

Technical Notes on *Blinkity Blank* (1955)

Visuals

An animated film made without the use of a camera, by engraving directly on black emulsion-coated film with a penknife, sewing needle and razor blade, the engraving being coloured with transparent dyes, and a sable-hair brush.

Animating directly on opaque black film poses the problem of how to position and register accurately the engraved image from one frame to the next. To bypass this problem *Blinkity Blank* intentionally set out to investigate the possibilities of intermittent animation and spasmodic imagery.

This meant that the film was not made in the usual way, one frame of picture following inexorably after the next, each second of time crying out for its pound of visual flesh – its full quota of 24 frames; instead, on the blackness and blankness of the outstretched strip of celluloid on my table top, I would engrave a frame here and a frame there, leaving many frames untouched and blank – sprinkling carefully – in relation to each other, to the spaces between, to the music, and to the idea that emerged as I engraved.

On the majority of the frames there is nothing at all. When such a movie is projected at normal speed, the image on a solitary frame is received by the eye for a 48th of a second, but, due to after-image and the persistence of vision, the image lingers considerably longer than this on the retina, and in the brain itself it may persist for several seconds until interrupted by the appearance of a new image.

To make play with these factors was one of the technical interests of producing *Blinkity Blank*. Sometimes, for greater emphasis, I would engrave two adjacent frames, or a frame-cluster, (that is, a group of 3, 4 or more frames); sometimes a frame-cluster would have related and continuous image within it and would thus solidify some actions and movements; at other times the frame-cluster would consist only of a swarm of disconnected, discontinuous images, calculated to build up an overall visual “impression”. Here and there, to provide much needed relief from the staccato action of single-frame images and frame-clusters, I introduced longer sections of contiguous frames with a flow of motion in the traditional manner.

During the process of making the film, tests and experiments revealed a number of definite laws relating to persistence of vision, after-image effects and intermittent imagery as they affect both the retina and the mind, especially when organized in sequences and with continuity.

Perhaps the film can be likened to a sketch, which uses a kind of impression of action and time, much like a draughtsman when he suggests a scene by leaving most of the page blank and only here and there draws a stroke, a line, or a blob of tone – often

to indicate quite a complex subject; this is in contrast to the usual animated film, in which all the frames of celluloid carry images, and which could be likened to a surface of paper which a draughtsman has completely covered with a fully rendered drawing.

Soundtrack

Since it was decided to record the music first, and having in mind that I would be sprinkling the images only here and there on what was for most of the time empty black film, music composer Maurice Blackburn took this into consideration in scoring the music, by allowing many silences between notes, phrases, short chords and tone clusters. He also approached the scoring in an experimental way, which he has described in the following notes.

Norman McLaren (1955)

Notes on the Music of *Blinkity Blank* by Maurice Blackburn (1955)

The group of instruments used for the recording of *Blinkity Blank* consisted of a flute, an oboe, a clarinet, a bassoon, and a cello. The music was written without key signature on a three-line stave (instead of the usual five lines); the spaces between the three lines were not used, therefore there were only three possible note positions to indicate pitch. If a note appeared on the top line, it indicated that the instrument played in its high register; a note on the middle line – in its middle register; and a note on the bottom line – in its low register. The limits of the three registers were set before-hand for each instrument. Inside that register, the musician was completely free to choose whatever note he wished.

The notes, however, indicated the precise time value and rhythmic pattern, time signatures and bars being used in the usual manner. It was therefore possible to conduct the orchestra and give some coherence to the group of instruments.

Signs for the control of dynamics and signs for instrumental colour were used in the conventional manner.

The best results of this “semi-free improvisation” were achieved by taking the orchestra practically by surprise and recording without rehearsals, thus ensuring as complete a divergence of inspiration in each musician as possible, a complete freshness of improvisation and a complete disregard for all consciously agreed key signatures.

Occasional percussive rhythms were added by engraving directly on a separate 35 mm optical track, which was fed into the final mix.

Maurice Blackburn (1955)