

Strubbelingen rond een kopie

BALLET MÉCANIQUE

[Net werkzaam bij het Nederlands Filmmuseum werd mijn aandacht getrokken door een schrijven van de 'erfgenamen' van de schilder Fernand Léger aan het Filmmuseum. Zij hadden bezwaar tegen een 'gekleurde kopie' van *BALLET MÉCANIQUE* die het Filmmuseum bezit. Ik herinnerde mij dat ik enkele maanden tevoren, tijdens een gesprek met de Amerikaanse deskundige op het gebied van experimentele films, dr. William Moritz, terloops gesproken had over een gekleurde versie van deze film. Om meer duidelijkheid over deze zaak te krijgen, schreef ik Moritz een brief en kreeg een lang antwoord terug. Daaruit blijkt – weer eens – hoe ingewikkeld ook het film-filologische werk is! Dat bovendien vaak niet erg vergemakkelijkt wordt door – al dan niet verantwoorde – onwelwillendheid van instellingen en individuen.

Met toestemming van William Moritz wordt zijn brief hieronder integraal afgedrukt. Bijgevoegd – maar hier niet afgedrukt – waren fotokopieën van J. Freeman, 'Léger Reexamined': W.J. Reilly, 'When is It an Moving Picture?' en handgeschreven aantekening met betrekking tot een shot-list van Moritz zelf. – *Eric de Kuyper*]

Feb. 21, 1988

Dear Eric,

I am quite surprised that 'heirs' of Léger (whoever they may be) would question the validity or integrity of your tinted print of *BALLET MÉCANIQUE*. I think that there is no question about its authenticity, and no question possible that several tinted prints came from the hands of Léger himself. In Judi Freeman's article 'Léger Reexamined' (*Art History*, vol. 7, no. 3, September 1984), which is the best published text about *BALLET MÉCANIQUE* that I know, she shows, p. 353, that Léger's interest in a colored version of *BALLET MÉCANIQUE* extended even to his last years.

I am going to write out here all that I know about *BALLET MÉCANIQUE*, including some background details which are not exactly pertinent, but which explain how I came to investigate the Léger/Murphy film – and why a definitive critical analysis and history of the film has not yet been written.

First of all, we must remember, and reiterate, that the film *BALLET MÉCANIQUE* is a collaboration, a real and full collaboration, between Dudley Murphy and Léger. Man Ray has written about this (and he confirmed the fact verbally to me during an interview May 8, 1972 in Paris): Murphy, who had made films previously in America, came to Paris with the intention of making an experimental film, and since he was short of money, he contacted several celebrity artists whom he assumed might be willing to finance or collaborate on the film. Man Ray turned him down, but Léger accepted. Murphy returned to America later in the 1920s, and continued his career as a filmmaker; most notably he deigned to direct films with black performers at a time when the Hollywood industry was bitterly segregated – procuring such films as *ST. LOUIS BLUES* with Bessie Smith and *EMPEROR JONES* with Paul Robeson. Since, however, Murphy's career was not as illustrious as that of Léger, people seeking prestige attribute the film solely to Léger – as do those who, for nationalistic reasons, wish to categorize it exclusively as a 'French' work, despite the contribution of George Antheil as well as Murphy. One example of this 'prestige' seeking is the *Cubist Cinema* book of Standish Lawder, which was his doctoral thesis for the Art History department at Yale University: consequently, although he briefly acknowledges, pp. 117–119, Murphy's co-authorship (quoting Antheil, Léger. Man Ray, and Murphy himself attesting to Murphy's seminal rôle in the film's creation), he blithely and tacitly treats the film throughout the rest of the book, before and after pages 117–119, as if it were Léger's sole personal, artistic creation. This position is obviously untenable, and any question of the rights or, as in your present case, of the artistic integrity of *BALLET MÉCANIQUE* must involve the co-authority of Dudley Murphy and his heirs. Having said this, I blush to confess that I do not know the heirs of Murphy personally, but they are mentioned in Judi Freeman's article, and I am sure you could contact them through Ms. Freeman, who is a curator of Twentieth-Century Art at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 5905 Wilshire Blvd., Los Angeles, California 90036 (telephone 213/857-6332). She was one of the organizers of the *Spiritual in Art* exhibition and catalogue, and she devoted a significant portion of her doctoral dissertation to *BALLET MÉCANIQUE*, and made extensive attempts to research Murphy's rôle in creating and distributing the film.

Concerning the distribution of *BALLET MÉCANIQUE*, we know (cf. Lawder, p. 185) that Murphy screened the film in New York and London in 1926, and subsequently he made prints of the film widely available to cineclubs in America. In an article 'When is It a Moving Picture?', which appeared in *Moving Picture World*, May 15, 1926, p. 209, Dudley Murphy is listed as the sole creator of *BALLET MÉCANIQUE*! William Reilly interviewed Murphy shortly after the New York première of the film. The article is illustrated with Murphy's portrait, and several specific sequences in the film – the use of kaleidoscopic mirror arrangements, the use of everyday mechanical and utilitarian tools, and the animated sequence in which hosiery models perform a charleston in a shop window – are noted as Murphy's pet ideas. Furthermore, Murphy discusses at length the question of rhythmic editing, relating *BALLET MÉCANIQUE* to feature films like *BIG PARADE* and Chaplin's comedies, and he claims to have worked out the montage – tempo, rhythm and shock value – through his own experiments and his own sense of musical values. Murphy's camera work is praised – as, indeed, it had been in the *New York Times* review of his earlier film *THE SOUL OF THE CYPRESS* (July 11, 1921): 'Its separate scenes are striking photographic works, distinctively composed and expressive...' In the 1930s, the Museum of Modern Art Film Department acquired their release prints from the Cinémathèque Française, and these copies contain French-language titles that make no mention of Murphy, stating specifically that Léger 'directed' and 'composed' the film, and listing it formally in the titles as 'un film de Fernand Léger' [cf. Lawder, pp. 191 and 205]. These titles were made by the Cinémathèque Française, and when I spoke about them to Henri Langlois in the 1960s, he apologized and said he was particularly embarrassed about them since he knew very well that Murphy played a major rôle in the creation, both artistic and practical, of the film. But, he sighed, we all know how important nationalism is to the 'fonctionnaires', the civil servants who control budgets. A number of people I interviewed – including Man Ray, James Whitney, and Harry Hay (one of the collaborators on the 1937 film *EVEN AS YOU AND I* along with Hy Hirsh) – remember that Murphy was rather bitter about this, since the film clubs, museums and theatres which formerly would have obtained prints from him (containing titles correctly identifying the film as a collaboration between Murphy and Léger) were now showing MOMA prints with these French titles that omitted any mention of Murphy. Murphy himself still showed his own print in Los Angeles during the early 1940s, but I was never able to find an actual copy that I could definitely prove to be from Dudley Murphy's personal collection – but this does not mean

that there are none! As you know from your current difficulties, many film collectors prefer to conceal their holdings precisely in order to avoid the meddling or demands of people who suddenly 50 or 75 years after the fact may claim to own the rights to the film. If such a print could be located (and possibly some British source from the Film Society period might also survive), then we might be able to ascertain whether Murphy had any commitment to color tinting. Those who remember the Murphy prints insist that it was longer than the Cinémathèque Française version – closer to the length of Antheil's score – and that it contained many more scenes of Kiki and Katherine Murphy nude. These scenes of nudity were integrated into the montage for their specifically erotic content, making the insistent pumping rhythms of the machinery ironically copulatory.

To come to my personal observations of *BALLET MÉCANIQUE* prints, I must make yet one more background explanation. During the mid-1960s, I was working with the Creative Film Society, which had been a cine-club during the 1950s, counting among its members such illustrious people as James Whitney, Jordan Belson, Kenneth Anger and other California filmmakers. Gradually the club screenings atrophied, and the co-operative film distribution aspect was taken over by one member, Bob Pike, as a private business concern. Bob had a deep, serious love of film art, and expanded the CFS collection to include prints of many of the key masterpieces of experimental and animated cinema, as well as photographs and other documentation about them. (As you know, Pike bought the estate of Hy Hirsch, and CFS, now run by his widow, Angie Pike, is still the owner of full, exclusive rights to all of Hirsch's films.) Since I spoke French and German, Bob asked me to try to obtain prints of films for him from European sources. Among those films I was trying to acquire were those of Germaine Dulac, since only two of her films, *LA SOURIANTE MADAME BEUDET* and *LA COQUILLE ET LE CLERGYMAN*, were available in America, and only from MOMA, which had no rights for commercial distribution. I visited the Cinémathèque Française, who seemed to be the holders of the original negatives, even if not the rights, to all her films. I visited the charming Mlle. Malleville (Dulac's lover and heir) and Eve Francis, who seemed to have given me the nod of approval to take copies of the Dulac films (we particularly wanted *THÈME ET VARIATIONS*, DISQUE 957 and *ARABESQUE*) back for American distribution. I found, however, that the Cinémathèque had incorrect labels on their prints and printing materials of *LA COQUILLE*, so that the sequence of reels ran something like 1, 2, 4, 3, 5 – and one crucial reel break occurred at the point at which the Clergyman tries to strangle and throw over a cliff

the General-Priest, so that this action was interrupted by some 10 minutes, then continued. Henri, Mary Meerson and Lotte Eisner were quite embarrassed and a little angry about this, since it appeared clearly to me after one viewing of the print they were offering me, while they had been showing and distributing the film in this false sequence for 30 years, and apparently nobody had noticed. So they let me take *MME. BEUDET* and *LA COQUILLE*, but never did make prints of *THÈME, DIS-QUE 957* or *ARABESQUE* (we wanted 16mm prints, which they said they did not have yet). So, since I knew that MOMA received its prints of most of the French classics from Cinémathèque Française, I went to New York to check whether the MOMA prints of *COQUILLE* were also mounted incorrectly (they were, and despite the fact that I notified them at that time, neither MOMA nor Cinémathèque Française have yet corrected their copies! More than 20 years later...).

While I was there, waiting for some other materials to be delivered, I noticed a card in the files that indicated Léger himself had donated a print of *BALLET MÉCANIQUE* to the MOMA early in 1939. Since Henri Langlois said he had supplied the 35mm materials to MOMA – and indeed the MOMA prints correspond quite exactly to the Cinémathèque Française prototype – I asked to see the Léger print, wondering if it would actually be different from the Cinémathèque Française print. Much to my surprise, it turned out to be a 16mm print – I asked, to make sure, that this was Léger's own print, and I was told that it was a print which Léger had used when he lectured at Yale University in 1938, and that he had donated it to MOMA before returning to Europe early in 1939. When I viewed the print, I was astonished to find that it was hand-tinted in parts, mostly the sequences in which pure geometric forms were alternating on the screen. The general editing patterns seemed to be basically the same as the Cinémathèque Française prototype. I questioned the staff again, to make sure that Léger himself had tinted the print, and an older woman assured me that it had come exactly that way, tinted, from Léger's own hands, and that it was the very print he chose to show to University lectures. It had hardly ever been screened, she said, since the Cinémathèque Française had provided 35mm materials from which all the screening and rental prints were drawn. Unfortunately, my time in New York was limited, and I had many other films to research, so I did not take complete notes at that time. That was 1966.

In 1969, in England, I saw a projection of *BALLET MÉCANIQUE* from the prototype that I later learned originated in Holland. At the time, I was told this was a BFI print. It was totally black-and-white, but the editing pattern, the sequence of images, was considerably different

from the Cinémathèque Française version, and, quite astonishingly, still images of Léger paintings appeared here and there among the very active montage of dynamic shots. I was not able to get access to a print at that time, but during 1972, while in England and Germany for lectures and screenings of my films, I had a chance to see a 16mm safety print at the BFI, and determined that it came from a Dutch prototype, largely from the 'einde' title. (Meanwhile, I had visited Jan de Vaal almost every year since 1965, trying to get information about Hy Hirsh among other things, and I had asked him about *BALLET MÉCANIQUE*, but he denied that the Netherlands Filmmuseum had any interesting materials! When I questioned him again more specifically after seeing the BFI print in 1972, he still refused to let me look at the Filmmuseum print – so I still did not know that the Dutch prototype was also tinted. – By the way, I always had very pleasant relations with Mr. De Vaal: we would talk and have coffee and he would promise to 'look into things' and would promise that if I could come back later he would show me things, but when I came back later he would be gone, etc., etc.) I made a rough footage count on this BFI/Dutch print, of which I enclose a copy.

Much to my chagrin, in 1975 Standish Lawder's book *Cubist Cinema* was published, and I saw immediately that he had done no research to establish the provenance of the single print he used to analyze *BALLET MÉCANIQUE*, and that apparently he was quite ignorant of the existence of any variant prints. I actually spoke to Lawder, and he asked me if I would please refrain from mentioning any other prints since he hadn't mentioned them in his book! The following year, 1976, Jonas Mekas told me that the widow of Frederick Kiesler had discovered the nitrate print dating from the *BALLET MÉCANIQUE* world premiere in Vienna, 1924. When I visited New York in 1977 for an appearance on CBS television, I saw a safety copy (black-and-white) projected at Anthology Film Archive, but P. Adams Sitney would not let me see the nitrate. He claimed that it was not tinted, and he provided me with a typed outline of the Kiesler print compared to the Cinémathèque Française print as outlined in Lawder's book. This typed résumé had been prepared by a student of Sitney's or perhaps an employee of Anthology. I was not allowed to study the print on a editing table, as, Sitney said, they were having someone do a study of the two prints. I mentioned the Dutch prototype, but Sitney dismissed it, saying that it could not be very authentic since both the Kiesler version and the Cinémathèque/MOMA version came right from Léger, and he felt sure that Léger would never have put stills of paintings into his montage which Lawder had shown was based on dynamic principles. Judi Freeman has

seen the nitrate of the Kiesler print, by the way, and indicates that it contains many splices – so it is possible that either it was a ‘work-print’ (an early, unfinished version) or that it had been re-cut or censored (perhaps the nudity and sexual innuendo of Murphy’s version were omitted by Kiesler or Austrian censors) – or, indeed, both, since the copy might have begun as a working version with splices and additional cuts may have been made later.

During that same summer, 1977, I returned to the MOMA to study the tinted Léger print in detail, since neither Lawder nor Sitney had seen it, and they both scoffed at the possibility that Léger would have had a 16mm print at all, let alone bothering to tint it. I was happy to find that the tinted 16mm print did still exist in excellent shape, and I made a footage count and outline of the montage, including indications of the colors. In the decade since my last visit, however, the staff had changed largely, and no one seemed to believe that this 16mm print was really Léger’s. I insisted, and told them about my earlier visit, when the older people remembered getting it from Léger. They searched through the records and found the old card indicating that it was in fact the Léger print. They all became rather nervous, and said that it really ought to be properly copied, and that it should not be available ‘over the counter’ for study, etc. Fortunately, I had already written out my outline before they believed me that it was really a ‘painted original by Léger’.

Last Fall, when Ms. Grandia showed me the Filmmuseum’s print, I at last discovered that this Dutch prototype was also tinted! I did not have a chance to make a detailed listing of the tints, but you can do that, to see if they are somewhat consistent with the tints in the MOMA 16mm print. If they do correspond to a significant degree, this would prove beyond a doubt that Léger had some specific, definite intentions for color effects in *BALLET MÉCANIQUE*. Even if the color schemes do not precisely duplicate each other, however, I have no doubt that Léger himself tinted the two prints, and chose to have them shown at significant screenings. The MOMA print, deriving from lectures at Yale, could not have been made casually or easily – for example, in the 4 feet from 96 to 100, there are some 50 deliberate changes of color. Anyone who has tried to tint a film knows what intricate, tiring, demanding work it is. No one would do it for a joke or idle curiosity. This must have been done by Léger himself on purpose. Similarly, I know from the correspondence between Ed Pelster and Oskar Fischinger how exacting the Filmliga and the Uitskij Theatre were about acquiring authentic prints directly from the filmmaker, and presenting them in their most authentic form (speed, music, color, titles, etc.). Léger must have supplied them with the print including both the images of pain-

tings and the tinted geometric shapes. Léger may have changed his mind subsequently about the effectiveness of the shock/balance between the still paintings and the moving montages (again, nobody but Léger would have bothered or dared, for example, to cut 36 frames of a painting next to 36 frames of a hat around foot 12 of the 16mm print), but obviously he did not so easily give up the idea of the tinting, since the MOMA/Yale print would have been prepared nearly 10 years after the Dutch print, I would guess. (Do you have precise dating on the acquisition of your print?) Nor was the idea of tinting necessarily a late one, since in the 'preparatory sketches' that Lawder reproduces on p. 124 of his book, Léger mentions color effects such as 'une roue multicolore qui tourne' that may very well have been realized in the finished film by the quick alternations of primary colors, carefully hand-tinted into the prints.

While preparing this letter, I happened to scrutinize a print of *BALLET MÉCANIQUE* which comes from the Cinémathèque Française/MOMA prototype, and I noticed that several of the abstract sequences show definite signs that the original was tinted – both brushstrokes and painting over the frame edge are visible. This means that a third original copy from Léger's hand was also tinted, and precludes any question about the validity of colored copies. Indeed, any black-and-white prints are actually inauthentic!

In summary, I have no doubt that Léger himself hand-tinted at least two important prints of *BALLET MÉCANIQUE*, and that he intended them to be shown publicly in this tinted form. It is also quite possible that other colored prints once existed, and that color may have been added to some sequences using filters or color-wheels during projection. Dudley Murphy may also have preferred color effects.

I wish I had pursued *BALLET MÉCANIQUE* more insistently over the years, but it always seemed that someone else should be doing a definitive study. Shortly after Lawder's book, I heard from Judi Freeman about her researches, but although her *Art History* article contains the most thorough and insightful discussion of *BALLET MÉCANIQUE*, much more could be said in a book-length study. Sitney was very protective of the Anthology print because he insisted someone was working on it, and a definitive study would soon appear – but that is more than 10 years ago, and no such careful, scholarly comparative study has been published as far as I know.

The question of the validity of the hand-tinting is merely the tip of an iceberg. Deeper aesthetic interpretations need to be explored. I suspect, for example, that the Kiesler print represents Dudley Murphy's original montage (or at least a censored version thereof), and that the

Dutch print represents Léger's first attempt to make the film his own. The Cinémathèque Française print from the 30s probably represents a more thorough revision by Léger. One of the ideas that Dudley Murphy certainly meant to express by his version of the film concerned the relationship between human sentimentality and mechanical insensitivity (or impersonality): the expressions of emotion on the face of Kiki (often matted for emphasis) are used to parody the audience reaction to the machinery and to the washerwoman loops – as well as the 'picturesque' shots of Katherine Murphy swinging and sniffing a rose. The repetition of the Kiki shots (which may have been made with May Ray, by the way) also stresses the fact that so-called emotional expressions are merely muscular reflexes and consequently hardly different from the plunging pistons. Similarly, Murphy juxtaposes hat and shoe with circle and triangle to parody the pomp of fashion – as he animated the model hosiery legs to dance the charleston as a kind of burlesque of popular dance crazes. That Léger bothered to color the circles and triangles gives them a greater life and independence, makes them non-objective forces or presences with a life, meaning and action all their own – and a *superior* significance, since the live-action shots remain unrealistically grey. Does Léger's revised montage also de-emphasize the social parody implicit in Murphy's version? I can hardly wait for the definitive *BALLET MÉCANIQUE* book to find out!

William Moritz