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| **Your article** |
| Bute, Mary Ellen (1906-1983) |
| **[Enter any *variant forms* of your headword – OPTIONAL]** |
| One of the first female experimental animators in America, Mary Ellen Bute, was born in Houston, Texas in 1906. She studied painting at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and lighting and set design at the Yale School of Drama. Her interest in lighting proved crucial to her filmmaking: together with her husband and cinematographer Ted Nemeth (1911-1986), she explored the possibilities of visual expression of sound by controlling a source of light to produce images in rhythm. In the 1930s, she worked with Joseph Schillinger (1895-1943), a music theorist who used mathematical formulae to compose music. Their collaboration inspired visual music shorts synchronizing classical music with abstract shapes produced through light play and mixed media. Notable examples include *Rhythm in Light* (1934), *Parabola* (1937), and *Polka Graph* (1947). In the 1950s, Bute made two shorts using a modified oscilloscope: *Abstronic* (1954)and *Mood Contrasts* (1956)*.* The director manipulated and animated the abstract patterns generated by the oscilloscope in response to music and edited them with the corresponding tunes, inviting the viewer to ‘see sound.’ In 1956, Bute ventured into live-action filmmaking, producing the short *The Boy Who Saw Through*. Over the span of three years (1965-7), she completed her only feature film, *Passages from Finnegans Wake,* becoming the first filmmaker to adapt James Joyce for the silver screen. |
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| Further reading:  (Bute)  (Horak)  (Mary Ellen Bute Papers)  (Pilling)  (Russett and Starr) |