engaging, and relevant, and thus serves as an example of someone coming to terms with himself and his needs. This is particularly enhanced by his creative pride in completing the animation itself. Though there is little doubt that autism is profoundly debilitating, and that the film gives a persuasive account of the destabilised interior world of the autistic person, it is clear too, that creative expression through the language of penetrative animation is crucial in maintaining communication with a world that the autistic person may feel continually estranged from. Animation, in this instance, is a critical expressive and democratising language. When the environment is experienced like 'the unbearable noise of an on-rushing train' to the autistic sensibility, such a film may help society understand how that might feel.



# 4

# 25 WAYS TO START LAUGHING

> You get to be an impish God. You get to reform the world. You get to take the piss out of it. You turn it upside down, inside out. You bug-out eyes. You put moustaches on Mona Lisas. You change the world and have for a brief moment a bit of control over it. At least you get to humiliate it for a moment, and that's what all cartoonists get their kicks from![1]

Terry Gilliam, film director and animator of the linking sequences in *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, describes the capacity for animation to recreate and laugh at the world; to challenge its orthodoxy and pretention; to explore the boundaries of taste and expression; to suggest that things could be different. This chapter is concerned with comedy in the animated film. Comedy is assumed to be at the core of most animated films, seemingly, its intrinsic but largely uninterrogated vocabulary. Theories of comedy have proliferated ever since humankind started to laugh, and no one is any closer to knowing why human beings make absurd noises in response to the innumerable things that amuse them. Everyone would claim to have a sense of humour, but it seems that everyone does not possess the same sense of humour, so what is funny remains an entirely relative thing. In whatever shape or form, comedy can be silly or subversive, purposeful or perfunctory, observational or offensive, but always possesses energy and 'life', the intrinsic imperative of animation.

The apparent ambiguities and contradictions inherent in attempting to understand comedy as a genre should not mean, however, that comedy should not be addressed in the very particular way that it informs animation, for, as Gilliam has already implicitly suggested, the animated form extends the vocabulary of humour within the live-action film. No analysis could, therefore, be exhaustive, but in the spirit of the rest of this book, the following 'twenty-five ways to start laughing' constitute an attempt to both chronicle the evolution of humour in the animated film and create a typology of the 'gags' and comic structures that emerge in a representative cross-section of films from cartoon capers to computer comedy.

## 1 Magical surprises

As has already been stressed, early cinema was characterised by the development of live-action cinema and the emergent visual orthodoxies of photographic realism. This was countered by the tradition of the 'trick' film, which was essentially evolved as the consequence of experimenting with the new medium and finding that extraordinary effects could be achieved through stop-motion, frame-by-frame, photography. The early Edison and Pathé films, as well as those of Méliès, thus provide examples of proto-animation which amuse because of the sheer divergencies in imagery from representations of the 'real'. Trick films invested human beings with extraordinary capabilities, anticipating the animated film's preoccupation with the deconstruction and manipulation of the body. In investing human beings and their environment with magical properties, these films constantly surprised their audiences, who laughed in disbelief and wonder. These kinds of images soon constituted visual conventions. In manipulating the image in this way, film was able to demonstrate the transgression of physical laws and disrupt the patterns of experience and behaviour determined by them. Suddenly, the human body could move in ways that it was both impossible to do in the 'real world' and impossible to represent in live-action. This spectacle was inherently funny because it illustrated the literal breakdown of social order as it is located in the physical environment. The notion of *surprise* has always been intrinsic to such modes of comedy because the level of engagement with the moment of transgression from the representation of the 'real world' necessitates that the audience perceive reality in a different way. In a sense, the human beings in the films became depersonalised, heightening the audience's relationship to the 'gag' and further legitimising its comic purpose. These effects liberate the viewer into a new visual vocabulary, one that silent film comedy and, more importantly for the purposes of this discussion, the animated film, came to exploit and develop.

Clearly, Blackton and Smith's *The Humorous Phases of Funny Faces* (1906), signals its comic intentions by drawing upon the circus tradition of the clown 'pulling a funny face'. By distorting the expected symmetries of the face, and the normal conduct of expressions, the film, ironically, draws attention both to the limitations of human expression and to the special expressive qualities of small gestures. This is the essence of where the humour lies. A top-hatted man rolling his eyes in impossible ways, surprises and shocks his female companion, who eventually becomes engulfed in the man's cigar smoke, a chalk 'cloud' rubbed out by Blackton himself. This focus on small actions, in many senses, operates in a similar fashion to the comic decentring of the body in physical comedy, because the normal balance and symmetry of the body is challenged, making the subsequent execution of movement unusual and, thus, potentially amusing.





## 2 The power of personality

The catalyst for amusement in the early 'trick' films was a random moment of often unmotivated physical spectacle, happening to people in locations that the audience had no previously determined relationship with. In other words, the comic moments were largely unallied to identifiable characters or set within a developing story. John Canemaker suggests that it is Winsor McCay who began to change this in his film, *The Story of a Mosquito* (1912), creating a bonafide character:

> The film's star is a mosquito whose design is a disquieting combination of human and insect elements. He is an anatomically correct bug with six spindly legs, two slender wings, and over-sized eyes. But this mosquito also possesses small, pointed ears, eyebrows and a receding hairline. He wears a hat and short-legged trousers, and carries a valise.
> (Canemaker, 1988: 33)

The design of the mosquito, which anticipates Jiminy Cricket in Disney's *Pinocchio* (1941) (see Thomas and Johnson, 1981; Grant, 1993), begins to display anthropomorphic characteristics and, consequently, this enables audiences to understand the 'insect' on 'human' terms. The design essentially reconciles the 'alien-ness' of the insect with the 'familiarity' of human beings and provides the visual foundation for the character to begin *behaving* like a human being. Models of comic *behaviour* during this period were predominantly drawn from clowns and performers on the vaudeville circuit, and serve to inform the development of two related, but distinctive, forms of comic output, one informed by 'gags' in the spirit of the 'trick' film, but personalised by a comic character, and one informed by 'personality', deriving its humour from the recognition of comic aspects within the human character. Inevitably, the two forms overlap, but the latter, 'personality-centred humour directly informs 'personality' animation – 'an art that goes beyond merely moving designs around, and emotionally involves the audience by communicating a character's individualism to them' (Solomon, 1987: 33). The key aspects of this kind of performance which directly influence 'personality' animation and begin to create a vocabulary for comic purposes, may be characterised as follows.

1 The necessity for the illusion of eye contact between the character performing and the audience watching.
2 Facial gestures which obviously signified particular thought processes, emotions, and reactions experienced by the character.
3 Physical traits and behavioural mannerisms common to, and recognised by, the audience, which remain largely consistent to the character.
4 The direct expression of *motivation* in the character and the immediate execution of the narrational action which achieves the objective signified.

(This 'immediacy' becomes crucial to the speed and execution of cartoon 'gags'.)

5 The creation of a particular physical rhythm for the character which expressed a specific attitude or purpose.

6 The overall treatment of the character as if it were an actor playing a role (see also Jenkins, 1992: 59–72).

Canemaker assesses the personality of the mosquito in *The Story of a Mosquito*, stressing this comic 'business' describing him as 'an egotistical show-off' who is also 'wary and calculating', 'brave, but ultimately foolhardy', 'a homely reject so distracted by any attention to his antics, that he risks and loses his life' (Solomon, 1987: 35). Though perhaps over-stressing the dimensions of the mosquito's fate, Canemaker clearly identifies the 'personality' of the creature, and makes the crucial point that there is enough significant detail that defines the mosquito as an individual to support the view that he has an off-screen life. McCay properly develops 'personality' animation, however, in the figure of *Gertie the Dinosaur* (1914), who makes eye contact with the assumed audience and indeed, her creator, McCay, who, using the film in the course of his stage act, appeared to give Gertie instructions, and offer commentary. Gertie also expresses her feelings and attitudes; she smiles, cries, expresses happiness, tiredness and irritation; she dances, eats, plays with a mammoth, lies down and wags her tail, sleeps and scratches. Her motivation is always clear, underpinning her playfulness, and her relationship both to the environment she inhabits and the audience space beyond it. Her rhythm is determined by her weight and size; her sheer bulk prohibits fast 'leg-work', but she possesses a comic lope, and McCay cleverly used the elastic quality of her neck for additional lateral movement and comic expression, especially when Gertie hurls the mammoth into the far distance. The humour essentially resides in her behaviour and its 'performance' and not the execution of structured 'jokes'. Gertie fully anticipates the wholly rounded personalities of Mickey, Donald, Pluto and a host of others that emerged from the Disney Studios, who inevitably extended this form of animation and its comic possibilities.

Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnson, veteran animators at the Disney Studios, suggest that Disney understood that the fundamental principle of comedy was that 'the personality of the victim of a gag determines just how funny the whole incident will be' (Thomas and Johnson, 1981: 32). Crucially, 'personality' here precedes the 'gag' and, for Disney, personality is informed by status and identity; therefore, it is intrinsically funnier if a king slips on a banana skin rather than a child. In order to properly develop and reveal 'personality', it was necessary to concentrate on the narrative developments out of any one particular situation or context. This imperative to derive humour from specific kinds of behaviour in a plausible scenario supported Disney's overall drive towards the verisimilitude discussed in Chapter One. Though this was not at the full expense of the 'gag', Disney recognised that, to a major extent, the 'gag' was predominantly facilitated





by stereotyping and sought to resist this through his broader ambitions for the animated film:

> Walt's ideas of entertainment went far beyond gags: he sought the new, the novel, the unexpected, the beautiful, and the colorful situation with warmth. Instead of thinking of cartoon material as being 'entertaining', one might find a better concept in the word 'captivating'. Audiences have to be impressed, absorbed, involved, taken out of themselves, made to forget their own worlds and lose themselves in ours for cartoons to succeed. Walt had to find actions that were funny in themselves yet easily recognised as something familiar, gags that were plausible even though very imaginative, situations that were based on everyone's experience, and characters that had interesting personalities.
>
> (Thomas and Johnson, 1981: 34–5)

Disney's concession towards the stereotypical, however, did lie in the use of 'caricature' and 'exaggeration', which operated as heightened signifiers of human thought and emotion as they were played out by animal characters. 'Caricaturing' in the Disney canon is largely used to denote human flaws, whilst 'exaggeration' is deployed to stress human foibles, a distinction which essentially delineates the kind of comedy *caused* by the character themself, and the kind of comedy *inherently within* the character. Character flaws create *external* humour drawn from physical events while character foibles represent humour from an *internal* source evident in behaviour.

As has been stressed, 'personality' and 'gag' humour are not mutually exclusive, and both models, especially as they are expressed in the evolution of the animated film, display distinct vaudevillian roots. Norm Ferguson, another of the great Disney animators, had a particular predeliction for the vaudeville style and often employed certain routines in his animation of Pluto (Thomas and Johnson, 1981: 99). Pluto certainly embodied the 'physicality' of the vaudevillian clowns, but erred towards the style of acts described by Henry Jenkins as those which 'combined sentimentality and virtuousity' (Jenkins, 1992: 70). This, in many ways, remains consistent within the Disney canon. The vaudevillian 'gag', however, became the central facet of cartoons made both at Warner Brothers and MGM Studios, and will be addressed later, but it is important to stress that the evolution of personality animation accompanied the evolution of the animated form in its own right, and animators remained concerned with the uses of the graphic space itself, and the origination of humour which self-consciously used that space. Thus emerged the first examples of the 'visual pun'.

## 3 The visual pun

In Chapter One, the relationship between the comic strip and the early cartoon forms was emphasised. The codes and conventions that characterised comic

narratives were soon employed in the cartoon but, more importantly, developments in animated comedy were enhanced by the recognition and exploitation of the graphic possibilities available to animators. As Norman Klein has suggested, while this kind of work 'makes allusion to story, its primary responsibility is to surface, rhythm and line' (Klein, 1993: 5). Best remembered in this spirit are Otto Mesmer's *Felix the Cat* films, made at the Pat Sullivan studios in the early 1920s, of which Raymond Dugnat says, 'Felix's head, all cheeky points and apexes, and his curly limbs and grin are one degree nearer the doodle line, with all its chirpy freedom, than the oval and circular forms which were to sweep the cartoon in emulation of Disney's developing smoothness' (Durgnat, 1969: 99).

Mesmer himself stressed at the time that other animators were seeking to achieve 'full animation', he concentrated on the visual 'gags' that emerged from defying perspective in the animated drawing.[2] This directly challenged any plausibility in 'the story' at the level of Disneyesque verisimilitude but extended the narrative space by using all of the graphic possibilities that had been established in the *mise-en-scène*. For example, in *Felix in Fairyland* (1925), Mesmer, as he did in most Felix films, self-consciously uses the graphic space to achieve visual puns. This essentially means that shapes and forms as they are drawn may represent two or more things, and the transition from one graphic representation to another, when it is deliberately executed by the character in the film, in this case, Felix, becomes funny. The amusement arises through the *surprise* and *recognition* that the audience simultaneously experiences in acknowledging the graphic relationship between two shapes or forms that have been drawn to their attention, both by the animator, and the central character. Felix, for example, in attempting to win the affections of a fairy princess on a balcony situated next to a castle (which in perspective terms seems to be in the background of the image), takes the turrets from the castle and makes them into ice-cream cones, while also producing a scoop to fill the cones with ice-cream from what has previously been graphically understood as a cloud. Mesmer's manipulation of the graphic *mise-en-scène* shifts the emphasis from images which *denote* things to images which *connote* things, thus destabilising the visual space, and enabling comic events to continually take place. The initial representational idea that has been established in an image cannot be trusted because it is likely to change, and the chief elements to undergo a shift of emphasis in transition will be notions of size and implied weight. The castle turret, evidently a large construction in the way it is understood in the 'real world', becomes an ice-cream cone in Felix's hand, obviously a much smaller, lighter, object. The 'fluffy' cloud which *looks* the same as the consistency of ice-cream, is, of course, lighter and more transient. The transition bequeaths 'weight' to the ice-cream. In playing with these typographical perspectives, Mesmer calls attention to the two-dimensionality of the image, and makes audiences realise that 'every object he transforms is flat ink' (Klein, 1993: 5).

This is a significant development in the sense that this type of 'gag' is unique to the animated film, extending the possibilities of what Noel Carroll calls 'the mimed metaphor' in silent, live-action comedies:

> In such cases, humor arises from seeing objects in their literal aspect at the very same time that the miming gesticulation enables us to see them as otherwise: to see cogs as bugs and nails as turkey bones. The operation here is essentially metaphorical; disparate objects are identified for the purpose of foregrounding similes, in this case, visual similes. This abets the play of incongruous interpretations. For the self-same object can be seen either literally or figuratively.
>
> (Carroll, 1991: 31–2)

In the animated film the literal can *become* the figurative, once more emphasising the nature of the form, and extending the range of the visual simile (see also Leyda, 1986: 57–85). This is particularly so in the way that Mesmer manipulates the conventions of the comic strip and the design of his own character. For example, loving thoughts are expressed through the presence of 'hearts' above Felix's head which are literally pulled from the space above his head to become part of a banjo, while question marks that signify Felix's puzzlement or exclamation marks which signify his surprise and shock are literally transformed into hooks, keyholes, struts for car wheels, a propeller for an aeroplane etc. Even the notes which signify the idea of a musical tune in the silent era could be used for other visual effects. These visual puns were often conjoined with Felix's ability to use his own tail as a prop, it becomes an umbrella or a banjo neck in accordance with narrative necessity. The whole premise of the Felix cartoon is about the fluidity and uncertainty of graphic space, and though this provided 'gags' – *Comicalities* (1928), later foregrounding the relationship between the animator and the film in the way that the Disney and Fleischer Studios had also done – this could not wholly support the premises of the film. As Mesmer realised, it was Felix's playful character that abetted the comic strategies. He notes, 'I found that I could get as big a laugh with a little gesture – a wink or a twist of the tail – as I could with gags' (Maltin, 1987: 24). The drives towards the creation of an appealing character and the adoption of recognisable modes of performance drawn from vaudevillian contexts, as I have already suggested, began to properly inform the cartoon. Felix himself had been profoundly influenced by Charlie Chaplin, who directly worked with the Sullivan studios on a number of animated films specifically depicting Chaplin (see Crafton, 1993; 1992). Even though characterisation became an important aspect of the developing cartoon film, Mesmer's work had gone a long way to establishing a set of comic conventions which operated as a stock set of visual 'gags' which survived into the sound era, particularly in regard to the deployment of the *incongruity* gag (see later).

Felix did not survive into the sound era, his graphic humour usurped and surpassed by the emergent sound 'gag' and character comedy. Both Klein and Durgnat, however, both cite his comedy as the antecedent of the 'Theatre of the

Absurd' especially as it, in turn, becomes located in Eastern European animation. The 'Theatre of the Absurd', exemplified by the works of Ionesco and Beckett, illustrated the oppressive cycles of behaviour that characterise human existence, suggesting that modern patterns of living depersonalise and misrepresent human potential. This depressing scenario, they imply, can only be accepted if it is perceived in the spirit of black humour, recognising the absurdity of ever-repeating patterns of behaviour, and, inappropriate notions of order and routine as they are determined by hierarchical power structures in society. All this seems a long way from Felix, but the minimalist inflections of absurdist theatre (a recognition of the 'theatre' space and convention in itself, the use of a few props or settings, primarily for symbolic purposes, etc.) echoed the graphic conception and freedom of expression in cartoon films and the use of the 'gag' as a radical device to reveal or disrupt behavioural and environmental orthodoxies. What the absurdists (and their counterparts, the Eastern European animators) did, was to bring a philosophic dimension to the visual pun, and this will be further addressed later, in regard to the incongruity gag, and also as part of the overall working agenda of the Zagreb Studio, and the films of Jan Svankmajer.

## 4 Expectation and exploitation

The next stage in the evolution of the animated comic form was the consolidation of a vocabulary of 'gags' which exploited the form and determined certain codes of expectation in the audience. The analysis of *Soda Jerks* in Chapter One, and *Duck Amuck* in Chapter Two, serve as representative examples of the kind of vocabulary that the cartoon constantly employed, and came to use in a predictable and formulaic way. This formula included the following aspects.

- Establishing a recognisable context in which characters have specific roles or immediately identifiable traits or qualities, even if these become subject to quick change or redefinition.
- 'Riffing' a number of comic events by problematising a specific situation (e.g. employing mistakes, coincidence, misunderstanding etc.).
- Compressing the events by the use of elliptical conventions changing the logic of time and space in the narrative, often resisting 'unity' with regard to plot.
- Creating an 'unreliable space'(see Klein, 1993: 7), which destabilises narrative by revealing the mechanisms of the medium (e.g. 'squash-n-stretch' movement, metamorphosis of character and environment etc.).
- Using jokes which had been seen before but which had been subjected to a fresh interpretation or use (e.g. a character standing in mid-air, realising, and then, falling; a character being subjected to some form of violent act etc.).
- Establishing the idea of characters in conflict which would be played out within the narrative parameters of a chase.



The seven-minute cartoon essentially required that it foreground its terms and conditions with immediacy and clarity in the same way that the vaudevillian comedian had to quickly establish himself and determine the style in which he was working in order to make his audience engage with him. These formulaic elements served this function but also had the consequence of creating and sustaining particular kinds of stereotype. As Henry Jenkins has noted of the vaudeville context:

> This brutal economy weighed against the exposition necessary to develop rounded characters or particularised situations. Instead, characters and situations had to be immediately recognisable. An elaborate system of typage developed: exaggerated costumes, facial characteristics, phrases, and accents were meant to reflect general personality traits viewed as emblematic of a particular class, region, ethnic group, or gender.
>
> (Jenkins, 1992: 70)

Such a typage also informed the animated cartoon, and its implications with regard to gender and race will be examined later. This visual shorthand runs beyond character, though, and creates the comic aspects of the mise-en-scène. Within the context of this chapter then, it is useful to detail a number of the graphic conventions which came to inform the 'golden era' of the cartoon from the early 1920s through to the early 1950s (see also Pilling, 1984). This will constitute the framework by which other kinds of character comedy, situation comedy and 'gag'-oriented comedy may be addressed. It prioritises 'the visual', illustrates the exploitation of the form, and determines the schemata which underpins an audience's expectation of the cartoon. The examples are drawn from the cartoons of the silent era, and those produced by the Disney, Fleischer, Warner Brothers, and MGM Studios, as well as their smaller imitators in the sound era. Once again, such a list cannot be exhaustive, but does serve to link the comic object or event to its comic possibility or expectation.

Clearly, the iconographic conventions are used as a narrative shorthand as well as comic devices. In establishing a climate of expectation these devices become the lubricant for the engine of other more elaborate 'gags' which individualise each cartoon and the nature of the engagement between its chief characters.

## 5 'Just a minute, Chubby – you ain't seen half the kid's repertoire-e-e!': Some old saws

Henry Jenkins suggests, 'The fragmented, frenetic, and emphatic style of variety performance spoke to modernists of all nationalities, to many seeking alternatives to the conventionality of theatrical realism and the banality of commercial cinema' (Jenkins, 1992: 63). Conventional live-action films in Hollywood were soon characterised by what has become known as the 'Classical Hollywood Narrative

Table 4.1

| Comic object/event (signifier) | Comic possibility/expectation (signified) |
|---|---|
| ACME | A company supplying unusual inventions |
| Anvil | Omnipresent, incongruous, dangerous object |
| Babies | Nappied with large safety pin; able to talk in an adult way |
| Bandages wrapped around face | Bad toothache |
| Barrels | Hiding places prone to falling apart |
| Blackened face | Post-explosion (race) caricature of woe |
| Blunderbuss | Incongruous old-fashioned weapon; tends to split into ribbons on firing |
| Bulges | Usually under carpets or within metallic objects when figures are moving |
| Cauldrons | Cooking pots for characters with added vegetables; often accompanied by cannibals with bones in their noses |
| Corn on the cob | Fast food eaten as if mechanised |
| Desert islands | Small, single-palmed, surrounded by sharks |
| Dollar signs in eyes | Sudden possibility of wealth |
| Donkey ears on someone's head | Recognition of stupidity or humiliation (character often becomes an ass) |
| Extended tongue | Profound thirst or exaggerated shock |
| Eyelids/shirtfronts | Operate like rollerblinds |
| Fish | Eaten to leave a complete skeleton |
| Five o'clock shadow beards | Villainy |
| Flushing red faces/limbs etc. | Contact with heat/extreme pain |
| Fridge | Completely full with appetising foods |
| Huge gulps | Recognition of fear in overwhelming odds |
| Huge sandwiches with olive on a cocktail stick | Picnics; eaten in one bite |
| Indians | Literally 'red'; complex smoke signals |
| Large straws | Drinking from vessels quickly/at a distance |
| Painted tunnel/hole entrances | Illusion to fool victim which becomes three-dimensional |
| Round black bombs with lit fuses | Melodramatic suspense/explosion |
| Precarious rock formations | Falling rocks on victim |
| Prison vans, large nets | Dog-catchers |
| Pumping heart revealed through the body | Passionate love/lust |
| Semi-circular mouseholes | Fully-furnished mouse homes |
| Shattered teeth | Post-assault collapse of teeth; the gag is extended by expressing teeth as falling pieces of glass |
| Snoring | Suction so strong, it moves objects |
| Spinning blurred lines and smoke | A fight |
| Storks in post office hats | The delivery of a baby |
| Swelling lumps on head | Consequence of assault |
| Telephone receivers | Vibrates/moves on ringing |
| Twittering birds and stars | Confused look of being knocked out |



Structure' (see Bordwell, *et al.*, 1985). This approach to film-making became its dominant model, using particular kinds of cinematography and editing to create a seamless continuity in the story-telling process, rendering the process of film-making itself invisible. This narrative structure inevitably underpinned what was understood as the closest representation of fictional 'realism' because it corresponded to conventional notions of linear narrative, plausible motivation in the main characters, logical (if over-determined) resolutions to narrative 'problems' etc. Disney strove to achieve this in the animated film and, in doing so, prioritised personality animation and character comedy in the 'folksy' style of old rural populations. Other animation studios, however, strove to develop a vocabulary that legitimised what Norman Klein calls the 'anarchy' of the cartoon, heightening its modernist credentials, and drawing attention to the 'New Humour' of the non-WASP immigrant cultures which became part of the American 'melting pot' at the end of the eighteenth century (see Klein, 1993). Durgnat describes this humour as 'sharp, rapid, cynical, often cruel, reflecting a faster, quicker-witted world' (Durgnat, 1969: 102). It was clearly the humour of the 'gag', known as an 'old saw', the verbal one-liner that was the stock-in-trade of many vaudeville performers, and the central premise, particularly of the Warner Brothers output, especially in relation to the development of characters like Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck in the sound era.

It also becomes the intrinsic and enduring difference between the approach of Disney and the approach of the animators on 'Termite Terrace' at the Warner Brothers Studios. Disney continued to prioritise the human dimensions of his narratives, finding humour in his characters' vulnerability, while Warner Brothers exploited this vulnerability merely to create 'gags'. As Durgnat suggests,

> The gag represents, in a sense, a depersonalisation of emotional release, it depends on the very rapid recognition of emotional stereotypes. In splitting humour from character, it brings comedy towards the condition of farce. But, unlike farce, it can gear in very exactly with the mental aggravations of realistic social life. The new genre expresses both the brutalisation of comedy and the new shrewdness in farce. Life is becoming a matter of rapid manipulation of feelings rather than a full experience of them.
>
> (Durgnat, 1969: 102)

Warner Brothers' *Looney Toons*, in particular, oscillate between the dominant 'personable' aspects of their characters and the depersonalised style of the construction of gags which involve them. Rather than splitting humour from character, as Durgnat suggests, the Warner Brothers animators play out a tension between character and humour which enables the cartoon itself to oscillate between the construction and collapse of narrative. The vaudevillian aspects informing this process are a 'different performer–spectator relationship, a fragmented structure, a heterogeneous array of materials, and a reliance upon crude shock to produce

emotionally intense responses' (Jenkins, 1992: 63). Though it is possible to choose numerous examples from the Warner Brothers canon to illustrate these ideas and issues, a particularly apposite example, which directly recalls the 'vaudevillian' model, and demonstrates the full range of effects available to the cartoon is *Yankee Doodle Daffy*, made as late as 1943, but still engaged with Daffy Duck's aspirations as an entertainer. In a sense, the cartoon operates as war-time propaganda, overtly (perhaps nostalgically) recalling the vaudevillian model, and the contemporaneity of the animated cartoon film itself, as intrinsically American forms of entertainment.

### *Yankee Doodle Daffy* (1943)

Porky Pig, chief casting director of Smeller Productions, attempts to leave his office for his annual holidays, only to be obstructed by 'Actors' Agent', Daffy Duck, 'Personal representative of the most sensational discovery since the sweater girl', one 'Sleepy Lagoo', whom he is eager to promote. Porky refuses to audition him but Daffy refuses to accept this, and demonstrates Sleepy's act himself. Sleepy, meanwhile sits in a big armchair sucking on an oversize lollipop which literally changes the shape of his head from a circular form to an oval shape as he twists it in his mouth. The manipulation of physical form enabled by the animated film is intrinsic to its creation of comic events. Nothing is fixed; everything is subject to its revelation as something else.

Daffy illustrates the performance/spectator relationship by using Porky's office window and curtains as his proscenium space, launching into a version of 'I'm Just Wild about Harry'. Sleepy makes comment on the performance by producing a picture of 'ham'. This sight-gag, shown directly to the viewing audience, simultaneously acknowledges and criticises Daffy's over-the-top style – the joke here is located in the idea that Daffy, in despite of his enthusiasm and energy, is not talented, and it is his crassness and ineptitude which may be laughed at. This is reinforced by a similar sight-gag in which Sleepy produces a picture of a 'corn-cob', suggesting Daffy's style is 'corny', once more a critique of the lack of originality and datedness of his material. The audience is allowed to *laugh* at Daffy, but also *laugh with* him as he becomes the vehicle by which the cartoon demonstrates the vaudevillian traits of 'fragmented structure' and the use of a 'heterogeneous array of materials', described by Jenkins. As Daffy says, before embarking on a breakneck routine, 'Just a minute, Chubby, you ain't seen half the kid's repertoire-e-e!' Daffy plays a banjo solo, solicits laughs through his impersonation of Carmen Miranda, goes tragi-comic with his version of Pagliacci, the clown, and then becomes a singing cowboy in the spirit of Roy Rogers. Such rapid narrative shifts merely reproduce the vaudevillian performance ethos embodied in the skills of the single performer, whether it be a singer, a quick-change artist or an impersonator. Daffy's skills as a singer, musician and performer are abetted by the recognition of 'parody' in his impersonation of Carmen Miranda. Such a moment of overt cross-dressing may be read differently by contemporary





audiences. Daffy's performance may be understood as camp spectacle, whereby the humour is located in the ironic recognition of the sexual agenda inherent in the tension between Daffy's uncertain 'masculinity' and the extreme (and highly sexualised) 'femininity' of his appearance. These questions concerning the blurring of gender identity in animation will be addressed in Chapter Five, but here, Daffy's version of the Brazilian bombshell in the 'tutti-frutti hat' may be viewed as funny for the nature of its excess alone, especially as Daffy concludes his performance with an extraordinarily broad smile. Daffy constantly refers to the tableau suggested by theatrical performance and implicitly recognises that his tireless improvisation chimes with the necessary *variety* required by the audience.

Porky arrests his performance by shutting him in a safe, and this initiates the second sequence of the cartoon, which prioritises the expected vocabulary of the cartoon itself. Porky sits comfortably on the plane taking him to his holiday destination, only to discover that Daffy is the pilot, singing patriotically that he is 'Ready to Fly to be Free'. This defies narrative logic and signifies the 'impossible' acts that can only be achieved within the cartoon. Daffy has somehow escaped the safe, got to the airport before Porky, located the right plane, trained as a pilot, taken over the cock-pit etc., none of which is necessary to see, and which is omitted in the customary elliptical cut within the cartoon that stresses the emphasis upon the 'gag' and not its narrative plausibility. Contemporary audiences probably half-expect Daffy to be there, but in many senses, at the structural level, this corresponds to the creation of a 'surprise' gag through the use of 'crude shock for emotionally intense effects', the last of Jenkins' criteria for vaudevillian performance. It is no surprise, though, when the cartoon employs a 'falling' gag, as Porky exits the plane. The surprise comes when the camera pans upward to find Daffy nonchalantly acting as his parachute, as they both float gently on to a rooftop. From here the cartoon engages with its normal frenetic pace as Daffy chases Porky down several flights of stairs to the tune of the 'William Tell Overture', perhaps the most overused chase music in cartoons! Having paid lip-service to the expected chase conventions, the cartoon then returns to its overtly vaudevillian mode, but uses the dynamics of the cartoon vocabulary to present Daffy *simultaneously* tumbling, juggling, unicycling, back-flipping, spinning, and balancing himself. As Daffy says, 'And now the kid goes into his finale, and what a finale!' This multiplicity of performance styles represents the multiplicity of vaudeville acts and reflects the plurality of tastes and interests in the audience. It prefigures a curious coda, in which Porky finally agrees to see Sleepy, who slowly puts his lollipop into a 'violin' case as if it were a musical instrument (an obvious visual pun in the style described earlier), and starts to sing an operatic aria, only to collapse into a coughing fit. The cartoon's final irony is that, after all Daffy's efforts, Sleepy cannot perform. Of course, it little matters, because the cartoon has foregrounded Daffy's performance, and it is that which the audience expected to see and enjoy.

As Norman Klein has noted, 'At the top of the cartoon industry, virtually every producer and distributor from the twenties into the thirties had worked in

vaudeville in some capacity, either as a booking agent, or in art direction, advertising, or simply drawing or providing show-cards' (Klein, 1993: 21). The influence of the vaudeville ethos and output in the cartoon industry was profound and largely expressed the tensions of dealing with the development of mass culture in a newly industrialised nation. The 'modernity' of the fragmentary style reconciled contradictory tensions between the old and the new worlds, heightening the difference between rich and poor; town and country; law and order; us and them; now and then. These polarities were to inform the development of humour in the USA as a perpetual engagement between the 'one-liner' and situational comedy located in character. This reflected the tension between comedy as a mechanism for innocent reflection and comedy as an agent of progress and critique.

## 6 'Catch that and paint it green!': Adult Avery

Tex Avery radicalised the cartoon by suggesting implicitly and explicitly that the cartoon could be a medium for adult audiences. He clearly understood that children would be appeased by physical slapstick while adults required a more knowing, self-conscious approach, which would engage with more mature themes. These included:

- Status and power, and specifically, the role of the underdog.
- Irrational fears, principally expressed through paranoia, obsession, and the re-emergence of previously repressed feelings.
- The instinct to survive at any cost.
- A direct engagement with sexual feelings and sexual identity.
- A resistance to conformity, and consequently, a re-evaluation of the point of anticipated identification and empathy for the audience.[3]

Avery is a chief contributor to the the stock of visual 'gags' listed on p. 136, and his madcap invention did much to invigorate the cartoon and extend its possiblities. Taking up the vaudevillian mode and matching it with the absurdist principles of the visual pun, he directly addressed his assumed audience, calling upon its adult members to engage with something entirely different from Disneyesque 'cuteness'. Avery, in essence, rejected what may be termed the 'culture of cheerfulness' inherent in the Disney cartoon, preferring instead to be less endeared by humankind, and more engaged with the surreal madness of the universe. As Avery himself said, 'I've always felt that what you did with a character was more important than the character itself. Bugs Bunny could have been a bird' (Adamson, 1975: 162). In moving away from the complexities of fully rounded characters, Avery was able to focus on specific kinds of relationship between characters and the very environment of the cartoon. Most importantly, Avery's 'gags', in self-reflexively interrogating the boundaries of cartoon animation, simultaneously revealed the underpinning imperatives of human behaviour as





it was expressed through his characters as they, in turn, engaged with their destabilised and uncertain contexts. Avery's disruptions in the narrative became narrative itself. His development of the vocabulary of 'gags' became a perceptive engagement with inarticulable aspirations and unspeakable desires.

Avery's vehemently anti-Disney stance perhaps reaches its apotheosis in *Screwball Squirrel* (1944), in which Screwy Squirrel beats up a Disneyesque bunny, who is just about to embark on a pleasant cartoon story about woodland animals, but his efforts to challenge the aesthetic, narrative, and ideological certainties of the Disney cartoon characterised the whole of his career. This largely entailed recasting the role and function of the 'gag' to reform the cartoon to resist any coherent social or political stance, prioritising what may be termed 'primal motives'. Avery essentially achieved this in five ways:

1 extending the premise of a visual gag;
2 the deployment of *alienation* devices;
3 using the tension between the visual and the verbal to develop the literal gag;
4 integrating unexpected black humour into his narratives;
5 exploiting and exaggerating *psychological*, *emotional* and *physical* taboos.

These types of gag are illustrated below as specific examples of 'Twenty Five Ways to Start Laughing', with particular examples from Avery's films.

## 7 Extending the premise of the visual gag

In *Thugs with Dirty Mugs* (1939), (a parodic title echoing Michael Curtiz's 1938 gangster movie, *Angels with Dirty Faces*), Avery uses the typical live-action device of a montage of piling copies of the *Telegraph Post* showing the escalating number of National Bank robberies. Each newspaper's headline says, '1st National Bank Robbed by Killer', '2nd National Bank Robbed by Killer' etc., in an accelerating pace until the papers pause at the thirteenth bank, whereupon the headline says, '13th National Bank Skipped: Killer Superstitious'. The papers then pile once more, before Avery cuts to a robbery in which a car, able to squash-up and stretch-out around corners, and squeeze into small spaces, is used in a raid. A safe, pulled from a bank, also immediately becomes a caravan. The 'punchline' of the sequence is a newspaper headline proclaiming '87 Banks Robbed Today'. Avery cleverly extends the logic of each of the constituent parts of his sequence. First, he takes the idea that the one and only '1st National Bank' could, in fact, be the first of a whole lot of specifically numbered National Banks. Second, he uses the same sequence of numbers to call upon the superstition associated with the number thirteen to break the apparently predictable sequence of robberies. Third, he uses the elliptical cut to a robbery itself, in order to cut once more to the newspaper which says that eighty-seven robberies have taken place in one day, both making a joke of the fact that eighty-seven newspapers may have been

produced in a single day, and exaggerating possible events until plausibility is exhausted and disbelief becomes amusing. Even the intervening action of the robbery itself exaggerates the impossible capability of the car, and crucially provides the opportunity for Avery to suggest that this is merely one of an escalating number of robberies that are taking place. Avery looks to exploit and extend each aspect of both the initial 'gag' idea and its ultimate composition and execution. Avery's comedy thus often occupies the space between the improvised 'spot gag' and a coherently plotted form and, as has already been suggested, this constitutes the redetermination of narrative in the cartoon.

By extending the possibility of the 'gag', Avery not merely redefined narrative, but reconstituted established visual jokes. One of the most memorable occurs in *The Heckling Hare* (1941), which includes one of the most protracted 'falling' gags in cartoons. Willoughby, the hunting dog, based on Lenny from Steinbeck's novel, *Of Mice and Men*, pursues Bugs Bunny, only to be tricked into falling over a cliff, after initially avoiding a fall through a hole made by Bugs. Punished for his complacency and arrogance in humiliating Willoughby, Bugs actually falls through the hole, and both fall in parallel towards their inevitable doom. For over thirty seconds, Bugs and Willoughby tumble through the air screaming and shouting, pulling exaggerated faces, before arresting their fall and coming to earth safely. Both then turn directly to the assumed audience and say 'Fooled you didn't we?' Avery's recognition of the audience goes beyond Bugs and Willoughby's direct address, in the sense that he is manipulating the audience's expectations of the 'falling' gag by creating comic suspense, delaying or subverting the gag's predictable outcome.

Extending the premise of the visual gag may be understood, therefore, as:

- compressing subordinate comic possibilities within the basic structure of the dominant comic event, and;
- altering the timing and expected outcome of the dominant (and widely known) comic event.

## 8 The development of alienation devices

Though seemingly unrelated culturally and intellectually, the work of theorist and playwright, Bertolt Brecht, and Tex Avery, has much in common; chiefly, in what may be described as the use of 'alienation' effects. Brecht's concept of *verfremdung* may be translated as 'distantiation', 'estrangement' or 'defamiliarisation', but in whatever respect, it essentially means the aesthetic strategy by which the creator or performer of the text directly reveals the means and mechanisms of its creation to the audience. This intervention calls upon the audience to recognise the position of themselves as the 'subject' and the textual apparatus they are engaged with as the 'object'. The audience, therefore, is also offered the overt illustration of the shifting points of access and identification that they are normally implicitly asked to adopt (see also Pilling, 1984; Lindvall and Melton, 1994). As Elizabeth





Wright suggests, 'it sets up a series of social, political, and ideological interruptions that remind us that representations are not given but produced' (Wright, 1989: 19). While Brecht's agenda is to reveal the dynamics of social relations, Avery is concerned with the machinations of the individual, and the comic possibilities available by undermining the codes and conventions of the cartoon. These intentions do not necessarily depoliticise Avery's work, however, particularly in relation to his representation of women, and the ideological intent of his wartime propaganda. Clearly, though, Avery's refunctioning of the cartoon is prompted first and foremost by his desire to engage the audience in the direct participation with the consciously contrived aspects of his cartoon text. Interestingly, this finds direct correspondence with some aspects of Brecht's dialectical theatre:

> In order to unearth society's laws of motion this method treats social situations as processes, and traces out all inconsistencies. It regards nothing as existing except in as so far as it changes, in other words is in disharmony with itself. This also goes for those human feelings, opinions and attitudes through which at any time the form of men's life together finds its expression.
>
> (Wright, 1989: 37)

One need only replace the word 'society' here with the word 'cartoon', and Avery's working practice may be clearly understood. Avery uses the unique vocabulary available through the 'laws of motion' in the cartoon as the specific embodiment of the ambiguities and contradictions informing an inherently unstable sense of 'the self' and 'the social' in any situation. Perhaps Avery's most significant similarity to Brecht, however, lies in his insistence that his 'comedy' was historically relevant. Avery's 'gags' reflect a modern world aware of the precarious balance between tragedy and comedy. Disney's folksy optimism was in many ways passé. Self-consciousness in the cartoon represented self-awareness in its audience. The audience were sometimes literally included in Avery's films (a figure emerges from the audience to aid the stage-swami in *Hamateur Night* (1938), while Cinderella shouts 'Yoo hoo, here I am in the tenth row' to her Prince Charming in *Cinderella Meets Fella* (1938)), or constantly referred to (in *Happy-Go-Nutty* (1944), Screwy Squirrel and other characters rush into a dark cave and the audience hears typical cartoon crashing sounds. Screwy lights a match and says 'Sure was a great gag. Too bad you couldn't see it').

Most importantly though, Avery asked the audience to always remember that they were watching a cartoon, a medium reliant on contemporary technologies. In *Henpecked Hoboes* (1946), George and Junior, whilst chasing a chicken, cross a line with a sign on it which reads, 'Technicolor ends here', and immediately become black-and-white characters. The chase music also grinds to a halt at this point, drawing attention to its relationship to the action. This had already been made absolutely specific in *Screwball Squirrel* (1944), where the convention of the drum roll as the prefiguring sound to the anticipated action of a character, is

subverted by the fact that we see Screwy playing it within the course of the action. In the same cartoon, Screwy is able to look ahead to see the outcome of the next sequence by literally 'flipping' a few images in the corner of 'the page'. In *Magical Maestro* (1952), a conductor is literally transformed into a different character by the wave of a wand, but even the most committed viewer is distracted from the main action by the presence of a hair apparently moving in the bottom left-hand corner of the image. The conductor literally plucks the hair, but not before numerous projectionists had lost theirs in attempting to remove it from the projector lens!

These devices all 'alienate' the audience from the customarily settled condition of linear narrative and reveal the construction of the 'gag' in the cartoon by challenging the assumptions of watching a cartoon. Simultaneously, Avery implicitly suggests that the audience laughs at its own sense of certainty, in both the movie-house and the real world (see also Adamson, 1975; Peary and Peary, 1980).

## 9 Literal, visual and verbal gags

In *The Cuckoo Clock* (1950), Avery literally visualises a number of everyday phrases, rapidly stacking 'gags' to represent the escalating madness of a cat driven crazy by a cuckoo. 'Cuckoo' gags had already featured in *Cinderella Meets Fella*, but here become a *tour de force* of surreal thinking. As the cat imagines 'ringing in my ears', his ears become bells; when he says he 'kept seeing things', coloured squiggles float about in the corner of the screen with a sign saying 'things'; his eyes then grow 'big as saucers', and after doing so, break like china; when he says 'I couldn't keep a thing on my stomach', objects literally bounce off; not knowing whether he is 'coming or going' he simultaneously walks backwards and forwards going nowhere; confessing he was 'down in the dumps', he is seen pacing in a junkyard; his head keeps blowing up when he says 'I kept blowing my top'; his body falls apart when he feels himself 'going to pieces', only to be reconstructed when he admits 'I had to pull myself together'. Yes, he was 'going cuckoo'! These 'spot gags', deliberately play on the gap in the language between the literal and the figurative and essentially extend the vocabulary of the visual pun defined earlier. Nearly all Avery films deploy this device in some way, but some films, including the early mock-documentaries he made at Warner Brothers (*Believe it or Else* (1939), *Detouring America* (1939), *Cross-Country Detours* (1940)), his imaginative views of the future made at MGM (*The House of Tomorrow* (1949), *The Car of Tomorrow* (1951), *TV of Tomorrow* (1953), and *The Farm of Tomorrow* (1954)), and most particularly, *Symphony in Slang* (1951), which literalises 'hip' phrases like 'raining cats and dogs', prioritise the use of this device. The colourful and imaginative aspects of the verbal fuel the surreality of the visual, rendering the literal depiction of impossible similes and metaphors amusing.





## 10 On black humour

Playing on the tension that, perhaps, informed all of Avery's work, black humour emerges from the narrative preference to heighten the tragical aspects of the fine line between the tragic and the comic in the contemporary world. This usually emerges as an extension of violent conduct in Avery's cartoons but often in unexpected contexts. In *Hamateur Night* (1938), the stage-swami asks a member of the audience to participate in one of his tricks by getting into a basket, which he then spears with a sword. The trick, of course, relies on the man re-emerging, miraculously unharmed. In Avery's world, the trick fails, and the swami passes the basket to an usher saying 'Give this gentleman his money back'. The black humour emerges here from the swami's disregard for the man's death and the apparently ludicrous compensation implied by giving the dead man his money back. In order to create such a gag, Avery often has to empty an image of its associative meanings in order to prioritise the literalism that characterises the humour. For example, in *The Shooting of Dan McGoo* (1951), a man who is allegedly dying is described as having 'one foot in the grave', whereupon he enters with the entire paraphernalia of a grave on the end of his right leg. The tombstone and the plot of ground carry sacred connotations which may render this joke in bad taste in spite of its absurdity. Its use of 'sacred' imagery, though, still determines it as a mode of black humour unexpectedly emerging within this context.

This technique becomes important in the Avery canon though, because comic excess in the expression of black humour essentially renders the implications of the imagery, at best ambiguous, but for the most part, meaningless. A cartoon like *Blitzwolf* (1942) is, on the surface, an engagement with something as unfunny as Adolf Hitler, but becomes an excess of gags that parody the military and ridicule authority, recalling Hitler himself only at the iconic level. Similarly, *Who Killed Who?* (1943), a spoof of horror stories and murder mysteries, employs sinister imagery only redeemed by exaggerated comic effects. As Joe Adamson has noted:

> The grotesque sight of a door opening to let a corpse drop past the camera and thud to the floor is somewhat qualified by the equally grotesque sight of another corpse directly behind it, and then, after it falls, another one behind that. The graphics and the animation draw forth all the horror possible and the effect is genuinely ghastly, but by the time seventeen of them in a row have hit the floor it's just crazy. Finally, one of the cadavers pauses, in his drop, long enough to trill the words, 'Ah yes! Quite a bunch of us isn't it?'. And down he goes, followed by seventeen more.
>
> (Adamson, 1975: 65)

Avery's black humour acknowledges the implicit relationship between horror and humour, carefully playing out the notion that something may be frightening for an individual if it is happening to them, but amusing if the very same thing is

happening to someone else. Amusement comes from the alleviation of the terror or anxiety and its projection elsewhere. Avery carefully places his audience in the middle of this tension, soliciting a different emotional source for laughter. This approach directly informs his capacity to interrogate adult concerns.

## 11 Recognising torment and taboo

Avery's work is based on a consistent refusal to accept the conventional parameters of representational fiction. It is constructed wholly on the terms of a direct address to an audience who Avery assumes shares the same preoccupations and level of understanding. Avery implicitly asks his audience to *recognise* themselves in the codes and conditions of his *revelatory* mode, rejecting the easy narrative continuities of the Disney style or the fluidity of a certain 'dream-state' kind of animation located in cartoons by Friz Freleng, Bob McKimson or Bob Clampett, other major Warner Brothers animators (see Peary and Peary, 1980; Pilling, 1985). It is this style which ultimately draws attention to the thematic consistencies in Avery's work cited earlier. One of Avery's most dazzling illustrations of the tenuous conditions of status and power, for example, occurs in *Slap-Happy Lion* (1947), when a lion at the point of his greatest authority swallows himself in fear of a mouse, diminishing his self-imposed standing, proving, as Durgnat suggests, that 'not even lions should throw their weight about in the jungle, because everyone's neurotic about something' (Durgnat, 1969: 186). Issues arising concerning status and power are intrinsic to the chase cartoon because invariably the characters chasing each other correspond to the following models:

- inept hunter/superior hunted (Elmer and Bugs; Coyote and Road Runner);
- irritating pursuer/fleeing pursued (Daffy and Porky; Sylvester and Tweety);
- equally matched adversaries (Tom and Jerry).

Avery complicates these issues by constantly placing notions of status and power in flux, subject often merely to the whim of the characters themselves, within their delirious universe. Little Red Riding Hood, Grandma and the Wolf, for example, all decide that they are sick and tired of playing out the traditional Little Red Riding Hood tale in *Red Hot Riding Hood* (1943), and recast Red Riding Hood as a night-club 'vamp' fully aware of her sexuality and entirely self-possessed, Grandma as a sexually voracious society madame, and the Wolf torn between his unrequited lust for 'Red' and his deep anxiety over Grandma's relentless pursuit of him! By recasting role and identity, Avery redefines and relocates the notion of status and power in his characters. Because they are entirely free to pursue their most instinctive motives and desires, Avery's characters pay no attention to social etiquette, cultural norms, or prevailing hierarchies of influence and effect. This liberates them to behave entirely 'in the moment' and within the context of the 'gag' itself. Clearly, this liberation not merely redetermines aspects of status and power, but privileges the psychological, emotional and physical imperatives often





misrepresented or repressed within 'the social'. Avery lets his characters have free-play with their appetites and *irrational* motives, and as such, reveals the deepest of obsessions, the most primal of instincts, and the most inchoate aspects of the human condition.

By addressing two of Avery's most well-known cartoons – *Little Rural Riding Hood* (1949) and *King Size Canary* (1947) – some brief points concerning the implications of these revelations in regard to the creation and innovation of 'gags' may be made.

### *Little Rural Riding Hood* (1949)

This cartoon, like *Red Hot Riding Hood*, *Swingshift Cinderella* (1945) and *Wild and Wolfy* (1945), may be recognised as a body of work most representative of 'Tex on Sex'. Once more, rejecting the traditional telling of the 'Red Riding Hood' story, Avery plays out the town and country motif, so beloved of Disney in films like *The Country Cousin* (1936). The cartoon begins with a gangly girl telling the audience in the extended drawl of a country bumpkin that she is going to visit Grandma. Avery then cuts to Grandma's house, where the wolf, dressed in Grandma's nightie, says 'Folks, confidentially, I'm not the real Grandma, I'm the wolf, see', and proceeds to confirm that far from eating Little Red Riding Hood, he is going to 'kiss her and love her'. Avery, of course, is merely literalising the sexual connotations of the term 'wolf' in the everyday vernacular, recasting the wolf as a creature driven predominantly by his sexual appetites rather than his physical need to survive. In the film's opening sequence between the two characters, the Wolf chases Red attempting to kiss her, ending up in the first instance kissing a cow! Red dexterously opens doors with her feet, flattens the Wolf's body against the door, and charges through his body, leaving it flapping like two saloon doors. The chase then reaches a hysterical pace as a proliferation of doors suddenly appear in every wall and ceiling created by Wolf and Red as they pursue each other. This merely operates as a prologue, however, for the rest of the cartoon, when their chase is arrested by the arrival of a telegram from the country wolf's city cousin, who suggests he should come and see an entertainer called 'Red' in the city. He encloses a photograph of 'Red' which features a red-headed girl in a basque dress, to which country wolf's eyes widen out of his head to half the size of his body. Country Red, by this time, has rouged her lips ready to kiss him, but finds herself kissing the cow, as he excitedly motors to the city, skidding the car to a halt as if it was a piece of wood ground down to a pile of sawdust. He then meets his city cousin in a hotel suite.

The city cousin is the epitome of control and sophistication, a still character, heightening the total lack of control in his cousin, who is so driven by his lust for Red that he searches under the seat for her, extends his body to search within a lamp, and walks on air from building to building to find her in the adjacent apartments. The country cousin is in essence 'a force' beyond character; a spirit in a body that can operate outside the physical limitations of the body in the

expression of pure feeling. Avery changes the rhythm and purpose of the cartoon, necessarily overstating the action in extremes to heighten the recognition in the audience of feeling-states beyond articulable words. As Ronnie Scheib suggests:

> The impact of Avery's extremes is perhaps most visible in his celebrated 'takes' – bodies that break apart like a mad contradictory gaggle of exclamation points or zip out limb by limb, jaws that drop open to the floor in shock, necks that sprout multiple hydra-heads of surprise, tongues that jaggedly vibrate in horror or infinitely expand in desperation, eyes that grow to the size of millstones or spring out of their sockets or multiply to form sets popping out in rows towards their object of lust or terror.
>
> (Scheib, 1980: 115)

Avery derives humour from illustrating how the body would react if it did have the capacity to properly express the intensity of its feelings. He uses the cartoon to show the inadequacy of the body in representing the thoughts and emotions that are projected through it. The desire in the country cousin continues unabated when his city counterpart takes him to the club to see 'Red'. The country cousin's wolf-whistle defies being 'corked' by his cousin's finger, and travels through his cousin's arm to emerge out of his cousin's mouth! The city cousin pushes the country wolf's head down beneath his collar, and ties it at the neck, only for his head to re-emerge from his stomach as he pokes through his 'rollerblind' shirt-front. He literally smokes his cigarette and half his face off, and resists having his face pushed in by his city cousin by forcing his face back so vehemently on the rebound that he finds himself within his cousin's shirt collar. His city cousin also attempts to foil his whistling by forcing both his arms into his mouth and out through his ears, while also arresting his charge towards the tempting 'Red' by flooring him with a mallet which he 'fires' from the country cousin's braces. Flattened, the country cousin is pushed away like a wheelbarrow. City life is all too much, it seems, but what Avery is suggesting is that 'civilisation' stimulates desires which it then refuses to appease. The city cousin's every act is one of oppression and suppression, desperately trying to contain the overt public expression of a taboo emotion. Avery has no interest in maintaining the boundaries of the public and private, and this violation is at the core of his humour. As if to reinforce the view that primal impulses will not be inhibited, the cartoon concludes, with a classic Avery reversal when the city cousin expresses the same lust towards the gangly country 'Red', and Avery enjoys a frenetic reprise of the same gags that characterised the demise of the country wolf.

### *King Size Canary* (1947)

*King Size Canary* represents another evaluation of primal drives in the sense that it is principally concerned with the instinct to survive, whether this be in appeasing





hunger or guarding against threat. In Avery's world, these drives become obsessional, leading characters into strange realms which have their own internal logic, a logic which Avery pursues to its uncertain ends. A black cat, scavenging for food becomes desperate when three fish skeletons are stolen by other cats, leading him to break into a house. He foils a dog with searchlight eyes by using sleeping pills and defies gravity by stacking crates in mid-air to climb in a window. Though he imagines the fridge is full, it proves empty, envisaged as a room for let by Avery with a small 'For Rent, Furnished' sign. Even the sardine tin on the shelf proves a disappointment when the cat twists back the lid only to discover a 'Kilroy was here' sign. These deliberate constructions of gags at the expense of the central character, delay the fulfilment of the character's prime need and perpetuate the narrative. Avery's fundamental purpose for including these devices, though, is to escalate the character's paranoia, and to cast the world as a place without order, with no enduring sense or logic (see Peary and Peary, 1980: 121). Both the animator, and the world he represents, persecute the cat, refusing him success or resolution. This provokes a high degree of irrationality in the cat as he completely ransacks the house looking for food, finally happening upon a tin of cat food.

Excitedly opening the can, he tips out a mouse, who, unsurprisingly, in the Avery universe, though seeming to be the underdog in this situation, turns out to be more streetwise than the cat. Once again, Avery draws attention to the character's own self-consciousness about appearing in a cartoon, when the mouse resists the cat's attempts to eat him by saying 'Forget it, see, I've seen this cartoon before, and brother, believe me, if you're smart you won't eat me, 'cos before this picture's over, I save your life'. The cat accepts this, but remembers that he is still hungry. The mouse, leaning completely into the middle of the cat's head through his ear, suggests that he eat the 'Great, big, fat, juicy, canary' in the next room. Frustrated once more, the cat only finds an emaciated canary who says 'I've been sick'. Just at the point of utter defeat, he sees a bottle of 'Jumbo Gro', a plant feed, and after experiencing a literal 'brain-storm' with attendant rain, thunder and lightning, he feeds it to the canary. The canary becomes hugely inflated, and in doing so shifts its status. The cat plucks its leg, initially pursuing the logic of eating the canary as he had intended. He suddenly realises, however, that the canary is now bigger than he is, and thus presents a threat. Gingerly he returns the leg-feathers he has plucked, and adopts a new logic of survival, that of protecting himself from an enemy who may harm him.

The cartoon from here becomes a frenetic chase based on the exchange of the bottle of 'Jumbo Gro', and the ever-escalating size of the protagonists. The cat drinks some, and becomes intimidating to the canary, who in a typical Avery moment, refuses to believe in the presence of the cat, even though he is leaning against his fang-like teeth. He then pulls out the cat's teeth, nose and eyes, reconstituting his face in mid-air, in order to properly accept that the cat is there, only to quickly throw the pieces of face back on to the cat's head in a different order! The ensuing scuffle leads to the bottle being thrown, and it lands in a dog's mouth. He, of course, grows huge, and ultimately dwarfs both a house, and the

cat chasing the canary. The bottle is dropped down a chimney by the dog, landing near the feet of the mouse, who originally came out of the tin. He is reading 'The Lost Squeekend' (Ouch!), but inevitably drinks the 'Jumbo Gro' until he dwarfs the dog and, as prefigured much earlier, saves the cat's life. This, though, is not the end. The cat is still hungry, and perceives the mouse as food. The two then continually exchange the bottle as they traverse the world growing ever-larger. When the bottle runs out, the mouse says 'Ladies and Gentlemen, we're going to have to end this picture – we just ran out of the stuff'. The cat and mouse are arm-in-arm, standing on top of the planet. Beat that, Tom and Jerry! Avery pursues the relentless logic of a comic scenario until the idea was exhausted of possibilities. This approach radically changed the cartoon, and even extended the boundaries of film itself.

Tex Avery is one of the undisputed masters of animation. Even though he created the characters of Bugs, Porky, Daffy, Droopy and Screwy Squirrel, his interest was not in character comedy, but the *proliferation* of gags, simultaneously occurring and operating on a number of levels. Avery asks the audience to laugh at what it knows, takes for granted, little understands, and endures. His surreality is merely a recognition of the illusion of control and order in society; his comedy, an indulgence of the inchoate forces informing humankind but rarely engaged with. Curiously appropriate here is Avery's cry of 'Catch that and paint it green!' every time he broke wind. A funny sound, an absurd response, an impossible instruction, a taboo broken, an extended joke!

## 12 Jones' Road Runner gags

Like Avery, Chuck Jones made significant contributions to the vocabulary of cartoon gags, but unlike Avery, he became more interested in the comic possibilities of limiting the logic of a situation rather than over-extending it. For Jones, 'there are – there must be – rules. Without them, comedy slops over at the edges. Identity is lost'. To this end, Jones created the following specific rules for the Coyote and Road Runner series, which are useful to reprise in their entirety because they serve as a particular kind of comic model (Jones, 1989: 224–5).

1 The Road Runner cannot harm the Coyote except by going 'Beep-Beep'.
2 No outside force can harm the Coyote – only his own ineptitude or the failure of the ACME products.
3 The Coyote could stop at anytime – if he were not a fanatic. (Repeat: 'A fanatic is one who redoubles his effort when he has forgotten his aim' – George Santayana.)
4 No dialogue ever, except 'Beep-Beep'.
5 The Road Runner must stay on the road – otherwise, logically, he would not be called a Road Runner.
6 All action must be confined to the natural environment of the two characters – the south-west American Desert.





7 All materials, tools, weapons, or mechanical conveniences must be obtained from the ACME corporation.
8 Whenever possible, make gravity the Coyote's greatest enemy.
9 The Coyote is always more humiliated than harmed by his failures.

These rules underpin all of Jones' 'Road Runner' cartoons, and show the intrinsic difference between his work and Avery's. Jones cherished character, and consistently showed his affection for characters, even when they endured adverse experiences.[4] In many senses, Jones occupies the space between the cheerful bonhomie of Disney and the anarchy of Avery, combining an intrinsic warmth in his characters with the precision timing of the 'gag'. Unlike Avery's, Jones' gags essentially required that an audience knew the outcome of the gag, and the humour emerged from *when* something happened, rather then *how* it happened. The audience always knew that the Coyote would fail in his efforts to catch and eat the Road Runner, but enjoyed the *repetition* of the formula because what was important was the nuances of the gag rather than possible innovation. The Coyote's reaction to the inexplicable failure of his ACME products or the way in which the environment conspired against him, was just as, if not more, important than the slapstick physicalities of the gag. In numerous respects, though, the Coyote did endure the 'slap-of-the-stick' far more frequently than many of his cartoon counterparts because objects (normally huge catapults) would vent their mechanical malice upon him.

Jones' great skill was in the creation of *comic suspense*, when the audience recognises that the seed of a joke has been planted and they are merely waiting for its inevitable outcome. The tension that this creates liberates laughter with the eventual fulfilment of the gag. For example, on one occasion, Coyote builds an ACME trapdoor in the middle of the road which springs up at the touch of a switch. The Coyote's obvious hope is that as the Road Runner speeds round the corner, he can flick the switch, and the Road Runner will come to a sorry end crashing into the iron door. When it comes to the crunch, the door does not spring up and the Road Runner goes past. Coyote checks the mechanism, nothing appears to be wrong, but the trapdoor still refuses to spring up. The audience think, of course, that it is going to spring up, and harm the Coyote. Significantly, it doesn't. The cartoon passes on to other comic encounters, and just when the audience has possibly forgotten the failure of the trapdoor, or perceived it as a narrative loose-end, it springs up in the middle of another unrelated chase sequence, injuring Coyote. It is the delayed outcome of this scenario that makes it funny, working on the tension between the audience's mutual need for surprise and reassurance.

It is this tension which also informs Jones' 'running gags' which are essentially repetitions of the same scenario but with some comic variations on a theme. Coyote, for example, is constantly attempting to fire himself after the Road Runner like an arrow or within a large piece of elastic band. Similarly, huge catapults conspire against him, and no rock face passes without being the

instrument of his downfall. Jones' rules give the audience reassurance, and do not stir or represent Avery's primal motives. The consistency in character, location, action and typology of 'gags' resist social readings, except at the level of the kind of 'fanaticism' that the Coyote represents. The Coyote's relentless imperative to catch the Road Runner is, however, more about pride than paranoia. His obsession is purely related to his own puzzlement concerning why he has never captured or defeated the Road Runner, and not about some primal need to do so – as Jones suggests, he could stop at any time. Jones trusts the internal logic of characters and situations and interrogates their predictability. Avery uses characters as ciphers for gags related to primal motives while Jones creates in Road Runner and Coyote 'single-note' characters who he seeks to employ in subtle variations on the chase motif. The Road Runner's 'Beep-Beep' is both a surprise noise and a call-to-arms, an existential signature of continuous movement and yet, limited progress. The Coyote, it seems, cannot move on, unless he secures this particular prey. The limited conditions of the cartoon, seen in these terms, can have absurdist overtones, but Jones limits the darker connotations of their scenario, by privileging 'humiliation' over 'harm', sustained effort and endeavour over self-conscious defeat and resignation. This largely came about because of the abject failure of *Fast and Furry-ous* (1947), the first Road Runner and Coyote cartoon, which started out as a satire on the dominant orthodoxy of the chase cartoon, a satire which no one recognised, and which wasn't amusing either (Jones, 1989: 226). Satire was left in other hands.

## 13 Some theories on character comedy

Jones' preoccupation with character and the development of the chase cartoon, leads logically into a proper address of the role and function of character in the animated film. In this section, therefore, I intend to conflate three different theories, with recognisably similar aspects which will serve to inform the study of character, and also to suggest three specific models which might usefully serve as a point of access to extended study in one area. These are essentially a theory of character typology in the cartoon, a theory of character typology in character comedy in general, and the theory delineating the basic tenets of human character in psychoanalysis. Their relationship may be initially understood in Table 4.2.

Norman Klein's theory of cartoon character with regard to role and function suggests that there are three principal roles, the *Controller*, the *Over-reactor* and the *Nuisance* (see Table 4.2). He says 'the Controller is usually indestructible in the cartoon: he may feel anguished but he hardly ever gets hit', while 'the Over-reactor tends to take the lumps, like the fall-guy in a slapstick comedy', and 'the Nuisance usually starts off the cartoon by annoying the Over-reactor, who then keeps the gags flowing', becoming particularly useful because 'he is more like a force of nature than a character that thinks at all' (Klein, 1993: 38). Clearly, Bugs largely controls the action in his cartoons, though Elmer attempts to gain control of a situation and suffers accordingly, while Daffy perpetually plays out his



*Table* 4.2 Some theories of character

| *Theory* | *Character type 'A'* | *Character type 'B'* | *Character type 'C'* |
|---|---|---|---|
| Cartoon character (Klein) | Controller | Over-reactor | Nuisance |
| Comedy character (Jenkins) | The clown | Dupe/Killjoy | Counterfeit |
| | | Comic antagonist | |
| Psychoanalytic characteristic (Freud) | Id | Super-ego | Ego |
| Example | Bugs Bunny | Elmer Fudd | Daffy Duck |

mad-cap self-interest against the tension between Bugs and Elmer. Though these roles predominate, they are sometimes necessarily in flux to facilitate further gags, but their complexity runs deeper than merely structural device, and this is where Jenkins' work becomes of interest.

Jenkins asserts that 'the comedy of social disorder', of which the cartoon must be the most extreme example, features a tension between the Clown and the Comic antagonist:

> The Clown personifies change, encapsulating all that is rebellious and spontaneous within the individual, all that strains against the narrow codes of social life. The Comic antagonist embodies civilisation, all that is stifling and corrupt within the existing social order, all that would block or thwart efforts towards individual self-expression and personal pleasure.
>
> (Jenkins, 1992: 221–2)

Jenkins suggests that the 'Comic antagonist', however, is characterised by three further social types – the *Dupe*, the *Killjoy* and the *Counterfeit*. He describes the Dupe as 'completely bound by conventional patterns of thought', the Killjoy as representative of social stability at the cost of 'individual spontaneity and personal expressiveness', and the Counterfeit as those who 'claim unearned respectability and hold others accountable to standards they themselves refuse to obey' (Jenkins, 1992: 232–4). Once more, when applied to Bugs, his role as Clown is unchallenged, but interestingly within the cartoon, this is prioritised as the controlling rather than oppositional force. The cartoon privileges the Clown without necessarily determining him as a social outsider. Elmer is both Dupe and Killjoy in the sense that his predictability inhibits his ability to cope with 'the Clown' and in order to try and impose control he must attempt to outlaw the

pleasure and eccentricity embodied in Bugs. 'Hunting wabbits', after all, is an attempt to control the proliferation of the creatures and act in a spirit of containment. Daffy's double-standards render him as the perfect 'Counterfeit', and the hypocrisy embodied in the sneaky ways in which he attempts to undermine the opposition while according himself great dignity and status is concordant with his role in Klein's scheme because his attempts to think through a situation are always undermined by his more primal motives. He becomes a hysterical 'spirit of nature' because he ultimately cannot sustain his role as a 'Counterfeit'. Daffy would love to be a Clown, but despite all his efforts, he hasn't got the credentials. If these interactions are to be read outside their cartoon or comic context, though, a further set of readings is legitimised through the deployment of psychoanalysis.

In personifying his concepts, the *super-ego*, the *ego* and the *id*, (naming them after mythological figures), Freud brought previously alienated ideas slowly into the public domain. In some of his first models of psychic life, Freud identified the unconscious, pre-conscious, and conscious states, but as his studies developed he localised the workings of the super-ego, ego and id within the unconscious, thus further complicating the psychological mechanisms which seemed to underpin conscious 'external' life. Anna Freud, Freud's daughter, in her introduction to her father's 1923 essay, 'The ego and the id', usefully summarises its key themes:

> The blind search for satisfaction by the drives, which are given at birth and determine the nature of the id, is not compatible with the nature of the ego whose task it is to register conditions, requirements and dangers in the outer world and to take them into consideration. . . . For the ego itself is nothing other than a re-modelled part which, having split off from the id, is adapted to the external world; the super-ego, again, is a precipitate of the child's prolonged dependency on his parents and their demands with regard to drive restriction and socialisation.
>
> (Freud, 1986: 436)

The id is the collective name for the primal forces that constitute instinctive drives in the personality. Tex Avery's films, for example, are essentially an illustration of the free-play of the id, unchecked by other mechanisms in the personality. The id seeks to fulfil itself, and this is known as the pleasure principle, a wholly subjective drive to satiate physical, emotional and psychological appetites. An inherent imperative, it acts, resisting attempts to suppress it. This clearly coheres with the symbolic role of the Clown, and the controlling premise of the cartoon as it is embodied in Bugs. Bugs is always provisionally content, satiating his hunger by chewing on his carrot, enjoying a restful life without anxiety or stress. When this is disrupted or challenged, he resists 'civilising' processes which do not fit in with the fulfilment of the pleasure principle that his lifestyle represents. Bugs acts to maintain the free-play of his pleasure principle, using his comic capacity as 'Clown' to liberate him from inhibition or repression. As an





embodiment of the id, he represents the drives which achieve his particular wishes – anger, the instinct to survive, the enjoyment of sexual freedom (see Chapter Five) etc. Most importantly, he represents the essential energy and anarchy of the cartoon itself.

The ego may be recognised as a 'reality' principle, inhibiting psychic energy until it finds its proper fulfilment, simultaneously, attempting to hold the imperatives of the ego in check. In many ways, the ego is the psychic drive that balances the antagonistic tension between the id and the super-ego. Daffy, the Counterfeit, is the embodiment of this tension, oscillating between his desire to achieve power, status, and above all, control, and his collapses into madness through frustration or weakness. Daffy's 'ego' is, indeed, fragile, caught in the perpetual bind of wanting to 'do the right thing' but being seduced or distracted from the possibility of achieving it. Daffy tries to think and reason in order to be 'realistic' but he is destabilised by the things that happen to him and his irrational response to uncertainty. If Bugs is the free-playing anarchy of the cartoon, Daffy is his partial counterpart, having to deal, however, with another aspect of his identity, which is about attaining absolute control.

Absolute control is central to the idea of the super-ego, which operates as a kind of 'conscience', punishing transgression, and rewarding complicity and conformity. The super-ego often embodies traditional methods of doing things, and the common ideals and values which underpin the dominant ideology. In a similar approach to the earlier suggestion that Avery's work represents the id, it is clear that the predominant tone of the Disney output is locked into the machinations of the (American) super-ego. The super-ego is a regulator, mediated through the uncertainty of the ego in the attempt to contain the id. Often the super-ego solicits 'guilt' in the transgressor - Disney films are full of conscience figures making characters feel terrible about what they have done (e.g. Jiminy Cricket in *Pinocchio*, Thumper in *Bambi* etc.). In the Warner Brothers cartoons, Elmer Fudd is the closest one gets to a super-ego figure trying to impose himself on the world of nature, but suffering, despite all his attempts to punish transgression in Bugs. His role and function are to contain and restrict, but the very spirit of the cartoon resists the imposition of the super-ego. No matter how much Elmer tries to inhibit Bugs' pleasures and instincts, his efforts are doomed to failure, because his authority as the embodiment of the super-ego is constantly under question, or plainly ignored. The 'modernity' of the tension between the ego and the id in the cartoon fundamentally triumphs over the 'traditionalism' of the super-ego.

The cartoon can readily support these kind of interpretations, and these methodologies may be tested and modified against different character types in other forms of animation. Betty Boop, for example, in films made by the Fleischer Brothers, may be the Controller/Clown/id, set against the Over-reactor/Killjoy/super-ego of her principally male counterparts, or in another of the most successful Fleischer creations, it is engaging to play out the tension between Popeye, Bluto and Olive Oyl, as the interaction between Popeye as Controller/

Clown/id, Bluto as Nuisance/Counterfeit/ego, and Olive Oyl as Over-reactor/Dupe/super-ego, though in many respects the role and function of Popeye and Olive Oyl may be reversed; Popeye, it may be argued, only attains the status of Controller/Clown/id when he is helped by a can of spinach! Clearly, these delineations provide theoretical tools for different kinds of analysis, and help to clarify particular roles and functions in cartoon character formation.

## 14 The shaggy dog story

Having deployed psychoanalytic theory as part of the discussion of character, it is useful also in determining the conditions defining what may be termed the 'shaggy dog story' in animation. As Freud notes:

> The two fixed points in what determines the nature of jokes – their purpose of continuing pleasurable play and their effort to protect it from the criticism of reason – immediately explain why an individual joke, though it may seem senseless from one point of view, must appear sensible, or at least allowable, from another.
>
> (Freud, 1976: 181)

The tension between 'sense' and 'nonsense' is at the core of the 'shaggy dog story', suggesting, as it does, that the logic or expectation used at any one point in the comic narrative may be refuted by a counter-logic or alternative view which differs from the most obvious progression. At one and the same time, the narrative drive appears to sustain reason and rationality, whilst actually supporting utter absurdity. Recognising the space between these two positions results in the understanding of the kind of humour that is being deployed. A specific example illustrating this is *Special Delivery* (1978), made by John Weldon and Eunice Macauley, under the auspices of the National Film Board of Canada, and the sponsorship of the Post Office.[5]

### *Special Delivery* (1978)

Alice Phelps leaves for her judo class, instructing her husband, Ralph, to clear the front walk of snow. Ignoring her, Ralph goes out, only to return and discover that a mailman has slipped on the walk and died. Fearing the 'wrath of the Letter Carrier's Union', Ralph thinks through the situation, remembering a friend who had a similar experience in which his mailman had broken a leg, and concludes, anxiously, that in terms of the possible compensation he may have to pay, 'a broken neck is as bad as ten broken legs'. He decides, therefore, to wear the mailman's uniform, and deliver the rest of the mail, so that no one would know that the mailman had completed his deliveries at the Phelps' house, and no one would accuse him of being responsible for his death. Instead of doing the obvious thing and reporting an accident to the police, Ralph (and the narrative





Figure 4.1 Sponsored by the Postal Services, the National Film Board of Canada made the deadpan *Special Delivery*, an excellent example of animation naturally accommodating surreal logic and unusual occurrences as if they were everyday happenings

itself) pursues an alternative logic, resisting the simple course of action, but crucially, consistently justifying it. Ralph essentially thinks of himself as someone who has committed a crime, and fearing the consequences of being caught, tries to cover up the evidence. The fundamental joke is that by not doing a simple chore, Ralph casts himself as a serious criminal, and pronounces himself as guilty. Further, the joke is extended by the fact that the sponsors of the film are the Canadian Postal Service, who embrace a narrative which parodies the presence and supposed authority of the Letter Carrier's Union.

The narrative is told in deadpan voiceover, which simply tells the tale as if there was nothing extraordinary in it. This further exacerbates the tension between sense and nonsense because each is delivered in exactly the same tone and register, thus investing it with the same authority. When Ralph undresses the mailman, leaving him slumped naked in his living room chair, and departs to deliver the mail, this is delivered as if it were the natural thing to do. The development in the twisted logic of the piece comes when Ralph returns home from his delivery round (mercifully, arousing no suspicion in those people

receiving letters) and realises that his door key is in his original trousers. This necessitates that he try and break into his own house – he enters the window only to be spotted by the police who, hearing Ralph's protests that this was his own house, 'were doubtful that a mailman could own such a large house'. At this point, Ralph 'remembered there was a body in the living room and dropped the subject'. Ralph is arrested even though he has yet to commit a crime and is victim of his own self-made circumstances. Absurdly, he is perceived as 'a disgrace to the Letter Carrier's Union', even though he is not a mailman. The film, therefore, sophisticatedly establishes the counterlogic that resists order as its comic premise.

Alice returns to the home and sees an open window, a pile of clothes, an open whisky bottle, and the dead body. She recognises the body because she had an affair with the mailman some months earlier. Like Ralph, she does not take the obvious course of action and call the police. Rather, in a comic strip think-bubble she imagines the scenario that link the window, clothes, whisky and body. She believes that the mailman broke in, trying to rekindle their love affair, got drunk, ripped off his clothes and fell into a stupor – 'It was just like him', she thinks, implausibly. Only when she dresses him and returns him to his apartment does she realise that he is dead, and only then, does another possibility occur to her. She imagines that Ralph discovered the rampant mailman and killed him, and is now preparing to kill her. With sudden deadpan extremism, as a result of this scenario, the voiceover intones: 'Alice drove away to a new province and started a new life under the name, Patricia.' From a small domestic incident, the film has escalated into a neurotic film noir, in which the protagonists consistently imagine themselves as immoral and murderous. Clearly, a great deal of humour resides in the very ordinariness of the situation and the melodramatic morass the characters imagine it to be.

Ralph is released, and after discovering the mailman's body is gone, he burns his uniform and resolves to forget the whole incident. The dead mailman, of course, does not appear at his own trial, and a visit to his address by the police and the coroner finds him dead in his bed where Alice had put him. The police believe he may be a different man but explain away the difference by suggesting that this is merely because a dead body looks different. Similarly, the coroner justifies the fact that the man has died of a broken neck by suggesting that he had been so remorseful about his crime (the alleged break-in!) that he had dreamt he was being hanged, and the subsequent reflex action had caused his death. It is this sustained set of justifications for implausible acts that maintains the idea of nonsense as sense and, as such, implies that the story will carry with it a 'punchline' that further authenticates the whole premise. Instead, the film concludes with the narrator saying, 'After a while, Ralph stopped worrying about the fact that the body had disappeared and his wife had never come back, and in all the long and happy years that followed, Ralph never cleared the walk'. As Freud suggests, though:





> These extreme examples have an effect because they arouse the expectation of a joke, so that one tries to find a concealed sense behind the nonsense. But one finds none: they really are nonsense. The pretence makes it possible for a moment to liberate the pleasure in nonsense. These jokes are not entirely without a purpose; they are a 'take-in', and give the person who tells them a certain amount of pleasure in misleading and annoying his hearer.
>
> (Freud, 1976: 190)

Lest we forget that *Special Delivery* is an animated film, such is its prioritisation of the story and the story-teller, it is worth remembering that animation is particularly conducive to sustaining such a narrative premise. The film uses the medium to create a fluidity in the illustration of the tale so that its fundamental logic and counter-logic are never made obvious. Images evaporate, interiors metamorphose into exteriors, characters materialise in their environment, lines and shapes cohere as bridging links between the scenarios being described by the narrator, and the thoughts being experienced by the characters. The animated form facilitates a dream-like continuity which combines images in a way which makes the viewer uncertain of their specific status, particularly in animated films which aspire to be funny. What images, as it were, should we trust as embodying 'the truth' or the dominant contention of the narrative, when the image itself is fluid and unstable? Further, when the overt narrative, as it is told in voiceover, also brings apparent certainty to an absurd premise, it is the audience's suspicion of the story's questionable authenticity that creates its humour. Animation then, can bring *equal* symbolic status to any of its images, and it is this, whether used in a humorous context or not, which enables the animated film to be particularly successful in the manipulation of its effects. As Peter Munz suggests,

> The theory of the symbolic equivalence of images regardless of their ontological status gains added strength when one considers how arbitrary all attempts to distinguish the ontological status of one image from that of another really are. One is very hard put to state the difference in status between a dream and a daydream; between a dream and an imaginary image. The distinction between a hope and a memory may be somewhat easier; but we know so many hopes are projected memories (if one looks at their psychogenesis) that even here the distinction seems unstable.
>
> (Munz, 1973: 95)

When Munz speaks of 'ontological status', he refers to the source or basis for the image in the 'real world', and recognises that to establish the intrinsic essence or distinctiveness of an image is extremely difficult. Animators recognise this as fundamental in the creation of their imagery, slipping easily between representations of 'the real' and the illustration of 'thought' or 'feeling' without needing to

distinguish between the two. This informs all animated films, but is especially useful in the creation of specific kinds of 'gags', examples of which will now follow.[6]

## 15 Discontinued lines

Discontinuity is at the very essence of most approaches to creating humour. The rational order of the world and the whole nature of cause and effect must be disrupted by the unexpected. When two ideas that do not seem to naturally relate, meet, and indeed, fundamentally conflict, this can create a comic event. The joke comes out of a resistance to logical continuity. This informs many of the comic scenarios and gag structures already described, but further mention should be made of the work of Terry Gilliam in this context, as it was the incongruities that were at the core of his animated inserts that came to inform the approach to comic construction throughout *Monty Python's Flying Circus*. His cut-out collage animations were essentially 'spot gags' debunking fine art, creating absurd relations between high and low culture, and making fun of narrative conventions. Particularly memorable are his use of a foot from Agnolo Bronzino's painting, *Venus, Time, Cupid and Folly* (1545), which arbitrarily squashes other images to conclude a sketch, or his use of Sandro Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* (1485), in which Venus' nipple is used as a switch, and when tweaked by a hand which emerges from a shell she is standing within, it makes Venus dance, her leg impossibly spinning in circles. Such comic contempt for great works of art only serves to give the joke a more subversive function. Gilliam's shock tactics also include gags in which a man covers his whole face with shaving cream, only to cut his head off with a cut-throat razor; a hippo jumping up and down on a grave; a small man bouncing up and down on a naked Ruebenesque nude; and an old lady tripping a bus over! Gilliam also demonstrated Fleischeresque surreality in one of his earliest films, *Elephants at War* (1968), in which pulling an elephant's tail immediately reverses its direction, and blowing in its trunk makes its skeleton emerge out of its skin. The style and tone of these short pieces ran over into the sketches that followed in *Monty Python's Flying Circus* creating a surreal world that implicitly satirised the British temperament and tradition.

Similar modes of surreality inform *Bartakiada* (1985), a Czechoslovakian cartoon by Oldrich Haberle, in which a man endures a particularly arduous 'Friday the thirteenth'. That which the viewer assumes to be an open window revealing day and night turns out to be a picture of daylight or a night sky which the main character peels off like a calendar. The man fries an egg, and answers the phone, only to return to his cooking to find a wreath on the egg delivered by two chickens. At breakfast, he reads a sandwich, and eats a book, and so it continues. Incongruity follows incongruity but, unlike Gilliam's work, this is played out slowly, and consequently, Haberle creates a different atmosphere and tone. The speed and zany insanity of Gilliam's animation possesses the spirit of comic anarchy and violation whilst Haberle's jokes are essentially recognitions of the





absurdity of humankind's attempts to bring logical order to the world. Eastern European humour like this may be viewed as black irony – the surreality is a philosophic and political statement as well as the vehicle for humour. The incongruity is used for different comic purposes - Gilliam's to shock, Haberle's to reveal. One is the comedy of revolution, the other, the comedy of resignation.

## 16 Accidents will happen

The logical extension of random events is the idea that they will cause accidental things to occur, things which will be largely of a slapstick, 'destructive' nature. Most cartoons prioritise this as the substance of their narratives – Tom and Jerry, for example, continuously pursue each other, the consequence of which is the wholesale demolition of the domestic environment. Interestingly, this is all done without any real consequence. The home is immediately repaired and ready for its next assault, but the audience never sees the implications of destruction for those who experience or live within it. The same could be said of violent acts, or indeed, physical accidents akin to slipping on a banana skin, which have no enduring effects. The 'slap-of-the-stick' is a purely comic device which brings no harm, but does bring destabilisation and disorder, the space in which the comic flourishes.

The Disney cartoon, *How to Have an Accident in the Home* (1956), cleverly uses 'the accident' for comic purposes, but also to send messages about how to prevent domestic accidents. A small duck with a beard, called J.J. Fate, berates the audience for blaming 'fate' for their own capacity to cause accidents, while Donald Duck more than demonstrates how the contemporary home becomes a minefield of possibilities for accidents to occur. On his way back from work, Donald avoids racing traffic and falling pianos, and arrives 'safe at home, he thinks', but J.J. Fate tells the audience that over 5 million people have been hurt in the home, and the cartoon reveals the gamut of lit cigarettes, hot irons, toys on the stairs, leaking gas pipes and loose rugs on polished floors, all of which cause major accidents. The film is essentially warning the new commodity culture of the 1950s of the dangers of modern conveniences, and employs the engaging device of matching a recognisably dangerous activity with its taken-for-granted equivalent in the home. For example, it is suggested that Donald would never willingly sit in an electric chair, but the film then shows him using an electric shaver in the bath and receiving an excessive shock. Further, Donald would never put his head in a lion's mouth, yet he puts his head in the gas oven while lighting it, and though he would never go over Niagara Falls in a barrel, he negotiates the stairs unsighted because he is carrying something. With quiet irony, Donald, having been severely chastened by his experience of accidents, goes back to the safety of his work at a dynamite factory, while J.J. Fate counsels that average people are failing to use their 'average intelligence', and warns, 'Don't blame fate for your carelessness'. Ironically, by reinvesting the accidents with their real dangers, the cartoon fails to gain the maximum purchase from its slapstick

humour. Donald's personality carries the weight of being 'funny' but the caution offered by J.J. Fate only serves to limit the space to laugh.[7]

## 17 Objects have a life of their own

The 'autonomous' gag may be understood as the comic motif of investing objects and materials with an unpredictable life of their own. This, of course, is the whole premise of animated film, and thus 'gags' created in this spirit in animation differ slightly from their presence in live-action film. When the organic and inorganic worlds collide in live-action film this usually demonstrates a tension between humankind and the apparent autonomy of the physical environment. The joke emerges from the fact that the physical environment is expected to be benign, passive, and in the control of its human occupants, but seemingly conspires to undermine this view. The humour hinges on the belief in the live agency of an apparently inanimate place. Animation makes the 'life' in the inanimate space absolutely explicit and uses the organic and the inorganic as the subject of its basic principles and, thus, redefines the comic aspects of the relationship. For example, Norman McClaren, in his film, *Neighbours* (1952), uses the technique of pixillation to animate objects and re-animate the movement of two men. Pixillation is the frame-by-frame recording of rehearsed and deliberately executed live-action movement to create the illusion of movement impossible to achieve by naturalistic means. In this case, for example, figures spinning in mid-air or skating across grass.[8] A small flower, a picket fence, artificial scenery and deckchairs also move of their own accord within the film, and though the film carries with it a serious message, McClaren recalls, 'my memories are of the public laughing from beginning to the end of the film' (McClaren, 1978: 31).

*Neighbours* actually works on a number of levels. Its comedy largely echoes that of the 'magical surprises' in the trick film, discussed earlier, once more achieving humorous effects through the divergence between the representation of the real world and the presence of impossible events within it. A man appears to spin in mid-air – the man is real enough, but what he does is physically impossible, and thus amusing. The film also works as a piece of developmental animation that derives its humour by directly drawing attention to the conventions of the cartoon, and mounting an implicit critique of its representation of violence. Two neighbours, seated in deckchairs, smoking their pipes, reading newspapers with the headlines, 'War Certain if No Peace', and 'Peace Certain if No War', become involved in a territorial dispute over the ownership of a wild flower. The dispute escalates rapidly, horrible violence takes place between the two men, and the pair eventually end up killing each other.

McClaren alludes to the two-dimensional cartoon by using two-dimensional scenery in a real environment. Two hand-painted cartoon-like house fronts signify two homes in the middle of a field. McClaren creates a balancing symmetry in the mise-en-scène which he then disrupts when the men decide to fight over the flower, the fragrance of which each reacts to with ecstatic exaggeration,





anticipating the wildly exaggerated movement that parodies the physical excesses of the orthodox cartoon. Similarly, the electronic soundtrack echoes the role of sound effects in the cartoon, creating mood, accompanying actions, and replacing words. The outcome of using these conventions, but reinventing the means by which to create them, is to self-consciously draw attention to them for comic effect. This, in turn, signals that to reinterpret the conventions is to reinterpret the meanings inherent within them. To create cartoon conventions *showing* violence is to ignore that the conventions are *about* violence too. Understanding this, McClaren takes the exaggeration of cartoon violence to its logical extreme by showing the primitive barbarism in the two men's actions. By depicting this violence in a highly stylised and artificial way, McClaren examines the tension between the natural and the unnatural, the organic and inorganic, and the animate and inanimate. Objects, materials, and the supposedly civilised, highly ordered, human being, all it seems, possess an unexpected life of their own.

The orthodox cartoon regularly depicts objects with their own identity or personality, of course, whether they be the candlestick, clock or tea set in Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* (1989) or the techno-trousers in Nick Park's *The Wrong Trousers* (1993), but one of the funniest versions of the sustained autonomous gag occurs in Tex Avery's *The Cat that Hated People*, made in 1948, which features a cat fed up with urban life who rockets to the moon for some peace, but as Raymond Durgnat suggests, 'his peace is shattered by a Surrealistic procession of objects gone mad. A pencil-sharpener sharpens his tail, a nappy and safety-pin treat him like a baby, a garden spade buries him deep, a bulb and a watering can brings him sprouting up like a daffodil' (Durgnat, 1969: 185). All the objects possess their own logic and behave in a way which holds the cat (i.e. the apparently controlling figure) in complete contempt. The autonomous gag is, therefore, by extension, ultimately about humankind's precarious hold upon the space it inhabits and the control it assumes it has over the natural order.

## 18 'The sight of 40-year-old genitalia is too disgusting, is it?': Self-conscious humour

Animation possesses the special ability to render psychological, emotional and physical states, and as such can properly highlight the humour which emerges from self-consciousness. In depicting the frailties and idiosyncrasies of the body; the deep prejudices, concerns and neuroses that inform daily life; and the difficulties inherent in trying to communicate, the animated film properly represents humankind's own recognition of the inherent comedy within the human condition. As the old joke says, 'I've learned to laugh at myself . . . but then, I've got alot of material to work on'.

*Bob's Birthday* (1995), Alison Snowden and David Fine's Oscar-winning short film, is concerned with Bob's disaffection with life on his fortieth birthday. Bob, a dentist, is troubled by a mid-life crisis, which is characterised by his lack of purpose and the utter boredom of his existence. Unbeknown to him, however, his wife

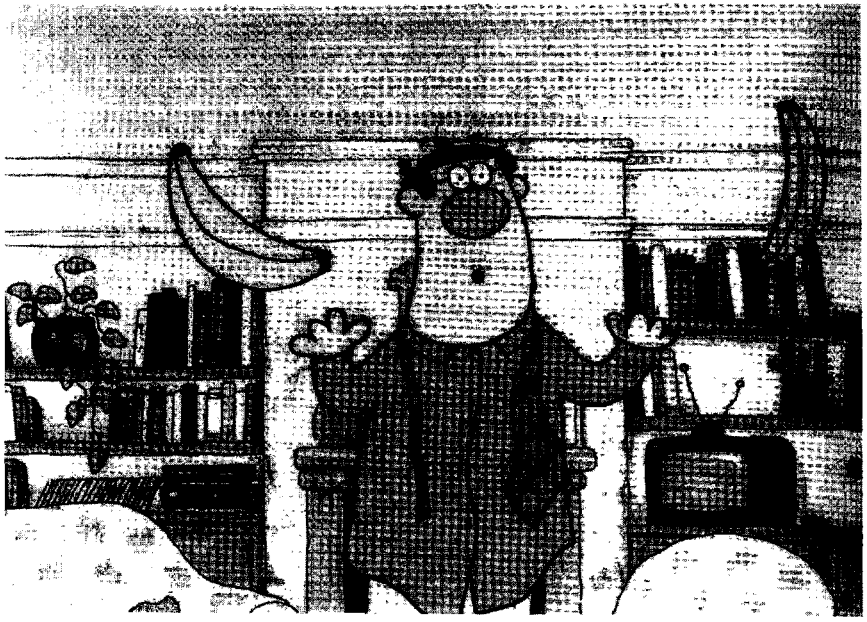

Figure 4.2 Oscar-winning *Bob's Birthday*, by Alison Snowden and David Fine, derives its humour from the observation of self-consciousness and embarrassment seemingly so deeply embedded in the British character

has organised a surprise birthday party for when he gets home. She suggests that all the guests find a hiding place and spring out when she gives the signal. Bob is too preoccupied when he returns home, though, and despite all his wife's efforts to get him into the living room, so that the party can begin, he starts discussing his problems with her. The viewer has the privilege of having information which Bob doesn't. The more intimate and personal Bob becomes, the more embarrassed his wife gets, and the more amusing it seems for the audience. Bob's self-consciousness leads him to question whether he should change his job and to ask his wife if she had ever been bothered that they had never had children. The revelation of these private issues are essentially being discussed in public because of the presence of the party guests, who can all hear what he is saying. This is exacerbated when Bob comes downstairs with no trousers on, and mistakes his wife's urgency for him to get dressed as a further indictment of his body and says, 'The sight of 40-year-old genitalia is too disgusting, is it?'. This begins a tirade which recalls his sexual prowess, principally through his 'pink elephant' routine, which he demonstrates with the bowl of fruit. He rails that his wife should go off with someone more sophisticated, and suggests one of the men in the room, simultaneously alleging that the man's wife is open to affairs, and that all their friends are boring. Bob's wife, consumed with embarrassment, runs to her bed-





room and covers her face with a pillow. Bob, of course, still has no idea that the room is full of these very same friends waiting to spring out and participate in his surprise birthday party. This operates as comic suspense for the audience who want the party-goers to emerge, but this suspense is never relieved as the film finishes with Bob and his wife going out to dinner, leaving everyone still hiding in the lounge. Bob's wife cannot confront her friends, nor can she reconcile Bob's anxiety, and the self-consciousness of the couple remains the governing principle for the film's comedy. They only recognise their deep-rooted fears and foibles, which the audience is invited to laugh at because the private has inadvertantly transgressed into the public space.[9]

A yet more self-conscious version of self-consciousness, though, occurs in Will Vinton's clay animation, *The Great Cognito* (1982), which features a middle-aged stand-up comic soliloquising about war and the military in post-war America. His routine explicitly takes personal thoughts into the public context as comic entertainment, his observations operating as satiric comment about the (myth) making of the American war hero. The main humour for the audience, though, emerges from the quick metamorphoses of Cognito's head into well-known figures and events, including Franklin Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, the Andrews sisters, a battleship, a Japanese attack, feuding brothers in the same head, and John Wayne, who is shot down with an arrow. His routine, essentially a neurotic tirade, shifts from personal insight to insane babble, concluding with near collapse at the idea that John Wayne had been shot. What animation achieves here is the conflation of Cognito's descriptive words *and* his inner thoughts, effectively articulating his inner-directed personality and its neurotic solipsistic world. Cognito embodies the collapse of American masculinity as it has been projected by its myths and its global will to power and status. The death of John Wayne caused by an arrow through his head becomes a complex satiric image. John Wayne embodies both the Frontier Cowboy Myth and right-wing militarist confidence – he is killed by an arrow, perhaps signifying the rise of the Native American and revisionist political understanding. At the comic level, though, the image recalls one of those arrow-through-the-head trick hats worn by anyone from Ben Turpin in silent era comedies through to Steve Martin in his 'wild and crazy guy' stand-up persona. This juxtaposition not only heightens satiric intent, but begins to point up the self-consciousness of comedy itself, an issue addressed in Phil Austen's and Derek Hayes' *Binky and Boo* (1988).

Aging music-hall artist, Binky, voiced by veteran British comic actor, Jimmy Jewel, looks at an old scrapbook, reminiscing about his career in variety theatre in a comedy double act, Binky and Boo. Made in cut-out collage, the film prioritises dark contexts and grotesque designs, foregrounding its black humour and its implicit, highly critical view of comedy which has no purpose and remains insensitive to those it offends. Highly correspondent to the rise of 'alternative' comedy and the tide of political correctness, *Binky and Boo* operates as a comedy about comedy. Binky and Boo are red-nosed, boatered, physical clowns, who use a cross-talk repartee, doing clichéd 'mother-in-law' gags in the traditional 'I say, I

say, I say' manner. Austen and Hayes highlight the hackneyed, irresponsible nature of the gags, by calling attention to the structure of the gag, altering it so that it demonstrates the anticipated formula of the joke but changing its punchline to signify its unfunniness. For example, Boo says, 'I wouldn't say the mother-in-law was fat . . . ' to which Binky intercedes with an overemphasised 'But . . . ', prefiguring the joke, which Boo concludes by saying 'when she's upstairs she's not downstairs'. The punchline is effectively a non sequitur, and is amusing in a surreal way, but most importantly, it interrogates the gag, rendering its structure and content as stale, predictable and, ultimately, unacceptable.

This treatment of the gag is consistent throughout the film, and informs Binky's revisionist versions of his performances during the war, and when he couldn't get work, his performances in alternative time periods, parallel galaxies and works of literature! Binky's inability to distinguish fact from fiction is facilitated by the animation in the sense that his supposed performances in contexts that he can only imagine he was involved in are treated with the same dark veracity as contexts in which he was plausibly involved, though even these have evidently been subject to shifts of emphasis and omission in his memory. The ontological status of the image, and the narrative which informs it, is once again highly questionable, and serves to enable the film to reveal its purpose by using ever escalating absurd versions of Binky's experience. Binky claims to have entertained 'Stage door Johnny' Louis XIV, those present in the Black Hole of Calcutta and at Custer's Last Stand, and even 'hunter/gatherer societies', 'primitive life forms', and Captain Ahab from *Moby Dick*, insisting that 'every killer whale had its own theatre'. The film's use of exaggeration in this way calls attention to the idea that comedy, as well as being a useful tool to address political ideas, may also be used to ignore or absolve political agendas from their complexity and meaning. The joke, in the variety model that Austen and Hayes criticise, as suggested earlier in regard to some of the imagery employed by Tex Avery, can only succeed if it is emptied of its associations and implications. The surface of the joke may be funny, but will only remain funny if its other meanings are ignored or suppressed. Binky does not see the horrors of war, or the Black Hole of Calcutta etc., because he insists 'you've got to laugh, haven't you', absolving himself from the political implications of his own role in implicitly endorsing those who caused the horror and from whom he is making a living. In short, Binky does not possess conscience or consciousness of his actions, and Austen and Hayes clearly wish their audience to laugh at him, not with him; criticise him, not accept him.

This issues are at their most focused and acute when Binky and Boo get their bookings mixed up, and perform for Adolf Hitler in his bunker during the last days of World War II. Binky and Boo witness and uncritically accept human atrocities, but maintain their mission to entertain. It may be argued that this approach asserts the healing and disinterested aspects of humour, but Austen and Hayes are careful not to let their audience be seduced into accepting this view by suggesting that no one could possibly accept the idea that comics would entertain Hitler himself. Indeed, they also insert critical jokes about Hitler using the



premise that Boo can be 'cheeky and saucy'. Boo says to Hitler, 'I wouldn't put you in charge of a Reich that's supposed to last for a thousand years. Don't give up your day job, that's all I can say'. Austen and Hayes carefully foreground these aspects of ex-stand-up comic, Bernard Padden's script, because they effectively reveal the manipulation and redefinition of the variety/vaudeville form in critical contemporary terms. Binky and Boo thumb their nose at Hitler, not because it is a political gesture, but because it's a silly joke. The style of the film makes these moments ambiguous, however, drawing attention to the invalid nature of variety comedy, criticising its misrepresentative stereotypes, its lack of political awareness, and its preparedness to ignore the social context in which it takes place. This signifies a self-consciousness not merely about different modes of comedy, but about the changing nature of the contemporary psyche. The film concludes with the demolition of the tower block in which Binky lives. Binky willingly dies because he cannot accept change, nor can he really live in the past. His death only signifies the passing of the vaudeville/variety mode, and the assertion of the New Humour, wiser, more cynical, more ironic.

## 19 Everything can mean its opposite

The ironic gag creates a framework by which everything can mean its opposite, at once apparently endorsing one point of view, but at the same time undermining it. 'I am happy' may be said in the most doleful of tones, or even whilst crying, and it is unlikely that anyone will accept that this is so. Inevitably, this fine line between what is asserted and what is actually the case, often informs the tragi-comic and the parodic.[10] A good example of this would be the collaboration between the political caricaturist Steve Bell, and veteran British comedy animator Bob Godfrey, called *Send in the Clowns* (1987). The piece, drawn in Bell's style, is a satire on the supposed 'special relationship' between Britain and the USA, particularly during the Margaret Thatcher/Ronald Reagan era. The film uses the song 'Send in the Clowns', sung by a Reagan sound-alike, with some adjustments to the lyrics. Reagan is drawn as if he were a comic strip 'Rambo', and the political arena is defined as a circus or a theatre. The ironic clearly underpins the film's central metaphors – the image of an aging Reagan does not sit with his muscularity as 'Rambo'. Similarly, the 'Iron Lady' image of Margaret Thatcher is re-cast when she is presented as a ballerina. Reagan's datedness is accentuated by the manipulation of the lyric, 'I'll make my entrance again with my usual *flares*', when he literally appears in red flared trousers.

The central premise of the film, though, is to discredit the nature of American foreign policy and military interventionism, ironically redetermining the phrase 'Send in the Clowns' by placing red noses on the faces of American troops who were 'sent in' to Vietnam, Grenada, etc. As the song concludes with the line 'Where are those clowns?', the film shows a line of graves, and the notion of a 'clown' as a physical, playful figure of fun is wholly redetermined as a powerless 'fool' subject to the whims of 'clowns' with political power. One of the most

persuasive images in this respect is a large clown's nose placed over Reagan's genital area both *endorsing* phallic power, but *undermining* it as well. Indeed, the clown's nose is the chief signifier of irony throughout the film, playing on the ambivalence of the clown's face as a sinister comic mask, hiding human excess. The clown figure, in general, usefully acts as the chief embodiment of the ultimate collapse of language and the physical expression of the difficulties in maintaining language as a meaningful tool with which to properly communicate. It is this issue that informs the histrionic gag.

## 20 Yabba-Dabba-Do!!!

The histrionic gag occurs less in the animated film because its comic premises are fundamantally visual. In prioritising the visual over the verbal, the relationship between the two is altered. The animated image either relates directly to voiceover or creates its own conditions for comic events. The histrionic gag emerges from the premise that language can properly express the thoughts and emotions of the speaker. Ultimately it becomes clear, however, that the relative and ambiguous nature of language betrays the speaker, leading to inarticulacy, and the collapse into physical expression, and the hysteria of 'clowning'. In the live-action context, for example in the Steve Martin vehicle, *Roxanne* (1987), Martin attempts to help his inarticulate friend express his feelings to Roxanne. In order to do this, his friend wears a radio receiver within his hat so that he may listen to and use the words Martin suggests. Initially, his friend copies Martin faithfully and expresses himself poetically and eloquently, but his receiver picks up interference and he starts to copy a police intercom system. Rendered totally inarticulate when he removes his hat and the ruse fails, he resorts first to clichés, and then to incompetent physical oafishness – the hysteria of 'clowning'. The amusement comes out of the transition from one state to another.

The primacy of the physical in animation means that this comic construction occurs less often, but within the realms of character comedy it does directly inform characters like Donald Duck and Daffy Duck. Both habitually lose control and the deep frustration they experience renders them speechless, leaving them defined only by their physical expression. In many ways, *Duck Amuck* (see p. 39) perfectly illustrates Daffy's decline into hysteria. Betrayed by his own inability to negotiate, or to come to terms with power greater than his own, Daffy has nothing left to say, and merely becomes the subject and object of the physical gag. In other types of animation that more resemble the situation comedy, the verbal is once more the dominant form, and the histrionic gag gains proper purchase. Even Fred Flintstone's cry of 'Yabba-dabba-do' ultimately represents Fred's desire to express happiness and optimism without the formal language to do so, and triggers his physical liberation from the constraints of work. He slides along a dinosaur's tail in the opening credits of the *The Flintstones*, and jumps into his car, pedalling his feet furiously in order to propel it. These visual jokes are facilitated by the animation, and prompted by Fred's delirious transition into



physical expression. Many of the comic moments that occur in quasi-sit-coms like *The Flintstones* and *The Simpsons* emerge from this context. Language fails, physical 'clowning' begins.

## 21 Telling it over and over again

One of the fundamental structures of comedy (if not life itself) is repetition. Recognising formulaic patterns becomes part of the pleasure of watching comic events because it legitimises the anticipation of expected outcomes, and the further pleasure derived from encountering the unexpected. Repetition constitutes an important structural device because it creates the conditions for a comic event with particular economy. Viewers know that certain events are going to take place and what they essentially await are the variations on the main theme. This may be a matter of changing *emphasis*, an additional *complication* which alters the fundamental premise, the *extension* of the initial premise, or the *resistance* to the established comic logic. These aspects re-focus anticipated scenarios in most cartoons, but some animations use the very concept of repetition as their main comic function. A good example of this is Cordell Barker's *The Cat Came Back* (1988), which takes as its premise the repeated attempts of a man to avail himself of an unwanted, highly destructive cat. While the conventional cartoon operates as a series of comic scenarios in a similar way, *The Cat Came Back* uses the refrain of a song to support its simple premise.

### *The Cat Came Back* (1988)

The film begins with what will be its recurrent visual motif – Mr Johnson's house on the hill. A tune is being played on a tuba. The viewer initially assumes that this is a non-diegetic theme, but when the film cuts to the house interior, the viewer sees that it is actually a diegetic sound because it is Mr Johnson who is playing the tuba. The theme he is playing, however, does become the film's recurring song, 'The Cat Came Back', with lyrics that help construct the narrative of the piece and comment upon the action. The very sound of the tuba, in the first instance, though, helps to establish a jaunty melancholia, echoing Mr Johnson's eccentric aloneness. Disturbed by a knock at the door, he irritably answers, bellowing 'What?' at the top of his voice. His anger soon subsides, however, when he notices that a yellow cat has been left on his doorstep in a baby carrier. At first, he behaves with coy sentiment, compassionately playing with the cat as if it was a baby. When the cat breaks his childhood rattle, however, the relationship is at an end, and the cat is unceremoniously dumped outside, the welcome mat he is placed on withdrawn from inside. The cat, of course, refuses to leave, constantly returning to the house to cause increasing havoc. This constitutes the establishing premise of the cartoon and from here, as in the cartoons described earlier, the film becomes a chase cartoon played out in a number of sequences, each operating as a self-contained scenario with a variety of comic events, interspersed by Mr

Johnson's return to his home. With each return, comes a new verse of the song, and the escalation of both the speed of the cartoon and the level of destruction.

As in all cartoons, the very condensation of events serves to exaggerate them further, but in *The Cat Came Back*, Barker, whilst compressing time in the elliptical manner discussed earlier, makes sure that these events are not merely repetition in the Road Runner/Coyote sense, but *repetition with remembering*. The Road Runner/Coyote series, in employing *repetition with forgetting* can create renewal, but *The Cat Came Back* pursues the logical consequences of a sequence of events, principally the effects upon Mr Johnson in his attempts to get rid of the cat, and the cat's escalating destruction of his home. When Mr Johnson tries to leave the cat in a dark wood, he returns to his car, only to find the cat in the driver's seat. Attempts to leave the cat deep in the wood fail and result in another leitmotif in the film, Mr Johnson's anguished wail, which in this case, is loud enough to disturb the birds. Returning to the house on the hill, Mr Johnson enters the door dishevelled and covered in sticky pine-cones, only to discover the cat ripping up the wallpaper and tearing his sofa apart. The cat's omnipresence is similar to that of Droopy in *North West Hounded Police* (1946), and creates like-minded paranoic responses in Mr Johnson. He tempts the cat into a sack with the lure of a fish, for example, and tries to drown the cat at sea, succeeding in nearly drowning himself by clinging on to the anchor as it drops into the water. Humour emerges from his own sense of self-defeat, especially when he blows bubbles at the fish, who return in kind, but then play a game with Mr Johnson's single strand of hair.

Trying to cope with his humiliation, he returns once more to the house, only to find that the cat is scattering the interior padding of the sofa all over his living room. Mr Johnson picks up the cat, cycles to a hill top, places it in a hot air balloon, and in a scene reminiscent of Richard Condie's *The Big Snit* (1989), attempts to saw away the guide rope. Even as he does this, the balloon shoots off, expelling air after the fashion of a rapidly deflating domestic balloon, and the cat somehow survives again. Mr Johnson, exhausted, and with a fresh black eye, returns home again, collapsing on the floor, some of his teeth falling out of his mouth. The cat, meanwhile, is undoing the thread of both the carpets and the curtains, leaving only the template of carpet where Mr Johnson's body is lying. In the film's most inspired sequence, Mr Johnson grabs the cat, and with renewed vigour, speeds up a mountain on a hand-driven railway truck. Here the film deploys the *Comic Rule of Three*, whereby the first thing is expected, the second thing is expected, but the third thing becomes funny by not being expected. Barker revises and extends this basic premise. The first thing is the *unexpected* presence of a woman tied to the railway tracks. The viewer accepts this because it is an image that knowingly references a similar image in Victorian melodrama. The second thing, however, extends the joke by surprisingly showing numerous women tied to the tracks. The third thing, which does operate in the anticipated way of the *Comic Rule of Three*, is the presence of a cow being tied to the rails. This is made funny by the viewer's anticipation of a third take on the women-tied-to-the-track theme, which Barker adjusts through the use of the cow. The cow also seems





a slow, cumbersome, 'comic' creature, utterly different from the cunning relentlessness of the cat. The railway truck somehow transcends all these obstacles but, in a clever variation, is actually thrown off the track by a tiny green beetle who, in a subsequent shot, is seen to be cut in half. Mr Johnson falls over a cliff (naturally) and ends up down a mine. In the dark, the viewer sees two pairs of eyes, and clearly anticipates that it is the cat who is seated alongside him. In a neat *reversal* gag, Mr Johnson lights a match and sees that it is not a cat, but a rat, not merely one rat, but hundreds, who along with a group of bats, chase him home.

Back at the house, the cat is breaking the final taboo by defacing and destroying pictures of Mr Johnson and his wife (absent, and evidently missed). The violation of family mementoes leads Mr Johnson to fill his house with a huge barrel of dynamite. Even his attempts to blow up the cat are foiled by the fact that he lights his own single strand of hair, mistaking it for the fuse. He explodes and, ironically, becomes gleeful when he realises that he is a ghost and, thus, is free from the material world and the presence of the cat. This moment of triumph is soon undermined, however, when in another clever reversal, Mr Johnson's physical body drops on the cat, inadvertantly killing it. Not one, but nine ghosts appear, representing the nine lives of the cat, ready to persecute him in the afterlife. The chase continues into the sunset, suggesting that the mode of comic repetition could continue *ad infinitum*. *The Cat Came Back* sustains its lightness of tone through its playfulness, at once recalling the tradition of the cartoon, but finding surreal variations by stressing the timelessness of the conflict.

Another method of using repetition as a comic structure is in the parodic mode, where the animated film directly takes the familiar characteristics of a live-action *genre* and places them with the animated *context*. This can produce mixed results. One example is particularly revealing about the different sense of humour in Eastern Europe to that in the USA. Puppeteer of renown, George Pal, left Budapest to make animated advertising films in Holland, before going to the USA to make the celebrated 'Puppetoons'. In a film called *Western Daze* (1941), Pal parodies the Western, and depicts a slapstick chase across a prairie, ending with the fall of the villains down a rock face. This physical comedy was clearly the staple of American humour, and fitted comfortably within America's most familiar film genre with regard to design and narrative. At the end of this sequence, though, Pal injects a moment of darker, absurdist humour, when a sign appears next to the villains saying, 'There ain't nobody lower than we', a gag that, first, operates at the literal level, given that the villains have fallen to the bottom of the cliff, but second, at the philosophical level, illustrating their status as villains. The two modes of comedy sit uneasily together, as one nearly counteracts the other. Slapstick essentially empties its action of consequence and meaning, while the comic comment reinvests the characters with social position and a moral dimension.

## 22 25 ways to exaggerate, understand and alienate

Bill Plympton, currently contributing animated links to the American satirical sketch show, *The Edge*, has a distinctive comic style, which makes him the natural successor to Tex Avery as the animator dealing with primal motives and their consequences. Instead of adopting Avery's frenetic style, however, Plympton's work is almost static, concentrating on the limited movements of one or two faces or bodies. Plympton's work often includes a middle-aged, smartly dressed man, whose sheer stillness accentuates the sometimes excessive violence he is subjected to, or imposes on himself. The man often remains largely inexpressive in the face of the things that happen to him, and once again, this is where Plympton takes a deadpan stance instead of the stylised over-reaction of Avery's characters. Plympton's middle-aged man is just as obsessive and paranoid as his Averyesque counterpart, however, and demonstrates extreme behaviour as a consequence of his desire or preoccupation. Plympton's film, *25 Ways to Give Up Smoking* (1988), aptly illustrates his relationship to Avery, and most particularly, shows some of the ways in which he has contemporised similar themes.

### *25 Ways to Give Up Smoking* (1988)

The structure of Plympton's film is simple. Essentially the film consists of twenty-five consecutive 'spot gags', each prefigured by a caption and a laconic voiceover suggesting a method by which someone might give up smoking. Each spot gag features the same middle-aged man, mainly in medium shot, testing out each of the recommendations. Of course, none of the suggestions has any real validity, but all are the logical development of a more plausible method, subverted, distorted or manipulated for comic effect. Plympton's style is one of understatement but, predominantly, he understates already extremely exaggerated actions. His central character is remote, possessing no affecting personality. Consequently, the viewer is alienated from the excessive nature of his actions, never feeling sympathy for the man; enjoying the cumulative effect of the 'gag-stacking' but not the cumulative effect of the physical assault he consistently experiences. Most importantly, like Avery, Plympton is careful to use the unique vocabulary offered by the animation itself, to extend the comic possibilities inherent in the form.

Inevitably, Plympton uses a running gag which occurs at the beginning, near the middle and at the end of the piece, involving a sumo wrestler who falls from the sky flattening the middle-aged smoker. This sets the tone of the piece in the sense that it suggests that even in spite of one's best efforts to lead a healthier life, it may easily be taken away by the most random of events. Plympton takes this 'random-ness' to its logical extreme by using an accidental gag, made more amusing by both its sheer impossibility and its repetition. From here, Plympton's gags may be roughly divided into four distinct comic categories, though all except one are played out though the body of the male figure. These categories are:





1 the deconstruction or manipulation of the physical form;
2 satiric takes on contemporary psycho-therapy;
3 extraordinary events with some degree of plausibility;
4 extraordinary events which are implausible but amusing because of their 'fantastical' excess.

Plympton's deconstruction or manipulation of the body differs slightly from Avery's in the sense that his middle-aged protagonist acts upon his own body rather than merely being a victim of its untrammelled expression. He can 'remove the orifice of entry' tearing off his own mouth to watch it emit smoke outside his body; he can pull off his own head and exhale through his neck; he can put a paper-clip over his face or tie a knot in his neck to prevent smoke entering his lungs; he can use a 'safer orifice' to smoke, namely, his naval, or confront the internal workings of his body by literally coughing up a lung or imploding his head within his body, only to re-emerge and scream with terror. Whilst his body retains the capacity to do all these things, it also must admit to failure. He imagines his mouth has been lost to cancer, and eats by sucking food up with his nostril. Ironically, Plympton reveals the fallibility of the physical, while using animation to depict its impossible extremes. The animated form enables Plympton to demonstrate the apparent malleability of the body, finding humour in its shortcomings and in the violation of the body as a fixed, highly controlled, functional thing.

Plympton mocks the psycho-therapeutic approach to the body by satirising its terms and conditions. 'Aversion therapy' amounts only to putting a stick of dynamite in your mouth and blowing your head off. Plympton times the explosion to coincide with the arrival of the next title card, thus effectively staging the event 'offscreen', but implicitly asking the audience to imagine the consequences. This is clearly an imaginative development of the 'explosion' gag in cartoons, which normally show blackened, highly dishevelled characters and environments which have been completely destroyed. This does not disrupt the overall 'coolness', pacing and rhythm of the piece. In a similar way, when the man attempts to reach his cigarettes, which he has hidden in a food-blender placed on the top of a cupboard, the audience can anticipate that his fingers are going to be injured, but it is not until the viewer sees the blood spattered on the next title card is the deed *imagined* to be done. These comic devices prevent the film from moving into violent excess, and sustain a particular kind of momentum in the timing of the gags. Whilst the viewer only imagines the outcome to these gags, the film does not collapse into the kind of distastefulness which would alienate the viewer in the wrong way. The response is one which maintains the suspension of disbelief in the service of illogical and previously unimaginable comic events. To over-indulge, for example, is to fill an ever-expanding mouth with hundreds of cigarettes, and light them simultaneously, or to engage in self-discipline is to punch oneself in the face after every 'puff'. Plympton essentially literalises and exaggerates psycho-therapeutic advice, rendering it spurious and superficial.

'Empathising with the cigarette' means you dress up as one, struggle to stand up, and then get flattened by a falling sumo wrestler.

Plympton's extraordinary events that possess a modicum of plausible motivation operate in a similar fashion. If indeed, one did use heat-seeking missiles attached to the head to stop smoking, it is entirely likely that they would find the offending cigarette and blow your head off! Similarly, if one did try to make it hard to light a cigarette, it would be perversely logical to attempt to do so in a windy igloo, or underwater, the latter only recognisable in Plympton's vocabulary by the way a lighter floats to the bottom of the sea and fish swim past. Seeking divine intervention, or placing oneself at the mercy of fate is equally debilitating. God merely crushes your head or electrocutes you with a bolt of lightning. Plympton's advice is sometimes highly practical, though, when he suggests that a smoker should try different lighters, demonstrating that if you use a blow-torch you can reduce your head to a cinder and never smoke again. Even the use of something as practical as a smoke alarm is subverted by Plympton when the viewer discovers that the smoker has swallowed it, discarding it as soon as it goes off!

Plympton's use of the extraordinary extends to the 'fantastical', though it does to some extent rely on allusion. He suggests, for example, that the smoker should lock his cigarettes 'in a car on a hot day', treating the cigarette as if it were a pet. The cigarette's pitiful cries of 'help' almost elicit sympathy. The film also suggests that the smoker should join an African tribe because the wooden embellishments on the mouths of some African tribesmen prevent the cigarette being smoked altogether. Though, clearly, the gag itself has some racist overtones, its humour emerges more from the persistent attempt to smoke the cigarette, despite the fact that it is impossible. Every time the smoker closes his mouth, its wooden ornamentation snaps the cigarette to the floor. Keeping a pet tobacco beetle, however, means that every now and again a huge green insect devours both the cigarettes and their packet. Having tried all of Plympton's twenty-five suggestions 'you can now walk in the fresh air and breathe free'. This, of course, is entirely untrue, and reflects the failure of many smokers to give up. Attempts on the scale of Plympton's violent extremes would result in death anyway, but of all his twenty-five ways to give up smoking, probably the most persuasive is also the one which best reveals the economy of the animated form. The brown-haired, ruddy face of the middle-aged man metamorphoses into the ashen death-mask of an old man in one extended inhalation of a cigarette. Black humour at its darkest; animation at its most effective in the compression of time and the revelation of effect.

## 23 Dedicated to those who disapprove but continue to watch

Plympton's work, some would argue, is on the edge of bad taste. This is an issue which characterises most discussions of comedy in general. It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to establish the limits of comedy, and attempt to





delineate when 'good humour' becomes offensive or inappropriate. It would seem that no subject area is absolutely taboo in comedy, nor does it seem that there are limits to the way in which a comic view is expressed. The reception of comedy is also an entirely relative thing, dependent on so many factors, from being in a conducive mood to being in the right company. How, then, is it possible to define what is acceptable or unacceptable as a 'gag', particularly in animation, where the freedom to express more 'extreme' points of view is validated by the medium itself? Terry Gilliam suggests that 'there is no such thing as good taste, but there might be such a thing as bad timing'.[11] This insight provides a clue to some of the parameters of comic expression. It implies that no subject is sacrosanct, but dealing with it is a matter of self-censorship and sensitivity to context. The animator should, in the first instance, be entirely responsible only to his/her role as an artist, uninhibited by his/her role as a citizen, but, nevertheless, should be aware of the audience the work is directed to, and the time and place in which it is shown.

Animation further confuses these issues, however, because it still retains the stigma of being a form directed at a children's audience whilst having the facility to show things that are not available to mainstream live-action 'adult' film-making, i.e. nudity depicting genitalia, sexual acts, marginalised codes of sexual conduct (cross-dressing, transvestism etc.), and cross-species coupling. Somehow, graphic or three-dimensional expression in the animated film disguises the apparent explicitness of this imagery and, supposedly, dilutes its impact. In some respects, this is profoundly liberating for animators, but in other ways, does not properly acknowledge the capacity of the medium to address such issues and to find new ways of expressing a view about them. Comic exaggeration in animation, in this respect, is sometimes particularly effective in drawing attention both to a taboo issue and the animated form's unique vocabulary in illustrating it. Whether this amounts to 'bad taste', however, still remains contestable.

Marv Newland's Rocketship animation company, based in Vancouver, addresses this debate explicitly in a compilation film, made by a number of reknowned animators, titled Pink Konkommer (1990). The film concludes with the dedication used in the heading to this section, deliberately highlighting the double standards of many viewers, who criticise and disapprove of particular kinds of artistic expression yet continue to watch – the implicit suggestion being that they too are enjoying it, but denying its pleasures; pleasures which often emerge from the breaking of taboos and the questioning of moral boundaries. This may be best achieved through comedy and the imaginative use of animation, a brief which informs the basic premise of Pink Konkommer. Each animator uses the same soundtrack as the illustration of a sexual fantasy. These are the fantasies of a little old lady, animated by Chris Hinton, who serves as the narrative link to these short sequences. Though a little repetitive, the format enables Newland himself, Paul Driessen, Alison Snowden and David Fine, Craig Bartlett, Stoyan Dukov, Janet Perlman, and Sara Petty to bring their own comic talents to a supposedly taboo subject.

The musical theme of the film has burlesque overtones and foregrounds the sexual orientation of the images that are to follow. Craig Bartlett's opening 'dream' shows a newly born chick peeping through a large keyhole in a box in which he sees a frying pan cooking two eggs with green yolks and a toaster which simultaneously 'pops-up' a piece of toast and an erect penis. Clearly, any interpretation of such a set of images is purely subjective, and probably indicates more about the viewer than it does the film-maker. As the phrase goes, 'it's a tough job but someone has to do it', so I will offer some tentative analysis. In many ways all 'dream' sequences require psychoanalytic attention but, such is the nature of animation, its image systems, whilst being the most appropriate vehicle to illustrate 'inner-states', also recall other codes and conventions of aesthetic expression which colour any interpretation. As noted in Chapter Three, many images may be understood at the purely *symbolic* level, and sequences of images may constitute the construction of a *metaphor*. In regard to Bartlett's 'dream' it is hard to resist the view that the chick, freshly emergent from its shell, directly engages with its first *primal scene*, voyeuristically recognising the domestic space as a highly sexualised environment. It is in this sense that Bartlett's imagery also becomes amusing, however, because it mocks the idea of the *primal* scene through the absurdity of the imagery, and by drawing attention to the ease in constructing *innuendo*. The soundtrack, with its various moans, groans, whipcracks, roars and lip-smacking, directs the audience to think of sexual acts, but Bartlett's imagery also reflects the obvious nature of this direction, by the use of visual puns. The penis 'pops-up' like a piece of toast, the eggs (perversely) resemble breasts etc.

The images from here, though, become a little more complex. The chick pours a drink and re-engages with the pleasures of watching – an agenda taken up by the whole film – and sees a blue car pull into this 'kitchen' area, a large, fishnet-stocking-clad, pink-stilettoed leg crash through the window, and sexual consummation between what turns out to be a chick with human legs (and further, a large concertinaed penis), and the blue car tied to a chair. The more one attempts to describe these images, the more ridiculous it seems, but each image does carry symbolic value. The chick watching these scenes continues to observe the first *primal scene* between its parents. The viewer watching the film sees a set of images which recall sexual practices and deliberately confuse the boundaries of taste and acceptability. The blue car seems to be gendered 'male'; the leg, with its fishnet stockings and stiletto-heeled shoes is gendered 'female'. When the viewer sees the legs belong to a chick, this challenges expectations, but in the realms of animation, merely highlights the cross-species coupling which characterises many cartoons. By giving this figure a penis, 'gender' is clearly blurred, an issue addressed in Chapter Five, and whilst this may also appear shocking, it recognises the ability of animation to destabilise traditional notions of male/female, and, masculine/feminine. In the eyes of the chick, this is merely the recognition of the indistinct nature of gender in the first stages of socialised sexual identity. When the chick-figure and the car tied to a chair copulate, all manner of sado-masochistic ideas seem to be conflated within one image. A hybrid, loosely





gendered creature, physically engages with an inhibited machine and is ultimately consumed by it. Humankind devoured by late industrial capitalism? Surely not, or certainly only on specific terms. Two cars (one pink, one blue – presumably the one with the chick-creature in) on a hoist, suddenly emerge into the same space, only to collapse through the floor, replaced by a highly phallic easel with lots of rapidly changing pictures of works of art and social scenes. The collapse of late industrial capitalism but the maintenance of creativity? Who knows, but if such a set of images is to be coerced into sense and operate beyond its superficial juxtaposition of strangely matched forms, the images must be interrogated as a set of symbols which move towards metaphoric continuity, however forced this may seem. The legitimacy of such interpretation comes out of the simultaneous recognition of the knowing manipulation of the animated form to controversial comic ends and the politicised agenda which often informs the radical imagery of the surreal.

Analysis of this sort is also appropriate to the rest of the 'dreams'. Janet Perlman, creator of a satiric assault on good manners in *Lady Fishbourne's Complete Guide to Better Table Manners* (1976), sophisticatedly uses the figure of a clown mime-artist to physically suggest sexual acts while juxtaposing her character with a shadow narrative of images suggesting sexual activity between a knight and a corseted woman, possibly in jelly! I remain uncertain of what exactly is going on, but a recognisable penis ejaculates at one point, and this is enough to point up the intrinsic difference between animation and mainstream live-action film. Such imagery does of course beg the question of whether this is, indeed, pornography; a question, it seems, that is not posed because of its animated context, and its comic scenario. Bulgarian animator, Stoyan Dukov, director of the controversial *March* (1986), which deals with the effects of a sex shop on a peasant village, contributes a sequence which highlights the fluidity of the two-dimensional space, as a self-flagellating dominatrix in a circus is willingly devoured by a lion that she has artificially stimulated with an aphrodisiac. Such fluidity also characterises Sara Petty's much less figurative response to the soundtrack, deploying abstract cubist designs to echo the penis and vagina, but also to use animation to illustrate the feeling of orgasm. This is coitus with, and through, the aesthetic dimensions of 'modernist' experimental animation.

Alison Snowden's and David Fine's 'dream' effectively illustrates two related 'gag' forms, which find particular purchase in the British context. Like Craig Bartlett, Snowden and Fine, point up the notion of *innuendo* in the noises from the soundtrack. Though here demonstrated through sound, innuendo humour is normally verbal, and is essentially the use of a double meaning in words which directs the listener to think not of the dominant meaning of the words, but of their very 'literalness' in suggesting a more taboo meaning. A good example can be found in Bob Godfrey's film about Isambard Kingdom Brunel, *GREAT* (1975), which includes the song, 'What a Big One', literally about his ship but, in the grand music-hall tradition, alluding to the size of a man's penis. The visual version of the innuendo 'gag' is the *substitution* 'gag', where one image

which recalls the more taboo image is literally substituted in its place. Snowden and Fine use carrots and sausages instead of an overt depiction of a penis; stuffing a chicken as an image which half-echoes coitus; and the unselfconsciousness of nudists on a picnic to bring innocent shock to the madcap moment when a cat, previously used by a couple in a badminton match, literally devours the woman player! If Petty's interpretation of the soundtrack was erotic, Snowden's and Fine's is playful.

Paul Driessen, also discussed in Chapter Three, probably makes the most explicit sequence in the film, though any real offence that may be caused by the *action* in the film is undermined by the *design*. Driessen's flaccid, 'blobbish', over-extended figures de-eroticise numerous acts of copulation, fellatio, cunnilingus and masturbation, and essentially dilute the seriousness associated with sex and sexuality. The scenes appear to be set on clouds in a dark, night sky, and the inclusion of angel figures suggests that this may be heaven. Right at the beginning of the sequence, an angel bites off the penis of a man, and though psychoanalysts may suggest that this foregrounds anxieties about castration (a fear seemingly echoed in many of the sequences), a more controversial reading might suggest that the man is God, and that the sexual acts that follow, performed by men, women and beasts, are merely the physical indicators of an amoral universe. Marv Newland's contribution does not lend itself to similar metaphoric intensity, but locates itself purely in the realm of male sexual fantasy. Nude, winged, fairy-girls burst through a window and ravish a man sitting in an armchair, wearing a pair of rabbit slippers. The most interesting image in the film is the attachment of five 'fairy-girls' to the man's penis. His penis goes through the mouth, body and bottom of each of the girls and seemingly conflates the allusion to oral, coital and anal sex into one image. Though this may be deemed sexist and unacceptable, this compression of actions (beyond their political implications) and the creation of this kind of imagery is only achievable in animation, legitimised by its apparently fantastical context. The comedy here, surely, is *about* sexual excess and physical extremism, mocking the obsessional quality of fantasy by parodying its perversity.

Chris Hinton's figure of the old lady, who has supposedly had all these dreams, concludes the film by being the central figure in a desexualised interpretation of the soundtrack. Slurps and groans which have previously been the soundtrack to various physical acts are now used merely as the sounds which accompany an old lady having a cup of tea and dunking her biscuit, although she does pluck her pet bird when it breaks the teapot! The whole film is about the fact that attitudes towards sex and sexuality and, indeed, morality, are entirely personal and relative. Its comic daring, and its particular *deployment* of animation to illustrate this relativity, suggests that perception and understanding is 'all in the mind'. The images couch themselves as funny and ambiguous, thus dismissing any notion that they may be censored. Comedy in animation is clearly a subversive tool.





## 24 Driessen's comedy of cruelty

> There's a lot of black humour, I think, in my films. There's some kind of cruelty I have, I think, and most people probably have, and I can get away with in my films, and not in real life, because basically I am a nice person![12]

Paul Driessen's contribution to *Pink Konkommer* is in some ways unrepresentative in its directness, as Driessen's work is characterised by a certain comic obliqueness. His vision is entirely his own, and unlike many of the animators who create specific 'gags', his narratives tend to create unusual comic events out of apparently typical scenarios. His designs do much to simplify these scenes, though, distantiating them from 'the real', and, in depersonalising the main figures, enable him to prioritise their actions. These actions sometimes focus on the hostility inherent in comic acts and highlight the more cruel dimensions of human life through the role of the victim (the butt of the joke). In *Uncles and Aunts* (1993), a small baby approaches the edge of a ledge, and this is described as 'Junior's first steps'; the very same animation is then shown with the caption 'Junior's last steps' as he topples over. Similarly, 'Mother trying out Father' begins with her punching his face, cutting his head off with a large sword, then striking his head with a club so that it bounces round the four walls of the room. Only when she finally decides to put a paper bag over his head is the audience invited to think that she may have undertaken these actions because she didn't like the way that he looked, and having failed to get rid of his head, she merely decides to cover it up! The humour here relies upon the reconciliation of the joke, in the sense that implausible justification is given to excessive acts which appeared initially to have no motive at all, logical or otherwise.

Driessen's film, *Oh, What a Knight!* (1981), takes this kind of cruelty to its logical extreme by making the butt of the joke someone who does not deserve to be. Within the traditional story, the knight is expected to save the damsel in distress. Driessen seeks to subvert this outcome with a particular comic 'twist' – a 'punchline' which differs from the one that has been anticipated and redefines the previous narrative. The knight in Driessen's film, rides through a storm and over ravines to save a damsel from a three-headed dragon. Throughout the film, though, his armour keeps falling apart and reassembling, effectively deconstituting and re-constituting the knight's 'body' – there is no sense that there is anyone in the armour; the pieces of armour, it seems, are the man inside. Defeating the dragon, and a huge frog-like monster holding the damsel captive, the knight engages in a final confrontation on a cliff-edge, with another dragon still holding the girl. In a particularly inventive variation on the cliff-edge 'gag', the little man in the suit of armour climbs out of the back of it and climbs around the cliff-edge to pounce upon the dragon from behind. As he edges around the cliff, cars pass incongrously below, destabilising the time period of the film, and placing it entirely in the realms of fantasy. Once he pounces on the dragon, killing

it, the damsel merely pats him on the head, and approaches the knight thinking that he is still standing in front of her. It is only the armour, of course, and the damsel tumbles off the cliff as she attempts to take it in her arms. The man doesn't get the woman, the woman dies, the heroism of the knight gains no reward, and the whole myth has been cruelly satirised. As Michel Ciment comments about Driessen's work, '[he] achieves a fusion of the Hollywood cartoon with its manic rhythms, and the Zagreb studio with its more philosophical concerns' (Bendazzi, 1994: 311). Driessen's comedy of cruelty is rarely without purpose and, like much of his work, serves as a warning against assuming things, and complacency about aspects of existence which may offer revelation and surprise.

## 25 Techno-titters and post-modern forms

While computer animation clearly offers another visual language in which comic devices may be created, it is, ironically, an ex-Disney animator working in the style of the Warner Brothers cartoon who has achieved a great deal through its use. John Lasseter, using the PIXAR system (see Lee, 1989a), essentially three-dimensionalises the animated cartoon, using the limitations of computer animation in the representation of figures to his advantage in depicting neo-cartoon characters. Computer animation, at the time of writing, is still negotiating the difficulties of creating persuasive human figures with a high range of expression. Computer animation can show the three-dimensionality of geometric forms and physical space to good effect, however, providing a dizzying redefinition of conventional environments. Lasseter thus combines the characterisation and comic structure of the cartoon form with the multiplicity of possibilities in the construction of material contexts made available by computer animation.

In 1989, John Lasseter won an Academy Award for *Tin Toy* (1988), in which a one-man-band tintoy lives in fear that Billy, a baby, might play with him. In one of the funniest of revelatory gags, his fear leads him to rush under a chair. The film cuts to a whole number of other tin toys also hiding there, all evidently having experienced the same thing. Fear becomes compassion, though, when the tin one-man-band thinks the baby has fallen and has hurt himself. He rushes out, momentarily entertaining the baby, distracting it from its pain, only to be abandoned when the baby prefers to play with the box that the tin toy came in, and then a paper bag. This is merely the film's narrative, however, and not half of its achievement. The figures in the film were first created as drawn figures like cartoons, then modelled like puppets or clay figures, then overlayed with a wire-frame grid so that each element of the body has a reference point which may be electronically traced into the computer, and finally digitally rendered with colour and lighting effects. This method of construction is important to relate because it determines particular ways in which a figure can move, and thus the vocabulary available to the animator for comic effects. This applies not only to the figures, objects and environments within the film, but the simulated movements of a 'camera'. As Nora Lee explains:






*Figure* 4.3 John Lasseter's *Tin Toy* prefigures *Toy Story* in its experimental use of computer-generated animation, but echoes the earliest 'trick' films in its use of toys as characters and calls upon the slapstick of the Silly Symphonies and the 'gags' from Looney Tunes in its jokes and narrative

> The opening sequence is a nice overhead view of the bag, box, and toys on the floor that ends as the camera cranes down to look squarely at Tinny's profile. When Tinny attempts to escape from the monster [the baby], the camera dollies with him as he flees, which increases the feeling of speed. In another sequence, as Tinny emerges from under the couch, the camera gives an overhead view of Tinny coming out to meet his doom, showing us exactly how small our hero is compared to the enormous baby.
>
> (Lee, 1989a: 82)

These movements are crucial to the construction of comic moments reliant on particular kinds of timing and the recognition of size as possible threat. As also becomes significant in Lasseter's *Knick Knack* (1989), the sense of confinement and entrapment in an apparently vast space is also intrinsic to the comic event. The computer, as mentioned earlier, is particularly effective in producing geometric shapes and forms, and less impressive in its depiction of the organically moving figures.[13] It is for this reason that *Tin Toy* is a great achievement, extending the range of *personality* animation in a different form. Rarely has a sneeze been so amusing, but it is made comic by the recognition of the delay between the baby's realisation that it is going to sneeze and the sneeze itself. Such details characterise

real babies, but go unnoticed. The computer baby is a plausible enough character to enable the joke to work, deriving humour from the control imposed upon the moment when the sneeze comes. The timing of a sneeze in the real world becomes the comic timing of a computer generated one.

The poses and direct-to-camera looks of the baby and the tin toy become the stock of *Knick Knack*, in which a snowman tries to escape from the glass snow-shaker ornament he is part of so as to pursue another girl 'knick-knack' on the mantle shelf. This was the first properly three-dimensional, computer-generated film made by Lasseter, exploiting all the possibilities of time and space for cartoon effects. Lasseter self-consciously utilises the ease of creating geometric objects by having ornaments as his lead characters. Each possesses a rhythm, however, which complements Bobby McFerrin's a cappella soundtrack, and matches the pace of the action. The scantily-clad girl ornament from Florida also has ridiculously spherical breasts which recall previous designs of women in the cartoon from Betty Boop to Red Riding Hood to Jessica in *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* (1988). It is the sheer plasticity and artificiality of the objects, though, which computer animation is adept in expressing. The snowman in his snow-shaker is an entirely plausible ornament, but becomes characterful by the manipulation of the pieces of coal and a carrot which constitute his face. Each attempt to escape from the snow-shaker – running into the ornament's glass dome; using the two-dimensional igloo from the arctic landscape to try to break the glass; banging his carrot nose against the glass with a hammer as if it were a nail; using dynamite – all disfigure his expression, signifying his disappointment and frustration. His attempts to escape the ornament, are, of course, a succession of gags in the Avery/Jones tradition, all operating without any explanation of where he gets a hammer, an aestheteline torch, dynamite, etc. When he blows up the ornament though, he spins round in a flurry of snowflakes, toppling the 'knick-knack' to the edge of the mantlepiece, whereupon it falls. Computer animation is particularly effective here in defining the extraordinary drop that the object has. During this extended fall, the snowman sees an exit door in the bottom of the ornament and makes his escape, only to topple into a fish tank. Initially daunted, he then sees a fishbowl 'knick-knack' – a mermaid from Atlantis, and moves to approach her. Unfortunately, the snow-shaker ornament which he thought he had escaped falls on him before he can reach her. The film concludes with a closing iris focusing on the snowman's frustrated look towards the audience.

### Post-modern forms

In many ways then, *Knick Knack* is Road Runner revisited in a contemporary form, using computer-generated imagery to provide a different look and appeal to similar gags in a redefinition of the cartoon. Animation, in this sense, is a deeply self-conscious medium, but clearly, because of its self-defining purpose in relation to live-action film-making, it always has been. When it is not calling attention to the limitations of photographic realism, it is recalling its own codes



and conventions and, most significantly, developing new ones. This intensifies the progressive nature of the form and resists the retrogressive reliance upon post-modern codes of pastiche and reiteration that have informed artistic practices in the post-war period. In many ways, animation insists upon its *modernity* even in the post-modern era (see Lindvall and Melton 1994).

Norman Denzin suggests that post-modernism is defined as:

> A nostalgic, conservative longing for the past, coupled with an erasure of the boundaries between the past and the present; an intense preoccupation with the real and its representations; a pornography of the visible; the commodification of sexuality and desire; a consumer culture which objectifies a set of masculine cultural ideals; intense emotional experiences shaped by anxiety, alienation, ressentiment, and a detachment from others.
>
> (Denzin, 1991: vii)

Though such a generalisation may be directly challenged by the specifity of an alternative model which refutes these tendencies, this list of dominant cultural processes provides a set of conditions which may be tested against the animated film itself, and the role of comedy within it. Contemporary animation is characterised by so many different styles and approaches that it is impossible to say what its dominant mode of engagement is, but even if it may only be measured by its most obvious proponent, the Walt Disney organisation, it is clear that the animated film is still subject to a progressive agenda which doesn't necessarily sit easily with Denzin's summary of post-modern preoccupations. This is partly because some of its conditions have *always* been crucial issues in the construction of the animated form in general. Clearly, animation has always exhibited 'an intense preoccupation with the real and its representations' because it has fundamentally resisted 'reality' as its governing aesthetic agenda, and even when expressing the kind of 'realism' defined in Chapter One, it necessarily creates alternative conditions for its expression. The temporal agendas of the animated film also correspond to the conflation of past and present, but as a necessary condition of creating a *timeless* space rather than as a particular recognition of the past's place within the present. For the most part (although there are obvious cultural codings which would challenge this view), the cartoon does not signify a particular historical moment. In prioritising comedy as its agenda within a highly simulated space it looks to resist the realistic premises which locate the film in a certain time in a certain place and limit its possible effects. It must be remembered that these agendas *precede* the post-modern era, yet exhibit its characteristics. Other animated films, not in the cartoon mode, and not attempting to be funny, also look to create this unstable notion of time and space in order to interrogate and refute the logic imposed by time and space, and the naturalised conditions of expression and existence attendant to them.

The form itself then, offers resistance to inhibiting consistencies which, in

turn, also means challenging 'the pornography of the visible' and 'the commodification of sexuality and desire'. The very *ambiguity* of the animated image and the in-built *contradictions* which inform the codes and conventions of representation in animation constantly re-evaluate 'the visible' and redetermine its 'exploitation'. Even a film like *Pink Konkommer* is an exploration of the image and the relativity of the pornographic, not merely a reproduction of the seen and known, and this is fundamentally achieved through the 'open-ness' of animation as a form as much as it is the personal expression of the film-maker. Animation also undermines the commodification of sexuality and desire because it redetermines how sexuality and desire may be expressed, blurs representations of gender and its socialised identities, and is a medium which has produced a genuine *feminine aesthetic*. These issues will be discussed in detail in Chapter Five, but they are also fundamental to the ways that patriarchal norms have been challenged in animation, by both men and women. It is mostly in the area of 'intense emotional experiences shaped by anxiety, alienation, ressentiment, and a detachment from others' that animation has provided a particularly appropriate vocabulary. As suggested in Chapter Two, animation has become a vehicle by which *inarticulable* emotions and experiences may be expressed. Most importantly, with regard to this chapter, though, it is the way that anxiety, alienation etc. have been used as the fundamental tools in the creation of comic forms that is of special interest.

The avant-gardist notions of post-modernism in the USA during the 1960s and after, provide a useful focus to briefly discuss the comic aspects of the post-modern in animation, a 'post-modernism' intrinsic to the form, even out of its modernist roots. The avant-garde determine the post-modern as outlined below (Smart, 1993: 19).

- Future oriented, innovative temporal imagination.
- Iconoclastic attack on the institution, organisation and ideology of art.
- Technological optimism, bordering at times on euphoria.
- Promotion of 'popular culture' as a challenge to high art.

Whilst the post-modern condition itself remains an illusive concept, despite all the critical theory engaging with the topic, it is broadly recognised that post-modernism posits the idea of an end to the discrete narrative, and the proliferation of discourses resisting modes of closure. It is further recognised that these discourses often relate specifically to previous models of representation and exchange. Animation, from its earliest developments, has prioritised the 'temporal imagination', predominantly in the comic mode, and as a liberating form of expression in the face of the institutionalisation of mainstream live-action cinema. Its agenda from the outset has been to challenge the ideological certainties naturalised in photographic realism, and the emergence of classical Hollywood narrative. This was further enhanced by the use of different kinds of animation as a resistance (conscious or otherwise) to the industrialisation of



the form, and the hyper-realistic consistency of the Disney Studio in the late 1930s and 1940s, though Disney, ironically, had been the embodiment of 'technological optimism' as it revolutionised the industry. The cartoon did much to sustain the *anarchic* mode which refused orthodox discourses, and opened up a multiplicity of agendas through the formulation of the 'gag' as it has been discussed in this chapter. Not merely did it define, promote and engage with 'popular culture', but it undermined high art while possessing many of its graphic and aesthetic qualities. Other forms of animation, for example, puppet animation and clay modelling, took up this agenda, locating *personal* expression within the popular form, sustaining its innovation while recalling some of its key premises. Animation seems, therefore, to occupy the space between modernity and post-modernity, and the comic is the central feature of its ability to sustain a multiplicity of discourses yet maintain aesthetic focus.

Ironically, a interesting example of these tendencies comes from, of all places, the Disney Studio, in its recent version of *Aladdin* (1992), which featured stand-up comic improviser, Robin Williams as the genie. Amidst the technical innovations of combining traditional cel-animated movement with computer-generated imagery, the customarily obvious representations of moral adversaries, and accusations of racism concurrent with new debates about orientalism (see Said, 1978; Felpin-Sharman 1994; Griffin 1994), Williams' performance as the genie was accommodated by the Disney animators in ways which broke with traditional modes of Disney story-telling. Williams' cameo as the stall-holder who tells the story of Aladdin uses a direct to camera address, and even uses the illusion of the camera itself, when the stall-holder asks the audience to come closer, only to find his nose jammed against the implied lens/screen. 'Too close', he says nervously, prompting the withdrawal of the camera, and the apparent presence of the audience who share its point of view.

This merely prefigures Williams' improvisations as the genie, which include impressions of popular figures such as Jack Nicholson, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Ed Sullivan, Peter Lorre and Groucho Marx; references to William Buckley and the character of Travis Bickle as played by Robert De Niro in Martin Scorsese's film, *Taxidriver* (1976); and references to the Disney canon itself in the inclusion of the elephants from *Fantasia* (1940), a Goofy hat worn by the genie when he becomes a tourist and, most specifically, when the head of Pinocchio emerges on the genie's neck, when the genie assumes that Aladdin is lying when he promises to set him free. The genie, of course, can metamorphose into anything he wants to – he becomes a Scotsman, a dog, a one-armed bandit, a rocket, a barber, a magician, a dragon, a dresser, a bee, a sheep, an orchestra, a submarine and a set of cheerleaders, all comically redetermining his body. Uncharacteristic in a Disney film, though, are his Averyesque leanings – bug-eyes, dropped jaw, cross-dressing, and the support of 'Red'-like girls.

Like *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*, the genie works as a compendium of comic cartoon expression, but it is Williams' contemporary wit and delivery which defines the modernity of the animation through the post-modernity of its terms

of reference (see Canemaker, 1988). The speed of the visual changes matches Williams' verbal delivery and even extends beyond it. Such rapidity of visual invention, over and beyond its recall and deployment of cartoon conventions, and the assurance of its execution, takes the animated form a stage further in its development. The genie is located in the contemporary era and directly addresses a contemporary culture aware of the terms of reference Williams brings to the character – the 'laughs', as it were, often occur outside the context of the narrative. The genie, though, is also the definitive embodiment of the possibilities inherent in the animated form and an expression of the capacity for animation to resist conventional modes of expression. At once he is confirmation of the form's modernity and a demonstration of its post-modern credentials. Even his last line of dialogue confirms this. He says, 'I'm history, no, I'm mythology; I don't care what I am, I'm free!' As this chapter has hopefully illustrated, only in an animated comedy could that be said.



# 5

# ISSUES IN REPRESENTATION

The idea that animation is an *innocent* medium, ostensibly for children, and largely dismissed in film histories, has done much to inhibit the proper discussion of issues concerning *representation*. The modes of narration and the strategies for comedy described in previous chapters have deliberately concentrated on the structural premises by which certain ends may be achieved in the animated form. Though some attention was paid to the ostensible content of certain films, the complex ways in which animation problematises the representation of gender and race have yet to be discussed and that is the focus of this chapter. As is by now obvious, the distinctive language of animation raises some important questions which are as much about the unique parameters of expression available to the animator as they are about socio-political issues. The conventional methods by which such issues are addressed will always be further complicated by the use of animation which, almost by definition, transforms the codes and conditions by which traditional or dominant modes of representation are considered.

Like many art forms in the twentieth century, animation has been subject to the revisionist readings of the lobby for political correctness, and has inevitably been found wanting, particularly in its use of racist caricature and in its sexist bias. Clearly, there always remains the apparent defence that these kinds of representation were innocent in their intention and did not mean to cause offence. Further, it is sometimes argued, for example, that female and black artists were involved in aspects of production, and contributed to the creation of works which are now criticised for their misrepresentation of these people. These codes of representation, of course, occurred mainly in the American animated cartoon, and it is important to remember that this kind of work prefigured the lobbies of the Civil Rights and Feminist movements who demanded political sensitivity in all aspects of society and, critically, in popular art forms. It would be easy to perceive the animation industry in the West as pathologically male, run by men in the spirit of expressing the interests of men, creating patriarchal hierarchies in major studios. In many senses this is true, but part of a historical orthodoxy, that is now subject to revisionist research, and which is reclaiming the place of marginalised or unrecognised figures in the evolution of the animated form (see Pilling, 1992; Langer, 1993; Allan, 1994; Klein, 1994). Though this does much to properly

filming the movements, editing the material etc. The complete control that the animator can wield over the work has made the form especially appealing to many artists, and most particularly women, who have been estranged from both the cinematic apparatus and the predominant codes of the (patriarchal) film text. Animation has offered women film-makers a distinctive aesthetic which has fulfilled particular thematic and artistic agendas in a way not available to them in mainstream live-action contexts. Throughout my discussion, I have assumed that the film-makers addressed work in the closest spirit of auteurism, in the sense that they can credibly claim as much control over creative work as is possible in the contemporary commercial and industrial setting.

4 Chuck Jones tells an amusing story which confirms the blurred lines between the perception of reality and synthetic forms. A 7-year-old boy was furious when Jones was introduced to him as the man who drew Bugs Bunny. 'He does not draw Bugs Bunny', he insisted, 'he draws pictures of Bugs Bunny' (Cholodenko, 1991: 59). Bugs Bunny's existence as a *real* phenomenon negates the notion of his creation, and endorses his iconic value in a way that makes it only subject to replication. 'Bugs Bunny' has the same ontological equivalence as any natural, found or constructed phenomenon and, thus, may be perceived as just as 'real'.

5 Denzin, (1995) usefully lists the developments and challenges to Mulvey's approach, pp. 42–63.

6 Frierson notes that 'Clay Replacement Animation follows the method developed in the 1930s by George Pal, who used wooden puppets and a series of interchangeable body parts that were substituted over successive frames to suggest movement. Instead of turning and carving the parts from wood as the Pal Studio did, clay replacement merely sculpts a series of figures or body parts in clay to create the incremental visuals' (Frierson, 1994: 26). He adds '*Clay painting* is a two-dimensional technique that creates subtly changing colors and a unique fluid motion very different from animating cel or drawn figures' (ibid.), while *clay slicing* or *strata cut*, works in a way that requires the construction of 'long clay "loaves" with three-dimensional visuals embedded within them that are slowly revealed through sequential one-eighth of an inch slices across the loaf when it is filmed' (ibid.: 27).

7 Interview with the author, February 1995.

8 Interview with the author, February 1995.

9 Starewicz's daughter, quoted in a Channel Four documentary about her father, called *The Insect Affair*, Screen First, broadcast in December 1994.

## 3 ONCE UPON A TIME: NARRATIVE STRATEGIES

1 See Cabarga, 1988: 81, and Hendershot, 1993: 1–15.

2 ASIFA is the international organisation for professional people working in the field of animated cinema.

3 For a full discussion of the Harlequin figure, see Nicoll, A., *The World Of Harlequin*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976.

4 Quoted in *The Magic Art of Jan Svankmajer*, BBC broadcast 1992, and fully discussed in Hames, P., 1995.

5 Quoted in *Profile of Yuri Norstein*, TV Films/Eclan, Sofia, Bulgaria, broadcast on Channel Four, 1992.

6 Quoted in Rosenberg, K. 'The World View of Yuri Norstein', from *Animator* no. 28, p.15.

7 Quoted in *Profile of Yuri Norstein*, TV Films/Eclan, Sofia, Bulgaria, broadcast on Channel Four, 1992.

8 Ibid.





9 Yuri Norstein uses this technique for serious purposes, but a similar dislocatory use of forms, shapes and patterns that appear to have only abstract aesthetic signification, but then which gain associative and configurative meanings, occur in Alison Snowden's and David Fine's playful animation, *Second Class Mail* (1984).

10 The use of sound in animation is worthy of an extended study of its own, since many animated films are predicated on particular strategies about the use of song, dialogue, diegetic and non-diegetic sound etc. The intrinsic relationship between sound and image in the animated film is explored by Norman McClaren in his film, *Synchromy* (1971), in which the animated music track itself is displaced on to the picture area and constitutes the abstract movements of the film as the sound is produced. This was achieved by the use of a special optical printer, which also enabled the animated music track to be coloured using filters. Thus the music is actually *seen* and *heard*.

11 Even though the UPA studios have been acknowledged as the pioneers of an innovative visual and aural style, Disney historian, Brian Sibley, claims that the Disney Studio anticipate this kind of work in the late 1940s and early 1950s, in films like *Make Mine Music* (1946) and *Melody Time* (1948), and culminating in their history of music in *Toot, Whistle, Plunk and Boom* (1953) (see Holliss and Sibley, 1988).

12 Quoted in 'A Spoonful of Sugar', BBC Radio Four, transmitted 25 October 1973, transcript p. 8.

13 Erica Russell's Oscar-nominated film, *Triangle* (1994), takes these principles further in a complex configuration of associative and abstract movement. The vocabulary detailed in this chapter usefully aids the description and possible interpretations of the film, over and above its self-evident technical and aesthetic expertise.

## 4 25 WAYS TO START LAUGHING

1 Interview with the author, February 1995.

2 John Canemaker has made a short documentary on the work of Otto Mesmer called *Otto Messmer and Felix the Cat* (Phoenix Films Inc., 1975), which properly acknowledges him as the creator of Felix and includes an interview and examples of his work.

3 These ideas were foregrounded in a BBC documentary on Tex Avery broadcast in 1990.

4 A particularly useful analysis of the development of one of Jones' earliest characters, 'Nibbles', was given as a video lecture by David Williams at the *Fifth International Conference of the Society For Animation Studies*, Farnham, Surrey, 1993. (See also, Jones, 1989; and Kenner, 1994.)

5 British animators, Alison Snowden and David Fine, readily acknowledge the influence of films like *Special Delivery* and *The Big Snit* in their own working practices, particularly in a film like *George and Rosemary* (1984) made at the National Film Board of Canada. (Interview with the author, October 1995.)

6 These six categories are drawn from Charney, M., *Comedy: High and Low*, London & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979.

7 Many of Disney's sight gags are predicated on notions of sustained incompetency and the proliferation of accidents, rather than overt slapstick played out in a spirit of conflict. Goofy, Pluto and Donald Duck are prone to falling foul of their environment or their inability to interact successfully with artefacts and materials. Indeed, their efforts can be broadly read as an ineffectual response to the increased perils of modernity as it is played out through new technologies and social pursuits. Many of the *Silly Symphonies* demonstrate this clearly – *Clock Cleaners* (1937), for instance, shows how Mickey, Pluto and Donald fail to deal with *mechanism*, and is merely one example of films where the Disney characters cannot cope with machines.

8 Norman McClaren describes Grant Munro's dance in mid-air in an interview in

*Sequences* no. 82, October 1975, published in the *Canada House Gallery Guide* for the exhibition of his films and paintings mounted in the same year. Munro had to take a rest after every twenty-five jumps, and McClaren achieved the effect by cutting his film using the frame which recorded the high point of each jump.

9 See Law, 1995. Candy Guard's narratives play out self-perpetuating situations in which women are constantly entrapped by their own self-doubt in the face of failing to attain the image and identity expected of them by a male-determined society. Guard's female characters are frustrated by their own attempts to come to terms with the received knowledge that defines them in contemporary culture. These narratives may be seen as detailed analyses of gendered ennui which provoke particular kinds of recognition in female audiences, who acknowledge the use of humour as a critique of passivity and socially determined oppression.

10 For a discussion of cartoonal parody, see Cohen, M., 'Looney Tunes and Merrie Melodies', and Lowry, E. Obalis, L. & Black, L., 'Cartoon as Ritual', both in Pilling, J., *'That's Not All Folks!': A Primer in Cartoonal Knowledge*, London: BFI Distribution, 1984. Many types of animation have parodic elements, which often inform the self-reflexive aspects of many films. For example, Nick Park's Oscar-winning film, *The Wrong Trousers* (1993), includes a train chase in the silent film style, (actually based on the chariot race from *Ben Hur*) and numerous film noir effects, all given an eccentric English twist by being 'played out in a front room in Wigan'. (Interview with the author, February 1995.)

11 Interview with the author, February 1995.

12 Quoted in a Screen First Documentary, *Going to Work on an Egg*, broadcast on Channel Four, 1994.

13 See Bishko, 1994; Darley, 1993.

## 5 ISSUES IN REPRESENTATION

1 In a range of films including Mimica's and Marks' *Alone* (1958), Marks' and Jutrisa's *The Fly* (1966), and Dragic's *Passing Days* (1969), the Zagreb Studios have addressed the 'everyman' character, as a victim of loneliness, alienation and oppressive social and supernatural forces. This very much characterises work appearing in creative environments in Eastern Europe, subject to the political intervention from the former Soviet Union. For a full discussion, see Holloway, 1972.

2 Interview with the author, March 1988.

3 Ibid.

4 *Wayward Girls and Wicked Women* was the title given to a series of video releases featuring the work of female British animators. For an overview of these films, see Kotlarz, 1992; and Winterson, 1992.

5 See E.M. Forster, 'Mickey and Minnie' in *Abinger Harvest*, London: Penguin Books, p. 64 (first published by Edward Arnold, 1936).

6 Burton (Carvajal), J., 'Don Juanito Duck and the Imperial Patriarchal Unconscious: Disney Studios, the Good Neighbour Policy, and the Packaging of Latin America' in Parker, A., Russo, M., Sommer, D., and Yaeger, P. (eds), *Nationalisms and Sexualities*, London & New York: Routledge, 1992, pp. 21–42. Updated as '"Surprise Package": Looking Southward with Disney' in Smoodin, E. (ed) *Disney Discourse: Producing the Magic Kingdom*, London & New York: Routledge, 1994, pp. 131–48; see also Dorfman, A. and Mattelart, A., *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic*, New York: International General, 1975.

7 This case study concerned with Tom and Jerry was first addressed in Kirkham, P. (ed) (1996) *The Gendered Object*, Manchester: MUP.

8 *Tom and Jerry – The Movie* (1994), and further television spin-offs followed the original series, but with the continuing showings of the original Hanna Barbera cartoons still in regular circulation worldwide, the predominant and influential canon of work is still regarded as the 1940–1958 period. (See Adams, 1991; Brion, 1990; and Sennett, 1989.)

9 Some cartoons during the 1930s and 1940s cannot be reclaimed as in any way defendable or celebratory in their representation of race stereotypes. A particularly offensive example, is Walter Lantz's cartoon, *Scrub Me Mama – with a Boogie Beat* (1941), which depicts exaggeratedly indolent slave caricatures, who shoe-shine, eat melons, and blow cotton, as a seemingly half-caste young woman stimulates music and mirth while a large washer-woman scrubs clothes at the laundry.

10 Animation is produced worldwide in many contexts, and in many nations may be constituted as a particularly *national* cinema in the sense that it properly represents the national preoccupations and aesthetic traditions of that country, resisting the influence of Disney, and creating distinctive works. This is only partially referenced in my discussion, but is addressed in Bendazzi, 1994; and in various monographs, essays and articles looking at particular cultures of animation (see the Bibliography, p. 250).

## 6 ANIMATION AND AUDIENCES

1 For an accessible discussion of these issues, see J. Mayne, *Cinema and Spectatorship*, London and New York: Routledge, 1993.

2 Animation is particularly appropriate to the needs of advertising in the sense that its language is wholly correspondent to the short form. The very 'look' of various kinds of animation is distinctive; previously inanimate lifeless brands become colourful characters; impossible scenarios are executed with persuasive authenticity. Animation effectively dramatises the 'fantastic' premise/promise of the product beyond the limits of its actual capacity. This may be made literal through changing the scale, scope, and function of the product itself, or the objects/environment associated with it, in order to spectacularise the concept which effectively sells the product. From the Tetley Tea Folk to the Creature Comforts animals of the Heat Electric advertisements to the Canon Copier Man, animation has facilitated memorable and enduring product identity. For brief discussions of animated commercials by Richard Purdum, Nick Park, and Joan Ashworth, see Wells, P. (ed.), *Art and Animation*, Academy Group/John Wiley, 1997, and a range of animated campaigns involving new technologies in Noake, R., *Animation*, London and Sidney: Macdonald Orbis, 1988.

3 From *America – The Movie*, Reel Four: Utopia Unlimited, BBC Radio Four; broadcast June–July 1988; researched and compiled by Paul Wells; script and narration by Christopher Frayling; produced by John Powell; original source: BBC Archive: Walt Disney in conversation with Fletcher Markle.