Seeing Without Watching.
Musical Visions by Norman McLaren

Edoardo Dotto

Abstract

Among the 'unconventional' graphic practices, around the middle of the last century, in the circles of avant-garde cinema, that of drawing directly on film, with the most diverse techniques, became widespread, making films in which figurative abstraction was often used. Among the most successful films of this genre, there is Begone Dull Care, *a work by Norman McLaren made with the contribution of Evelyn Lambart, in which –with a distinctly visionary trait and using the most diverse techniques– an animation is built perfectly synchronized with music specially written by jazz pianist Oscar Peterson. After having taken into consideration the story of the making of the film, in the following note we examine the works McLaren refers to in order to build his graphic language, mature and surprising, and the different forms of connection that the author has established between music and the images, showing how in many cases these overcome the construction, albeit veiled, of any form of musical notation, thus avoiding the banal direct correspondence between sounds and images, pushing in the direction of the realization of completely visionary abstract image sequences.*

Keywords: artistic avant-garde, abstract film, Norman McLaren, Evelyn Lambart, visionary.

Introduction

In 1949 the video maker Norman McLaren together with his collaborator Evelyn Lambart completed *Begone Dull Care*, a short movie of seven minutes and fifty seconds made on 35 mm film which, like other works by him made in the same period, constitutes a cornerstone in the history of abstract animation cinematography. In the movie a modality of relationship between music and images is refined, hitherto explored only by some pioneers such as Oscar Fischinger, Len Lye and a few others [1]. In *Begone Dull Care* the connection between images and music –specially composed by the jazz pianist Oscar Peterson, then 24 years old– is so dense that they seem to spring from one another, as if the visual forms in movement were the result of a

visionary imagination triggered by the sound flow and vice versa. The film was awarded in 1950 with a *Special Genie Award* for experimental filmography [Pinson 2017, p. 101].
Much of the originality of the film –although McLaren was not the first to propose this method of realization– lies in the fact that the animated images are created by painting directly on the surface of the celluloid film (fig. 1) or by scratching the emulsion with some metal tips, taking care to synchronize the different passages with the musical sequences already recorded. The film, therefore, is made without the use of the camera, using the film –so to speak– as the support of a very long continuous drawing, drawn without considering the

Fig. 1. Norman McLaren working on Begone Dull Care, 1949. <https://blog.nfb.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/mc-121.jpg> (accessed on 2021, september 27).

separations between the individual frames. During the viewing of the movie, the projection machine mechanically divides the continuous strip into a sequence of images lasting 1/24 of a second, giving the impression of diachronically scrolling the drawing on the film while witnessing the continuous flow of the music.

Norman McLaren

The son of an interior decorator, Norman McLaren was born in Stirling, Scotland, in 1914. In the wake of his father's interests in 1933 he moved to Glasgow to attend the School of Fine Arts where he developed a deep passion for cinema and where he founded a group of filmmakers interested in classical Soviet filmography (Eisenstein, in particular), French and German [Rondolino 1959, pp. 35,36; McWilliams, Dionne 1990; Jordan 1953, pp. 1-3]. During this period, he began to develop great

interest in the works of some avant-garde directors who explored the possibility of composing abstract moving images. After making the first promotional and advertising films, in 1936 he was fascinated by *Color Box*, a film by the multifaceted New Zealand artist Len Lye who led him to experiment with making films traced directly on the film without resorting to the use of the camera. After a short stay in London in 1939, he left for New York where on his own behalf and at the invitation of the Guggenheim Museum he made a series of small abstract sound and color films, including *Star and Stripes* and *Dots* and participated as an animator in the making of *Spook Sport*, a film by Mary Ellen Bute.

In this period, already at the age of 27, McLaren had had the opportunity to assimilate the style of his main authors of reference –Fischinger, Lye and Bute– and had to his credit about twenty films made in increasingly prestigious locations, so as to place himself as a young promise in the field of experimental cinema. In 1941 the pioneer of documentary filmmaking John Grierson, also Scottish and emigrated to Canada, in charge of founding the National Film Board of Canada, asked McLaren to move to Ottawa where he would work for the rest of his life, enjoying a freedom almost absolute. Over the years McLaren built a solid work team modeling it on their needs and the specific qualities of their employees. She worked extensively with actor Grant Munro, collaborated several times with composer Maurice Blackburn and above all shared a good part of his path with animator Evelyn Lambart whose creative streak supported McLaren more than once in the definition of his operating method. Lambart was also born in Ottawa in 1914. Hearing deprived from an early age, she was directed to visual art studies becoming in 1942 the first female animator at the *National Film Boureau* of Canada. His collaboration with McLaren lasted from 1944 until 1965. Lambart's inventive and methodical spirit supported McLaren as assistant director in the making of other extraordinary films such as 1956's *Rythmetic*, 1960's *Lines: vertical*, 1962's *Lines: Horizontal* and *Mosaic* of 1965. Despite the public recognition that McLaren bestowed on her, her contribution to the making of these films still appears too undervalued today. In any case, Lambart stressed several times how the most intense and productive collaboration with McLaren was the one developed in *Begone Dull Care* [McWilliams 2017; Rosenthal 1970, p. 11].

Begone Dull Care

The collaboration between Norman McLaren and musician Oscar Peterson originated from a chance meeting after a concert in Montreal, during which McLaren explained that he was interested in music for the abstract film he was working on. Peterson soon went to the *National Film Boureau* to see some of McLaren's works such as *Dots* and *Loops* and, having figured out what music was suitable for this type of film, he immediately accepted with enthusiasm. He then began to propose a series of pieces and musical fragments that the two selected together and that Peterson elaborated in the following days in a sequence of different songs that –recalls McLaren– had very little to do with the initial ideas [Pinson 2017, p. 103, McWilliams 2017; Rosenthal 1970, pp. 10, 11; Rogers 2014, pp. 74 and 76]. In this way, a completely unpredictable result was reached which, however, perfectly suited the spirit of the project and the rhythms of McLaren's animations.
Peterson's music for *Begone Dull Care*, played by a trio consisting of piano, double bass and drums, is divided into three pieces, in the classic Allegro-Andante-Presto sequence, and is pervaded by the joyful intelligence and grace that Peterson would have further developed in the following fifty years of activity.
As we said, *Begone Dull Care* is made without the use of the camera, making exclusive use of the drawing on the film and the scratches on it [Jordan 1953, pp. 4-6; McWilliams 1991, pp. 82-84]. Having the recorded song available and having to synchronize the images on the film with extreme precision, it was essential for McLaren and Lambart to be able to pin the duration of each musical succession directly on the celluloid in order to have precise references on where to start and end a specific sequence. To identify the points of the music track where a sound fragment was located, they used an oscilloscope and marked the different points of reference on the film: "the music was measured, note by note, phrase by phrase, etc. The measurements, transferred to a 'dope-sheet' which charted the music on paper. The measurements were numbered, and these numbers were marked on the 35 mm celluloid, between the sprocket holes and along the edge of the film" [McLaren 2006, p. 5]. In this way, the individual parts to be animated were identified with care and it was possible to proceed quickly to create them one

after the other, verifying with slow motion that the images were appropriate and perfectly synchronized with the music [Dobson 1994, p. 203]. As McLaren said "we made *Begone Dull Care* in shots, as it were, the shots being defined by the length of the musical phrase. We'd do maybe five or six versions, after which we'd run them on the moviola and choose the best. Some were painted as the moviola was moving, and we'd dance the brush full of paint to the rhythm of the music in the picture-gate" [Collins 1998, p. 40; Pinson 2017, p. 105]. The very close control, the proximity that the authors maintained with the sequence of shapes just traced, allowed an immediate confirmation that the use of the camera –imposing the times for development and printing– would never have allowed. The ability to instantly check the film and make corrections and improvements allowed Lambart and McLaren to lay out a very long visual work on the film, allowing ample room for improvisation, like what Peterson did with music. For *Begone Dull Care* McLaren had not made a storyboard or a script and at each working session he and Lambart had only a vague idea of how much they would draw [Dobson 2006, p. 176]. Moreover, the use of slow motion and the immediate verification of the consistency between images and music made it possible to prevent the entire system of the film from being ineffective or even boring. In fact, McLaren said "many years ago I was confronted with a problem regarding abstract film visuals. It is relatively easy to make a one or two minute abstract film that will hang together and be a unity. But with an eight or ten minute abstraction, it is much more difficult. One runs the risks of creating either too much monotony, or too much diversity. Some kind of format or structure seemed necessary to vary the uniformity or to discipline the variety. I found that some of the forms which music has evolved (to solve the same problem) lent themselves to abstract visuals. I used the ABA form of European classical music in *Begone Dull Care* and *Spheres*, and a short rondo-like form in *Short and Suite*" [Pinson 2017, p. 108; McLaren 1977, p. 25; Dobson 2006, p. 204].
The techniques used to trace the shapes on the film were the most varied. McLaren and Lambart used watercolors, painting on both sides of the film (figs. 2, 3), India ink, spray paint, cell painting [2]. They imprinted the textures of some fabrics imbued with color, used grains of dust to shield the film during spraying, used

Fig. 2. Norman Mc Laren, Begone Dull Care, 1949, stillframe. In the frame it is clear how the surface of the film is painted on both sides in order to obtain the superimposition of different layers of watercolor and ink.

Fig. 3. Norman Mc Laren, Begone Dull Care, 1949, stillframe. As you can see, the red spots overlap a light brown haze probably obtained by applying the brush in the direction of the length of the film.

different types of stencils or –especially in the slower motion of the film, the Andante– they scratched the celluloid blackened by the emulsion.

The process used to make films without the use of a camera is described with generosity and precision by McLaren himself in a pamphlet published by the *National Film Boureau* in the 1950s [McLaren 1958]. With a series of witty and accurate drawings and some concise captions, all the tools and techniques needed to draw directly on the film are shown with punctuality and precision (fig. 4). The description is so detailed that one has the feeling of being able to perfectly replicate the technique developed by Len Lye and perfected by McLaren. The main part of the booklet concerns the making of films in which the images are caged in the individual frames –as in *Loops* for example– but in the final part McLaren points out how the making of films drawn on the film regardless of the cage of the individual frames, just like *Begone Dull Care*, it's even simpler.

Music and Images

Throughout his career, Norman McLaren used music in his films in different ways, alternating ways that depended on the type of film he wanted to make and the different forms of collaboration he intertwined with authors and performers [Rogers 2014, pp. 75-77; Bethônico, J. M., Chaves 2015, pp. 35-38; Mok 2017]. For example, in *Spheres* of 1969, made with René Jodoin, the music is a Bach fugue performed by Glenn Gould which becomes the occasion for a visual interpretation aimed at showing Bach's complex compositional mechanics. In this case [Bazzana 2004, p. 330] McLaren could interact with Gould only on aspects relating to the choice of the piece without having –obviously, due to the complex personality of the pianist– any role in his interpretation. The music in this case was taken as an established fact and the animation slavishly follows its development with an almost descriptive approach. In other films such as *Loops* and *Dots*, both from 1940, the soundtrack is directly drawn by hand on the film –with brush and India ink– obtaining a series of modulated sounds with a characteristic timbre. The technique, further perfected over time, has for years been a sort of 'trademark' of McLaren's films [Dotto 2014, pp. 191, 192].

HOW TO MAKE ANIMATED MOVIES WITHOUT
A CAMERA

NORMAN McLAREN

Things needed:

1. A chair — for the artist to sit on.

2. A table — for the artist to sit at.

3. A board — fixed securely on the table at an angle to allow the artist comfort while drawing.

4. A hole — about 2" by 10" (50 mm. × 250 mm.) cut in the board to let light through from behind.

5. A lamp or mirror or even a wide sheet of white card — to place on the table behind the hole, to give Illumination or to reflect skylight or daylight through the hole.

6. Two strips of wood — for fixing vertically onto the board about 3 1/2" (90 mm.) apart, thus making a channel on the board above the hole.

The film holder:

7. A piece of wood — about 3 1/2" by 21" (90 mm. × 533 mm.), to slide smoothly up and down in the channel.

8. A row of pegs along one side of the piece of wood — so that the artist's free hand can easily push the wood up the channel a little at a time, while he is drawing frames of film. The pegs should be on the left hand side for the right-handed artist, and on the right hand side for the left-handed artist.

9. A groove — along the entire length of this piece of wood to hold the 35 mm. film. The groove must be 35 mm. wide and have lips on either side to hold the film securely in place. The lips should overhang about 1/8th of an inch (3 mm.) and should not press on the edges of the film enough to prevent it being pulled through the groove.

10. A hole — about 1" by 19" (25 mm. × 480 mm.) should be cut out of the centre of the groove to let the light through from behind.

11. A piece of frosted or ground glass, or thick ground celluloid — to be countersunk into this hole, so that the film held in the groove will have a solid but transparent support.

12. A rod — fixed below the table to carry 1000' (304 metres) roll of blank 35 mm. film for drawing on. The film will feed upwards between the artist's knees and into the groove in the film holder.

13. A bin — placed on the far side of the table from the artist to catch the film as it drops down from the top end of the channel. The drop should be sufficient to let the wet ink image drawn on the film dry before it hits the bottom of the bin.

Fig. 4. Norman McLaren, two pages from Cameraless Animation, 1959. The playful and light-hearted style of McLaren's drawings becomes the means for a precise description of the production technique of films made without the use of the camera.

In other cases, the music was commissioned directly by the author, often to musicians with whom he had an extraordinary affinity and a habit of work, as happens with the music composed by the Canadian musician Maurice Blackburn who worked several times for the *National Film Boureau* and composed, for example, the soundtrack of *Lines: Vertical* from 1960. *Begone Dull Care* also belongs to this category of film, in which the music is the result of a precise and intense interaction between filmmaker and composer. In this case the music, even if there is no precise script to refer to, seems already predisposed to intertwine with a visual history, although still completely vague. McLaren himself writes "There was much give-and-take between us, in the sense that Peterson often did things on the piano that for me gave rise to new visual ideas; on the other hand, I had already certain visual ideas which dictated that he do certain things in the music. From his abundant improvisation of him I was able to select from and arrange ideas that would inspire us when I and Evelyn Lambart came to make the picture" [McLaren 2006, p. 5].

In some films such as 1955's *Blinkity Blank*, these different modes coexist, and the soundtrack entertains various and surprising relationships with the images.

In any case, in no other film as in *Begone Dull Care*, McLaren and Lambart manage to achieve together –paradoxically– such unity with music and such independence from it. The final effect of the film is to create two communication tracks, perfectly synchronized from a rhythmic and emotional point of view, without noticing the supremacy of one over the other. The authors are able to design a film that interprets the music without representing it, that comments on it without telling it, building a flow of images that is totally pertinent. Precisely from this point of view *Begone Dull Care* is a fully visionary film, a sequence of images in which the relationship with music is placed on a level of absolute equality and in which musical improvisation –free but clearly structured in advance– triggers a sort of hallucinatory sequence of images, solidly controlled by the rigor of the technical and interpretative tools
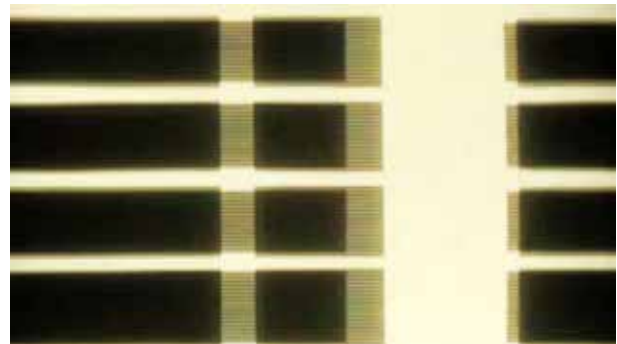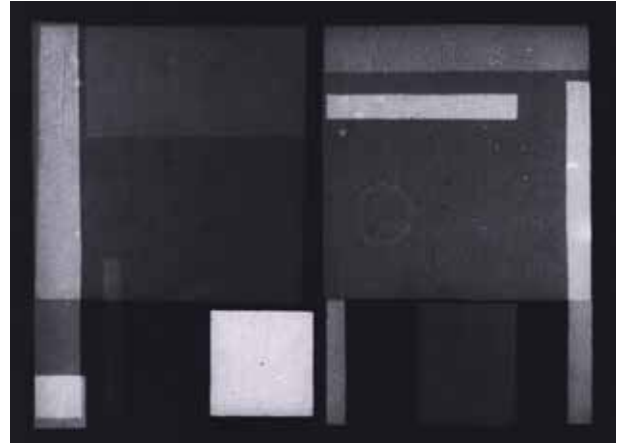

Fig. 5. Hans Richter, Rhythmus 21, 1921, stillframe.

Fig. 6. Walter Ruttman, Opus IV, 1925, stillframe.

Fig. 7. Oscar Fischinger, An Optical Poem, 1938, stillframe.

implemented by the authors who, with the exception of a few frames, never use recognizable forms, making total use of an unprecedented repertoire of abstract forms. In the movie, the filmed sequence transcends the structure of the music but maintains a very close relationship with it, resulting in the construction of a unity between sound and image that probably neither McLaren nor Lambart would ever achieve again.

References

As we said, in the period in which *Begone Dull Care* was made there was already a solid tradition of "absolute films" –as abstract films were also called– in which non-figurative images were presented, sometimes supported by a soundtrack. In this context, the main references useful to illustrate McLaren's visual and technical background around 1940 are many but in this note, for reasons of clarity and space, it seems sufficient to indicate –not in strict chronological order– only five works, in the knowledge that it is a reductive choice that excludes works of great importance such as, for example, Duchamp's experiments [3].
The first is *Rhythmus 21* from 1921 by Hans Richter, a three-minute film in black and white, in which a series of abstract images, consisting mainly of white rectangles, move on a black background, accompanied by a soundtrack (fig. 5). The film is made with the use of stop motion –thus shooting the individual frames with the camera– and proposes from a visual point of view a meditated alternation of solids and voids, ordered and measured.
The second is *Opus IV* by Walter Ruttman of 1925, in black and white, for about four minutes in which an original composition of horizontal and vertical lines in motion is shown which, thickening and thinning, rapidly change their relationship with the background (fig. 6).
The third is *An optical poem* by Oscar Fischinger of 1938, a film lasting almost seven minutes in color in which the relationship between sound and image is even more dense and intense than those already described. On the notes of Listz's *Second Hungarian Rhapsody* in this film, made famous also thanks to the distribution of the film giant Metro Goldwyn Mayer, a series of colored geometric shapes changes form intertwining with iridescent backgrounds in a flood of persuasive and captivating shapes and colors (fig. 7).

Fig. 8. Mary Ellen Bute, Syncromy 4 Escape, 1938, stillframe.

Fig. 9. Len Lye, Colour Box, 1935, stillframe.

The fourth film is *Syncromy 4 Escape* by Mary Elle Bute, from 1938 for four minutes in color, in which the forms that are composed on different levels draw on a more varied and effective technical and expressive repertoire (fig. 8).

The film that most inspired McLaren is certainly *Color Box*, already mentioned, by the multifaceted New Zealand artist Len Lye of 1935. The film, made for the British General Post Office under the guidance of John Grierson –as we said, the man who would involve McLaren at Canada's *National Film Boureau*– it's a three-minute color animation, shot without a camera, tracing shapes and colors directly on film, just like *Begone Dull Care*. Like the latter, the images are not divided into frames and Lye's drawing –a lucid and unscrupulous experimenter– unfolds freely over long sequences of the film (fig. 9). Obviously, the *Color Box* experiment, clearly focused on visual narration rather than on the relationship with sound –a Cuban 'danceable'–, shows a much lower degree of finiteness than *Begone Dull Care*. In any case, it is impossible not to notice how *Color Box* is the result of an extraordinary research that has given the avant-garde filmography repertoire a complete experimentation of languages and forms, ready to be assimilated by McLaren's sensibility. In some way, Lye's abstract and –also in this case –visionary approach finds its evolution in *Begone Dull Care*, both in the perfect integration between images and music and in the fullness of the visual story.

If the avant-garde films just mentioned can largely justify McLaren's approach, we must not forget how around the 1940s the foray of abstract figuration into cinema was an object of general interest and was going through a period of great splendor. For example, a collaboration between Oscar Fischinger and the Disney film 'giant' for the realization of a part of the film *Fantasia* is widely documented. Starting from 1938 Fischinger was consulted for the sequence in which *Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D minor* is proposed (which by the way is the same music used by Bute for *Syncromy 4 Escape*) and produced a series of screenplay proposals and some sketches. Unfortunately, the collaboration had no concrete outcome and that part of *Fantasia* unfolds a series of images that are placed at the limit between the abstract and the figurative, proposing an unstable balance between recognizable figures and fantastic forms.
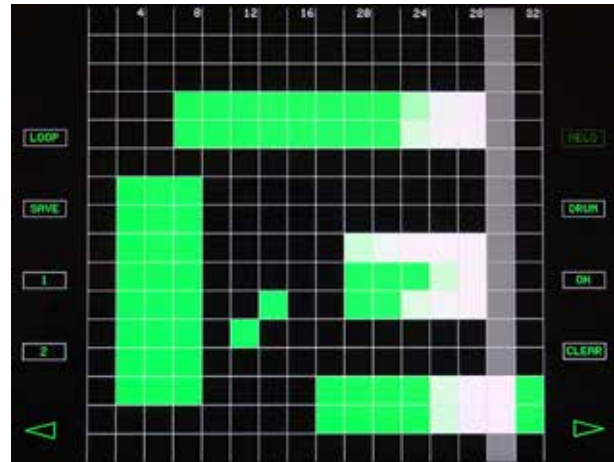

Fig. 10. Kraftwerk, Kling Klang Machine, tablet application, 2009. This app allows you to easily compose short sound loops in the style of Kraftwerk by resorting to drawing on square matrices of huge pixels that set the frequency of the sounds or the scan of the rhythms.

Fig. 11. Bjork, Biophilia, tablet application, 2011. The transcription of the score of Bjork's songs uses an abstract and persuasive language that makes the individual notes recognizable, giving them iridescent colors and dimensions. Unlike what happens for Begone Dull Care, this modality is directly referable to a form of musical notation.

Conclusions

Even in the context of experimental films, the relationship between images in sequence and music often ends in the search for a sort of correspondence between sounds and forms which –by analogy– could be classified within some form of 'notation'. Even though the forms of contemporary musical notation [Valle 2002, pp. 187-190] –while remaining anchored for functional needs to the category of mnemonics– exclude the obligation of a direct and punctual relationship between music and its graphic transcription, opening up areas of greater freedom and indeterminacy for the latter need to establish a 'one-to-one correspondence' between forms and sounds.

If we also take into consideration quite recent examples, we can indicate several cases –moreover of great aesthetic refinement– in which forms are used to describe, underline, represent the musical sequences [Dotto 2014, pp. 196, 197]. In this sense, the abstract images involved in programming Kraftwerk's *Kling Klang Machine* (fig. 10) or the colorful transcriptions of the persuasive music of Bjork's *Biophilia* (fig. 11), can be referred to forms of notation, in which each sign it corresponds in an identifiable way to a sound or a group of them, in a very similar way to what Kandinsky proposes in *Point Line Surface*, when through the juxtaposition of small black circles he transcribes the beginning of *Beethoven's Fifth* (fig. 12).

Rather, the work of McLaren and Lambart in *Begone Dull Care* shows an overcoming of this form of descriptive relationship between single notes and visual

Fig. 12. Vassily Kandinsky, Punkt und Linie zu Fläche, 1925, p. 42. There is a one-to-one correspondence between the notes on the staff and the Kandinsky points. This form of representation coincides with a transcription of musical notation.

elements by arranging the approach to a full vision, in which, paradoxically, the adherence to the musical text is deeply identified with pure image creation. The music and the film seem to chase each other in a game of subtle advances and slight delays that manage to determine an unprecedented link between the two different levels. In this film the authors give unequivocal proof of how technique and rigor can be perfectly intertwined with visionary creativity and the freedom of invention and how the development of a precise operating method is the most effective tool to travel profitably still hidden areas –in this case– of abstract drawing and avant-garde filmography.

Notes

[1] All the films mentioned in the text, except for Walt Disney's Fantasia, are available on the web. In selecting the films to be submitted as an example, whenever possible, the choice of material that is easily available on the web was favored, indicating each single active link in the references list. To substantiate the reading of the text, it is strongly recommended to view the films indicated, considering that a sample view of the sequences of each work may also be sufficient.

[2] *Cell painting* is a technique with which it is possible to fragment the application of the color spread on a surface (even with the help of hot air or a flame) to obtain a sort of 'cretto' that gives the impression of an organic cell tissue.

[3] Purely by way of example, see *Anémic Cinéma* of 1926: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dXlNTf8kXCc> (accessed on 2021, september 27).

Author

Edoardo Dotto, Dipartimento DICAr, SDS di Architettura di Siracusa, Università di Catania, edoardo.dotto@unict.it

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