29}$
$\overline{20} \overline{98} \overline{155} \overline{79} \overline{34} \overline{10} \overline{57} \overline{82} \overline{104}$
$\overline{159} \overline{105} \overline{66} \overline{189} \overline{99} \overline{50} \overline{72} \overline{162} \overline{53} \overline{137}$
$\overline{71} \overline{180} \overline{13} \overline{107} \overline{83} \overline{97} \overline{5} \overline{176} \overline{68}$
$\overline{65} \overline{144} \overline{90}$
$\overline{12} \overline{37} \overline{48} \overline{56} \overline{30} \overline{113}$


Solution of last week's Double-Crostic will be found on page 35 of this issue.


[^0]:    * For rentals consult the list of SR Film Referral Libraries, available at 10c a copy
    from Film Department, Saturday Review, 25 West 45 th Street, New York $36, \mathrm{~N} . \mathrm{Y}$.

