

Funny Pictures

*Animation and Comedy
in Studio-Era Hollywood*

Edited by

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Tex Avery's Prison House of Animation, or Humor and Boredom in Studio Cartoons

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I've done it all a hundred different ways. I'm burned out. I just don't think the stuff is funny anymore.

—TEX AVERY

There is a thin line between comedy and tedium. Anybody who has seen several Tex Avery cartoons in a row is probably very familiar with this boundary. The film critic Jonathan Rosenbaum once wrote, “To be sure, if you see as few as half a dozen Averys at a stretch, you’re likely to notice repetitions of gags and certain recurring obsessions . . . and as many as a dozen together is an experience promoting migraines and nervous exhaustion.”¹ The Avery scholar Floriane Place-Verghnes agrees: “Seeing that these cartoons should be entertaining, it may seem paradoxical to say that watching them for two hours (that is, the average duration of a movie) is an extremely tiring exercise as far as the concentration of the audience is concerned.”² Even Joe Adamson, who otherwise praises Avery’s work, recognizes the dangers inherent in it: “But, like any freedom, the freedom of the animation medium brings with it its own responsibility. The stylization, the exaggeration, the free-wheeling disregard for earthly reality, are all liberating enough for a scene or two, but it’s a thrill that can wear out pretty quickly, unless it’s given a steady guidance beyond the momentary.”³ It’s a theme in the literature about Avery’s cartoons: even the best examples walk that razor’s edge between the sublime and the boring.

To be fair, a Tex Avery cartoon is not the only thing that walks that line. Comedy itself inches toward monotony. If Henri Bergson’s theory of laughter is correct—that comedy depends on the invocation of the mechanical—then there

is something in the very nature of comedy that is circular and, hence, evokes the specter of boredom.⁴ Comic routines that depend on repetitive gags or the constant inversion of roles (e.g., hunter and hunted) have a circular energy that can go on like a perpetual motion machine. Gags can be endlessly repeated and varied, roles constantly reversed. The gag can take on a life of its own, studiously unconcerned with character or plot. And if, as Bergson argues, what's funny always amounts to the intrusion of the mechanical into life—what makes us laugh, in other words, is the recognition of, say, mechanical rigidity or thingness in humans—then this very tendency toward the mechanical is part of the soul of comedy but also carries with it the threat of tedium.

Bergson does not deal with failed comedy. He does not discuss why something that tries to be funny is *not* funny. In fact, no one who writes about Avery dwells on his sometimes listless stabs at humor. For good reason: trying to explain why one cartoon is funny and another isn't is rather futile. Nevertheless, Avery cartoons lend themselves especially well to what we might call a "Bergsonian" analysis. On one hand, if we want to understand the thin line between comedy and boredom, Bergson's theory of laughter is an excellent starting point. On the other hand, if we want a great example of the constitutive relationship between humor and tedium, we need look no further than a typical Tex Avery cartoon. What critics have recognized as Avery's tendency toward monotony hints not only at a "mechanical" approach to the task but also points toward something deeper and sadder. We see this in a number of places. First, we have the cartoons themselves, which are structured in such a way that they are almost perfect examples of Bergson's ideas about comedy and the mechanical. Second, Avery's cartoons constantly reference the monotonous yet intermittently funny process of image production during the era of classical Hollywood studio animation. From these references we can almost see Avery coming to grips with the grind and glee of his art form. Finally, we have Avery's biography, which is a tale of perfectionism, obsession, frustration, and despair about the drudgery of studio animation and also, perhaps, about the meaninglessness of it all.

Bergson's thesis on comedy is not the only one out there, of course, and it may seem rather perverse to think of Avery's cartoons in light of a theory of laughter written in 1900. But there is something about each that resonates with the other. Avery's cartoons are certainly very funny, yet, taken as a whole, there is also something sad about them. The very thing that sets them apart from standard studio animation—the frenetic accumulation of gag after gag—also reveals their dependence on inherently mechanical comic structures. Ultimately, I want to explain how Avery cartoons can be very, very funny and yet very sad or even boring at the same time. They are undoubtedly exuberant—no one who has seen the Wolf's reactions in *Red Hot Riding Hood* (1943) could say otherwise. But we must also admit that there is something slightly cold and mechanical about these

very same cartoons. Taken individually, some cartoons sing with sparkle and energy, while others might tackle their individual gags with relish but without much conviction about the value of the project as a whole. Looking closely at some of Avery's cartoons with Bergson in mind might help us understand Avery's tragicomic, almost nihilistic, world.

UNDERSTANDING AVERY

Born Frederick Bean Avery in 1908 in Taylor, Texas, "Tex" Avery graduated from North Dallas High School, where he enjoyed drawing cartoons of school activities for the yearbook.⁵ He hoped to sell a comic strip but had no luck in Dallas, Chicago, or eventually Los Angeles, where he migrated in the late 1920s. In 1930 he got a job as an inker and painter at Charles Mintz Studios, then at Walter Lantz Studios, where he moved up to become an animator's assistant. At Lantz, Avery found the opportunity to direct; he also found his wife, an inker named Patricia Johnson. It was also at Lantz Studios that he lost his left eye as the result of an office gag gone awry. In mid-1935 Avery left Lantz for Warner Bros. Along with fellow team members Chuck Jones and Bob Clampett, Avery changed the pace and style of humor in Warner Bros. cartoons. He created Daffy Duck, and his versions of Porky Pig and Bugs Bunny became definitive. Avery made more than sixty films in his six years at Warner Bros., before moving to MGM in September 1941. The animation historian John Canemaker makes this assessment: "There, at Hollywood's grandest and wealthiest studio, he reached his apogee as a director by intensifying the pacing and exaggeration of the cartoons and elaborating on themes, character types, and humor that he first explored at Warners."⁶ Avery worked there in the division opposite William Hanna and Joseph Barbera, who made MGM's Tom and Jerry cartoons, until 1954, when MGM shut down Avery's animation unit. He then went back to Lantz Studios for a year, making only four cartoons, and eventually settled at Cascade, a small Hollywood studio where he directed animated television commercials in relative obscurity for twenty years. In the last three years of his life he worked for his former rivals at Hanna-Barbera Studios; he died in 1980. This chapter will focus on his MGM period, arguably the richest vein in a mother lode of comedy.

Let me begin with a typical Avery cartoon. *Droopy's Double Trouble* (1951) is not one of his best, but it's not one of his worst, either. It's the eleventh Droopy cartoon out of a total of sixteen over twelve years; Droopy was probably Avery's best-known character (other than Bugs Bunny or Daffy Duck, of course), the one that had the best chance for the brand-name recognition that Tom and Jerry or the Warner Bros. characters enjoyed. While Droopy was undoubtedly popular, he didn't catch fire and sweep the nation in the same way that Mickey Mouse,

Bugs Bunny, or even Tom and Jerry did. Avery's inability to create a truly merchandisable character was something of a frustration for the cartoonist; he tried a number of different characters during his years at MGM, but his particular comic approach was more gag-oriented than character-oriented.⁷ Of all his MGM characters, Droopy hung around the longest.

Droopy, of course, is a comically unimposing, overweight little bloodhound with the sad-sack voice of Wallace Whimple from the *Fibber McGee and Molly* radio show.⁸ Often pitted against the treacherous bulldog Spike or the opportunistic Wolf, Droopy carries out his task unruffled by the various plots they mount against him or by their wildly frantic reactions as their plans backfire. Droopy is, as Adamson so eloquently put it, "an imperturbable semicolon surrounded by exclamation points."⁹ In *Droopy's Double Trouble* the head butler, Theeves, has left sub-butler Droopy in charge of the mansion: "While I'm away with the master, you'll need a bit of help around the house. Locate a reliable person and have him report to me for instructions," Theeves says. This gives Droopy the opportunity to hire his twin brother, Drippy, who apparently just hangs out at the gym all day. "That's my brother. He's strong," Droopy says to the audience as Drippy gratuitously punches holes in the front door. Theeves offers only this instruction to Drippy: "No strangers are permitted on the premises." Meanwhile, Spike (sporting his best Victor McLaglen Irish brogue) plays a bum who has befriended Droopy for the handouts Droopy kindly offers. Running to the back door to meet Droopy in the kitchen, Spike is astonished by the welcome Drippy gives him: a powerful punch that sends him flying into a hammock, which in turn sends him slamming back into the door. Drippy exits and Droopy now opens the door to find dazed and bruised Spike waiting. He brings him in, sets him at the table, and starts to feed him but exits to get something, leaving the way open for Drippy to follow orders once again, Spike never recognizing that Drippy and Droopy are two different hounds.

This situation sets up the gags that follow: unbeknownst to Droopy or Spike, Drippy switches places with Droopy in order to carry out his orders and clobber Spike in a variety of ways, then recedes once again. The basic gag is always the same; the interest lies in the way in which the clobbering is administered and how Spike reacts. This is one of two basic comic structures in Avery cartoons of the MGM era. Both structures follow a "variations on a theme" pattern. In *Droopy's Double Trouble* and others, after the initial setup the same gag is repeated over and over with variations on the same action. *Rock-a-Bye Bear* (1952) provides another example: Spike is hired to keep things quiet for a cranky hibernating bear. He can't make any noise, or he'll be fired. His rival wants his job and so tries to make him squeak by inflicting pain, but Spike holds in his cry of pain, runs outside to the top of a hill, and lets go with a yelp. Repeat. An even better example is *Bad Luck Blackie* (1949), a masterpiece of this genre: all a little kitten

must do to protect himself from Spike's cruelty is ring a bell, after which the eponymous black cat will walk in front of Spike and something will automatically fall out of the sky onto Spike's head. The rest of the cartoon is a series of escalating gags repeating the same action with variations.

In other Avery cartoons, such as *Homesteader Droopy* (1954), which is set in the Old West, or *One Cab's Family* (1952), about a family of anthropomorphic taxicabs, or *The Shooting of Dan McGoo* (1945), based on Robert Service's famous poem,¹⁰ the setting is stable and the gags vary. The different gags are based on the filmmaker's and audience's shared knowledge of the setting and its clichés. If taxis could have children, for example, what jokes would that setting or situation create? This is not to say that action variations like those described above cannot find their way into a setting-dominated cartoon, or vice versa. In *The Shooting of Dan McGoo*, for example, the sultry singer from *Red Hot Riding Hood* puts on a show, and the same repeated action that we saw in that film—the Wolf reacting to her wildly and with much fanfare—takes up a couple of minutes of the cartoon. Still, this repeated gag is not the motivating structure of *The Shooting of Dan McGoo*. Instead, the structure hinges primarily on a series of different gags deriving from the setting or situation, in this case, the retelling of the Service poem. In *Dan McGoo* the gags range from what John Canemaker calls "literalizations"¹¹—literal visualizations of a colloquialism, such as "Drinks are on the house, boys," and everybody rushes to the roof for a drink—to reaction gags to "metagags" that comment on the action (a sign in a rowdy bar reads, "Loud, isn't it?").¹²

Generally speaking, then, there are two common patterns in Avery's MGM cartoons: a comic structure that revolves around a repeated gag with variations and a comic structure that creates different kinds of gags out of a single setting or situation. These options are not exclusive, and they can be combined. *Screwball Squirrel* (1944), for instance, appears to alternate gags that derive from a setting or situation (the chase) with variations on a single kind of gag, the metagag. But even if cartoons often combine structures, usually they tend to lean one way or the other. Close examination of *Screwball Squirrel*, for example, reveals that nearly all the gags are variations of the single-gag option—that is, almost every gag is a metagag, a commentary on the conventions or process of animation, from the famous "skipping-phonograph-creates-a-skipping-image" gag to the more subtle use of the frame line as a way of restricting and revealing point of view (I will discuss this gag in more depth later in the chapter).

The main point here, however, is that this two-option pattern explains and emphasizes the importance of *repetition* for the typical Avery cartoon. Things happen over and over again in Avery's world. In individual cartoons gag structures are repeated, and settings and stories are repeated across cartoons. Individual gags are never repeated within cartoons, but they often recur in different

cartoons. In *Señor Droopy* (1949) the Wolf guides a charging bull into a cellar and closes the door, then folds the door into ever smaller units until it is the size of a matchbook. He then tosses the item away, at which point it unfolds and the bull charges out again. The same gag appears in *Homesteader Droopy* (1954). Sometimes even footage is repeated: the live-action footage in *TV of Tomorrow* (1953) is used again in Avery's very next cartoon, *The Three Little Pups* (1953). Sometimes whole stories are repeated: *Little Johnny Jet* (1953) is exactly the same story as *One Cab's Family* (1952); only the type of family (taxicabs, airplanes) has changed. At the level of style certain devices are always at Avery's disposal, such as the frame-line trick I noted above (the camera "pans" to reveal someone who has appeared just outside of the frame). Characters, stories, gags, setups, openings, endings, reactions, backgrounds, voices, sound effects, musical cues, stylistic techniques—everything in Avery's arsenal is reused at some point.

AVERY MEETS BERGSON

I am not criticizing Avery's work. This kind of recycling is fairly typical in the animation industry and in comedy in general. Cartoon backgrounds, for example, are often repeated to save time and money. And as Donald Crafton writes about silent film comedy, "Slapstick cinema seems to be ruled by the principle of accretion: gags, situations, costumes, characters and camera techniques are rehearsed and recycled in film after film. . . . Nothing was discarded in slapstick."¹³ Indeed, perhaps more than brevity, repetition is the soul of comedy. This is the thesis of Bergson's treatise on comedy, *Laughter*. As I noted earlier, Bergson argues that what we find funny is basically the intersection of the human and the mechanical. When someone does something funny, Bergson maintains, we can find something machinelike in those actions: "The attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine" (79). A comic body is machinelike, according to Bergson, not only for its movements but also for its qualities: it becomes something that is not fluid and adaptable but rigid, inelastic, and objectlike. It is the superimposition of these qualities on more flexible, malleable, "human" qualities that creates humor and laughter: "Any arrangement of acts and events is comic which gives us, in a single combination, the illusion of life and the distinct impression of a mechanical arrangement" (105). Hence repetition, to the extent that it reminds us of the automatic functioning of the machine, is comic when it pertains to human action. "Wherever there is repetition or complete similarity, we always suspect some mechanism at work behind the living . . . in a word, of some manufacturing process or other. This deflection of life towards the mechanical is here the real cause of laughter" (82). Those familiar with Bergson's other philosophical works, such as *Matter and Memory*

(1896) or *Creative Evolution* (1907), will recognize his interest in vitalism in this essay on laughter:

Life presents itself to us as evolution in time and complexity in space. Regarded in time, it is the continuous evolution of a being ever growing older; it never goes backward and never repeats itself. Considered in space, it exhibits certain coexisting elements so closely interdependent, so exclusively made for each other, that not one of them could, at the same time, belong to two different organisms: each living being is a closed system of phenomena, incapable of interfering with other systems. A continual change of aspect, the irreversibility of the order of phenomena, the perfect individuality of a perfectly self-contained series: such, then, are the outward characteristics—whether real or apparent—is of little moment—which distinguish the living from the merely mechanical. (118)

Given this definition of "life"—continuous change, irreversibility, individual uniqueness—it is not too difficult to guess what Bergson ascribes to "the merely mechanical": *repetition*, *inversion*, and what he calls the "*reciprocal interference of series*" (118). Each of these, as it turns out, is a common comic device that Bergson recognizes in French theatrical comedy but that we can also see in Avery cartoons.

Let us examine *Droopy's Double Trouble* in light of Bergson's ideas. First, Bergson counts as mechanical not just processes, such as repetition, but also certain characteristics, such as rigidity or inelasticity. But it seems counterintuitive to call a Tex Avery cartoon, especially, "inelastic"; cartoon characters are nothing if not elastic. For example, when Droopy introduces his extra-strong brother Drippy to Theeves the butler, Drippy shakes his hand and painfully renders it a stretched out, springy mess—a predictable cartoon gag that takes advantage of the ability of drawn animation to stretch objects beyond their "realistic" dimensions (Fig. 11.1). But Bergson would argue that it is not the stretchiness of the hand that makes it funny; the elasticity of the hand is secondary to what Bergson would count as the primary comic quality: its "thingness." That is, Drippy turns Theeves's hand into *an object*, and this is what strikes us as funny (or at least what Avery assumed would be funny). In fact, the elasticity of cartoon bodies invariably indicates the thingness of those bodies; it is precisely because they can stretch that they fall under Bergson's category of "the mechanical." Silly putty stretches; hands or dogs or ducks do not.

We must therefore think of "rigidity" in broader terms. Even though cartoon characters stretch, the source of the amusement comes from the imposition of "mechanical," "rigid," or "objectlike" qualities—which includes, in this case, the ability to stretch—onto human or anthropomorphic characters. The same holds for live-action comedy. If someone makes a funny face, according to Bergson, it is funny because it "will make us think of something rigid" (76). Even though the



FIGURE 11.1. Drippy turns Theeves's hand into an object in *Droopy's Double Trouble* (MGM, 1951).

funniest face might require extraordinary flexibility of the muscles, what's funny about it is the sense that "the person's whole moral life has crystallized into this particular cast of features" (76). The funny face becomes a *mask* that does not hide but instead reveals one aspect and holds it, maintains it, and presents it as a permanent and dominant feature of that personality. Like a caricature a funny face brings out and reduces the personality to a single feature; the normally mobile and fluid quality of the face or personality becomes static. This is the "rigidity" or "mechanical inelasticity" to which Bergson refers. This rigidity also applies to personality itself. Single-mindedness, the inability to adapt flexibly to changing circumstances, can be very funny, for example. Drippy's function in the cartoon is to carry out his instructions without question or doubt, and this makes him a comic character. Spike, too, pursues his goal without regard to consequence, even though most would be on their way after the first punch. Droopy also has a comic function: he is not allowed to notice the events going on behind his back. Absentmindedness, then, is another comic characteristic because it implies an *automatic* quality to the action. The absentminded character is on "autopilot," so to speak, or more precisely, is unconscious of him- or herself. This brings out the "mechanical" aspect of the character, which is the source of the comic. With his stress on "automatic" qualities, Bergson pursues a distinctly modern definition of comedy that emphasizes the tension (and reciprocity) between the human and the mechanical. We may disagree with the historically contingent nature of this definition, but it rings true when we think of modern comic characters:

"In one sense it might be said that all character is comic, provided we mean by character the ready-made element in our personality, that mechanical element which resembles a piece of clockwork wound up once and for all and capable of working automatically.... It is comic to wander out of one's own self. It is comic to fall into a ready-made category. And what is most comic of all is to become a category oneself into which others will fall, as into a ready-made frame; it is to crystallize into a stock character" (156–57). In Avery's cartoons, at least, we constantly encounter this "ready-made," "automatic," *mechanical* aspect of character. To summarize: "The comic is that side of a person which reveals his likeness to a thing, that aspect of human events which, through its peculiar inelasticity, conveys the impression of pure mechanism, of automatism, of movement without life" (117).

So "automatism" applies to both character and process. Repetition, as we have seen, is a part of the comic repertoire that happens to evoke the automatic quality of machines. Even if the action is constantly repeated, even if we know that it's coming, we laugh. Why? "Because I now have before me a machine that works automatically. This is no longer life, it is automatism established in life and imitating it" (81). Similarly, Bergson names another comic process: *inversion*. Take, for example, the inversion of roles one might find in any given cartoon. Screwey Squirrel and the dog may perfunctorily take on the roles of hunted and hunter, but these positions are inverted throughout the cartoon: Screwey, always in charge, allows himself to be hunted for the sake of the plot, while the dog often involuntarily surrenders his typical role of hunter. Back and forth they go, and these turnarounds are a source of humor in the cartoon. Such inversions imply a reversibility and interchangeability that is both mechanical and comic. But the concept of inversion can also explain more subtle reversals in the Avery universe, such as the metagag. Why are metagags funny? Some argue that such gags rely on a "comic distancing" effect that reminds the viewer of the process of production and thus provokes laughter. Place-Verghnes writes, "When watching a cartoon, we have an impression of reality because we accept its codes from the start. However, if the said codes are questioned and if the 'set of strings' is uncovered, the effect is comical. Tex Avery uses various means to lay the structure of the cartoon bare, the leitmotiv clearly being: 'never forget you are watching a cartoon.'"¹⁴ So, according to this argument, the metagag is a comic reminder that we are watching a cartoon, as if we forgot, and the reminder provokes surprise and laughter. But explaining laughter in terms of "surprise" or "distancing" or "incongruity" is insufficient, since these could equally apply to any number of cases that do not provoke laughter at all. Thinking about it in Bergsonian terms, we could argue instead that the metagag is *an inversion of diegetic and nondiegetic worlds*.

For example, in order to evade Meathead the dog in *Screwball Squirrel*, Screwey

ducks into a hole in a tree and reemerges through another hole above it. Meathead is in hot pursuit, but at the last second Screwy reaches down and actually *moves the first hole* up so that the dog slams into solid wood (not quite solid, since it takes on the shape of his head). What's going on here? How can there be one set of laws in which a hole is movable and another in which the tree is solid? Both can exist at the same time in animation, but what makes this a gag (and not science fiction) is that the laws *do not* exist at the same time. Instead, there is a momentary inversion of the two sets of laws, one pertaining to a fictional world of squirrels and dogs and trees, another pertaining to the nondiegetic world of animators. That is, there is one set of laws that apply to a "normal" fictional space (as in live action) and another that derives from the endless possibilities of drawn animation. This inversion implies their equivalence and reversibility; the role of cartoon character and that of animator can be inverted at any moment. We may be surprised and pleased at the gag, but surprise is not the comic element; instead, the comic element is, again, the transposition of human (animator) and mechanical (cartoon). We see this inversion of cartoon and animator again and again in Avery's world: a visible line between color and black-and-white reads "Technicolor ends here" (*Lucky Ducky*, 1948), or a voracious goat literally chews up the scenery (*Billy Boy*, 1954). In each case the gag depends on an inversion of one set of rules for another. It is also noteworthy that this inversion is often tied to character. Some have argued that there are no consistent laws of physics for an Avery cartoon, nothing defining the difference between real and unreal; the laws seem to be different for hunter and hunted, rascal and victim.¹⁵ But that is precisely the point: the laws *are* different for each character. What we might call good luck or good karma or good timing in the real world is codified in comedy according to character. Buster Keaton gags, for example, often revolve around Keaton's uncanny ability to escape harm: recall the famous *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* (1928) gag in which a falling facade of a house appears about to crush him; only he occupies the one spot where an open window allows him to stand unscathed. Nature works differently for some. The same principle applies in animation, except that there are two distinct laws of physics at play and some characters have access to both.

There is one last Bergsonian comic device to explore before we move on: the "reciprocal interference of series." This is a series of events that can be interpreted in different, sometimes mutually exclusive, ways, depending on the point of view. In *Droopy's Double Trouble* we could say that there are at least three series or three interpretations of the events: Droopy sees a bum who needs a handout, Drippy sees an intruder who needs to be expelled, and Spike sees a single Droopy who is alternately gracious and vicious. Then there is the actual series of events that the audience sees: there are twin Droopys. The comedy comes from the collision of these series, resulting in mishap for Spike. There are two keys to this

device: absentmindedness and point of view. Spike must be so inattentive that he does not notice the switch of Droopy for Drippy. The audience sees this switch, however, so our point of view creates a new interpretation of events. So we could simplify to say that there are only two series: the events as the protagonist (Spike) imagines them and the events as the audience actually sees them. As Noël Carroll explains with regard to similar silent film gags, "The actual situation or event interferes with the protagonist's imagined picture of the event, with the net effect that the protagonist's expectations have been reversed."¹⁶ Spike's expectation is that Droopy will be kind to him, but we see the switch and expect the disaster that follows. Spike's limited knowledge of the events leads to his confusion and eventual madness—at the end of the film he is carted away by an ambulance as a "mad dog," having been driven insane by Droopy's apparently bipolar behavior. This collision of imagined versus actual events is what Bergson means by the "reciprocal interference of series."

With this particular device, absentmindedness is used to restrict point of view. The gag doesn't work if Spike sees everything the audience sees; staging the switch so that it escapes his attention is an easy way to ensure that he doesn't. Avery has another device that restricts point of view in the same way—what I will call "the frame-line reveal." The first Droopy cartoon, *Dumb-Hounded* (1943), has many examples of this technique. In this cartoon the Wolf is an escaped prisoner trying to elude Droopy, who slowly but surely tracks him down. The Wolf (and the audience) thinks he has left Droopy long behind as he races up the stairs to an apartment. He enters the apartment and closes the door. He turns screen right and the camera pans right as he walks. Suddenly, the pan reveals Droopy to have appeared out of nowhere (Fig. 11.2).¹⁷ In this gag the frame line acts as a limit for both the Wolf and the audience. There is an even bolder example in *Screwball Squirrel*. Meathead, the dog, has chased Screwby up a tree. In a medium two-shot Meathead backs Screwby onto a branch. Screwby backs out of frame right, leaving Meathead alone in the frame. Meathead proceeds forward, the camera tracking slowly to follow, he suddenly registers surprise and the camera pans quickly right to reveal a sign at the end of the branch: "Sucker!" Even though Meathead should be able to see beyond the frame—if this were a live-action film—he does not; the frame almost forces his inattentiveness. It functions the same way for the audience: we cannot see beyond the frame either, so the "reveal" inverts our interpretation of the events, which we share with Meathead. So this technique shares some features with the "reciprocal interference of series" device in that it relies on restricted point of view and reversed expectations. This could also be considered a metagag, since we have a similar inversion of diegetic rules (he should be able to see beyond the frame) for nondiegetic rules (in drawn animation, nothing really exists beyond the frame until it is created by the animator). It is indeed a versatile gag, and Avery used it liberally.



FIGURE 11.2. The “frame-line reveal” in *Dumb-Hounded* (MGM, 1943).

THE PRISON HOUSE OF ANIMATION

Bergson’s theory of laughter is useful because it emphasizes comic devices “that consist in looking upon life as a repeating mechanism, with reversible action and interchangeable parts” (126). Comedy, in other words, can be a very mechanical business. No one would know this better than a studio animator. A typical cartoon could require up to ten thousand drawings. Studio animation units were designed to make this work as efficiently as possible by creating an

intricate division of labor among directors, head animators, character animators, in-betweeners, backgrounders, inkers, and painters.¹⁸ Even with all these people working on a single cartoon, the film would go through various stages, from initial storyboard to exposure sheets to pencil tests to final film. So the tally of eight thousand to ten thousand images required for a finished film does not count all the storyboards and drafts and tests. Any way we look at it, that’s a *lot* of images—generating images, one after the other, is a constant feature of the job. There are positive aspects of this division of labor, as Adamson notes: “Though the final result seems to be the reduction of the animator to one solitary post on an assembly line, the intended and usually effected outcome was to allow the creative aspect of animation to be separated from the mountainous drudgery.”¹⁹ Indeed, Avery recognized early that he would not have been able to take on the job of animator: “They [animators] get new scenes all the time, but it’s a monotonous thing, in a way. I couldn’t do that for twenty-five years. I’d get tired of it. But I never got tired of directing cartoons. It was always a new challenge.”²⁰

Nevertheless, even as a director Avery could not escape the daily grind. Coworkers remarked on his legendary perfectionism and his inability or unwillingness to delegate. One Warner Bros. story man, Michael Maltese, says in an interview,

Tex is a hard man to work for; he’s a perfectionist to this point: that even when he’s ready to turn out a good cartoon, it’s still not as good as he wanted to make it. Another director will say, “All right, it came out great. That’s fine. I’ll take my bows, and next time we’ll see what else we can do.” I think nobody worried and suffered to make a great cartoon more than Avery did. It was never good enough for him. I told him, “You proved yourself already,” but he’d think, “No, it’s got to be better.” And he worried himself to the point where it got to be too difficult for him.²¹

Likewise, the MGM story man Heck Allen recalls, “Tex never had anybody. He laid the pictures out for the goddam background man; he did everything for the so-called character man, who draws the models of the character. Tex did it all, the guy just cleaned up after him.”²² The pressure to produce images, along with the self-imposed pressure to produce perfect cartoons, even forced Avery to take a year off between 1952 and 1953:

Oh, I got too wrapped up in my work. I tried to do everything myself. Normally a director will rough the scenes out and time them, and then check over the completed scenes and make changes for the boys. But I attempted to put so much on paper, the way I saw it and the way I wanted it, pinning it right down to the frame, that it required a lot of work—Saturdays, Sundays—to keep up to schedule. I was doing all the technical stuff: pans, and getting a character in a certain spot at a certain time. I enjoyed it, but it got too rough for me.²³

There were other pressures as well. Canemaker paints a darker picture of Avery's career than we normally see in portraits of him. His vision of his films clashed with that of the Production Code Administration, so "he spent considerable time and effort thinking of ways to avoid offending" that office.²⁴ His producer at MGM, Fred Quimby, was a humorless ex-salesman who didn't understand most of Avery's gags. And Quimby seemed to favor Avery's rivals, Hanna and Barbera, which was another source of irritation and insecurity.²⁵ Heading this list of frustrations is the incident at Lantz Studios: an office gag with a flying paper clip cost Avery his left eye and his confidence. Canemaker concludes from interviews that Avery changed after this event and "became less expansive, more closed, and focused on the insular world he was creating in animation."²⁶ But even this world had its limitations, and Avery grew increasingly unhappy with his own gag formulas. A fellow MGM animator, Michael Lah, recalls Avery's sad assessment: "I've done it all a hundred different ways. I'm burned out. I just don't think the stuff is funny anymore."²⁷

The year off helped, but the MGM cartoons from 1953 to 1955 are not Avery's best work. There are some inspired moments—*Deputy Droopy* (1955) takes the central gag of *Rock-a-Bye Bear* to sublime heights—but generally, they lack the earlier spark. Avery's fatigue is most evident in his last MGM cartoon (which, admittedly, he codirected with Michael Lah), *Cellbound* (1955). In this film an inmate takes twenty years (from 1934 to 1954, approximately the number of years Avery spent in the studio system) to dig himself out of prison by the spoonful. Once he escapes, twists and turns of the plot find him inside a television set destined for the warden's home, where he must now improvise and impersonate various TV shows if he is to remain undetected. It is an uninspired cartoon, full of lame gags and leaden timing, but its narrative movement from one prison to another is remarkably prescient of Avery's career. Even in the earlier films, however, the usual exuberance is sometimes tinged with boredom and despair. Avery's MGM cartoons, it seems, speak to the Bergsonian tension between automatism and spontaneity in comedy. That is, the energy of even the best Avery cartoons is often balanced by sly asides about or rehearsals of the drudgery of studio animation. The liberating power of drawing cartoons for a living often finds itself cancelled by the capriciousness of fate and its swift reversals of fortune. It's enough to drive anyone mad, as it does Spike in *Droopy's Double Trouble*. Sometimes, bemused resignation is the only option left.

To conclude, let us look at another Droopy cartoon. *Northwest Hounded Police* (1946) best illustrates this ambivalence between novelty and repetition. It is the fourth Droopy cartoon, basically a remake of the first, *Dumb-Hounded*.²⁸ Both films feature Droopy implacably pursuing the Wolf, who has escaped from prison (prison seems to be a theme in Avery's cartoons). The gag is that Droopy inexplicably shows up no matter how far or how quickly across the planet the Wolf

runs. Droopy is *always* there. So both films are, structurally speaking, examples of Avery's single-gag formula. Variations come from the Wolf's reactions, the lengths he goes to escape, the way Droopy is revealed, and the occasional metagag. *Northwest Hounded Police* begins at a version of Alcatraz called "Alka-Fizz Prison," where "No Noose Is Good Noose." The Wolf is in his cell when he produces an extra-large pencil and draws a crude door on the wall outside his cell. Drawing is power: the Wolf opens the door and starts his ingenious escape to Canada. At Mounty County Police Headquarters, where "We Aim to Police," Droopy (as Sgt. McPoodle) is volunteered to track down this vicious criminal. As the Wolf runs across the Yukon territory, he finds a series of Burma-Shave signs:

Don't Look Now
Use Your Noodle
You're Being Followed
by Sgt. McPoodle.

The Wolf looks and the camera pans left to find McPoodle on his little blue horse. Thus begins the gag, which consists of variations on the frame-line reveal. The Burma-Shave jingle hints at the cartoon's themes of invisibility/visibility ("Don't Look Now") and omnipresence ("You're Being Followed"). The Wolf runs, but he can't hide.

The Wolf runs immediately to a cabin and shuts the front door—and another on top of that, and another, and another . . . (there are eight in all), just to be extra sure. Frame-line reveal right—Droopy is in a chair by the fire, reading the comics. Reaction, then reopening each of the doors to reveal Droopy again. Reaction, bust through the back door, open it, Droopy there again. Reaction, escape to a bird's nest at the top of the highest mountain—"He'll never find me here"—Droopy cracks out of the egg. Reaction, dive to a lake below—Droopy is in a passing school of fish. And so on. Sometimes the reaction comes before the reveal, sometimes after, but even though the audience can always expect the reveal, Avery plays with expectations. At one point, the Wolf finds himself on a tiny atoll in the middle of the ocean. Flanked by two rocks, the Wolf, like the audience, has by now caught on: "Yeah, I know. He'll probably be right under that rock." But no, Droopy appears under the other, smaller rock. This reduces the Wolf to tears of frustration and copious self-flagellation before he swims to New York and runs into a movie theater (in a nice metagag he takes a turn too quickly and nearly runs off the edge of the film). What's playing? An MGM cartoon, of course, and Droopy says from the screen, "Hello, Joe." The Wolf finds a plastic surgeon, only to receive Droopy's face. The doctor changes it back but is then revealed to have Droopy's face himself. The Wolf decides to end it all by throwing himself to the lions, but he even finds Droopy inside the belly of the beast. Finally, he mercifully ends up back in prison. "Well, I'll be," he says matter-of-factly, "he finally got me."

But there's just one thing that's bothering me. I wonder if there coulda been more than one of them little guys?" Quick pan right to reveal hundreds of Droopys saying, "What do you think, brother?" End, fade out.

The moral is clear: the power of the pencil may appear to be liberating, but you really can't escape. Droopy's omnipresence could be read as an allegory for the thousands of drawings of him that went into the making of this very cartoon. He and the other characters were everywhere in the animators' lives. After drawing Droopy several hundred times in a day, even going to a movie might not provide the escape one hoped for. The final shot of hundreds of Droopys is only a logical literalization of the truth that the Wolf discovers but that studio animators already recognized: the number and ubiquity of images is mind-boggling and inescapable. The pencil, in this case, is a double-edged sword, a promise and a curse.

In one sense, then, this is a very sad cartoon. It clearly indicates that the emancipatory potential of talent or creativity is an illusion. Idealistic or romantic notions of the creative power of authorship are eventually overwhelmed by the sheer number of images one is forced to produce as a studio animator. Making one image after the other, over and over again, is a monotonous job, but there are moments of inspiration and laughter. This is a theme in this cartoon, but this rhythm is rehearsed in its structure as well. Each gag is a brilliant variation on the last, but one can't help but notice the essential *sameness* of it all. The individual gag may be different, but the rhythm and structure of the gag are the same as all the others. Yet we laugh. Somehow, this cartoon rides that thin line between spontaneity and boredom. This is the line that studio animators walked every day: How do you maintain a sense of improvisation in a cartoon that is built out of thousands of drawings and dozens of tests? How do you keep laughing in the face of drudgery and setbacks? How do you separate what's funny from mechanical, automatic repetition? The wonder of this and other Avery cartoons is that they do not try; instead, they reveal the mutual reliance of humor and repetition and use it to great effect. But perhaps precisely because of this, Avery felt the tension between laughter and ennui most keenly of all.

NOTES

1. Rosenbaum, "Dream Masters II."
2. Place-Verghnes, *Tex Avery*, 139.
3. Adamson, *Tex Avery*, 27.
4. See Bergson, *Laughter*, 66ff.; subsequent references to this source are cited parenthetically in the text.
5. This biographical sketch is drawn from information in Adamson, *Tex Avery*; and Canemaker, *Tex Avery*.
6. Canemaker, *Tex Avery*, 16.

7. Ibid., 52.
8. Bill Thompson (1913–71) was the voice of both Droopy and Wallace Whimble (and many other characters on *Fibber McGee and Molly*).
9. Adamson, *Tex Avery*, 73.
10. The poem, "The Shooting of Dan McGrew," is included in Service, *Songs of a Sourdough*, 50–54.
11. Canemaker, *Tex Avery*, 159.
12. The term *metagag* is first used with regard to Avery cartoons in Scheib, "Tex Arcana."
13. See Crafton, "Pie and Chase," 107 (Karnick and Jenkins edn.).
14. Place-Verghnes, *Tex Avery*, 157. Ronnie Scheib makes a similar argument.
15. Place-Verghnes, *Tex Avery*, 169.
16. Carroll, "Notes on the Sight Gag," 30.
17. I use *track* and *pan* throughout with the knowledge that such techniques are simulated in drawn animation.
18. Not to mention writers, composers, producers, and others who did not actually draw images but were vital to the cartoon.
19. Adamson, *Tex Avery*, 22.
20. Quoted in *ibid.*, 157.
21. Quoted in *ibid.*, 134–35.
22. Quoted in *ibid.*, 141.
23. Quoted in *ibid.*, 180–81.
24. Canemaker, *Tex Avery*, 17.
25. Ibid.
26. *Ibid.*, 13. This list of pressures does not include the turn for the worse that Avery's life took after he left MGM, with the death of his son and the dissolution of his marriage.
27. Michael Lah interview, *Tex Avery*, television documentary (Turner Broadcasting/Moon-dance, 1988); quoted in Canemaker, *Tex Avery*, 18.
28. And *Dumb-Hounded* reworks the central gag from an Avery Warner Bros. cartoon, *Tortoise Beats Hare* (1941). In that one, however, the "trick" of Cecil Turtle's constant presence and duplication is "naturalized" by a plot device: he calls his family to help him win the race against Bugs Bunny.