Animation: Myth, Magic, and Industry

In December 1927 the New York humor magazine *Life* published a witty drawing that documents the average moviegoer's regard for animated cartoons at the dawn of the talkies (see figure 1, the frontispiece). The eight panels show two typical New Yorkers arriving for their weekly night at the show. The glistening architecture of the picture palace (probably the new Roxy) dwarfs them as they are ushered into the lofty third balcony. When the picture begins, it is not *The Student Prince, Sunrise, Wings, Underworld,* or another current hit, nor does the artist choose to depict Fairbanks, Chaplin, or Garbo. Instead he has Felix the Cat pounce into view, to the obvious delight of the laughing couple. The drawing's caption is tongue-in-cheek: "The Art of the Motion Picture."

Felix's ironic presence punctures the opera-house pretensions of the grandiose theater architecture, with its fake gilt plaster ornamentation and its walls hung with paintings. By implication, the highbrow reputation that intellectuals and critics were self-consciously ascribing to the cinema in the 1920s is also being undermined. Felix, the satirist is saying, is the real "art of the cinema."

At the same time the drawing affirms what it parodies; its every existence indicates the attraction felt toward cartoons by artists of the "modern" persuasion. This bold de-

sign, looking forward to art deco, underscores a conception of film—and Felix—as the imagery of modernism.

Felix's following had grown steadily, commencing around 1922 when *Life*'s regular critic Robert E. Sherwood had already placed the cat alongside Chaplin, Keaton, and Sennett in his pantheon of "cinematographic art."[1] Five years later, by the time of the drawing, Felix had become a ubiquitous fixture of the jazz age, loved by children as a cuddly cat and by adults as a being who shared their own feelings, frustrations, and fantasies, perhaps in his role as a henpecked husband, a doting father, or a philandering speakeasy reveler.

This book appreciates that intelligent and mature adults could participate in a ritual wherein a pen-and-ink representation of a cat is endowed with "real" status at least as great as that of the screen images of human actors. Clearly, audiences recognized their own behavior in Felix's and attributed to him the foibles of the human species. Moreover, they perceived in these animated drawings a personality—not just a character or a type, but an individual with his own quirks of appearance and behavior that distinguished him from all others. Felix's charisma was so subtly defined that he proved inimitable, although the audience was aware of a half-dozen inferior competitors. In the 30-year history of animation this book retraces, the primary concern will be to understand how this individualization process developed to the extent that it did, in the times when it did.

Animation, let alone silent animation, is admittedly a minor branch of the history of cinema. Furthermore, in comparison with mainstream filmmaking in the silent period, it was not commercially important. Film distributors (and alas, until recently, film collectors) tended to regard these cartoons as material better suited for the dustbin than for any other repository. More recently, film scholars have

tended to ignore early animation or to condemn it to the domain of film-buffism. Although it can be easily dismissed as esoteric or trivial, we shall also see that this not-so-serious subject can sustain "serious" consideration from the perspective of film history, cultural history, or industrial history. This is not an easy task. The growth of the animated film was erratic, the quality uneven, and the documentation unreliable. It is a frustrating yet wonderfully variegated area of study, out of which eventually emerges an aesthetically coherent body of work.

Any history must have an arbitrary beginning and end. A terminal event was easy enough to choose. Just when the *Life* cartoon was arriving at newsstands, Walt Disney, a young cartoon producer from California, was in New York learning the unhappy news that his distributor was forcing him to relinquish control of "Oswald," a series he had created. Out of this personal calamity a new mouse character was developed, and when *Steamboat Willie* opened at the Colony Theater in New York, on November 18, 1928, Disney knew he had made the *Jazz Singer* of animation. Soon Mickey, synchronized sound, and color would launch the modern age of cartoons, with Disney swept along as a kind of mass-culture deity in the 1930s. It is understandable that along the way to Disney's apotheosis the earlier achievements of other animators were brusquely swept aside, and that their films were considered obsolete and then forgotten.

Steamboat Willie provides a convenient end bracket, capping the silent period and heralding the glorious 1930s and 1940s, but no similar arbitrary event signaled the beginnings of animation history. No one knows who first discovered that screen motion could be deliberately synthesized by making single-frame exposures. It is likely that many tinkerers had some vague feeling that such a process was possible and may even have made some crude experiments.

However, the earliest date at which animation was first commercially exploited was 1898, and although even this cannot be documented that year will be our starting point.

One certainty is that animated cinema could not have existed before the cinema came into being around 1895. Here I depart from the traditional presentation of the subject, which invariably begins with litanies of "precursors," often extending back to hieroglyphic friezes, Chinese scrolls, or the Bayeux tapestry. There are references to Kircher's 1646 treatise on magic lanterns; to Robert's "Fantascope," which scared eighteenth-century Parisians; to Skladanowsky's rapidly projected slides; to the shadow plays of the Cabaret du Chat Noir; and to a hundred other optical curiosities.[2] But, technologically, the "prehistory" of cinema and animation are inseparable. One premise of this book is that the animated film is a subspecies of film in general. Its history coincides with film history at large, running parallel, weaving in and out. Thus, the old-fashioned attempts to animate pictures at best represent common ancestors, which were soon supplanted once photographic motion-picture-making became available.

The example of Emile Reynaud (1844–1918), who has misleadingly been called "the father of the animated cartoon," illustrates how little the first cartoonists were indebted to this optical tradition. A teacher of mathematics and science, Reynaud thought of a way to improve on the fashionable "persistence-of-vision" parlor toys that had been marketed since the 1830s. Originally created by Plateau and Stampfer to demonstrate the mind's ability to combine discrete images into an illusion of motion, these phenakistoscopes, stroboscopes, and zoetropes all required the viewer to peep through rotating slits. Reynaud's praxinoscope substituted a cluster of revolving mirrors, which reflected drawings on a horizontal band placed inside a revolving drum. Because the viewer did not look through

moving slits, he had an illusion of relatively smooth flickerless motion. Soon (in 1879) Reynaud refined the "praxinoscope theater," in which the moving drawings were superimposed onto scenery inside a little proscenium. This tabletop theater was in turn transformed into an audience-oriented spectacle in 1892 when Reynaud opened his "Théâtre optique" at the Musée Grévin wax museum in Paris. He rear-projected his "pantomimes lumineuses" onto a screen by means of a complicated mirror-and-lens system (figure 2). The images were hand-painted on long strips of transparent celluloid. Because his apparatus utilized many general principles of cinema, and because he projected "moving pictures" to an audience, Reynaud may be justifiably considered a forerunner of cinema. But his actual contribution to the history of the animated film is more romantic than real. Conceptually his programs were not far removed from nineteenth-century lantern shows, and there is no sign that his charming Pierrot plays influenced any of the early animators. Reynaud's method of drawing directly on film had little instruction to offer. It is unlikely that any of the pioneers of animation patronized his productions at the Musée Grévin (which, after all, were replaced by cinematographic projections after about 1900), or even knew of his work.

As many pioneers of animation later recalled, it was not any of these optical devices that inspired them. Rather, it was flipbooks—sequential drawings that produced an illusion of motion when thumbed—that first whetted their curiosity. The widely published motion-study photographs of Muybridge and Marey provided all the data needed for the analysis and reconstruction of movement image by image.

Significantly, the first animated films were concerned with making objects appear to move with a mysterious life of their own—what we would now call tabletop animation.

Figure 2.
Eugène Poyet, "Le Théâtre optique d'Emile Reynaud," *La Nature*, July 23, 1892.

Chapter 1 peers into this mysterious aura and discovers that it arose from a combination of myth and marketing. It was nearly a decade until "cartoons"—animated drawings—became recognizable. Chapter 2 examines the problematic relationship of these films to other popular traditions, including comic strips, stage, and journalism. Direct iconographic links to precinematic optical traditions are still hard to find. A more important source proves to be the cinema itself and its already embedded "trickfilm" genre, of which Georges Méliès was the undisputed master. Méliès and his imitators capitalized on the selective recording properties of the camera. By stopping the filming at carefully calculated moments, making planned substitutions, and then restarting the camera, they could produce illusions of startling metamorphoses. If any technical predecessor of animation need be identified, it would certainly be the stop-action substitution technique. From it Blackton, Booth, Chomón, and others evolved their own techniques. (Méliès probably never shot any true animated footage.) The iconography and primitive narrative structures of animation grew out of this kind of filmmaking.

Between 1908 and the first world war animation was gradually defined as a cinema genre by Emile Cohl and Winsor McCay, the subjects of chapters 3 and 4. Before then it was a "special effect" and not unlike other effects such as irises and lap dissolves. But with these artists, the technology began to be associated with recurring dramatic situations, narrative structures, iconography, and expectations concerning content. Especially strong bonds with the popular press were forged.

At the same time, the model of "regular" cinema elicited the need for longer and more narratively complicated films. But the tedious manual labor of drawing, modeling, and cutting (depending on which technique the animator chose) inhibited commercialization. Two competing solu-

tions were found, one developed by Raoul Barré and the other by Earl Hurd and John Bray. The latter was more viable, in part because it was protected by patents. This "cel" process would transform animation, in terms of both its commercial range and its graphic qualities. Equally important, though, was the structure of the studio entity itself, one of the concerns of chapters 5 and 6.

Despite the ravages of the war, significant animation work was done in Europe. The internationality of early animation cannot be ignored; chapter 7 provides at least a glance at the major contributors.

Meanwhile, the major American studios were consolidating their personnel and perfecting their techniques. Comic strips provided material to feed the ever-increasing appetite for gag material. After 1918, it becomes increasingly risky to make generalizations about this complicated business. As production costs rose, small producers tended to disappear and three or four major studios vied for the lion's share. A new risk began to loom: The market was being saturated, and the tired gags, recycled week after week, began to lose the audience's attention. During the 1920s the hegemony of the comic-strip hero waned, and characters developed exclusively for the screen, such as Koko the Clown and Felix the Cat, began to thrive. It was no longer a question of technical development; animation methods were being standardized and were reaching a plateau. It was a question of developing characters that audiences would respond to in personal, not stereotypical, ways. This mature studio period was marked primarily by the emergence of the "continuity character series." The characters gradually drifted away from caricatural representations of humans toward representations of animals. Chapter 8 outlines this trend and brings us back to Felix the Cat in chapter 9 for a closer analysis and a summation of the goals and aspirations of the animation artist.

It would be misleading to present the history of early animation solely as a chronicle of inventions, patents, titles, and anecdotes, although that approach has its place. It is also necessary to analyze it as an ongoing attempt to organize certain concerns and interests shared by animator and audience into an entertaining yet significant structure. Like mainstream cinema, animated cinema exists in part as an orchestration of myths and mores—some treated overtly, others couched in narrative and visual metaphors. For some of us, unraveling this extraordinary communication network in a seemingly simple art form is the most exciting aspect of viewing early animation.

This book argues that the early animated film was the location of a process found elsewhere in cinema but nowhere else in such intense concentration: self-figuration, the tendency of the filmmaker to interject himself into his film. This can take several forms; it can be direct or indirect, and more or less camouflaged. Identifying and tracing the various permutations over the years is a task the animation historian willingly accepts.

To interject oneself into one's film is a fairly audacious thing to do. But this tendency, which persisted throughout the three decades, seems on the evidence of the films' contents and the memories of veteran animators to have been real and conscious. At first it was obvious and literal; at the end it was subtle and cloaked in metaphors and symbolic imagery designed to facilitate the process and yet to keep the idea gratifying for the artist and the audience. Part of the animation game consisted of developing mythologies that gave the animator some sort of special status. Usually these were very flattering, for he was pictured as (or implied to be) a demigod, a purveyor of life itself. This aspect of animation has been perceived by sensitive viewers, and was first expressed by Gilbert Seldes in 1932:

Out of hundreds of animated cartoons, I can recall only two or three which were wholly bad; even the imitative ones and those lacking in ingenuity gave some sort of pleasure. This suggests that something in the form itself is a satisfaction to us. And that satisfaction, I think, is the childish one which the movie as a whole had in its beginning and which long custom and the injection of dialogue has taken away from the photographed drama. It is the pleasure in magic, in seeing the impossible happen. . . . In the early days we looked at a movie and marveled that a picture could be set into motion. Now we do not think of the picture—only of the actors. The animated cartoon shows us in movement something naturally inert, and it is essentially the satisfaction of magic that we get out of it.[3]

Two years later, art historian Erwin Panofsky echoed Seldes's suspicions: "The very virtue of the animated cartoon is to animate, that is to say, endow lifeless things with life, or living things with a different kind of life. It effects a metamorphosis. . . ."[4]

This exhilarating sensation that life is somehow being created before the spectator's eyes arises to greater and lesser extents from all animation, and perhaps constitutes its cinematic reason for being. But a detailed survey will show that this perception does not arise from a mystical "something in the form itself" or from a vague "virtue" of the medium. On the contrary, this genesis theme is the result of the animator's presenting himself in the role of life giver—not mysteriously, but deliberately and (as the history of the medium unfolds) with increasing subtlety and expertise until finally we take for granted that the animator can vivify things that could never otherwise have existed. Part of our enjoyment of Felix and his animated companions depends on our vicarious participation in the ritual of incarnation.

1 The Secret of the Haunted Hotel

Animation has bred a myth about its own origins that goes, according to the film historian's lore, like this: Animation was virtually unknown until 1907. It was then that *L'Hôtel hanté* opened in Paris. The public response to this first animated film was so strong that all the French producers racked their brains trying to figure out the tricks that made objects move by themselves. After considerable difficulty, the secret was discovered and the history of cartoons could begin.

A close look at this legend shows that at least one part is true: *The Haunted Hotel* was a tremendous success. It was produced by the American Vitagraph company and released in the United States in March 1907. Business was so brisk that almost a year later it was still promoted as one of the company's "recent hits."[1] It was directed by James Stuart Blackton, cofounder of Vitagraph, and photographed by his partner, Albert E. Smith. Like most films of the period, it began with a rather stagey long shot of a weary traveler seeking shelter at a mysterious hotel. Smith and Blackton were unconcerned with the originality of their plot; the idea had been filmed already by Georges Méliès, the French trick specialist, in *L'Hôtel empoisonné* and *Le Manoir du diable* (1896), *Le Château hanté* and *L'Auberge ensorcelée* (1897), and *L'Auberge du bon repos* (1903). In England, G. A. Smith had shot *The Haunted Castle* (1897), and in

Notes

Introduction

1. Robert E. Sherwood, "The silent drama," *Life,* November 22, 1922.

2. Of the many pictorial surveys, the best remains Ceram (Marek), *The Archaeology of the Cinema.* For scholarly discussions of protocinematic devices see Deslandes, *Histoire comparée du cinéma,* vol. I, and Centre Nationale de la Cinématographie/Le Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers, *Image et magie du cinéma Français.*

3. Gilbert Seldes, *The New Republic,* June 8, 1932.

4. Panofsky, "Style and medium in the motion picture."

Chapter 1

1. *Moving Picture World,* March 30, 1907; February 8, 1908.

2. *Photo-Ciné-Gazette,* February 15 and April 15, 1907.

3. Talbot, *Moving Pictures,* p. 242.

4. Issues of *L'Orchestre* and other Paris trade publications, 1907–08; *Le Fascinateur,* February 1908.

5. Victorin Jasset, "Etude sur la mise en scène," *Ciné-Journal,* October 8, 1911.

6. *Phono-Ciné-Gazette,* April 15, 1907.

7. Gustave Babin, "Les Coulisses du Cinématographe," *L'Illustration,* March 28 and April 4, 1908.

8. Arnaud and Boisyvon, *Le cinéma pour tous,* p. 73.

9. Smith and Koury, *Two Reels and a Crank,* p. 51. There are no surviving examples of these early animated films.

10. Eileen Bowser, "The Brighton Project," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* IV, no. 4 (fall 1979), p. 534.

11. Carlos Fernandez Cuenca, *Segundo de Chomón, Maestro de la fantasia y de la tecnica.* I am grateful to Donna D. Clarke for