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Abdicating All Mental Law

'I'm History; No, I'm mythology; I don't care what I am – I'm free !!'
– The Genie in Disney's *Aladdin*

Arguably, America has produced four major indigenous art forms. The Western (in film and fiction); jazz; the Broadway musical and the animated cartoon. The cartoon has borrowed liberally from the former, and indeed embraced all other forms in the arts; its inclusiveness part of its distinctive vocabulary. Fundamentally, though, animation in the United States has been characterised by a desire to express *difference* and *otherness*, and as Stefan Kanfer has recently noted, it is one of the few major art forms 'that has been able to widen its audience as it experimented and grew'.[1] From the cartoon to the computer-animated film it has engaged with the contradictory conditions of American mores, reflected the anxieties within American culture, and offered insight into the mytho-political, and indeed, mytho-poetic zeitgeist of a nation. The critical positioning of animated films as merely populist texts, however, has long proved to be inhibiting in properly acknowledging its omnipresent significance as a potentially radical art form and a culturally determined language of high social significance. The following discussion seeks to re-position the animated film in America within a range of critical frameworks which demonstrate the freedoms of its vocabulary and the complexity of its meanings.

Mark Langer has usefully summarised the trajectory of animation criticism, identifying how animation has laboured to achieve a degree of cultural capital, achieving its current, more favourable status through the efforts of 'animatophiles'over the last thirty years. Participants include 'animation company owners and employees, animation scholars, devoted fans and obsessive consumers of animation and its ancilliary products',[2] who have encouraged an engagement with the specialised particularities

of the form, and its specific rewards. Even in a contemporary period when animation enjoys increased critical attention, however, the idea that a 'cartoon' can support aesthetic and cultural analysis, and demonstrate valid positions about social preoccupations is often met with doubt and incredulity. Virtually all critical accounts have an overt or implied 'justification' of why it is crucial to address and analyse animated films. In some way this may be accounted for by the sense that the great era of animation in United States from the late 1920s to the early post-war period is in itself perceived to be the summation of the form's achievements.[3] Anything, thereafter, it is implied, merely lacks quality or credibility, and is effectively a pale shadow of the former affectivities of such films. It is certainly the case that it was in this period that animation received most critical attention, though this must be immediately qualified by the fact that what this essentially means is that the pre-eminence of the Disney studio and its output became synonymous with animation in a way that virtually marginalised any address of other work. Gregory Waller has observed that Disney not only received creditable attention in academic and art-related periodicals like the *Journal of Aesthetics* and *Art Criticism* but also enjoyed wider dissemination in general-interest and cosmopolitan magazines like *The New Yorker*, as well as the established news and entertainment industry publications. Tellingly, he notes that in 1942, Manny Farber 'offered the first and only appreciative assessment of Leon Schlesinger's Merrie Melodies unit at Warners published during this entire decade'.[4] In a sense this dominance has to a certain degree remained, but the more important point is how this critical paradigm which rightly elevated the work of the Disney studio to the status of 'art' while acknowledging its reassuring populist and ideological credentials, also managed to marginalise for many years the work of other pioneers in the field and the achievements in other areas of cartoon animation. The recognition of Disney's achievement was to create a hierarchical effect in the field which inevitably demoted the significance of other forms. With the passing of the 'Golden era' came the rise of television and the concomitant fall of critical interest in animation as both an important art-form and critical idiom. Arguably, animation as an industry only survived in the United States because of its albeit 'reduced' presence on television, and further, that in sustaining its presence ultimately facilitated its revival in the 1980s and 1990s. It is clear that animation did have a period of apparently less artistically significant work in what may be termed the 'post-theatrical' hiatus, but, curiously, this did enable particular

forms of pragmatic experimentation to take place, and the socio-cultural function of animation to be re-determined.

Interestingly, the 'art' of animation has been valorised in the 1990s by the production of individual animation cels configured as valuable paintings. The world wide web promotes gallery after gallery of cel-animated art; some specialising in cels drawn from contemporary films; others speaking of rare works from the Golden era. Animation's relationship to the principles and effects of 'Fine Art' is, of course, crucial in evaluating its aesthetic agendas, but it is also intrinsically related to its sociological value and meaning. Undeniably, the enduring cultural kudos of traditional painting practices has been co-opted by gallery owners and art critics alike in order to prioritise its artistic bases and principles, but while raising the profile of animation as an art work at one level, it has done much to distract from properly recognising the distinctive aesthetic language and vocabulary of animation, and its place as a socio-cultural document of its time. There remains little recognition that the very aesthetic values in Disney's work in the 1930s and 1940s championed by eminent figures like Philippe Lamour, Jean Charlot and Elie Faure, which fully acknowledged how aesthetic approaches privileged certain ideas and issues, are those which inform the current address of animation as an art. Simply, a market has emerged for particular images from well loved films, and little analysis has attended this phenomenon which embraces individual images in their own right beyond the familiarity and appeal of their source. Crucially, though, the key issue remains that to merely designate one frame as the 'art' of the animated film is to resist the recognition of animation as a language of moving images characterised by codes and conventions unique to its execution. Another aspiration of this discussion, therefore, is to recover the more formal critical perspectives which properly define the status of animation as a form, and apply them beyond the Disney canon into the whole realm of animated film in the United States.

These perspectives which endorse the primacy of animation as a specific and unique form of creative expression sit at an extreme from its position within the academic practice of Film Studies; its perceived role as merely 'children's entertainment'; and its previously marginalised function as a television 'schedule filler'. In the contemporary era, however, this is changing. The overall boom in the production of animated feature films – Disney now competing with Dreamworks SKG – and the creation of animated sit-coms – *The Simpsons*, *King of the Hill*, *South*

Park and so on, have altered both the cultural climate for, and the cultural cachet related to animation. Similarly, the emergence of niche children's channels, and dedicated broadcast outlets like the Cartoon Network, have necessitated a re-evaluation of the place of cartoons and animated films in aesthetic and commercial terms. The development of Nickelodeon, the Disney Channel and the Fox Network competing head-to-head against the majors, ABC, CBS and NBC, in the children's market has led to a contradictory position for animation within the realms of the political and creative economy available through broadcasters. On the one hand, this degree of competition has necessitated significantly reduced licence fees and production budgets for new work, and forced small- to medium-sized production companies to agree new pre-sales and distribution agreements in order to maintain their company status and a competitive position in a buoyant and ever changing marketplace. On the other hand, this has meant an increased prominence for animation in a number of broadcast contexts, creating an eclectic mix on all broadcast channels of 'classic' cartoons from the 1930s to the 1950s; previous 'home produced' television animation; imported series from other countries, (most notably Japan, but increasingly Britain has a foothold in overseas markets with programmes like *Noddy*, *Maisy*, *Kipper* and *Bob the Builder*); and new work, produced in recent times, on much reduced investment.[5]

The Hanna Barbera back catalogue, for example, and a range of Warner Bros. *Looney Tunes* and *Merrie Melodies* have found their place on the Cartoon Network, seeking its original audience of 'baby boomers', and now, their children. Original series like *Jonny Quest* have been updated as *The Real Adventures of Jonny Quest* in order to accommodate computer-generated animation and 'modernise' the science fictional premise of the series. Fully computer-generated series, like *Starship Troopers*, *Max Steel* and *Beast Creatures*, contemporise this aesthetic further, echoing the graphic space and violent confrontational thematics of many computer games and their virtual environments. The often neglected *Reboot*, made in the United States by British artists, was a pioneer in this area by setting its narrative within a computer environment, aping Disney's feature film, *Tron* (1982). The popularity of mainstream Japanese feature animé is also reflected in the presence of *Pokémon*, *Digimon* and *Dragonball Z* in the schedules, and may be traced in many elements of contemporary American cartoons. Ironically, many 'American' cartoons have often been made in Japanese, Korean and Taiwanese production houses.

These factors have made a significant impact in relation to the idea that animation could embrace and facilitate serious issues and agendas. Previously, the predominantly comic discourses of the most popular animated films have also been viewed as antithetical to any notions of seriousness. This has been misleading in a number of ways, most notably in maintaining a historically determined, and hugely misinformed, view which ultimately confuses seriousness with solemnity, and comedy with 'escapism', rather than relevance. While it is the case that some forms of comic address do not seek to be didactic or have purpose or intent in making statements, the very language of comedy, like animation, is an intrinsically alternative one, speaking to a revisionist engagement with the 'taken-for-granted'. In the American context, it is especially the case that animation in all its forms, not merely those played for laughs, has served to operate as a distorting and re-positioning parallel genre both to established live-action film and television texts (and their predominantly conservative codes of representation), but more importantly, to society in general. Ironically, its status as a peripheral form, or more precisely a form which does not carry with it connotations of earnest sociological engagement, has legitimised what might be characterised by what former *Monty Python* animator Terry Gilliam has called 'wonderful acts of smuggling' in regard to representing or expressing different viewpoints, ideas and emotional states.[6]

Animation – simplistically, the art of making films frame-by-frame – serves to question and challenge the received knowledges which govern the physical laws and normative socio cultural orthodoxies of the 'real world'. Roger Cardinal suggests that at its most radical, 'the whole idea of the animated film is to suppress the categories of normal perception', and ultimately, to 'annihilate the very conditions of rationality'.[7] This is not merely the view of the detached aesthetic or cultural theoretician, however, but one which drove the imperatives of the animators at Warner Bros.' 'Termite Terrace', the nickname given to the old studio buildings inhabited by Tex Avery, Chuck Jones and their colleagues. Donald Crafton notes that this was a distinctiveness always understood by the animators-turned-scribes of the in-house bulletin, 'The Exposure Sheet'. Appositely, story-writer Michael Maltese writes,

> Set aside your indignations,
> And regard the machinations
> Of the animation industry with awe;

Nowhere else in all the nation,
Will you find a near relation
To this abdication of all mental law.[8]

This is an especially crucial observation when attempting to evaluate how the very language of animation is deployed in the service of ideologically charged material, or merely re-determines the consensual paradigms of everyday existence in any one cultural or national formation. The highly rationalised, some would argue 'naturalised', agendas played out through the majority of American televisual or cinematic texts, still often endorsing the values and characteristics of cultural populism, become subject to re-definition. Crudely, for example, at one level, *The Simpsons* is merely a variant on the American sit-com tradition, including the dominant stereotype of the white, blue-collar buffoon, and the resolution of dysfunctional aspects of family life, but its very status as an animation asks an audience to re-perceive supposedly everyday issues, themes and knowledge. The management of many texts in the United States in order to secure narrative, moral and commercial coherence is undermined when the animated text itself refuses management, annihilating the codings of the kinds of social existence predominant in soaps, sit-coms and generic dramas. Ironically, a text like *The Simpsons* demonstrates a more limited degree of challenge than other animated texts but within the limits of generic expectation in which it works it revises a number of predominant paradigms which have come to define aspects of America and 'Americanness'. There is a long tradition of this kind of subversion which stretches back to the animated 'stag' film *Buried Treasure* (1928), featuring the animated penis, Eveready Harton; the titillating Betty Boop cartoons of the 1930s – *Silly Scandals* (1931), *Boop Oop A Doop* (1932), *Chess Nuts* (1932), and *Betty Boop's Penthouse* (1933); the John Magnusson and Jeff Hale animation of a Lenny Bruce routine, *Thank You Mask Man* (1968); Ralph Bakshi's *Fritz the Cat* (1972) and *Coonskin* (1975); and the work of contemporary iconoclasts like Bill Plympton and John Kricfalusi.[9]

Beyond the intrinsic de-construction of a more literal conception of the image offered by animation, there are its qualities as a vocabulary that both illustrate and define the execution and consequences of 'movement' in its widest terms. Stanley Cavell has usefully delineated animation as a model in which the viewer is presented with 'drafts of the world's

animism' and the essential 'circulation or metamorphosis out of and into the human organism'.[10] This constitutes animation as a mode of expression which both re-defines the material world and captures the oscillation between interior and exterior states, thus engaging with matters both of (aesthetic, spiritual and intellectual) consciousness and the reception of a pragmatic (socio-cultural) 'reality'. Consequently, this results in an ontological equivalence in the animated text which recognises the co-existent parity of perceived orthodoxies in representing the literal world and the expression of dream states, memory and the fragmentary practice of 'thought' itself. As Czechoslovakian surrealist animator Jan Svankmajer has observed, this serves to disturb 'the utilitarian habits of the audience, to unsettle them, [sometimes] for subversive purposes'.[11] It is clear that the vocabulary of animation challenges the notion of passive acceptance through the sustained creation of a self-evidently artificial, constantly evolving but pertinent aesthetic of pictorial mediation. At once, and at any time, the animated form is both a depiction and an interpretation, collapsing the sense of differentiation between the literal and the imagined. As Hugh Kenner has noted when discussing the tension between violence and sentimentality in Chuck Jones' films, and most particularly, *Bully for Bugs* (1953), 'despite everything its script inflicts on a bull we sure never think [it is] real ... [but] that's a tricky concept. For if we don't think of a bull the cartoon gets trivial, whereas thinking of a beast in pain expels us from the cartoon world. But that is not a beast, therefore not in pain; it's a wondrous arrangement of lines and color [*sic*] and movement'.[12] Consequently, the cartoon becomes inherently metaphysical because it is playing out creative ideas which are extrapolated from, and interpretive of, observational and representational codings. This invariably results in expression which moves beyond the recognisable limits of the material world in order to comment upon them. If nothing else the American cartoon tradition alone has re-determined how the parameters of 'law and order' may be interpreted psychologically, politically and geographically.

Attempts to grapple with these issues have often superficially floundered on the basis of viewing animation only as a mode of 'fantasy', or as a language which works as an approximation of the less stable but seemingly cogent image systems which have been determined within the practices of fine art – most notably, surrealism, impressionism and expressionism. Crudely, of the main cartoon studios, it was Disney that most embraced impressionism (though this is couched within a

predominantly realist aesthetic); Warner Brothers, the dynamics of the surreal, especially in the cartoons of Tex Avery and Bob Clampett; and the Fleischer Brothers, the use of expressionism, in a way that comes to define the notion of a 'cartoon noir'. This will be explored further through the analysis of texts, but here it is interesting to note that Hermann Warm, designer on the German expressionist classic, *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1919), and a key figure in the Berlin Sturm group promoting expressionism in all art forms, suggested that 'films must be drawings brought to life',[13] while earlier in 1916, director Paul Wegener unconsciously anticipates the evolution and importance of the animated film when he says, 'I can imagine a kind of cinema which would use nothing but moving surfaces, against which there would impinge events that would still participate in the natural world but transcend the lines and volumes of the natural'.[14] Lotte Reiniger, the creator of cut-out silhouette animation, for example, drew directly upon these inspirations in the development of her work,[15] but such debate was not unusual in cultures both in Europe and the United States, which were developing the whole concept of 'film art'. It is a debate, however, that even within the contemporary era, which while still having validity, runs up against the perception of film largely as a mass entertainment medium *per se*, and the clogging proliferation and cultural saturation of popular and academic film criticism. Even within this context, however, it remains the case that animation still requires championing as a 'film art' in its own right. The challenge in 'animation' is to recognise its presence, achievement and uniqueness as a film form, but invariably this issue is coloured by the return to a view of animation as an inexact method and aesthetic, and an anxiety about the perception of the form as one which may be accepted and recognised as the facilitator of progress in the visual arts. A premise it is *actually* achieving on its own terms and within the currencies of new Hollywood production. Again, as Waller has noted of the Classic Disney era, this desire to properly place animation in its most appropriate critical and creative culture has resulted in unhelpful divisions because on the one hand some writers like Jean Charlot readily elevated animation, acknowledging its seemingly highbrow credentials, while others like Dorothy Grafly rooted animation in a 'folk' tradition which resisted the obscurities and aspirations of modern art.[16] Even within the parameters of the latter, though, important aspects remain which speak to ideas and issues beyond the cultural mainstream. As Erwin Panofsky noted of early cartoons in 1934:

> They retain the most important folkloristic elements – sadism, pornography, the humor engendered by both, and moral justice – almost without dilution and often fuse these elements into a variation on the primitive and inexhaustible David-and-Goliath motif, the triumph of the seemingly weak over the seemingly strong; and their fantastic independence of the natural laws gives them the power to integrate space with time to such perfection that the spatial and temporal experiences of sight and hearing come to be almost incontrovertible.[17]

These achievements in themselves define 'difference' as a mode of expression which collapses the expectations of cinematic photo-realism, narrational orthodoxy and determinist representation into a form of cinema predicated on a more primal and unconscious expression which recalls and encourages the most progressive of creative impulses. It is my own contention, therefore, that animation is a child of the modernist principle, and is concerned with the consistently evolving premises of 'modernity' even within the contentious terrain of the post-modern era and the populist agendas of American culture. At every point of social, cultural and artistic development, animation has expressed the continuing tension between a medium in which innovation and creativity can continually take place while aligning with, and depicting the most human of needs, desires, thoughts and feelings. Consequently, it is perhaps inevitable that animation in America must be understood as the bastard child of its own avant garde, insinuating itself into spaces available to it at the moments of significant change within America's emergent culture. Animation, then, in the United States is not fantasist, but the language of projection and sublimation, played out in both populist contexts and creative 'arthouses' which did not recognise or describe themselves as such. As Robert McKee has noted from a highly pragmatic perspective in promoting the deep structures of story-telling in screenwriting, 'there is no necessary contradiction between art and popular success, nor a necessary connection between art and Art film'.[18]

One need only remark upon Disney's own self-consciousness about, and suspicion of, 'culture' to recognise that the mixture of humility and aesthetic ignorance which characterised his response was a resistance to foregrounding the status he perceived in 'art' and its apparent remove from the entertainment he wanted to provide for the average American.[19] Of course, this is also closely related to the idea of Disney's model of creating animation through an industrial and commercial process which

readily denied the specific artistic credibilities of individual creators and was predicated upon the 'branding' of the animated film in his own name. To demote the aesthetic in order to promote the spectacle in animation does much, however, to misrepresent its actual achievement, and the ideological and philosophic engine at its heart. Understanding this has divided critics and commentators throughout the century of animated film from America, and the debates which have characterised its evolution as a form have persistently engaged with this issue.

In general, criticism of the animated film is often predicated on its distinctiveness as an embodiment of 'pure cinema', and, most particularly, intrinsically related to what Disney had achieved by the 1930s, than in its more prototypic or various forms. This has configured animation in opposition to 'realism' instead of being recognised as an artistic interrogation of 'the real'. More often, more populist, if detailed and highly informed journalistic profiles of Disney himself or his studio have become a vehicle by which a particular kind of 'mainstreaming' has occurred, little challenged by more leftist critiques of the 'sweatshop' principle of industrial animation. Only among film art critics and practitioners did some assessment of meaning and effect in the animated film enter the debate, which soon gave way to analyses of issues of taste and creativity.[20] What is clear, though largely unacknowledged, however, is the fact that animation credibly supported and sustained this breadth and depth of interest and criticism. The animated film clearly said something different about American culture, and said it in a different voice. In many senses its emergence was grounded in what had become typically American grand narratives – pioneers creating a language of expression which explored new frontiers; apparently ordinary people applying their artisanal skills to achieve fulfilment as individuals and as progressive working communities; succeeding within the harsh conditions of industrial capitalism and the new machine age; expressing the desire for a liberal democratic consensus that embraced utopian values and ideals. At the very same time as animation spoke to these principles, however, it insisted upon its intrinsic difference and appeal, which ironically was concerned with unconsciously and unknowingly playing out the differential and progressive concerns of an avant-garde perspective. Crucially, as Stephen Dwoskin has noted, 'Even in the cartoon or dramatic animated film, the drawn image that represents figurative forms still has a stylized and generalized feeling rather than attempting

photographic realism'[*sic*].[21] It is this sense of 'style' and the notion of an expression of 'feeling' which underpins even what might be regarded as the most orthodox of animated films. These elements inform the very subjectivities and personal visions that characterise the most extreme examples of more experimental film art, but their place within what has become naturalised as a mainstream corporate entertainment practice should not detract from their presence and execution, both in animation's evolution as an art-form and as populist cinema. As Joe Adamson has warned though, 'The stylization, the exaggeration, the free-wheeling disregard for earthly reality are liberating enough for a scene or two, but it's a thrill that can wear out pretty quickly, unless it's given guidance beyond the momentary. The liberation is inherent in the medium; the control is up to the individual director.'[22] These points begin to advance an argument for animation as an intrinsically *auteurist* medium, and though this is clearly complex in the light of a great deal of animation from the United States being made within an industrial context, it remains important to address the contributions of individuals in the spirit of determining their particular vision, and, consequently, their particular 'take' on American culture. Repeated viewing of the Warner Bros. cartoon canon clearly shows, for example, that even within the context of 'Termite Terrace', the famed Warner Bros. animation studio, there were very different aesthetic and thematic inflections in the work of different directors, most notably Tex Avery, Bob Clampett, Chuck Jones and Frank Tashlin. Even lesser known figures like Isadore 'Friz' Freleng, Bob McKimson and Art Davis clearly had their own style. Writers and commentators have increasingly recognised this and named key figures across the industry as instrumental in the development of the genre, but have not really defined the principles of authorship underpinning these assumptions.[23] Again, the very attempt to delineate these factors has become a key stumbling block for a number of critics who can somehow sense the distinctiveness of animation, both in terms of its language, and its self-evident demonstration of an individual identity, but cannot quite articulate it.[24] This has resulted, ironically quite usefully, in speculative practices which have only enhanced the credibility of animation, and, perhaps most importantly from the point of view of this discussion, made claims for the animated film which prioritise its uniquely American qualities, while also addressing the ways in which other European and global art-forms have been absorbed within, and impacted upon its meanings and outcomes.

William Kozlenko, writing in 1936, at the moment when the Disney studio was fully establishing its prominence in the field, is merely one speculator, trying to assess the unique appeal of the animated cartoon.[25] Appositely, yet ultimately dismissively, he suggests that psychologists would claim that the appeal for adult audiences would lie in the indulgent regression into an adolescent state or in the opportunity to re-live the freedoms of a child's uninhibited imagination. Certainly, the child in its early years perceives animism both in the animate and inanimate, and clearly as a model by which the appeal of the animated film may be understood, this is a persuasive claim. Further, Kozlenko's view tells us much about the ways in which animation embodies a resistance to aspects of the civilising and socialising processes in western cultures, but for Kozlenko the absolute promise of animation lies in its claims to be free 'from the restrictions of an oppressive reality', and therefore to enable audiences to accept 'the logic of fantasy'. He concludes, thereafter, that in engaging with this logic – presumably the fundamental yet not articulated terms of animation itself – that the audience has to 'accept its conclusions, and though the resultant situations may be unlike those of reality, it does not question them'. For Kozlenko, then, animation is only escapism. It offers a parallel universe determined by its own inner logic, which ultimately requires acceptance not interpretation. This viewpoint wholly misreads the function of animation that I have already alluded to in relation to sublimation and projection, refusing the ways that animation has actually envisaged the wish-fulfilling dimensions of the dream, and re-formed the world in order to inflect representations of 'the real' with caricaturial comment and critique. Arguably, animation in its entirety may be viewed as a fundamental questioning and interrogation of the representational apparatus upon which the dissemination of ideas rests.

Kozlenko maps the trajectory from the 'world of limited movement to one of unlimited movement' in animation as the playing out of 'unrealised objectives', and ultimately, into the realms of a dream. He fails to note, however, whose 'unrealised objectives' these are, or why this parallel dream-like expression is required to accommodate them. This implicit refusal to accept the language of animation as anything more than the achievement of the tangibly unrealisable is to ignore its acts of deconstruction and re-construction, and the distinctive characteristics of

re-envisaging and re-determining material existence and its psychological and emotional premises.[26] Inevitably, 'the dream' remains a convenient parallel to the language of animation because of its apparently 'like' qualities – most notably, the seemingly uninhibited free-play of imagery. Arguably, animation may potentially be understood on the same terms and conditions, and lend itself to psychoanalytic interpretation. This may prove to be especially crucial in defining how animated films may be compared to dream-states at the level of identifying the unrealised objectives Kozlenko highlights, and the degree of wish fulfilment played out in these texts. Martin Grotjahn suggests, for example, that '[some] symbolic creations of little men trying to deal with the big troubles of our time may be seen in Ferdinand the Bull with his passivity, Mickey Mouse with his conquest of the machine, and Superman with his dreams of glory'.[27] This perspective offers a view of animated characters which transcends the subjective nature of any one dream and defines a universal thematic intrinsic to populist definitions of the 'American Dream'. Consequently, animated films within the United States in engaging with particular preoccupations, conscious and unconscious, may be read as projections which sit between 'consciousness' and 'consensuality' defining a terrain which unpacks the ambiguities and contradictions of the American character as it has been defined historically and culturally. In being able to depict this seemingly inarticulable space, animation, even in its most overt and readily understood forms offers a degree of experimentality which oscillates between what Kracauer termed 'plastic beauty'[28] and what Sergei Eisenstein, in a more politicised stance, defined as a 'plasmaticness', which he claims is subversive because: '[In] a country and social order with such a mercilessly standardised and mechanically measured existence, which is difficult to call life, the sight of such "omnipotence" (that is, the ability to become "whatever you wish") cannot but hold a sharp degree of attractiveness'.[29] This latter view is especially provocative in the light of the more ideologically conservative views normally accorded to the Disney canon in particular, and serves as a benchmark for the ways in which animation may be understood as a vocabulary which moves more towards a sense of the 'unregulated', and potentially 'unregulatable'. Animation can, therefore, offer the greatest potential for expressing a variety of divergent points of view, while at the same time accommodating a dominant paradigm of estab-

Kozlenko acknowledges that Disney cartoons do have contemporary social significance from 1933 onwards because, in his view, they exchange the mythical, hypothetical, and dream-like for actual social reference points. He especially cites *Three Little Pigs* (1933) because he can prove its apparent social impact in the appropriation of the film's signature ditty 'Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?' as a rallying cry against the effects of the Depression and as an implied endorsement of Roosevelt's New Deal strategies. Interestingly, Walter Lantz's benchmark 'Oswald the Rabbit' cartoon, *Confidence* (1933), is rarely cited in this way, and yet it is absolutely explicit in its endorsement of Roosevelt's policies as the cure for the ills of the Depression era. Roosevelt advises Oswald that what is required is 'confidence' in the fundamental qualities of the nation, so returning to his small town context, Oswald literally injects the serum of 'confidence' into the local community, and America's economic and social stature is immediately revived nationally and globally. Ironically, it seems that the 'implied' message of the Disney cartoon, matched with an increasingly recognisable sense of status in the Disney 'brand' seems more persuasive than the quasi-propaganda of the Lantz film. Either way, the cartoon must be viewed as directly concerned with social conditions and the belief in progress.

Curiously, Kozlenko's point about *Three Little Pigs* operates as a recognition of the tensions I have already begun to explore in this introductory context. Firstly, it is clear that cartoons were grounded (consciously and unconsciously) in social reference points from the turn of the century and their initial emergence as a form, clearly long pre-dating *Three Little Pigs*. Secondly, animation is defined by the way that it uses the hypothetical and propositional in its interrogation of social reference points. Caught up in endorsing Disney's increasingly hyper-realist stylings – 'aesthetically questionable precisely because they comply with the cinematic approach'[30] – Kozlenko enjoys the mode of animation 'which entails no unhealthy distortion of the world of fact'. In reading animation in this way, Kozlenko, like many others, only promotes the medium as a vehicle for cogent social and political comment when it most approximates the very thing it most disengages with – live-action representation. This also indulges and endorses ideological as well as aesthetic principles, but denies the free-ranging perspectives of the more open and speculative execution of most animated films, even those with overtly propagandistic or informational messages. These perspectives – central to animation as an art – are its truly disruptive and potentially

subversive credentials, but for the most part they have been coralled into the fantasy/reality dichotomy that Kozlenko's piece is predicated upon.

Writing some forty years later, Robert Sklar also suggests that Disney films changed in 1933, delineating a shift from 'fantasy' to 'idealisation'.[31] He does acknowledge, however, that the Disney shorts which most correspond to a 'fantasy' which depicts no obvious social order to existence actually get close to portraying 'the cultural mood, the exhilarating, initially liberating, then finally frightening disorder of the early Depression years'. The 'idealisation' that then follows in Disney's films seems much more in tune with the moral absolutism and social discipline where order becomes paramount and conflict is played out in the certainty that its outcome will be a valuable lesson in the acceptable limits of responsible behaviour. The films from the Warner Bros. and Fleischer Brothers studios were essentially a direct corollary and antidote to this, but arguably Disney films can also be seen in a way that does not confine them to this strict schemata, again, even when they begin to adopt an even greater degree of verisimilitude. As F. E. Sparshott has argued, 'the basic illusion of movement by itself gives an impression not of reality but of a sort of unattributable vivacity'.[32] This is not unlike the perspective offered by veteran Disney designer Zack Schwartz, who suggests that Disney talked of the simultaneity of 'caricature' and 'reality', ultimately arriving 'at the view that "reality" was not the reality of the real world, but conviction'.[33] It remains important to recognise that the dominant paradigms that have come to categorise Disney films, dismiss cartoons, and ghettoise animation in general are all open to question when the alternative perspectives at the heart of the vocabulary of animation are properly recognised. The 'unattributable vivacity' and 'conviction' underpinning what is inevitably a contradictory and ambiguous medium of expression become the clues by which meaning can be attributed, but not fully determined. Consequently, animation in the United States offers the highest degree of discourse, a condition further compounded by the dominance of 'comedy' in the field.

The construction of a 'gag' in itself is a mode of disruption and breech; an alternative version of events and their possible outcomes.[34] As Durgnat has noted the gag is also 'a depersonalisation of emotional release',[35] and again, this usefully chimes with the modes of projection and sublimation I have already accorded to the animated text. In the broad context of American humour, the specific kinds of comic event in animation are distinctive both in their inventiveness and execution, and

as a meta-language by which significant attitudes and models of behaviour are depicted. Animation here offers a particular and historically determined notion of identity, conduct and status constructed through the frameworks necessitated by the comic stylings of a changing American culture from slapstick and visual comedy, through to the new immigrant humour, to post-war subjectivities and the increased levels of cynicism and irony in the contemporary era. As the comic inflections change so does the model of animation accommodating them, and consequently the aesthetic and social sensibility informing them. From the innocent slapstick of Disney's *Playful Pluto* (1934) to the counter-culture satire of *Thank You Mask Man* (1968) to the perverse sex and violence of Bill Plympton's *I Married a Strange Person* (1997), animation has stretched the boundaries of comic representation, and, with that, suggested that what might be previously viewed as a marginal point of view has a much more mainstream currency.

It remains then to address the evolution and development of animation in the United States with a greater degree of openness, taking into account the distinctive vocabulary of animation itself; the theoretical models which have confirmed its status as an art-form with significant sociological meanings and effects; the role of sublimation, projection and distanciation in animated texts as a viable model of alternative and subversive perspectives; and the differing approaches to comedy as they have informed change within animation. The final objective is to analyse the achievements in animation which delineate aspects of America and Americanness in a variety of historical, cultural and thematic contexts. The dominant presence of the Disney canon and the sense of homogeneity in 'the cartoon' has inhibited any potential reading of animation from the United States as anything but a medium which endorses and promotes ideological certainty in the guise of utopian populism and the rhetorical promise of 'the Dream'. At one level, the freedoms of expression available in animation speak rhetorically to the constitutionally determined sense of 'freedom of expression', but at another level, animation facilitates and enables this in a much more troubling and challenging way than has previously been acknowledged. The overused and undervalued term often attributed to the animated cartoon – 'anarchic' – needs considerable re-evaluation in this sense. Ultimately, animation in all of its production contexts has the capacity to subvert, critically comment upon, and re-determine views of culture and social practice. Its very language collapses structural fixities and known frameworks, and

fundamentally is especially responsive to, and expressive of, change. More than any other means of creative expression animation embodies a simultaneity of (creatively) re-constructing the order of things at the very moment of critically de-constructing them. Every animation reorders the world; every anthropomorphised animal or object comments on what it is to be human; every line drawn, object moved, and shape changed is a destabilisation of received knowledge, and in the case of animation in the United States reveals what it is to be an American citizen, and how the 'melting pot' has figuratively and literally become the 'kaleidoscope' of nation and nationality.[36] In enunciating itself, animation enunciates America: history, mythology, freedom.

Notes

1. S. Kanfer, *Serious Business: The Art and Commerce of Animation in America from Betty Boop to* Toy Story (New York: Scribner, 1997), p. 231.
2. M. Langer, 'Animatophilia, cultural production and corporate interests: the case of *Ren & Stimpy*', in J. Pilling (ed.), *A Reader in Animation Studies* (London: John Libbey, 1997), pp 145–50.
3. This view is partly endorsed by what may be regarded as some of the definitive works in animation history, most particularly Michael Barrier's exhaustive and invaluable study of the 'Golden era'. See M. Barrier, *Hollywood Cartoons: American Animation In Its Golden Age* (New York and Oxford: OUP, 1999).
4. G. Waller, 'Mickey, Walt and Film Criticism from *Steamboat Willie* to *Bambi*', in D. Peary and G. Peary (eds), *The American Animated Cartoon* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1980), p. 57.
5. See P. Orton, Keynote Address, 'Animation Means Business' Transcript, Producers Alliance for Cinema and Television, March 2000, pp. 2–5.
6. Interview with the author, April 1996.
7. R. Cardinal, 'Thinking through things: the presence of objects in the early films of Jan Svankmajer' in P. Hames (ed.), *Dark Alchemy: The Films of Jan Svankmajer* (Trowbridge: Flicks Books, 1995), p. 89.
8. D. Crafton, 'The View from Termite Terrace: Caricature and Parody in Warner Bros. Animation' in K. Sandler (ed.), *Reading the Rabbit: Explorations in Warner Bros. Animation* (New Brunswick and New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1998), p. 119.
9. See K. Cohen, *Forbidden Animation* (Jefferson, North Carolina and London: McFarland & Co, 1997).
10. S. Cavell, 'Words of Welcome', in C. Warren (ed.), *Beyond Document: Essays on Non-Fiction Film* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), p. xix.
11. P. Hames, 'Interview with Jan Svankmajer' in P. Hames (ed.), *Dark Alchemy: The Films of Jan Svankmajer* (Trowbridge: Flicks Books, 1995), p. 111.
12. H. Kenner, *Chuck Jones: A Flurry of Drawings* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1994), p. 33.
13. S. Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (Princeton University Press, 1947), p. 68.

14. L. Eisner, *The Haunted Screen* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1983), p. 33.
15. For a brief discussion of Lotte Reiniger's career and her film *Papageno* (1934), see P. Wells, 'Art of the Impossible' in G. Andrew (ed.), *Film: The Critic's Choice* (Lewes: The Ivy Press, 2001).
16. G. Waller, 'Mickey, Walt and Film Criticism from *Steamboat Willie* to *Bambi*', in D. Peary and G. Peary (eds), *The American Animated Cartoon* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1980), p. 50.
17. E. Panofsky, 'Style and Medium in Motion Pictures', in G. Mast and M. Cohen (eds), *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings* (London and New York: OUP, 1974), p. 160.
18. R. McKee, *Story* (London: Methuen 1999), p. 89.
19. Quoted in P. Wells, *Understanding Animation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 231.
20. See E. Smoodin (ed.), *Disney Discourse* (London and New York: Routledge/AFI, 1994); J. Wasko, *Understanding Disney* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001).
21. S. Dwoskin, *Film Is* (London: Peter Owen, 1975), p. 230.
22. J. Adamson, 'Suspended Animation', in G. Mast and M. Cohen (eds), *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings* (London and New York: OUP, 1974), p. 395.
23. See, for example, J. Adamson, *Tex Avery: King of Cartoons* (New York: Da Capo, 1975); L. Cabarga, *The Fleischer Brothers Story* (New York: Da Capo, 1988); H. Kenner, *Chuck Jones: A Flurry of Drawings* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994).
24. I am attempting to address some of these issues in P. Wells, *Animation: Genre and Authorship* (London: Wallflower Press (forthcoming)).
25. W. Kozlenko, 'The Animated Cartoon and Walt Disney' in L. Jacobs (ed.), *The Emergence of Film Art* (New York: Hopkinson and Blake, 1969), pp. 246–53.
26. See P. Wells, *Understanding Animation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 68–127.
27. M. Grotjahn, *Beyond Laughter: Humor and the Subconscious* (New York and Toronto: McGraw Hill, 1957), p. 206.
28. S. Kracauer, *Theory of Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 186.
29. J. Leyda (ed.), *Eisenstein on Disney* (London: Methuen, 1988), p. 21.
30. S. Kracauer, *Theory of Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 89.
31. R. Sklar, 'The Making of Cultural Myths – Walt Disney' in D. Peary and G. Peary (eds), *The American Animated Cartoon* (New York: E. P. Dutton 1980), p. 57.
32. F. E. Sparshott, 'Basic Film Aesthetics' in G. Mast and M. Cohen (eds), *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings* (London and New York: OUP, 1974), p. 213.
33. From 'Disney Discourse: On Caricature, Conscience Figures, and Mickey, too' in P. Wells (ed.), *Art and Animation* (Academy Group/John Wiley, 1997), p. 6.
34. P. Wells, *Understanding Animation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 127–87.
35. R. Durgnat, *The Crazy Mirror: Hollywood Comedy and the American Image* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), p. 102.
36. For a useful explanation of these metaphoric positions see J. Macdonald, 'Conceptual Metaphors for American Ethnic Formations' in P. Davies (ed.), *Representing and Imagining America* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), pp. 84–92.

CHAPTER 1

Animation and Modernism

The emergence of the animated film in the United States is coincident with what is recognised as the period of late Modernism. Little work has engaged with the particular problematics animation poses within the dominant paradigms of Modernist thought and achievement. On the one hand, early cartoon animation speaks only to sources in the populist forms of vaudeville and the comic strip,[1] and, as Donald Crafton has noted, also takes its predominant aesthetic from the 'lightning sketch' in its improvisatory and transitory status.[2] On the other hand, it is possible to locate animation within some of the Modernist practices across the arts, and some of the philosophic aspects of the avant garde. Significantly, this re-contextualisation enables animation to be viewed as a progressive language which refuses the ahistorical stances of much Modernist art while at the same time re-determining the formulations of graphic expression beyond the established codes of pictorialism and motion picture design. In this respect animation distinguishes itself from the quickly emerging generic tendencies of the early cinema – itself, perhaps, the embodiment of the Modernist age – by having a specific vocabulary that was different to the language of live-action film. This scarcely acknowledged fact, and the secondary status therefore accorded cartoonal forms, has prevented animation in this period being fully noticed as a new language, and an intrinsically Modern form. Interestingly, this chimes with other aspects of the visual arts in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Nigel Whale has suggested,

> Pictorial art of the period has focused on the surface of the painting itself as the locus of attention, as the flatbed or plain where abstraction articulated the exchanges of perception and memory; this was done in reaction against the pre-Modernist view of painting as a perspective on a version of the visual world.[3]

Animation in the United States at this time is highly correspondent to