Off the Wall with Shchedryk⁴

Kalli Paakspuu
Sheridan College

Received: November 2, 2021 / Accepted: November 11, 2021 / Published: November 22, 2021 / Revised: December 5, 2021

Abstract: This paper examines how music and juxtapositions can ground a story in a longer history where the potential of images and cutting points become a dialectics of point, counterpoint, and fusion in a revisitation of archetypal images and as a co-authorship of reception. A visual dialogue evolves in the film *Shchedryk* (2014) through a remediation of scenes from Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), Alexander Dovzhenko's *Earth* (1930) and Norman McLaren's experimental film *Synchromy* (1971). People who do not have recourse to the dominant culture are through recipient-co-authorship able to replay things in more sophisticated ways. Judith Butler's idea of the performative and of subjects re-performing an injury (Butler 1993) can be introduced to the multi-screen experience. Foregrounding the wounding aspect as visual images is about 'bad pleasure' (O'Brien & Julien 2005). If realness is a standard by which we judge any performance, what makes it effective is its ability to compel beliefs and embody and reiterate norms (Butler, 387).

4. Article first published by #IFM2014 Conference: Moura, Hudson et al. (eds.). *Interactive Narratives, New Media & Social Engagement International Conference Proceedings*. Reprinted with Author's Permission.

Introduction

The film *Shchedryk* is a contemplation of war troubled Ukraine through composer Mykola Leontovych's arrangement of a traditional *cappella* chant. Our design team identified *McLaren Wall-to-Wall* as an opportunity to develop an audience for our theatrical documentary *1921 The War Against Music*. A Call for Projects for architectural videos stated, "If Norman McLaren were alive today, his creative canvasses would be the Web browser, tablets, airports, public spaces and architectural surfaces" (3). This was *McLaren Wall to Wall* – a centenary celebration of the birth of Norman McLaren, the founder of the National Film Board of Canada's animation studio – an international competition and initiative of the National Film Board of Canada in co-production with the Quartier des Spectacles Partnership. Jazz artist Paul Hoffert improvised a performance of Leontovych's *Shchedryk* for our documentary, and a visual dialogue evolved through a remediation of scenes from Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) and Alexander Dovzhenko's *Earth* (1930), both shot in Ukraine. These innovators of sovietmontage theory were activists of social movements, and fusing frames from Eisenstein's and Dovzhenko's early films with citations from McLaren grounded our story into Ukraine's longer history (see Fig. 1).

Fig. 1: Frame from *Shchedryk*, directed by Kalli Paakspuu.

Each wall of the Quartier des Spectacles was to project a video that cited one of McLaren's films, *Synchromy* (1971), *Spheres* (1969), *Begone Dull Care* (1949) and *Neighbours* (1952). The finalists would be spiritual heirs to McLaren, and the competition required artists to use visual content from their chosen McLaren film, such as *Synchromy*, "to create a dual perspective, a dialogue with the work of McLaren" (4) and share a \$40,000 prize; their work would be projected on the facades of The Place de la Paix, Cégep du Vieux Montréal, the UQAM Bell Tower and UQAM's Centre de Design, respectively, from April 11 – June 1, 2014. Our collaborative design team, with myself as director, Ron Graner as writer and Peter Gugeler as editor, envisioned a McLaren-inspired visual language for Hoffert's performance, used as a framing device for *Synchromy*.

Dovzhenko's lyrical and poetic film depicted the life of rural farmers in a sympathetic portrait of Kulaks wanting to keep their land after Joseph Stalin's 1929 effort to "eliminate rural capitalism" and "smash the Kulaks."

Eisenstein wrote the revolutionary propaganda film to test his montage

Paakspuu, K. "Off the Wall with Shchedryk," *Interactive Film and Media Journal* v.1, n°2 (2021): 52-65.

This article is released under a Creative Commons license (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0).

theory. His famous Odessa Steps sequence from *Battleship Potemkin* is one of the most memorable scenes in the history of film montage. The massacre on the steps by the descending Tsar's soldiers and the mounted and charging Cossacks is actually a fiction, though "the bloodshed on the Odessa Steps is often referred to as if it really happened" (Ebert 1998). Eisenstein "argued that film has its greatest impact not by the smooth unrolling of images, but by their juxtaposition. Sometimes the cutting is dialectical: point, counterpoint, fusion. Cutting between the fearful faces of the unarmed citizens and the faceless troops in uniform, he created an argument for the people against the czarist state" (Ebert 1998). Eisenstein's and Dovzhenko's scenes as part of the *Shchedryk* song bring an expanded dialogue to their work that resonates with today and the contemporary war in the context of McLaren's playful experimentation. As a re-articulation of the wounding project of dominant imagery, Judith Butler's idea of the performative and of subjects re-performing an injury (Butler 1993) can be introduced to the multi-screen experience, as people who do not have the recourse to dominant culture through recipient-co-authorship are able to replay things in more sophisticated ways. Foregrounding the wounding aspect as visual images is about 'bad pleasure' (O'Brien and Julien 2005). If realness is a standard by which we judge any performance, what makes it effective is its ability to compel beliefs and embody and reiterate norms (Butler, 387). When slippage occurs between the continuity and rupture of expectations, conceptual and political transitions are made possible. An exterior wall or gallery space moves the cinematic experience beyond the

normative, narrative expectations towards questions of spectatorship and the autonomy of the viewer in different relations of parallel montage and surround sound, wherein disjunctive and creative relationships exist around “time,” “memory” and the lived effects of globalization (O’Brien and Julien, 50) as speaking from a positionality and not for it.

A “visual citation” of *Synchromy* was a requisite at the Place de la Paix location. The synopsis from the Call for Projects described *Synchromy* thus: “A rigorous experience of synchronism between sound and image: cards with synthetic sounds are photographed on the soundtrack. Norman McLaren thus obtains absolute synchronism” (7). This clinical synopsis conceals the transgressive cinema that McLaren actually practiced, which invariably questioned the accepted conditions of art, undermined its axioms, transcended existing limitations, and questioned the nature of film as art and as medium (Kluszczyński 2007). The postmodern question is then turned over to the recipient, who participates in a critical evaluation of the film as a co-author recipient. Humming the tune from the film would be an interaction that could spontaneously erupt away from the exhibition site—and it would give an interpretation of the “wounding”—witnessed outside the editing room by passerby’s humming the tune where the film *Shchedryk* was created.

American experimental filmmaker Stan Brakhage theorized that there were three spheres participating in a film event: 1) the phenomenological external world, 2) the optical-biological and mechanical-

apparatus, and 3) the psychical universe, including both the physical brain and its process of memory, imagination, dreams and capacity to generate visions in a closed eye. Every time a film is subjected to the recipient's perception, "This unification, the particular syntheses of the individual, the external world and the hybrid, optic interface connecting them, might then be said to become the perceptive and creative experience of each viewer" (Kluszczyński 2007, 471).

Narratives are the stories that emerge as products of our interactions and goals as we navigate an experience. Emergent narratives are constructed throughout our daily activities to help us remember, understand, categorize and share experience (Galyean, 1995). A story produced by a group of improvising actors is not determined from the top down; it emerges from the interactions among the members of the group, which includes embodied memory through the sensual and somatic. Deconstructive methods are projecting film on more than one screen simultaneously, looping, introducing performance actions and spectacles that lead to the erosion of obligatory frames and boundaries of films. A dialectic occurs when there is an ongoing relationship with looping. Parallel montage, surround sound and the distinctive and creative relationship that a recipient develops and explores around "time" and "memory" are unique to multiscreen setups and interrogate and inhabit their multitemporal environments. Digital technology enables different ways of looking at the moving image and enables a transgression of time that can occur in and

between frames, side by side, and in relation to each other. With four of McLaren's films cited in various Montreal locations, the decentring of the cinematic experience is transformed into an interactive multimedia art.

We studied the dimensions of the building surface of Montreal's Hotel Zero1 building, its brick structure and placement of windows, and incorporated these physical aspects into the editing design of *Shchedryk* and our proposal. The Place de la Paix (or Peace Park) is located on Montreal's famous Saint-Laurent Boulevard. The square "blends granite and nature harmoniously, symbolizing both the urban bustle of Montreal and the city's appetite for the great outdoors" (7). We considered the impact of looping a repetitive soundtrack in the geographical location over an extended time. *Shchedryk* could have multiple lives and will also be seen in the conventional theatre and in our crowd-funding online experiences. It will eventually be incorporated into the intro sequence of our documentary, *1921 The War Against Music*, which features two Ukrainian composers whose beautiful music inspired their peoples: David Nowakowsky (1848-1921), a Jewish Reform Zionist whose unpublished manuscripts were buried in occupied France, and Mykola Leontovych (1877-1921), an Orthodox Christian Ukrainian Nationalist who arranged *Shchedryk*. Both of these composers were mostly unknown to Western audiences, with the exception of Leontovych's *Shchedryk*. There were very few composers collecting or arranging Ukrainian folk music, and Leontovych made songs from the communities where he taught music a career focus. Our theatrical story

would be a revisitation of the earlier Ukrainian history through film frames of Ukraine's early 20th Century years, which had several purposes: 1) we could be re-immersed in the time and place through actual people of the time, 2) there was a particular address of activism made to the public by filmmakers Sergei Eisenstein and Alexander Dovzhenko, which was important to know, 3) as the 1920s was a time of upheaval and nationalist movements, a re-evaluation from a decades-later perspective could bring another evaluation to the film arts, and 4) in incorporating the experimentation and innovativeness of McLaren, Eisenstein and Dovzhenko in a culture jam with an *Acapella* song, their multiple perspectives afforded a unique visual treatment to our creative team. The reason this song became known by the name of *Carol of the Bells* is that neither Ukraine nor Russia was signatories of the Berne Convention, an 1886 international agreement governing copyright that recognized author copyright in other signatory countries. This made copyright unprotectable, and music produced in countries that were not members of the Berne Union unrestricted for use in Russian and Ukrainian film and television.

Norman McLaren believed cinema was in an experimental stage as an art form, and he pioneered techniques of drawing and engraving on film, cross dissolves, pixilation, synthesized sound, stop motion, optical printing, and innovative montage techniques. His early works had an immense influence on experimental methods of the sixties and seventies, such as structural filmmaking, conceptual art, multimedia performance, painting

directly on celluloid, and the use of found footage. The N.F.B. gave us the entire film of *Synchromy* in a high-resolution digital form, on the premise that we would cite visual sequences of it, but we could not use the original synthesized music. Our own recorded music had been the motivating factor for entering the competition. The song *Shchedryk* itself had been viral from its beginnings as a Ukrainian folk chant welcoming spring to its transformation in the West as *Carol of the Bells*—a Yuletide favourite featured in popular Hollywood films like *Home Alone* (1990). It was a song that worked with McLaren's original film, with its bright psychedelic colours that improvised on each other and flowed in a musical round of marching tones of sound, colour and shifting lines. We proposed:

In Ukraine the song Shchedryk was arranged by composer Mykola Leontovych as a New Year carol that sings of the wealth to come in the spring. Utilizing digital manipulation techniques Shchedryk cites Norman McLaren's Synchrony in its juxtaposition of colour, tone and visual rhythm in an interplay with this music. A close up of jazz musician Paul Hoffert's hands play Shchedryk intercut with McLaren's Synchrony, filmed portraits of 1920's Ukrainians from Eisenstein's Odessa Steps and Ukrainian Alexander Dovzhenko's films. Hoffert's performance is manipulated visually and transformed into the bright colour range of Synchrony's reds, greens, blues and yellows. The hands on the piano turn upside down, multiply with the rhythm of Synchrony in the spirit of McLaren's improvisation. Place de la Paix's wall will flicker with 1920s filmed portraits of the ongoing struggle of Ukrainians to maintain their culture through the tyrannies of the Russian Czar, the Bolsheviks and the present day political forces in centuries long efforts. Leontovych was assassinated in 1921 for his role in the nationalism movement in Ukraine which became a republic after the independence war in 1917–1921. The film Shchedryk will be a dual homage to McLaren and to the Ukrainian peoples' call for a promised prosperity. Hoffert's filmed performance will be book ended with a digitally manipulated performance of his piano recording of Shchedryk in a dialogue between the public, the environment and the experimental arts and in an homage to Norman McLaren.

Our proposal didn't become a finalist for McLaren Wall to Wall. A company from Spain got the grand prize for their interpretation of Synchrony, and no other Canadian⁵ projects were finalists. However, we did get the right to use the McLaren footage for the film festival runs, and

5. The Grand Prize winner was Christo Guelov of Spain. URL: <http://mclarenwalltowall.com/en/works/color-rythmetic>

Paakspuu, K. "Off the Wall with Shchedryk," *Interactive Film and Media Journal* v.1, n°2 (2021): 52-65.

This article is released under a Creative Commons license (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0).

Shchedryk was exhibited in a loop of experimental films in a gallery at the Muskoka Independent Film Festival from August 28-31 and in competition at the Jasper Short Film and Media Festival, Sept. 27, 2014. We also cut a version without any of McLaren's footage, which was featured in a palace gallery at the Venice International Experimental Cinema and Performance Festival on Sept. 1, 2014.

The film *Shchedryk* features several cinematic narratives through the multiple frames that weave through *Synchromy*'s architectural composition. If history is "a manifestation of our perception and understanding of the past through the present, it is a product of changing philosophical and methodological approaches, cultural strategies and deconstructive and reconstructive strategies" (Kluszczyński 2007, 469). Our original recording of *Shchedryk* provided a narrative and story structure manipulated with *Synchromy*, where jazz artist Hoffert's hands perform in a panoply of multiple images with distortions that dissolve in the sequences from *Synchromy*. The multiple portrait frames within the film frame are projections like windows originally conceived to be bent and distorted on the uneven hotel building's surface with its own windows; these pulsate with the centuries-long struggle of Ukrainians to maintain their culture, which becomes a lens on the present-day politics and war for which a historical continuity cannot be ignored. We selected portraits from Eisenstein and Dovzhenko's famous films, which were clearly critical of dominant political systems. Interestingly, Eisenstein's most famous film,

Battleship Potemkin, was lauded in Europe as a prime example of the propaganda film, as its criticism of the czar advocated socialism in the Soviet state. Hitler's propagandist Leni Riefenstahl emulated Eisenstein's films to glorify the Third Reich in her films *Olympia* (1938) and *Triumph of the Will* (1935).

Returning to McLaren's experimental form and revisiting earlier film masters of the public domain can bring a certain consciousness to Ukraine's present civil war — of which the portraits from Dovzhenko and Eisenstein's films speak eloquently. The performativity of their actors in the Ukrainian locations of their films embody a way of being in a historical community and as a screen performance. Our design of *Shchedryk* anticipated a multi-frame experience with the irregularities of windows on a brick surface as a screen. Hoffert's piano performance of Leontovych's song stirs it up with the haunting visual of Eisenstein's blood-splattered nurse. In a second version of the film, *1921 The War Against Music*, the nurse's portrait is followed by images of composer Leontovych splattered with blood. The classical composer was murdered in his sleep by an overnight guest at his father's home in 1921. Leontovych's classical music was suppressed for being too influential in the Ukrainian nationalism movement.

In the spirit of McLaren's experimentation, our editor Peter Gugeler manipulated the visuals and piano to improve the two films featuring Ukrainian performers. Citing the early film innovators is an archaeological perspective that transforms the past itself through new interpretations and

shifts away from those perspectives previously privileged. Utilizing digital manipulation techniques, the film *Shchedryk* is a culture jam in innovative film arts, designed as a first step in the development of the theatrical documentary *1921 The War Against Music*, which will feature original classical music recordings of two banned composers, David Nowakowsky and Mykola Leontovych. Digital technology enables a different looking and listening of moving image arts, where a transgression of time is within reach of our imagination. Our design team met our film public with McLaren-inspired aesthetics of experimental animation and its deconstructive and transformational potential. The curatorial context of the gallery space where the film was looped in a program of experimental films offered a particular audience address, with viewers maintaining a certain autonomy in co-authorship. An interactive concept of authorship through the use of multiple frames expands the dialogue into personal memory tropes and questions of historical veracity.

Bibliography

- Butler, J. *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of "Sex."* New York, NY: Routledge, 1993.
- Ebert, R. "The Battleship Potemkin," *Roger Ebert.com Reviews*, URL: <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-the-battleship-potemkin-1925> [Sept. 12, 2014]
- Galyean, T. *Narrative guidance of interactivity*. Ph.D. thesis, MIT Media Lab, MIT, 1995.
- Kluszczyński, R. W. "Re-writing the history of media art: From personal cinema to artistic collaboration," *Leonardo*, v. 40, n.5, The MIT Press, (2007):469-74.
- McLaren, N. URL: <http://mclarenwalltowall.com/en/normanmclaren>
- O'Brien, A, and Julien, Isaac. "Suturing the aesthetic and the political- Multiple screens, multiple realities: An interview with Isaac Julien." *Circe*, #114, Winter, 2005.
- Walsh, R. "Emergent narrative in interactive media," *Project Muse*, v. 19, #1, 2011.
- Call for Projects, McLaren Wall-to-Wall: Architectural Video Projection in Montreal's Quartier des Spectacles. URL: http://www.mclarenwalltowall.com/pdf/McLaren-CALL_FOR_PROJECTS.pdf