Experimental filmmaker Norman McLaren created his abstract animated films at a pivotal moment in the history of animation and in the development of film and sound technology. During his career of over forty years (from 1941 until his death in 1987) at the National Film Board of Canada [NFB], McLaren was a key player in this evolution, incorporating sound and video in new and innovative ways. In both his aesthetic and approach to sound, McLaren followed in the footsteps of German filmmaker Oskar Fischinger, whose animation awakened McLaren’s fascination with film and its ability to “express his feelings about music.”¹ Best known for his drawn-on sound techniques, McLaren developed techniques to compose electronic music by drawing or printing graphic patterns directly onto the optical soundtrack.² [See Figure 1] His 1971 animated short “Synchromy,” referred to by the film scholar Thomas Y. Levin as “the magnum opus of the synthetic sound film,” is an examplar of McLaren’s audio technique.³ [See Figure 2] By incorporating the images from his audio track directly into the film’s animation, McLaren augmented the visuals, revealing that the deep connections between sound and film were essential to his compositional process.

“Performance as Narrative in Two McLaren Animated Shorts”
Lucille Mok

Figure 1: Above: Stills from the documentary, “Pen Point Percussion,” in which McLaren demonstrates his drawn-on sound technique. Below: McLaren’s square wave cards, organized by pitch. When photographed onto the optical soundtrack, the graphic patterns produce electronic pitches as indicated.

Figure 2: Two screen shots from “Synchrony,” in which McLaren used visuals from his optical sound track in the film itself.
It is this fantastical conjunction of the visual and the auditory that I want to explore; a persistent theme throughout McLaren’s work, it became even more prominent in his films featuring live performance. Although many of McLaren’s films employ his own electronic compositions as soundtrack, he also collaborated with musicians including sitar player Ravi Shankar and the virtuoso pianists Glenn Gould and Oscar Peterson. His creative processes surrounding his use of performed music especially shed light on McLaren’s perspective on sound and what it contributed to his filmmaking endeavors.

McLaren was keenly aware of the challenge he faced in creating his extended abstract films: to create compelling visuals while also maintaining audience attention without the benefit of conventional narrative elements. In 1975 McLaren discussed his perspective on the art of balancing his abstract aesthetic within an extended film:

Many years ago I was confronted with a problem regarding abstract film visuals. It is relatively easy to make a one or two minute abstract film that will hang together and be a unity. But with an eight or ten minute abstraction, it is much more difficult. One runs the risk of creating either too much monotony, or too much diversity. Some kind of format or structure seemed necessary to vary the uniformity or to discipline the variety. I found that some of the forms which music has evolved (to solve the same problem) lent themselves to abstract visuals.

If film provided a medium to express McLaren’s feelings about music, music, in turn, allowed him to address one of the major challenges he faced as a filmmaker, contributing form and a sense of narrative trajectory to his eclectic animated films. To McLaren, music provided what

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5 McLaren in response to Ivan Stadtrucker questionnaire, March 1975, NFB Archives, McLaren files. 1184 D112, p.5. Quoted in Terence Dobson, The Film Work of Norman McLaren (Eastleigh: John Libby Publishing, 2006), 205-206. McLaren tackled a similar challenge in a 1967 publication entitled Six Musical Forms Put Into Drawings by Norman McLaren, a collaboration with the NFB composer Eldon Rathburn with text by Marthe Rathburn. In an attempt to integrate form and abstract visuals, McLaren paired each of Eldon Rathburn’s six musical compositions with a drawing that depicted the work’s musical form (such as fugue, theme and variations, canon, etc.).
Roland Barthes might have referred to as the functional aspects of the film’s structure.

According to the same system of narrative analysis, McLaren’s abstract visuals, void of explicit information about characters or plot events, are the indices and informants, the signifiers of mood and situational context for the visual action rather than players in the narrative action. In other words, film and music are mutually dependent in many of McLaren’s films, contributing to one another to create a coherent whole.

In this paper I focus on two animated shorts: “Begone Dull Care” (1949) with music by the Oscar Peterson Trio and “Spheres” (1969) accompanied by Glenn Gould’s performances of two fugues and a prelude from the first book of J.S. Bach’s *Well-Tempered Clavier*. Alongside primary source documents from Library and Archives Canada I examine how McLaren integrated audio and video in these films for the purpose of consolidating abstract visuals into a unified short film. These collaborations freed McLaren to explore themes that had fascinated him throughout his career, though perhaps to an even greater degree than he had been able to before. Moreover, they shed new light on McLaren’s use of sound as well as the significance of his partnerships with musicians.

“The Begone Dull Care”

The initial idea behind McLaren’s short film “Begone Dull Care” arose directly from performances by the Oscar Peterson Trio. Upon hearing the trio in performance at a Montréal jazz club, McLaren inquired as to whether they would be interested in a film collaboration. Soon after, they met in a recording studio where, over four days, they welcomed McLaren into their

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7 In this paper, timings have been taken from the versions found on the 7-dvd box set, *Norman McLaren: The Master’s Edition* (Homevision, 2006).
creative space, discussing musical ideas and recording the trio’s original improvisations.\(^8\)

McLaren initially expressed trepidation at the Peterson Trio’s musical. As McLaren described it,
every time they rehearsed it, he [Peterson] improvised something new. And the whole shifts a little bit. Some of the new things he’d done were better than our original thing, but many of the things he had changed were not as good for me.\(^9\)

Their creative journey required negotiation and compromise on the part of both musicians and filmmaker, nevertheless, McLaren fondly recalled this collaborative aspect of their partnership.

There was much give-and-take between us, in the sense that Peterson often did things on the piano that for me gave rise to new visual ideas; on the other hand, I had already certain visual ideas which dictated that he do certain things in the music. From his abundant improvisation I was able to select from and arrange ideas that would inspire us...\(^10\)

What seemed at first to be a struggle in fact offered fertile material for the filmmaking process, generating ideas for new filmmaking techniques.

McLaren brought the creative energy of the recording studio to the film studio where he joined his associate Evelyn Lambart. Using various materials, they applied paint directly to film stock, creating textures and images alongside the Peterson Trio’s recordings. Venturing beyond cell-by-cell animation techniques, their frameless animation melded texture, colour, and flashes of familiar images that evoke the vivacity of the Peterson Trio’s performance.\(^11\) McLaren described their extemporaneous techniques as a process of discovery that sometimes yielded unexpected results:

We applied the dyes with big and little brushes, with stipple brushes, with sprayers, with finely crumpled paper, and with cloths of various textures. We pressed dry textured fabrics into washes of still wet dye. Netting, mesh and fine

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\(^8\) Maynard Collins provides an account from McLaren’s perspective on the details of this collaborative effort. Maynard Collins, *Norman McLaren* (Ottawa: Canadian Film Institute, 1976), 76-77.

\(^9\) Collins, *Norman McLaren*, 76.


\(^11\) In cell-by-cell animation, the animator draws an image for each respective frame, altering each drawing slightly. Each cell must be photographed individually. Motion is simulated by the rapid succession of the images on the developed film. In frameless animation, the filmmaker draws or paints the images directly onto film stock. This type of animation does not require a camera because the images are contained on the film itself.
lace were stretched out tightly in various ways against the celluloid, to act as stencils when dye was sprayed on the film. Different types of dust were sprinkled on wet dye, which formed circles as it recoiled from each dust speck. We found a black opaque paint which, as it dried, created a crackle pattern. And so on. ...  

The film’s spontaneous origins might have resulted in a visually diffuse film, yet McLaren’s perspective on sound and sound synchronization indicate that he resisted this tendency, paying particular attention to the reciprocal relationship between audio and video. Sound and film synchronization was more than a trifle to McLaren, rather, he used it to visually emphasise important musical events. For instance, he resisted the monotony of an extended film based on a single visual theme by mirroring the large scale ABA form (fast-slow-fast) of Peterson’s performance in the animation, each of the three sections focusing on a different visual theme.  

![Figure 5: Stills from the three sections of McLaren’s “Begone Dull Care”](image)

L to R: A (at 01:38), B (at 04:05), A (at 06:01)

[See Figure 5.] He also used the smaller-scale organization of Peterson’s musical ideas to structure the visual themes of his film. Correspondence between Lambart and McLaren suggests that they shared concerns about the fidelity of sight to important moments in the soundtrack. A

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13 In the 1975 NFB questionnaire mentioned above, McLaren referred to the large-scale organization of “Begone” and “Spheres” as ABA form. The first and last sections of “Begone” were created with clear film stock, whereas in the second section, McLaren etched patterns and images onto exposed film stock (the film is black). Moreover, the animation of the second section is slower moving, with less action on the screen. In contrast, the frenetic animation of the first and third sections is characterized by quickly changing visual motifs.
letter from McLaren to Lambart on the occasion of the film’s L.A. premiere contains candid thoughts about how they might improve it:

I have regretted that the black crackle section had not continued to about twice its present length (that is, to the end of the musical phrase, instead of stopping halfway thru it as at present). The golden stuff that follows it, [sic] is a let-down, which only picks up when the golden turns to a heavy brown with an emphatic net pattern. If you feel at all strongly about this too, you might sometime make such a replacement...¹⁴

McLaren refers to beginning of the second A section, which, as it currently exists, unfolds without his proposed revisions. Here, the black crackled paint fills the visual space beginning with Peterson’s melodic phrase on the piano [6:06]. Although the melodic phrase does not end until 6:13, the animation changes from black crackled paint to a splattered orange section at 6:10 (what McLaren refers to as “the golden stuff.”) [See Figure 6.]

![Figure 6: Stills from McLaren’s “Begone Dull Care”](image)

L, texture from 06:06 to 06:10; R, texture from 06:10 to 06:17, begins before the end of Peterson’s phrase

The difference between the appearance of this new visual pattern and the beginning of the phrase seems at first blush to be inconsequential, but McLaren’s obvious discontent with this visual disruption to the music-visual continuity demonstrate that he was particularly concerned with maintaining a direct connection between musical and visual phrasing.

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Although “Begone” is visually eclectic in its exploration of rapidly changing visual ideas and elements, it does not seem like a motley assortment of random visual stimuli. To McLaren, the film was tied to the structure of Peterson’s performance - its phrasing, tempo, and form. The trio’s improvisation was integral to the filmmaking process, guiding decisions around the film’s aesthetic and the relationship of the parts to the whole. In other words, the music, in addition to providing the inspiration for the film, also serves as the connective material for the various aesthetic components, its functional element, its reason for being.

“Spheres”

Although the aesthetic of “Spheres,” McLaren’s seven-minute stop-motion short, greatly differs from McLaren’s aesthetic in “Begone Dull Care,” it nevertheless provides further evidence of music’s prominent functional presence in his films. McLaren, along with his creative associate, the NFB animator René Jodoin, created the visuals for “Spheres” in 1948, twenty years before he paired them with Gould’s recordings from J.S. Bach’s Well-Tempered Clavier. The short film features circular cutouts that move across the screen in a way that McLaren’s biographer Maynard Collins described as “balletic” - controlled and choreographed to the musical tempo and synchronized to musical events. Initially, the film was scored with original music by composer Maurice Blackburn and performed by Bert Niosi on saxophone with electronic musical accompaniment. But, McLaren acknowledged the monotony of the original version of the film, shelving it for several years until he came across Gould’s recordings. He recalled that

In stop-motion animation, each photograph yields one frame of animation and the filmmaker moves the object or objects slightly in each subsequent frame. In this case, Jodoin and McLaren animated a set of flat metal circle cutouts that were painted to resemble three-dimensional spheres.

Collins, Norman McLaren, 78.
One day while listening to them [Gould’s recordings], it suddenly occurred to me that the constant, steady and flowing motion of some of the slower fugues and faster preludes might be just the right kind of accompaniment for the ‘spheres’.\(^{17}\)

McLaren perceived a resonance between the meticulousness of Bach’s counterpoint and the visual aspects of the film both of which represent the relationship of each part to the whole. He structured the short film with a different fugue or prelude for each of the three sections, again creating an ABA (fast-slow-fast) framework. To ensure the recordings were the appropriate length for the visuals, however, McLaren had to make significant changes to the musical recordings. He omitted almost fifty-four measures of the “Fugue in B Flat Minor” in the first part of the film (A section) and almost seven measures of the “Fugue in F Sharp Minor” in the third part (A section).\(^{18}\) In the B section, he incorporated a repetition of the “Prelude in A Minor,” edited from midway through measure 25 of the first repetition.\(^{19}\)

From the point of view of musical form and harmony, these edits are, at least in the case of the two fugues, considerable. McLaren ostensibly edited the music in the service of the film’s length, taking freedom with the splices and subsequently changing the length of individual measures. He also removed structurally significant sections, for instance, the entire development section of the B flat minor fugue.\(^{20}\) Yet by employing audio-visual synchronization at particular musical moments, McLaren used music in the service of the film’s form and temporal trajectory aligning audio events, such as subject recapitulation and increasingly complex harmonic

\(^{17}\) McLaren, *Technical Notes*, 56.

\(^{18}\) In the B-flat minor Fugue the recording is spliced from the first beat of m. 13 and carefully edited to insert the rest of the fugue from m. 68 until the end. In the F-sharp minor Fugue the recording is edited so that the fugue continues from the second beat of m. 20 to the first beat of m. 28.

\(^{19}\) Here, the cross fade is more obvious, occurring on the first beat of measure 25 and ending at the third beat where the first measure of the prelude’s repetition takes over.

\(^{20}\) In some ways this is the perfect example of what Gould referred to as an active listening, an idea that he expounded in a discussion with Humphrey Burton in the CBC/BBC Festival Television Broadcast in which Gould argued that in the future, “listeners will have the power to make interpretative decisions.” This also connects to Marshall McLuhan’s notion of the cool medium, media that require a more participatory and engaged listening or viewing subject.
progressions, with dramatic visual gestures. In a radio interview with McLaren for his CBC radio program *The Art of Glenn Gould*, Gould remarked on McLaren’s use of synchronization to mark connections between visual and musical events and their potential musical significance.

What really amazed me was that the actual motivation on the screen seemed to relate precisely to the variance in the music - harmonically, melodically and so on. I admit that the eye and the ear can be very generous, but at the same time, this wasn’t generosity. The pivotal ideas that you had on the screen really did elide with changes of harmonies that were significant ones.\(^\text{21}\)

As Gould observes, the visuals seem to respond to fugue’s harmonic and melodic function. And because the two are so closely linked, the increasing musical tension, expanding range, and formal trajectory of the fugue in turn, provide directional sense and meaning to the otherwise abstract visuals.

This relationship between audio and video is quickly established in the first section of the film where McLaren establishes a relationship between visual motion and musical counterpoint.

McLaren pairs the beginning of the fugue’s subject entries - a descending perfect fourth - with striking visual moments: the first evocation is accompanied by the initial splitting of a single

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sphere into two [00:29] and then the two into four [00:31]. [See Figure 7.] The third subject entry in measure ten is another such event. Until this point, the melodic action has taken place in the upper register within the octave from B-flat 4 to B-flat 5. This subject entry, one octave lower than the low B flat, adds range and timbral dimension, a musical moment visually signaled by the sudden and striking division of eight spheres into sixteen, coinciding with the descending interval [01:03]. [See Figure 8.]

As the contrapuntal lines converge in the last few measures of the work, so too does the movement of the spheres. McLaren’s animation mimics the general reduction of musical range, a closing in of all four voices towards the final cadence: the objects come closer together, culminating in a reunion of the spheres. Whereas McLaren paired fugal entries up until this point with fast-moving outward motion on the screen, he couples the last four measures of the fugue [01:35-01:49] with the inward motion of twenty-one spheres. From 01:35 to 01:38, the remaining spheres come into closer proximity with one another, their final coordinated movements occurring on the third and fourth beats of m. 71 and the downbeat of m. 72. Their movements in the final moments of the fugue are minimal in contrast to the expansive and
accelerated movement associated with the opening subject entries. Here, the spheres are contained, serving as a consequent to the previously rapid outward gesture. [See Figure 9.]

In the closing sequence of Fugue in B Flat Minor, McLaren keeps the spheres very close to one another. This sequence features inward motion in contrast to the outward motion that characterized the work up until this point.

In this film McLaren demonstrates that visual space connects to something fundamental about music’s spatial qualities. With each subject entry and expansion of the musical range, the movement of the spheres also expands to the outermost edges of the screen. When the contrapuntal lines converge, so too do the spheres close in. In the absence of conventional narrative, McLaren’s filmic objects provide the visual context and aesthetic, but are connected by the functional aspects of the music - its contrapuntal and tonal relationships. On its own, the original version of “Spheres” fell flat and without the appropriate musical soundtrack, McLaren regarded it as incomplete. The visual events and music together, however, provided the elements that form a coherent narrative. Whereas the animated objects are what I described before as the indices, providing context and setting, the music serves a diegetic function, linking the indices and in turn, creating a sense of narrative arc.

Conclusions
McLaren’s fascination with the audio-visual relationship originated from his philosophy that sound served as a unique sensory catalyst to the viewing experience, exploding the familiar audiovisual concept introduced by Michel Chion, of “added value.” Sound and music, rather than an auxiliary aspect of McLaren’s films, became a crucial part of the filmic experience and perhaps even more significantly, a key aspect of his creative process. Although I’ve contrasted McLaren’s work with traditional sound recordings against his experimental sound films, the concepts behind both types of film are linked, emerging from what McLaren saw as a close kinship between audio and visual. “Begone Dull Care” and “Spheres” demonstrate the extent to which music impacted McLaren’s creative spirit. The form, textural models, and spatial aspects of their musical soundtracks provide shape and narrative trajectory to McLaren’s abstract style, recruiting music’s through-time aesthetic forms for his experiments with film’s materiality. Though McLaren is best known for his use of experimental sound technology, his collaboration with musicians prove a worthy inclusion to his contributions to film history.

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