

# Tarantella

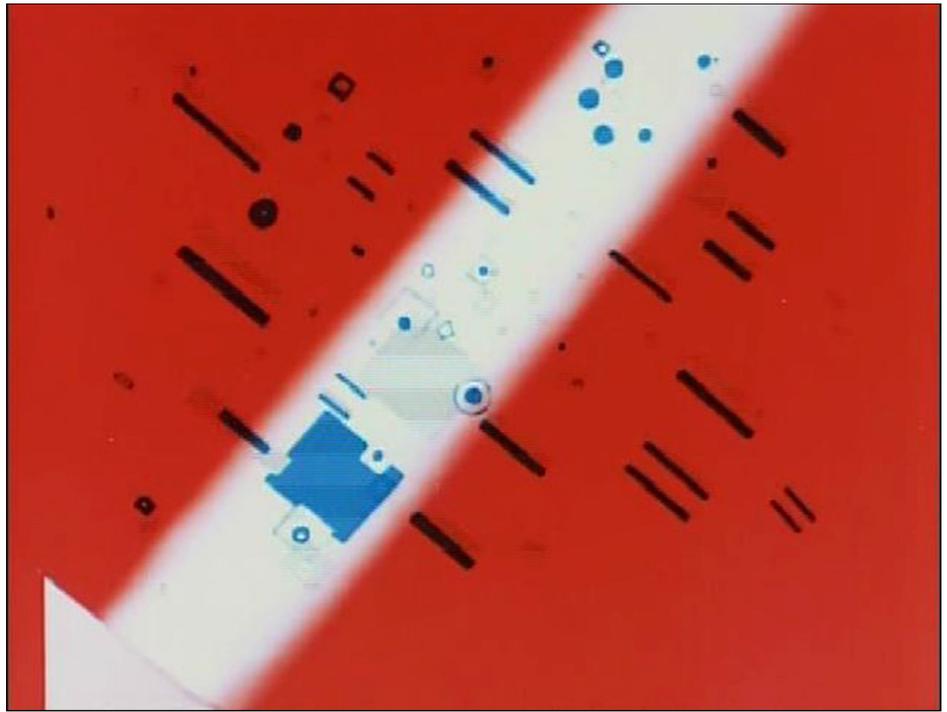
By Lauren Rabinovitz

Adapted by permission of the author from "Lovers of Cinema: The First American Film Avant-Garde 1919-1945" (University of Wisconsin Press, 1995)

In 1940 the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) Film Library actively began to document a rich international experimental cinema, and staged a show featuring the works of Hans Richter, Fernand Léger, Man Ray, Marcel Duchamp, Len Lye, Ted Nemeth and Mary Ellen Bute. Richter, Duchamp, Léger, Man Ray, and Lye – filmmakers working in Europe – have all become familiar names in any standard text of avant-garde cinema, and their films included in this show have become cinema classics. Mary Ellen Bute and her movies, however, are practically unknown today.

Such a fate was not unusual for prewar American experimental filmmakers. They worked in the 1930s and 1940s within a fragile support network and, after World War II, received only sporadic attention from serious film critics when a new generation of filmmakers achieved prominence. The individual filmmaker of the prewar era had to be not only a filmmaker but also a distributor, critic, and educator for an experimental cinema. The reclamation of the individual filmmaker can reveal a great deal about the definition and workings of an experimental cinema in the United States before World War II. Bute's career exemplifies how the artist-filmmaker during this period successfully invented experimental cinema at both the individual and the systemic levels. She achieved an individual aesthetic style, separate and distinct from her European counterparts, and she devised strategies for the distribution, exhibition, and reception of experimental cinema in the United States.

Ten of Bute's films, made between 1934 and 1953, belong to the category of cinema known as "abstract films," "motion paintings," or "experimental animation." They place Bute in a painterly-filmic tradition alongside Richter, Viking Eggeling, Oskar Fischinger, Lye, and Norman McLaren. Yet if Bute's films today



*A frame enlargement from "Tarantella" which was created from more than seven thousand drawings. Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.*

seem easily contained within a discrete aesthetic category and tradition of cinema, they were less easily situated within the contemporary avant-garde's rigorous and exclusionary measures for film art. Unlike most experimental filmmakers before and after World War II, Bute did not explicitly claim an anti-Hollywood stance for her aesthetic principles. Indeed, she publicly situated her films not in *resistance* to Hollywood, but in conjunction with it, since she marketed her films as short subjects for commercial, theatrical bookings. In the 1940s and 1950s, Bute's films opened for Hollywood features in Radio City Music hall as well as theaters across the country. It is, however, precisely this tension between the films' elitist modernist aesthetics and their popular reception as pretty amusements that is worth further exploration.

Trained as a painter at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in the early 1920s, Bute identified with the dominant intellectual preoccupations of the modernist avant-garde. Like Richter and Eggeling in Europe, Bute tried to express movement and controlled rhythms in time-sequence paintings. Like Richter and Eggeling, she subsequently decided that painting itself was too limited a medium to represent time and motion. Throughout the 1920s and early 1930s, she extended painterly concerns to music and light so as to represent the kinetics of modern, fast-paced, highly technologized life. Like many other painters, she understood that such concerns were

within the mainstream of contemporary art, the logical outcome of a linear tradition established through Paul Cézanne's abstractions of form and color, Cubism's attempts to produce "surface sensations to the eye," the Italian Futurists, the American Synchronists, and Wassily Kandinsky's paintings of relationships between colors and music, works that Bute herself called "abstract compositions based on an arbitrary chromatic scale of senses."

After she graduated from art school and moved to New York City, Bute attempted to transcend the limitations of painting through combining theatrical performance, music, colored lighting, and two dimensional pieces in stage lighting and design. She attended the Yale School of Drama, and following her graduation in 1925 and a subsequent trip around the world as a drama director for a "floating university," Bute worked with the inventors of the new light organs, musical keyboard instruments that could simultaneously produce and create moving colors on a screen. From the Russian physicist and color organ inventor Leon Theremin, in particular, Bute developed a sophisticated orientation to art as an elaboration of the scientific phenomena of color and light. Theremin taught her to use light on a static surface and how not to use light haphazardly. While Bute was working with Theremin, a third person joined the team. Russian-born Joseph Schillinger ranked among America's most sought-after composition teachers for his methodology which reduced musical elements to geometric relationships. Schillinger's students included popular music icons Tommy Dorsey, George Gershwin, and Glenn Miller. With his application of mathematical concepts to music composition, Schillinger taught Bute a central means by which she could coordinate musical composition with painting in shared terms of light, form, time and color. Bute went on to apply concepts from her collaborative experiments with Theremin and Schillinger in her own "absolute film" titled "Rhythm in Light" (1934).

Bute's four films released between 1940 and 1950 represent a third phase of "absolute films" and the most mature of her drawn films. Textual inscriptions that introduced each of these films marked Bute's cinema as educationally edifying by announcing the film's intention "to present a new type of film-ballet." Such titles presented Bute's cinema from the outset as promoting appreciation for tunes already popularly canonized as acceptable highbrow music.

"Tarantella" (1940) is a five-minute color film animated from more than seven thousand drawings and set to original piano music performed by Edwin Gerschefski. [Editor's note: Gerschefski, a student of Schillinger, created compositions that reflect the stylistic diversity obtainable with Schillinger's system, according to Craig B. Parker, an associate professor of music at Kansas State University. Some are unabashedly tonal, while others are modal or atonal, Parker observes.]

[Editor's note: According to film historian William Moritz, Bute hired pioneering animator Norman McLaren (living in New York before he went to Canada) to draw directly on film strips the "characters" of ghosts, bats, etc., to synchronize with Saint-Saëns' "Danse Macabre" for her 1940 film "Spook Sport." She kept McLaren's painted originals, and reused some of the images in later films, including "Tarantella." Moritz describes "Tarantella" as Bute's best film noting that she animated most of the imagery herself, using jagged lines to choreograph dissonant scales. Even the sensuous McLaren interlude, he adds, is not totally out of character.]

Bute positioned her short films in commercial movie theaters as toney introductions, "class" or "art" acts that would precede specific Hollywood prestige productions. "Tarantella" opened for "Paris Waltz" at New York City's Paris Theatre, where Bute's original animation art was displayed in the lobby.

The commercial premieres of Bute's films often occurred a few years after their completion. But if the films did not always win immediate commercial success, they enjoyed longevity without regard for timeliness or topicality. Bute attributed their long runs to the films' abstract nature: "It's just like music. You can see it over and over."

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.*

*Lauren Rabinovitz is Professor of American Studies and Cinematic Arts at the University of Iowa. She is the author of books and articles on film and American culture, including Points of Resistance: Women, Power & Politics in the New York Avant-Garde Cinema, 1943-1971; For the Love of Pleasure: Women, Movies and Culture in Turn-of-the-Century Chicago; and Electric Dreamland: Amusement Parks, Movies, and American Modernity.*