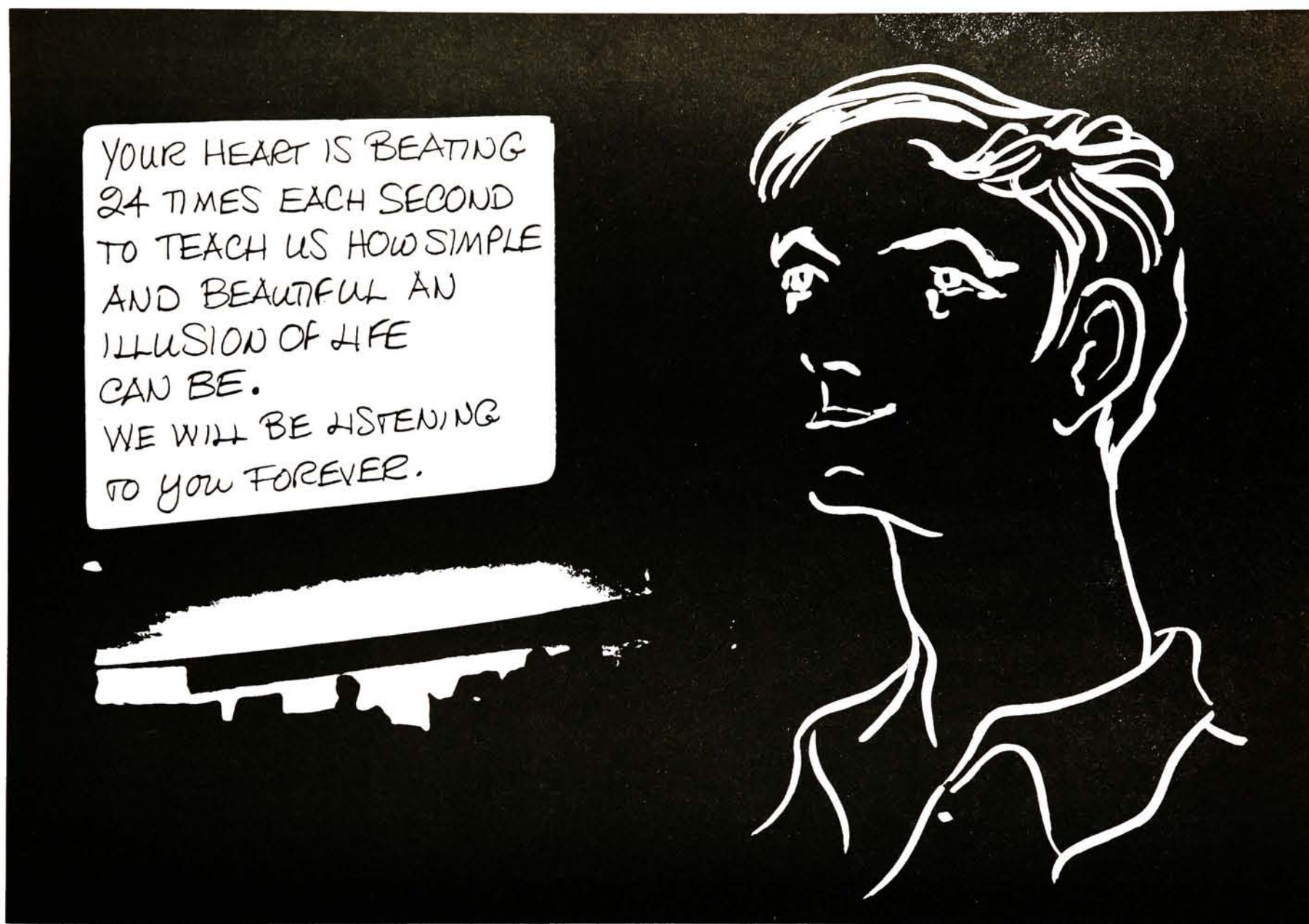


# NORMAN McLAREN YOU ARE ALIVE.

MARCOS MAGALHÃES: (BRASIL)



YOUR HEART IS BEATING  
24 TIMES EACH SECOND  
TO TEACH US HOW SIMPLE  
AND BEAUTIFUL AN  
ILLUSION OF LIFE  
CAN BE.  
WE WILL BE LISTENING  
TO YOU FOREVER.

*"Your camera catches not only physical movements that are inapprehensible by pencil, brush or pen, but also certain states of soul, recognizable by indices which it alone can reveal."*

— Robert Bresson,  
*Notes sur le cinématographe*

**A** few words." What can really be said about a person who has done as much for the advancement of cinematographic art as any other in the history of this medium. The few words that greeted me on my arrival one morning at the National Film Board were pasted on the bulletin board outside the infamous cafeteria. Without emotion, they simply read "Tuesday, January 27, 1987. Norman McLaren passed away yesterday at 1:15 p.m. There will be no funeral or memorial service. Please do not send flowers or donations."

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**E**n 1953, lors de mes études de photographie en Suisse, Norman McLaren, l'Office national du film, You-suf Karsh, Félix Leclerc et la Gendarmerie Royale du Canada représentaient à peu près la totalité de mes connaissances du Canada.

Rendre un hommage à Norman McLaren... Honoré, humble, pas à la hauteur, pourquoi moi?: Je ne faisais pas partie de ses intimes. Pourquoi pas moi?: Je l'ai côtoyé pendant tant d'années.

C'est Claude Jutra qui m'a présenté à Norman en 1962. J'étais très ému et impressionné; je confesse que je me souviens très peu de cette première visite. Il m'expliquait comment il fabriquait la trame sonore, pour je ne sais plus quel film; je n'ai pas compris grand chose.

J'étais fasciné par l'homme. Je me souviens tout particulièrement de ses yeux. Comme tous les grands personnages que j'ai rencontrés par la suite, il avait un regard bien particulier. Des yeux doux, tristes, scrutateurs, qui tantôt me fouillaient furtivement, pour aussitôt me quitter pour son for intérieur;

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Alexander Alexeff and Claire Parker: IN McLAREN'S FILMS

NONE OF THE FUNDAMENTAL PROPERTIES OF LIVING MATTER IS ABSENT: ONE MAY RECOGNIZE EMOTION, MOBILITY; PLASTICITY; EXCITABILITY AND THE EXTRAVAGANCES OF LOVE. THE ENTIRE WORK OF NORMAN McLAREN MAY BE CONSIDERED A SORT OF FUNDAMENTAL HUMAN COMEDY. IT IS REFRESHING TO FIND THAT IN HIS EXPERIMENTS THERE IS ALWAYS THE IDEA OF ARTISTIC RISK, THE RECOGNITION OF THE DANGERS OF CREATION AND THE AFFIRMATION OF THE IMPORTANCE OF CRAFT AND EXECUTION. THE QUALITY OF TOLERANCE, WHICH SO BECAME HIM, MADE HIM AN IDEAL TEACHER.

JOHN HUBLEY: McLAREN ALWAYS PUSHES AN IDEA TO ITS ULTIMATE ORIGINALITY; NEVER FEARING THE HOSTILITY TO NEWNESS; RECOGNIZING, I SUPPOSE, THAT THERE IS NO TRADITION IN A MEDIUM THAT IS AS IMMEDIATE AS THE PRESENT MOMENT.

'NEIGHBOURS' IS THE FILM McLAREN IS PROUDEST OF HAVING MADE BECAUSE OF THE PRAGMATIC USES TO WHICH IT HAS BEEN PUT TO SHOW THE CONSEQUENCES OF VIOLENCE.

DEREK HILL: WHEN SOMETHING NEW COMES OUT OF SCOTLAND, IT NEVER EMERGES - IT ERUPTS!! WHISKY, BAGPIPES AND NORMAN McLAREN. CAN ANY OTHER COUNTRY BOAST THREE SUCH DEVASTATING CONTRIBUTIONS TO CULTURE?

Quotes collected by Grant Munro

"NONE OF HIS COUNTLESS IMITATORS COMES UP TO HIS ANKLE. NO ONE QUITE SO OFF-BEAT HAS EVER BEEN SO FIRMLY ON THE BEAT."

McLaren:

Sometimes I get the impression from articles people write about me that I make my films almost single-handed. Now, this is a quite erroneous impression. Usually it's with one or two people. We form a small team. Most often it's been with Evelyn Lambert, but almost as frequently with Grant Munro. On the music side it's with Maurice Blackburn. So there's usually three people on the team.

André Martin: THE FILMS OF NORMAN McLAREN POSE A PROBLEM. THEY FORCE US TO SPEAK OF THINGS ABOUT WHICH OUR KNOWLEDGE REMAINS IMPRECISE, BUT WHICH THEY THEMSELVES DEFINE PERFECTLY IN A WORDLESS LANGUAGE.

McLaren: ANIMATION IS NOT THE ART OF DRAWINGS THAT MOVE, BUT RATHER THE ART OF MOVEMENTS THAT ARE DRAWN. I THINK THE TERM "MOVIES" IS A MUCH MORE WONDERFUL TERM THAN "FILM" BECAUSE MOVIES MEAN THAT THEY MOVE. THAT'S THE ESSENTIAL QUALITY.

McLAREN NEVER ADOPTED AN ATTITUDE OF SUPERIORITY AND ALWAYS HAD THE AUDIENCE IN THE BACK OF HIS MIND NO MATTER HOW ABSTRACT OR CONCRETE A FILM MIGHT BE. TO QUOTE HIM ON THIS MATTER:

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Norman McLaren's films speak for themselves. For the most part they speak without words and rely on visual and aural experimental research that brings them closer to the visual brain rather than the speech brain. His films create their own meta-language. They fly in the face of form. They make linguistics of the linguistics of film expression, expanding it like classssstic. They are music for the eyes. As Harold Benson stated in the January, 1955 issue of *American Cinematographer*, "McLaren has the genius of expressing emotion through the simple movements of matchstick figures."

Norman McLaren created flowers. The day after he died, the National Film Board, a place where he spent 43 very productive years after an equally productive early period in Europe and America, was very quiet. A moment of silence was organized in honour of the man who created its soundtrack. The flag was lowered to half mast and I stood alone in the cold and the snow watching it cast a shadow, as he did, on the building and institution whose reputation he built with over 60 films that won 200 awards including Oscars and Palme d'Ors. Those films were the bricks that built the international reputation of that place and this country.

It was just like Norman to go out in such a self-effacing way. I first remember him when I came through the NFB on a tour in 1971 with my film school. I saw him in the hall. We were

all awestruck. Silently he passes by... wasn't that... that was. Wow! Tucked away in a private world with private friends and feelings, he was nevertheless a real live gentle genius creator.

Once I got to graduate into this silly world, I had the opportunity to look at a lot of his early films. I was amazed to find a film he made with Helen Biggar in his Glaswegian (Glasweegian) days called *Hell Unlimited* (1936) which many consider to be the world's first peace film. It glowed like hot glass on the screen. It said more about disarmament and development than a thousand speeches at the United Nations. I had been watching and programming a lot of peace media and it seemed to me that this film said a lot more than any other anti-war film in a shorter amount of time.

*Hell Unlimited* was among a certain number of his films that displayed what we now call 'social consciousness.' It was heartening to discover that besides being a cinemartist he was a political man as well. His politics were those of colour and line and synthesis and music and humanism and commitment and compassion and peace and love. Although in his early days he may have been an ardent supporter of the Left (he went to Madrid in 1936 with Ivor Montagu to make a film to raise funds for the Republican cause in the Spanish civil war), he didn't let dogma dominate.

He may have mellowed into another kind of civil servant, working with the General Post Office Film Unit in London and the NFB here, but the Griersonian influence was important to his social self. Indeed one of his most important films was made within the framework of

the NFB. The definitive *Neighbours* is 8 minutes and 10 seconds of absolute pacifist poetry which won him eight awards including the Oscar in 1953 and has been seen by everyone in the world except Ronald Reagan and Mikail Gorbachev. I don't know if it's coincidental but 8 minutes and 10 seconds is the amount of time that it takes for a ray of sunshine to reach the earth from the sun. McLaren was the sun and his films were rays of sunshine. They reflected his quest for new cinematic expression and the expansion of his various creative, private and political lives. Those rays burst upon the cinema screens of the world.

It may seem that McLaren, in the later years, allowed his political self to become subsumed by his more pure visual research. I first met Norman when I brought him down to the Cinémathèque Québécoise to show *Hell Unlimited* at the New Cinema Festival in 1983. The overflow audience applauded wildly at the end, recognizing its visionary wisdom. Norman remained quietly appreciative. I was standing outside the screening room with a big white bucket, looking for public donations so we could help

another anti-war filmmaker, Peter Watkins, make his new film *The Journey*. Norman and Guy Glover came by and slipped what was, for us, a large sum of money into the pail and wished us good luck. We ended up producing the film with a lot of good luck.

Ironically and fortuitously, we ended up editing the film at the NFB in the same room where Norman worked after 1956. I put up a production still from *Neighbours* on the outside of my door. That was another good sign. After, I talked to him irregularly about Mary Ellen Bute, a wonderful pioneer animator with whom he had worked on *Spook Sport* in New York in 1940. I met him for the final time last year at a conference on peace and security called *Illusions and Realities* in the Nuclear Age.

It seems to me that Norman McLaren knew about illusion and reality in this nuclear age. He was at McGill University to receive a special award, acknowledging NFB filmmakers for their contributions to peace education, and to be honoured by the university's creation of an annual prize to be awarded to a student who "demonstrates exceptional talent in media studies and manifests



I KEEP THINKING OF A GROUP OF PEOPLE WATCHING ONE OF MY FILMS AND I KEEP LOOKING OUT FOR THE POSSIBILITY OF THEM GETTING BORED. I THINK THE TASK OF THE FILM MAKER IS - YOU'RE GIVEN THIS AMOUNT OF TIME: YOU'VE GOT A CAPTIVE AUDIENCE AND YOU MUST KEEP THEM INTERESTED THROUGHOUT THAT WHOLE SPACE OF TIME. I'M TERRIFIED OF BORING AN AUDIENCE.

BILLY GIOVENE: FANCY FROM THE TALKING PICTURE - THAT VAST PROVINCE OF THE CINEMA THAT BORDERS, INDEED OVERLAPS, ON THE REALM OF LANGUAGE - THERE EXISTS YET ANOTHER PROVINCE OF THE CINEMA WHERE TALK IS LIMITED AND WHICH TOUCHES ON THE FRONTIERS OF MUSIC AND DANCE.

IN A CORNER OF THAT PROVINCE IS TO BE FOUND THE LITTLE GARDEN OF NORMAN McLAREN WHOSE FILMS TALK ONLY THROUGH IMAGE AND MOVEMENT.

WHAT WOULD HE HAVE DONE HAD HE BEEN BORN BEFORE THE AGE OF MOTION PICTURES? HIS ANSWER REVEALS THE VARIETY OF INTERESTS HE CHANNELLED INTO FILM-MAKING. GRAPHIC ARTIST, MUSIC COMPOSER, INVENTOR OF GADGETS, CHOREOGRAPHER, PUPPETEER... BUT SO UNTHINKABLE IS McLAREN WITHOUT FILMS THAT, HAD HE LIVED BEFORE THERE WERE MOVING PICTURES, HE MIGHT HAVE INVENTED THEM.

CLAUDE JUTEA: NORMAN McLAREN'S FILMS ILLUMINATE FOR A FRACTION OF A SECOND A LANDSCAPE TOO VAST FOR THE EYE TO GRASP IN ITS TOTALITY. WHAT WE DO SEE SEARS THE RETINA AND BRANDS ITSELF ON THE RETINA.

IT IS A VISION OF THE UNKNOWN, DENIED US UNTIL THEN. AN ORIGINAL, ALMOST BLINDING VISION.

WE CAN DO LITTLE TO REPAY HIS ACHIEVEMENTS EXCEPT TO HONOUR HIM.

LUIS MATILLA (Madrid) JAN. 27/87

HOY ES UN DIA DE PROFUNDA TRISTEZA PARA TODOS LOS QUE AMAMOS EL CINE. ME UNO A TU DESOLACION POR LA MUERTE DE NORMAN.

SU OBRA, VUESTRA OBRA, QUE DA ENTRE NOSOTROS.

TRANS: (TODAY IS A DAY OF PROFOUND SADNESS FOR ALL OF US WHO LOVE CINEMA. I SHARE YOUR DESOLATION AT NORMAN'S DEATH. HIS WORK, YOUR WORK, REMAINS WITH US.)

the global consciousness and awareness exemplified by Norman McLaren."

After he died, I was sad. Working late that night at the Board getting ready for our premiere at Berlin, I felt his spirit in those sacred halls. Something was there and lost and found again - A spirit of creativity, of joy and play, of social significance. That meant something to Canadian culture.

That weekend I went with my two-and-a-half year old daughter, Mira to a retrospective screening at the Conservatoire, one of several that had been organized to honour a man who wished for no flowers. It seems that such appreciation always comes too late. These tributes always come too late.

As we watched several of his films, Mira got up out of her seat and found a space on a balcony where she could stare intently at his magic in the dark, just as I had done when I was young. As *C'est l'aviron* (1944), one of the films from the *Chants populaires* series, came up she began to move rhythmically to the folk song and was bathed by his flickering light show. She worked herself into a wonderful dervish dance and began to laugh, thereby disturbing most of the other serious cinephiles in the audience who were there in respectful silence.

As she danced on, impervious to the world, I'd like to think that Norman would have been there dancing too. The shadow of his soul dances on for what we hope will be the next generation. It dances on...

**Peter Wintonick**  
February 1987

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le regarder à ce moment-là, c'était comme scruter un lac sans fond, je devenais triste à mon tour.

Il travaillait dans deux petits bureaux transformés en salle de montage et en plateau de tournage. Il y avait un tel bric-à-brac qu'il fallait presque le découvrir. Ces deux réduits donnaient sur un corridor où peu de gens passaient. On ne rencontrait donc pas Norman par hasard. Juste à côté de lui travaillait Evelyn Lambart, son assistante pour plusieurs de ses films; elle était là, souriante, rassurante.

Il a toujours été mal logé, son équipement vieillot, Moviola et caméra ont probablement servi à faire tous ses films, depuis ses début à l'ONF. (Il y a été engagé par John Grierson, en 1941.)

Donc grâce à Claude qui m'a permis de briser cette glace, j'ai renouvelé ma visite à Norman presque régulièrement deux fois par année.

Timidement, je frappais à sa porte et, timidement, il me l'ouvrait. Notre rencontre commençait toujours par des excuses mutuelles suivies d'un silence qui augmentait sensiblement le malaise. Lorsque j'étais avec Norman, j'oubliais le peu d'anglais que je savais et il passait péniblement au français pour me rendre mon séjour agréable.

Il m'expliquait ce qu'il était en train de faire; il me faisait des démonstrations, comment graver des trames sonores. Il s'informait de mes montages, on parlait de l'Office. Puis je ressortais de chez lui à reculons, heureux, mal à l'aise, gêné de l'avoir dérangé. Six mois

plus tard, je prenais mon courage à deux mains et je récidivais.

Il m'avait passé deux filtres Polaroid et nous collions du «scotch tape» sur un des filtres et la polarisation donnait des douleurs absolument fabuleuses; je cherchais de *tape* de différentes qualités pour obtenir toutes sortes d'effets différents. Norman m'a demandé de ne pas parler de cette expérience, car il avait l'intention de l'utiliser dans un de ses prochains films. Je n'en ai jamais parlé et Norman n'a jamais fait ce film.

Un jour à ma grande surprise, c'est lui qui frappe à la porte de ma salle de montage, la boîte de *Pas de deux* sous le bras. «Werner, j'ai beaucoup de difficultés avec une coupe.» Qu'à cela ne tienne, me dis-je, je vais enfin pouvoir lui montrer ce dont je suis capable!

Je pense avoir essayé au moins pendant deux heures, sans succès. Norman était navré pour moi. Il s'en est voulu de m'avoir mis dans cette situation. Je suis donc le co-réalisateur de la seule mauvaise coupe dans *Pas de deux*, et c'est aussi la seule coupe qu'il y a dans ce film!

Après la construction de l'édifice: Grierson, Norman a déménagé dans un

beau grand bureau tout neuf, mais là encore il n'était pas aisé de le trouver. La plupart des gens pouvaient passer devant sa porte sans se douter que c'était son lieu de travail. Ça ne lui a pas pris de temps pour transformer ce bureau en véritable capharnaüm: planche à dessin, peintures, papiers, bouts de film. Il gardait tout. Comme Picasso. Picasso qui lui portait d'ailleurs une grande admiration.

Il était moins visible encore dans ce bureau que dans l'ancien. Mais il était là, terriblement productif.

Le malaise qu'il y avait entre nous, c'est-à-dire cette timidité presque maladive, nous l'avons pourtant entretenu près d'un quart de siècle!

Peu de temps après sa retraite, un jour sur ma table de montage, j'ai trouvé le livre *Les dessins de Norman McLaren* avec cette dédicace: «To Werner, with my gratitude and affection, Norman McLaren, April 1984».

Je l'aimais cet homme-là!

Il est sorti timidement de ma vie pour entrer de plain pied dans ma mémoire.

**Werner Nold**  
Février 1987

