

STOPPING THE SHOW:
EARLY SOUND ANIMATION, SPECTACLE, AND THE CINEMA OF ATTRACTIONS
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Stopping the Show: Early Sound Animation, Spectacle, and the Cinema of Attractions

Thesis directed by Assistant Professor Jennifer L. Peterson

This thesis explores the ways in which early sound animation, from approximately 1928 to 1937, can be seen in relation to Tom Gunning's theory of "The Cinema of Attractions." "The Cinema of Attractions" argues that film before 1906 was focused on display rather than storytelling. But, after that point Gunning argues that the "cinema of narrative integration" takes over, and bourgeois didacticism becomes the primary force in filmmaking. This period of animation also focuses on display and spectacle in lieu of classical narrative, and this can be seen through four components. First is the way early sound cartoons reflect what I have deemed "original attractions" (that is, the forms of popular entertainment the term "attractions" was first borrowed from such as carnivals, amusement parks, and vaudeville) in both form and content. Next, the style of rubber hose animation is shown to be central to claiming the spectator's attention through visual engagement. Third, the use of animals in central roles is an attraction, especially with the common use of animal-human hybrids in this era. Finally, the added element of sound is used in a decidedly non-narrative way, both in eschewing dialogue and constantly synchronizing sound and image. These four elements show that for a period of time animation functioned in a similar way to the films described by Gunning as a part of the cinema of attractions. However, similar to the process that happened in early cinema, the animation studios moved toward narrative integration in the mid-1930s. Realism and storytelling became goals, and this is especially true after the release of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (Disney Studios, 1937). The film was such a success that most other studios followed suit, and life-like, narrative-driven animation began to dominate. Like in live-action film, as described by Gunning, the cinema of attractions does not completely disappear in animation after this point; it continues today in various forms, but to a lesser extent than it did over seventy years ago when it briefly dominated.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The “Tom and Jerry Lunch” diner has music notes wafting from it. Inside, Tom and Jerry are cooking and making music. A baby enters, climbs up a stool, and fills a bucket before leaving. One customer orders two fried eggs, which Jerry prepares by placing the order with the cuckoo clock, which promptly rolls out two eggs; those eggs dance on the pan and crack themselves (fig. 1). A brute and a dandy eat next to one another, but when the dandy says, “throw me the salt bozo,” his voice is that of a pirate and the brute responds, “oh for heaven’s sake, why so rough?” in a girly voice. No matter, the salt simply jumps into the dandy’s soup itself (fig. 2). Jerry kneads some dough, turns it into bagels, and rolls them to a mouse who flings them into a bowl. The obese customer next to the bowl orders a cup of coffee, and after Tom delivers it he opens his jacket to reveal a dozen children, all of whom promptly grab bagels. The man dumps his coffee into his coat, and waddles away. Four customers sing, demanding soup. Tom prepares their soup by spinning four bowls on their side and spraying into them with a fire extinguisher, finally sliding the bowls to the hungry customers. Upon their arrival, the soups splash up to the side, show their faces, and sing in harmony “soup,” (fig. 3). The men are thrown spoons, which they play between their teeth before using. The customers finally break into full song, and Tom plays along on the cash register. He quickly stretches the register into a piano, which later grows a mouth and joins the singing (fig. 4). The kettles grow faces and dance, as do the hotdogs, while the men turn their stools into horns. Finally the structure of the whole diner itself is shaking and dancing, as it starts to roll downhill and onto train tracks. When it

finally collides with a train, the diner is completely intact and the train is in pieces, presumably from the sheer power of the joy and fun being had in the diner.

This Tom and Jerry cartoon from 1932, *Pots and Pans* (Van Beuren Studio), is a perfect example of the cartoons being made in America in the early sound period of animation.¹ From 1928 to approximately 1937 animation was often a blend of the absurd and the spectacular, as it is in *Pots and Pans*. Soup sings, a cash register becomes a piano, eggs dance, rough men have girly voices and so on and so forth. Objects change shape easily, music is central, and there is a setting but essentially no narrative. These cartoons are about showing the audience the happenings of a silly world where anything is possible.

The cartoons in the early 1930s were immensely popular, but despite this very little critical writing exists focusing on these films. There is a fair amount of historical writing, yet these books and essays don't consider the form and style of early sound cartoons seriously. Books like *The American Animated Cartoon* (Peary and Peary, 1980), *Cartoons: One Hundred Years of Cinema Animation* (Bendazzi, 1996), *Hollywood Cartoons* (Barrier, 1999), and *Of Mice and Magic* (Maltin, 1980) extensively describe the context in which these cartoons were made, but not the content. I would suspect one reason for this is that cartoons are associated with children and silliness. Though at the time they were made these cartoons were meant for all ages, today the bulk of cartoons produced are intended for children. Thus, it is considered appropriate to describe the circumstances under which they were made, but the cartoons themselves aren't serious enough to warrant critical attention. They are usually only seen on the surface level, with the assumption there is nothing deeper. Furthermore, the bulk of cartoons exist as shorts that ran before the "main

¹ See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ATvd-VPhnUE>

feature” or as television shows, both formats which film scholars are less likely to study. Feature length cartoons do garner some critical attention, but there were very few long format animated films before the success of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (Disney Studios, 1937). So, most cartoons from the early sound period are ignored by scholars, aside from their history, likely due to their current associations with children and their short format.

There are recently, however, a handful of books that do look at the style and content of cartoons critically. *Hollywood Flatlands* (Leslie, 2002) is concerned with animation’s relationship to critical theory, taking ideas put forth by Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer and Sergei Eisenstein (among others) and applying them to early animation. *The Illusion of Life* (Cholodenko, 1991) is a compilation of several essays on animation, taking different focuses and time periods in each essay. Finally, *7 Minutes* (Klein, 1993) is a critical history of animation, interweaving criticism with accounts of the history of the making of these cartoons. There are also books dedicated to specific aspects of the critical study of early animation, especially music (*Tunes for ‘Toons* [Goldmark, 2005] and *The Cartoon Music Book* [Goldmark and Taylor, 2002]), but also animals (*The Animated Bestiary* [Wells, 2009]), race (*The Colored Cartoon* [Lehman, 2007]), Warner Bros.’ cartoons (*Reading the Rabbit* [Sandler, 1998]) and space (*Animating Space* [Telotte, 2010]). The three books listed above – *Hollywood Flatlands*, *The Illusion of Life* and *7 Minutes* – are the primary sources of general critical theory on animation.²

² Another book is forthcoming from University of California Press, titled *Funny Pictures*, which will also be a compilation of critical essays on animation.

Besides not being taken seriously, the lack of critical theory until recently may be attributed in part to the problem of Disney. Walt Disney and the studio he helped found have come to dominate any discourse on popular animation, and especially early popular animation. This is unsurprising on a general level; the brand name of “Disney” is so ubiquitous, it is practically unavoidable.³ But the reality is that there were many other immensely popular studios (and still are) that are ignored in favor of the Disney Studio. There are countless Disney specific books but very few on any other studio, or with a general overview of all studios. Disney has been one of the top studios ever since *Steamboat Willie* came out on November 18, 1928, but it has never been the only studio. This imbalance leaves the incorrect impression that Disney was *the* animation studio of the time, and that all others are simply footnotes on the history of Disney. There is a dearth of critical research done on cartoons of the 1920s and 1930s, and especially research that doesn’t take Disney as its primary focus.

Yet, there is an aspect to these cartoons that is jubilant and invigorating, and deserving of more careful attention. They are unique, both in the history of film and the history of animation. Early sound cartoons display many elements that aren’t found anywhere else, and many of those elements make them into spectacles, in various ways. This exuberance is, as I will show, closely tied to the cinema of attractions, as outlined by Tom Gunning.

The history of popular animation is already fairly well documented. As in all histories there may be a desire to attribute “firsts” to various animators, but this is

³ Interestingly, in recent months it was reported that the Disney Corporation is giving mothers free Disney goods *while they are still in the hospital post-birth*. Brand initiation is taken very seriously.

unwarranted and unnecessary. The origins of animation are numerous: a product of comic strips, a result of lightning sketches, evolved from parlor toys, etc. According to Donald Crafton in *Before Mickey*, “The earliest date suggested for the discovery of this technique [single-frame takes] is 1898.”⁴ Once filmmakers realized the potential of single-frame takes, they began to make trick films and stop motion animation, notably the smash-hit *The Haunted Hotel* (1907) by James Stuart Blackton, in which the upkeep of a hotel appears to be done by spirits. Blackton also made *Humorous Phases of Funny Faces* (1906), which “was really little more than an assembly of unrelated experimental effects” according to Crafton, but is nevertheless an early example of animation (fig. 5).⁵ Both of these films are often called the earliest animated films, though there are examples (some of which are noted by Crafton) of others working prior to these films and as contemporaries.

Through the 1900s and 1910s experimentation continued, especially with the help of Emile Cohl. Donald Crafton notes that “Between 1908 and 1921 [Cohl] had completed more than 250 animated films.”⁶ One of the most notable of these 250 is *Fantasmagorie* (1908), one of the earliest animations made entirely of illustrations. Winsor McCay was another important animator, best known for *Gertie the Dinosaur* (1914) and the stories and characters of *Little Nemo*, which have appeared in numerous films and comics. He is credited by some as having increased the potential for character development in animation, and according to Crafton, “McCay’s graphic art set a standard for later animators. Even after the cel system had abolished the retracing method, with its kinetic subtleties and

⁴ Crafton, *Before Mickey*, 20.

⁵ Crafton, *Before Mickey*, 25.

⁶ Crafton, *Before Mickey*, 59.

suppleness, McCay's influence was still visible throughout the first years of studio animation in the predilection of artists for clear black lines on white backgrounds."⁷

But by the early 1910s, the retracing of each individual frame was entirely impractical and difficult to sustain in a market demanding quick production. John Randolph Bray developed techniques for increasing output, primarily the use of assembly line style production. Earl Hurd patented the technique of cel animation in 1914, before the two combined to form the Bray-Hurd Process Company also in 1914 (though, despite the importance of Hurd's patent, he was not seen as an equal partner).⁸ Cel animation consisted of painting different parts of the frame on clear sheets of celluloid and then layering those cels to create a whole image. This allowed the animator to only redraw the part of the frame that moved, rather than redrawing the entirety of every single frame. Rotoscoping – a technique in which a portion of live-action film is projected onto a stand frame by frame for the animator to trace, creating more true to life movements – was first experimented with in 1915.⁹ These new techniques allowed animation to quickly develop into a more refined art form. Series such as *Out of the Inkwell* (Fleischer Studio, beginning 1918), *Aesop's Film Fables* (Fables Studios, beginning 1921), *Mutt and Jeff* (Barré Studio, beginning 1916) and *Felix the Cat* (Pat Sullivan Studio, beginning 1919), came into production, among others. Similar to comedy series, animators generally set up characters and continued to make simple, single-reel stories about them. The next revolution in animation was the development of sound. Though often the title of "first sound cartoon" is attributed to *Steamboat Willie* (Disney Studios, 1928), there were several prior attempts,

⁷ Crafton, *Before Mickey*, 134.

⁸ Crafton, *Before Mickey*, 153.

⁹ Crafton, *Before Mickey*, 169.

though none as commercially successful as Disney's. With the public's love of *Steamboat Willie* fresh in their minds, studios quickly began to adopt sound into their cartoon production.

It is this point in animation – right after the popularization of sound techniques – that fascinates me the most. The films produced with sound after 1928 seem to represent a unique style; there is a vibrant joy to them, an excitement at the possibilities of the medium. There is also a notable lack of narrative, supplanted instead by gags and tricks. As the animator Dick Huemer once said, "Plots? We never bothered with plots. They were just a series of gags strung together."¹⁰ These cartoons are more interested in showing the audience something than telling them a story, so there is generally little dialogue and lots of wondrous imagery. That is, until the late 1930s when this trend was replaced by a more realistic, narrative-driven style of animation. The proverbial final nail in the coffin may be *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937). Not only was there a concerted effort to make the animation as true to life as possible with *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, but there was also a drive to tell a story, aided by the feature length. Though the film was ultimately difficult to make, the frenzied popularity it received warranted a shift in animation toward this new realistic style. The bouncy, malleable form was no longer fashionable.

A similar shift – from a drive to show something to a drive to tell a story – was previously described by Tom Gunning in his seminal article, "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde," first published in *Wide Angle's* Fall 1986 issue, and later reprinted many times, most significantly in a slightly revised form in *Early Cinema: Space Frame Narrative* (Elsaesser and Barker) in 1990. Gunning's article focuses

¹⁰ Thomas, *Disney's Art of Animation*, 29.

on cinema before 1906 (thus before the refinement and popularization of animation), saying that the films made in that period were qualitatively different from films made afterwards.

According to Gunning, before 1906 films were interested in the “harnessing of visibility.”¹¹ Though they are often only seen in their relationships to later narrative films (ie., development of continuity editing), these films aren’t truly a part of that tradition. Actuality films and non-actuality films are the two most common types made during this pre-1906 period, and he specifies that they should not be seen as narrative and non-narrative films, even if on the surface they may appear to be. These two types are united, according to Gunning, “in a conception that sees cinema less as a way of telling stories than as a way of presenting a series of views to an audience, fascinating because of their illusory power (whether the realistic illusion of motion offered to the first audiences by Lumière, or the magical illusion concocted by Méliès), and exoticism.”¹² After about 1906, though, narrative films become more prominent and what he has dubbed “the cinema of attractions” fades, being replaced by the “cinema of narrative integration.” The cinema of attractions does not disappear completely, and does reappear in other types of films, such as the musical. The “cinema of narrative integration” refers to, “a system by which cinema has followed an integrated process of narrativization.”¹³ These films have a sort of bourgeois didacticism to them; they are meant to teach the audience a moral, whereas films of the cinema of attractions are more related to popular entertainment. Gunning later summarizes the cinema of attractions by saying it “directly solicits spectator attention,

¹¹ Gunning, “The Cinema of Attraction[s],” 381.

¹² Gunning, “The Cinema of Attraction[s],” 382.

¹³ Strauven, *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, 373.

inciting visual curiosity, and supplying pleasure through an exciting spectacle – a unique event, whether fictional or documentary, that is of interest in itself.”¹⁴ These films are about the spectator, not about the diegetic world they try to create. He takes this term “attractions” in part from Sergei Eisenstein, and he makes the case for it as a direction that avant-garde films will take once “the tradition of contemplative subjectivity has perhaps run its (often glorious) course.”¹⁵ The argument and the article made a fairly large impact in the study of early film history and theory, with at least one book, *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded* (Strauven, 2006), dedicated to it alone.

In looking at early sound animation I find that the trends I observe are quite similar to those described by Gunning. I feel that these trends are more than a simple, partial resurgence of the cinema of attractions, as seen in films such as the musical. Instead, the period of animation from 1928 to about 1937 is dominated by a desire to show the audience something, in lieu of telling a story. Of course, this manifests itself differently in the early sound period than in the pre-1906 films Gunning focuses on. Animation itself is quite unique, obviously, and thus the channels through which the filmmakers capture the audience’s attention are different as well. I would like to claim that there are four primary components to the cinema of attractions style found in animation between 1928 and 1937. First, the relationship between early sound cartoons and what I have deemed the “original attractions” is laid out. Original attractions refers to forms of popular entertainment which helped form the idea of the cinema of attractions, the most important of which is vaudeville, but also the circus and minstrelsy. Second, visually, the rubber hose style of

¹⁴ Gunning, “The Cinema of Attraction[s],” 384.

¹⁵ Gunning, “The Cinema of Attraction[s],” 387.

animation that was popular in this era is shown to be a source of spectacle, both in its impossibility and aesthetic appeal. Next is the use of animals in these cartoons. This primarily has to do with our innate desire to look at animals, as well as the spectacle of watching animals act like humans. Finally, the unique ability of animation to showcase the new (at the time) sound technology is its own attraction, especially through constant synchronization. Some of these components are shared wholly or partially with actuality films and non-actuality films, and some are unique to animation. Regardless, all add to the sense that these cartoons are meant to show the audience a spectacle, something that will hold their attention with only a loose sense of story. The stories are used in the same way that Méliès describes his stories, saying “the scenario constructed in this manner has *no importance*, since I use it merely as a pretext for the ‘stage effects,’ the ‘tricks,’ or for a nicely arranged tableau.”¹⁶ Even when there is a narrative, it is usually not fleshed out and can be as simple as a goat driving to a glee club and then taking stage.¹⁷

Thus, I will argue through these four factors that cartoons produced by large studios in America between 1928 and 1937 reflect another manifestation of what Gunning has christened “the cinema of attractions.” I have chosen this date range because it is bracketed by two specific films, *Steamboat Willie* (Disney Studios, 1928) and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937). Although I wouldn’t argue that the Disney studio was the best nor the first, it did popularize many of the trends that were important to the course animation would later take. *Steamboat Willie* is not the first sound cartoon, (that title is more realistically given to the Fleischer Studio’s Song Car-Tune *My Old Kentucky Home*, released

¹⁶ Gunning, “The Cinema of Attraction[s],” 382.

¹⁷ This is the plot to *Goofy Goat Antics* (Van Beuren Studios, 1931).

in 1926, yet even that is debatable), but it does mark the first extremely popular sound cartoon, and its popularity led many others to quickly adopt sound as a practice. Sound is an important facet to the “attractive” qualities of these cartoons, and thus seems to be a natural starting point.¹⁸

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937) marks the end of this period because it greatly popularized feature length, narrative driven animation, though again it was not the first of its kind (*El Apóstol* [Quirino Cristiani] was a feature-length animated film, with a “linear, albeit complicated” plot, made in Argentina in 1917, two decades earlier).¹⁹ But, again, Disney popularized the new format, making realism and storytelling a new priority for animators.

The Fleischer Studio, the Van Beuren Studio, and Warner Bros. Studio are a few of the other studios especially important in this period of animation. Though often forgotten in place of Disney, their contributions are no less important. The fact that examples of cartoons in the cinema of attractions style can be found in cartoons from practically any American studio working in the period is a testament to the fact that this trend was not simply a fluke. For a certain amount of time it was what the audiences (presumably) wanted, or at least what the studios provided them. The following chapters will explore the ways in which early sound cartoons display the theory of the cinema of attractions, beginning with the original attractions.

¹⁸ I use this term, “attractive,” in the same sense that Eisenstein used it. He describes attractions as, “any demonstrable fact (an action, an object, a phenomenon, a conscious combination, and so on) that is known and proven to exercise a definite effect on the attention and emotions of the audience.” Thus when he says “attractive,” it can be extrapolated that he means it as a descriptor of something which functions as an attraction. Taylor, *The Eisenstein Reader*, 35-36.

¹⁹ Bendazzi, *Cartoons*, 50.

CHAPTER 2

ORIGINAL ATTRACTIONS

Many of the cartoons from the late 1920s to early 1930s featured what might be called original attractions. I use this term, “original attractions,” to distinguish from the cinema of attractions because, though similar, they each refer to different traditions. Tom Gunning describes the cinema of attractions as attempting to “directly solicit spectator attention, inciting visual curiosity, and supplying pleasure through an exciting spectacle.”²⁰ The films are meant to show the audience something.

When Gunning chose to call his new conception of cinema the “cinema of attractions,” he was at least partially borrowing from Sergei Eisenstein’s use of the term. Both writers felt “attractions” was an apt descriptor because it had to do with popular forms of entertainment, which “offer[ed] a new sort of stimulus for an audience not acculturated to the traditional arts.”²¹ These attractions are similarly focused on showing the audience something, although in a live format. In this conception, the two most important spectator-related traditions of popular entertainment would be vaudeville (or variety theatre), and the fairground. These relate to many other forms of entertainment, such as sideshow acts, amusement rides, magic shows, circuses, minstrel shows, and so on. Thus, when I refer to “original attractions” I am referring to any form of entertainment that would fall into this category associated with the historical meaning of “attractions,” rather than the Gunning meaning.

²⁰ Gunning, “The Cinema of Attraction[s],” 384.

²¹ Gunning, “The Cinema of Attraction[s],” 385.

Sometimes the form of these cartoons is clearly a product of an original attractions tradition. For instance, when a character performs with his body facing the audience, it can be seen as a product of the vaudeville tradition. In other cartoons the tradition is directly referenced in the content of the cartoon, such as when Betty Boop goes to the circus or Noah's Ark lands at Coney Island in an *Aesop's Film Fable*.

Cartoons were directly borrowing from these traditions in both their form and their content, and the result is a direct link to the exhibition aspect that is so central to Tom Gunning's conception of "The Cinema of Attractions." As Gunning says, "It is the direct address of the audience, in which an attraction is offered to the spectator by a cinema showman, that defines this approach to filmmaking. Theatrical display dominates over narrative absorption, emphasizing the direct stimulation of shock or surprise at the expense of unfolding a story or creating a diegetic universe."²² This is where the cinema of attractions and the original attractions most closely correlate, through the act of display meant for "an acknowledged spectator." Many historical entertainment traditions can be found in the form and/or content of cartoons, including the circus, minstrelsy and, most importantly, vaudeville.

Circus

One of the oldest original attractions would be the circus, though it took on its modern form only around 1830.²³ Circuses were traveling shows, "wending their way across the country reach[ing] towns too small to support other professional companies,"

²² Gunning, "The Cinema of Attraction[s]," 384.

²³ Lewis, *From Traveling Shows to Vaudeville*, 108.

according to Robert Lewis in *From Traveling Shows to Vaudeville*.²⁴ Generally these shows would begin with a parade through town, advertising the coming attraction, and then the circus would set up some tents and do a limited number of shows. These shows featured many types of acts including acrobatics, horseback riding, trapeze artists, clowns, trained animals, a sideshow and others. The shows were not loved by all, though; as Lewis writes, many evangelical Christians argued that they were insidious and pernicious, “Insidious, because what appeared to be merely a novel display of skill enticed, excited, and deluded the innocent; pernicious, because it ensnared the young, the most vulnerable, into a thoughtless love of pleasure that led to vice.”²⁵ Nevertheless, they were hugely popular with the working classes and brought joy to many. In 1866 Emily Dickinson wrote to her sister about the circus which had just paraded through her town, saying “Friday I tasted life. It was a vast morsel.”²⁶

Betty Boop made a foray into the circus in *Boop-Oop-a-Doop* (Fleischer Studio, 1932).²⁷ The first two-thirds of the film is simply about showing a circus, while the last third has a storyline tacked on about a brutish ringmaster trying to take Betty’s “boop-oop-a-doop” away. It is this first portion that is a prime example of the cinema of attractions, not only because it features an “attraction” (the circus), but also because that is *all* it shows. The first section is simply about showing the circus to the audience, nothing more.

The film begins with a shot of Betty doing some sort of hula type dance, and the shot zooms out to reveal it is a flag advertising “Betty Boop”; when it pans down the tent reads

²⁴ Lewis, *From Traveling Shows to Vaudeville*, 108.

²⁵ Lewis, *From Traveling Shows to Vaudeville*, 110.

²⁶ Lewis, *From Traveling Shows to Vaudeville*, 108.

²⁷ See: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LbX_8HUR0Kk

“circus.” The film cuts to a parade featuring music, various animal acts (an elephant, a seal with a ball), sideshow acts (a fat lady, a bearded lady), Koko the clown, and Betty, a horseback rider. The parade finishes and the ringmaster introduces a high diver who performs her act. A trapeze artist performs, biting the swing, and suddenly falls after his teeth come out. Dogs jump through a hoop and then we see Betty taming lions (fig. 6). Finally, Betty does a high wire act, singing while she walks (fig. 7). These episodes are interspersed with shots of the audience and Bimbo selling peanuts, blocking a small child’s view. At this point we see the ringmaster lusting after Betty, and the storyline switches to a simple one in which Betty rejects his advances and Koko must defend her.

The first portion of this film displays perfectly the way the structure of the circus can be used to string together different views for the audience. The acts function as they would in a real circus, inviting viewer curiosity and contemplation. They are exaggerated, though, so that rather than just taming the lions they become polite gentleman, and the high diver’s platform is impossibly high. The cartoon becomes an attraction by displaying an attraction – the circus – and exaggerating it in a way that is impossible in the real world.

Another example of the circus in early sound cartoons can be found in the 1930 Van Beuren Studios’ cartoon, *Circus Capers*.²⁸ The cartoon opens with the parade of a circus coming into town, with a marching band playing traditional circus music. There are dancing elephants and giraffes, and the audience is introduced to two mice, one a girl horseback rider, the other a boy clown. A caller reveals a fat lady who performs a dance to entice spectators into the sideshow (fig. 8). The ringmaster then introduces the horseback rider, who jumps from a very high platform onto the ring and performs her acrobatics (fig.

²⁸ See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eMjfikPjYnY>

9). She goes backstage, kisses the clown, and the clown performs his act with trained leopards. Next, the ringmaster tames a lion and the two dance together, until the lion kicks him backstage. The clown laughs at the ringmaster, so in retaliation the ringmaster sabotages the clown's cannon act by adding extra gunpowder and the clown explodes out of the tent. Meanwhile, the ringmaster and the horseback rider go into a trailer to flirt and kiss. The clown finally lands in the trailer and upon seeing the two lovers becomes sad and walks away, crying. Outside of the trailer he begins to sing a song called "Laugh, Clown, Laugh," about a sad clown that must stay positive (fig. 10).²⁹ This entices the horseback rider, who fights the ringmaster and goes to join the clown. However, at the last minute, the clown rejects her and winks at the audience.

Circus Capers is another prime example of the way the content of an attraction, the circus, can be used in a cartoon. The circus acts make up the bulk of the film, and the second largest portion of time is dedicated to the song, another sort of act. There is no reason for the circus – the story of love and rejection doesn't require it – other than to show the audience a circus. So, where circuses could bring entertainment to those in more remote areas, now the cartoons could bring the circus to anyone with access to a movie theater.

Minstrelsy

Another quite old tradition of exhibition, and a precursor to vaudeville, is minstrelsy. Minstrelsy is a type of live variety show in which there would be songs, acts,

²⁹ This song was a hit when it was released, and comes from a film of the same name, *Laugh, Clown, Laugh* (Herbert Brenon, 1928). The film starred Lon Chaney Sr., and in fact the song was played at his funeral in 1930.

and dances about African Americans performed by actors in blackface. These actors were generally white, although a tradition of African American blackface performers has been well documented. According to Lewis, by the 1850s minstrel performances were generally structured around three parts. He writes, "The first element introduced the whole company in music and comedy and closed with a rousing song from all... After the intermission, the olio, the second part, featured the specialized variety routines of individuals in short, virtuoso turns, impersonating 'wenches,' performing dances, delivering stump speeches, or pleasing the crowd with the sentimental songs of Stephen Foster. The concluding section was the most coherently organized with some semblance of a plot. The one-act farce... blended music and dance with slapstick comedy."³⁰ In these acts was an oblique dialogue about race, and it can be seen as subverting or encouraging racism, depending on the point of view. Either way, the use of racial stereotypes in these performances must be considered within the context of the era. In our post-Civil Rights era these stereotypes are known to be false, hurtful, and archaic. Before the Civil Rights movement and especially during minstrelsy's heyday, these stereotypes were seen as not only acceptable, but totally innocuous. We must bear this in mind when considering the spectacle of minstrelsy.

The first popular sound film (or at least, what is widely considered to be so) is *The Jazz Singer* (Alan Crosland, 1927), which features Al Jolson as a minstrel performer (fig. 11). It is unsurprising, then, that so many of the sound cartoons that followed, hoping for similar success, used minstrelsy as well. Music, phrases, and blackface characters were all borrowed from minstrelsy by animators, directly relating cartoons to this popular form of entertainment.

³⁰ Lewis, *From Traveling Shows to Vaudeville*, 68.

Many songs that were well known for their use in minstrel shows were featured in cartoons. For instance, *Steamboat Willie* features “Turkey in the Straw,” which is a version of “Zip Coon,” a “closing number for many minstrel shows.”³¹ Also, according to Christopher Lehman, “Van Beuren’s music director Gene Rodemich gave minstrel tunes the function of musically representing the pre-Civil War South as a happy period for slaves.”³² When choosing music to accompany a cartoon it seems the political messages of minstrel songs were not only known, but deliberately used to associate it with minstrel shows which depicted “happy” slaves.

The acts of minstrels were also mirrored, especially those made famous by Al Jolson. Particularly noted would be the repetition of Al Jolson’s “mammy kneel” in *Egyptian Melodies* (Disney Studios, 1931) and *The Shanty Where Santy Claus Lives* (Warner Bros. Cartoons, 1933).³³ The archetypal actions depicted in minstrel shows were, at times, repeated in cartoons, especially those featuring blackface, of which there were many.

A noticeable aspect of many characters, particularly animal ones, is they at times appear to be in blackface. Some are very literally so, such as Bosko, the star of the earliest Looney Tunes (Warner Bros., beginning 1929). Bosko looks like any human cartoon character from this era of animation, but he has blackface facial features such as big, white lips and eyes (fig. 12). Other characters also seem to be in blackface, though more abstractly so, such as Felix the Cat (fig. 13). Felix seems to be in blackface but is an animal, and the markings could be considered a part of his fur. Some other characters are only debatably in blackface, such as Mickey Mouse (fig. 14). It could be argued that Mickey’s

³¹ Lehman, *The Colored Cartoon*, 16-17.

³² Lehman, *The Colored Cartoon*, 21.

³³ Lehman, *The Colored Cartoon*, 17.

whole face is white, not just his lips and eyes, though especially in his early days his looks are constantly changing. However, these characters didn't necessarily function as traditional blackface characters. In *The Colored Cartoon*, Christopher Lehman discusses this aspect of Bosko, saying, "Critics accustomed to minstrelsy-derived gags for blackface cartoon characters did not know what to make of Bosko's lack of ethnic signifiers."³⁴ Others disagree, such as Hank Sartin who writes, "Bosko displays many signifiers of blackface performance."³⁵ Hank Sartin describes blackface performance as emphasizing musical talent, and points out the consistent relationship between the characters of Bosko and Mickey to music.³⁶ It is a long held stereotype that African Americans are especially musical, and this stereotype drove minstrel performances. Thus, when blackface cartoon characters live in a world of music, it might be said to be a reflection of that stereotype. Sartin writes of this idea, saying, "Blackface performance often emphasized musical talent, playing on strong cultural associations of blacks and music... Both Bosko and Mickey share this primitive, immediate relationship to music. They approach life as a perpetual song, dancing and singing their way through their adventures to a soundtrack of 'jazz.'"³⁷

There are also many examples of one-off episodes in which the recurring characters suddenly arrive in some stereotypical tribal island, with only a vague hint at where they are, geographically. These islands are usually populated by people reminiscent of traditional blackface minstrel show characters, and they often capture one of the main

³⁴ Lehman, *The Colored Cartoon*, 18.

³⁵ Sandler, *Reading the Rabbit*, 72.

³⁶ Sandler, *Reading the Rabbit*, 73.

³⁷ Sandler, *Reading the Rabbit*, 72-73.

characters due to their “savagery.” At other times, though, the location is deliberately described as Africa.

One of the most obvious cartoons to derive its content from minstrelsy is the Tom and Jerry cartoon *Plane Dumb* (Van Beuren Studios, 1932).³⁸ The cartoon begins with Tom and Jerry in a plane, flying over Africa. When Jerry says, “We won’t be safe in Africa!” Tom decides they should “disguise” themselves by going into full blackface, and soon after they crash into the ocean (fig. 15). Of course, the change is not only of skin color, their dialect changes to the stereotypical African American dialect; their personalities also change and they become, as the title suggests, “dumb,” as well as fearful, another stereotype. In short, the cartoon has quickly become its own minstrel show. While floating in the ocean they are met by many animals in blackface, and they eventually make their way to a cave. While in the dark four blackface skeletons suddenly appear, singing a hymn-like song (fig. 16).³⁹ Scared, the two run out of the cave, at which point numerous tribesmen in blackface appear and chase them (fig. 17). Tom and Jerry wipe off their blackface, and an iris out leads to a “The End” title card. The characters of Tom and Jerry in *Plane Dumb* seem to be directly taken from minstrelsy shows. They exhibit almost all of the stereotypes most common to minstrel shows, and any stereotypes they are lacking are provided by the blackface animals, blackface skeletons, or blackface tribesmen that appear in the cartoon.

Race in film is an incredibly complex subject, and there is no question that there is a desire to look at “the other” in film. Ethnographic films and many documentaries certainly

³⁸ See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TiMpnCp8Qbl>

³⁹ This portion of animation is, in fact, a direct retracing of a scene in the Tom and Jerry cartoon *Wot a Night* (Van Beuren Studios, 1931). In that cartoon the skeletons are also, inexplicably, in blackface.

attest to this, and I feel that blackface in its many forms is a (poor) way of relating to the other. By including this tradition in cartoons, the animators may have been filling a desire to look at the stereotyped other in a way considered acceptable at the time these cartoons were released (though quite appalling when seen today). Lehman posits that the reason African American stereotypes are so prevalent in early cartoons is that "Since the vast majority of movie patrons during the first half of the twentieth century were white, it may simply have been easier, or at least less risky, for producers to make African Americans the targets of ridicule and derision than any group of whites."⁴⁰ Racial stereotypes provide easy subjects for jokes, and given the marginalization of African Americans in the 1930s, it is unsurprising minstrel related content appeared in so many cartoons.

Vaudeville

A tradition that grew out of minstrelsy was vaudeville. Vaudeville also had a variety show format, featuring "a fast-paced program of music, comedy, and drama, embellished with specialty and novelty acts of human skill and ingenuity, where the diverse acts seemed blended together into a package," according to Robert Lewis.⁴¹ At times vaudeville included minstrelsy as a part of the show, yet blackface performance was never the central focus of vaudeville. Vaudeville was an entertainment tradition meant for all classes of people; the ticket prices were generally half that of the traditional theater. It was soon supplanted, though, by something it often featured as part of the show: movies. By the mid-1930s

⁴⁰ Lehman, *The Colored Cartoon*, 4.

⁴¹ Lewis, *From Traveling Show to Vaudeville*, 315.

vaudeville had almost completely been replaced by cinema, though it lived on in other ways such as in the U.S.O. and on television.⁴²

There are many vaudeville-like performances found in early sound animated films. The form of cartoons is arguably closer to that of vaudeville than any traditional film form. Regularly, whatever loose narrative structure there is stops for a performance, and at times this performance is literally on a stage (as seen in *Goofy Goat Antics* [Van Beuren, 1931] and *Dizzy Dishes* [Fleischer, 1930] among others). Whether or not there is a stage, the practice of performing directly to an audience clearly comes not from theatre, where the fourth wall is intact, but rather from vaudeville.

The most important tie to vaudeville is described by Sartin as follows: “During the early period of experimentation, animators used vaudeville performer types and adopted what Jenkins terms a ‘vaudeville aesthetic,’ which emphasized virtuosity of performance, flat, staged compositions, and the emotional immediacy of the entertainment.”⁴³ Sartin is specifically referring to Warner Bros. cartoons from the early 1930s, but this statement is easily applicable to most of the cartoon shorts of the era. This influence shifted “by the midthirties,” according to Sartin, so that Hollywood rather than vaudeville was the primary inspiration for cartoons (though aspects of vaudeville were certainly still present). The three aspects pulled out in this statement (virtuosity of performance; flat, staged compositions; emotional immediacy of the entertainment) provide a strong model through which we may understand the close relationship between early sound cartoons and vaudeville.

⁴² Slide, *The Encyclopedia of Vaudeville*, xv.

⁴³ Sandler, *Reading the Rabbit*, 69, referring to a model put forth by Henry Jenkins in *What Made Pistachio Nuts?*

The idea of “virtuosity of performance” relates to the showmanship of the vaudeville performers. Each performer had to have talent, as there was little-to-no story for him/her to hide behind (as there might be in a musical). Of course, the talent in cartoons is inherently contrived since the characters are creations, but it is nevertheless presented as a point of interest (and naturally, there *was* a talented singer, animator, rotoscoped dancer, etc. behind that performance). Part of this virtuosity is the seemingly natural talent of the characters. When a cartoon character breaks out into a song or dance, it seems as if he/she simply *is* a great performer. The naturalness that stage performers must fake is an actual part of the cartoon character.

The most obvious aspect of vaudeville present in cartoons would be the “flat, staged compositions,” as Sartin describes them. Although there were many attempts to strengthen depth of field (notably, the Fleischer’s technique of the three dimensional setback and later the Disney studio’s development of the multiplane camera)⁴⁴ the general aesthetic for cartoon shorts was incredibly flat. Partially this was due to technological and economic limitations, but it also likely had to do with the fact that these were not meant to be complex cartoons. Some studios chose to put more effort into the depth and detail of its backgrounds, but for the most part they were considered modest, popular entertainment.

This can be illustrated by countless examples, and to choose one we’ll look at *The Tuba Tooters* (Van Beuren Studios), a Tom and Jerry cartoon from 1932.⁴⁵ This cartoon, like others, is “staged” in that almost all of the movement is left to right or right to left, as it would be onstage. For instance, by having Tom and Jerry move from their bed to the piano

⁴⁴ Fleischer, *The Fleischer Story*, 71. Holliss, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, 25-26.

⁴⁵ See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ty0o9t-JdKY>

from right to left it immediately puts them in the correct position to be addressing the audience once they begin their song. Jerry, who is at the piano, turns his head to face the audience while Tom directs his dance toward them as well (fig. 18). The same is true of the pair next door (the titular tuba player and his dog) performing and dancing toward the audience rather than the more believable positioning facing each other. By only moving horizontally the animation looks even more two-dimensional than usual. The most movement forward and backward comes at the end. The "tuba tooter" is thrown into the back of a police car, and the tuba moves forward to reveal Tom and Jerry, and then it retreats again. The car then gets smaller as it drives away, before there is an iris out for "The End."

It is not just a matter of direction, but also of depth of field. Each shot of the cartoon contains a very simplistic background with only a sparse room as a setting and with little to no added depth, almost like a painted backdrop in a theater. The opening shot of a boat rolling over waves in *The Tuba Tooter* looks entirely two dimensional, with almost no attempt to deepen the image. The least flat shot of the cartoon is only a split second, and consists of many buildings along a street with people cheering out the windows and dancing in the streets. Though this shot may not be flat, it is visually simple. It is clear the detail of the characters furthest to the back was too much for the animators, and so they remain stick figures. This flattened aesthetic is common, and often it feels as if the cartoon characters are on a stage, as they move horizontally and directly face the audience.

Finally, the third facet outlined as part of the "vaudeville aesthetic" is the "emotional immediacy of the entertainment." Cartoons often take up a frantic pacing, due to their short format. Like a vaudeville act that must make an impression within a time slot (generally

under twenty minutes), cartoons had to make the audience laugh and feel joy within seven to eight minutes.⁴⁶ This means that very little setup is needed or used for each gag and/or sketch. The entertainment must impact the audience at once, and so rather than gags only functioning by adding to a story, it seems that the story only functions to add to the gags. There is a frenetic, chaotic nature to the cartoons of this period, and it seems to come, at least in part, from a vaudeville tradition.

The types of gags used were often also derivative of vaudeville. Sartin lists some of the common vaudevillian gags as “topical references, physical gags, ethnic jokes, and short verbal sparring routines.”⁴⁷ Although “verbal sparring routines” aren’t common to cartoons, aside from occasional muttering, the others are. An example of a topical reference can be found in the 1928 Mickey Mouse cartoon *Plane Crazy*, in which Mickey looks at a picture of Charles Lindbergh and fixes his hair to look like him before taking flight himself (Lindbergh had done his famous trans-Atlantic flight only a year earlier) (fig. 19).⁴⁸

Physical gags form the crux of the humor in cartoons, especially because there is no actor to be injured. Pratfalls can be and appear more extreme, particularly when paired with rubber hose animation. Physical gags can be found in almost any early sound cartoon, including *Plane Crazy*, the “plot” of which centers on Mickey attempting to control an errant plane, leading to many pratfalls. Ethnic jokes are also fairly common, such as the aforementioned minstrelsy derived gags.

⁴⁶ Sandler, *Reading the Rabbit*, 71.

⁴⁷ Sandler, *Reading the Rabbit*, 70.

⁴⁸ See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kCZPzHg0h80>

There are several examples of a literal vaudeville show taking place in a cartoon; one such example is *Stopping the Show* (Fleischer Studio), a Betty Boop film from 1932.⁴⁹ The cartoon opens with a shot of a theater that has “Betty Boop” flashing in lights, and crowds pouring into the building. It cuts to the animal musicians sleeping and rehearsing, and then to the theater itself. The show begins with the “Paramouse Noose Reel,” which consists of various silly news stories primarily consisting of puns and gags (such as the city names of “Fountain, Penn.” or “Nine, Tenn.”). This is interspersed with clips of the bored audience, waiting for the *real* show to begin, which it does after a “Bimbo and Koko” short, framed by the stage and curtains.

Finally, about halfway through the cartoon, Betty comes on stage with a card to the left announcing “Betty Boop’s Imitations” (fig. 20). The audience applauds her, and she breaks into song. Her first song is “That’s My Weakness Now,” a song made famous by Helen Kane. Kane was rumored to have been a model for Betty Boop, and certainly her singing style was.⁵⁰ When this song ends, a poster of Fannie Brice comes to life and requests Betty give “a little imitation from me,” and Betty quickly changes before singing “I’m an Indian.” Finally, the poster of Maurice Chevalier asks, “can you imitate me, Betty

⁴⁹ See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P2B5J9sMODE>

⁵⁰ The saga of Betty Boop/Helen Kane: Kane sued the Fleischer studios in 1932, though the trial was dismissed in 1934 when it was proven that others had used the “boop-boop-a-doop” phrase before Kane. Max Fleischer’s son, Richard Fleischer, maintains it was only a coincidence in his biography about his father, *Out of the Inkwell*, published in 2005, though there is much evidence to the contrary. Grim Natwick, a Fleischer animator, admitted in 1978 that Fleischer had given him a picture of Kane as a model for Betty’s hair. Also, the actress who primarily gave the voice to Betty Boop (but was also featured in many publicity photos) had won a Helen Kane look alike contest as a teenager. Yet, the Fleischers denied any relationship, so it seems that the reason the image of Helen Kane (see below) may have been cut in *Stopping the Show*, which included “That’s My Weakness Now,” a song made famous by Kane, would be to distance the studio from her. Fleischer, *Out of the Inkwell*, 56-57. Barrier, *Hollywood Cartoons*, 184.

Boop?” and she sings “Hello, Beautiful” with a faux French accent (fig. 21). While these two performers were clearly tied to their songs, the portion of the film in which a poster of Helen Kane talking was supposedly cut from the cartoon, to avoid obvious plagiarism.⁵¹ Finally, the crowd applauds, Betty says “thank you,” and an acrobat troupe called the “Durty Duzen” tries to perform, but are consistently forgone in favor of more Betty. They are finally given their time on stage, though by then are so tired from waiting that their act is done in bed.

Imitation is a traditional vaudeville act, and who Betty imitates is quite important. All three performers (Kane, Brice and Chevalier) had careers related to vaudeville and variety shows. Helen Kane was a singer and actress, and she performed in vaudeville shows as a kick line dancer and a singer; Fanny Brice was well-known for her work in *Ziegfeld Follies* and on the radio; and Maurice Chevalier was later an actor, but in his early days performed in vaudeville. At the time of the cartoon both actors were quite well known, enough so that the references to their performances were probably not lost on audiences.

As a story, *Stopping the Show* has little to offer: Betty Boop is an entertainer and sings popular songs to an enthusiastic audience. As a display the cartoon works well. Betty is literally on stage and addresses the audience in the movie theater through the audience in the vaudeville theater. Like many backstage musicals the façade of the theater, the proscenium arch, is simply an excuse for a performance directed at us, the viewers. Betty is showing us something, her ability to imitate the great performers of the decade. The entire

⁵¹ Though this is not formally documented anywhere, it seems quite likely based on the fact that the sound seems to change suddenly. At one moment the audience is applauding, and suddenly it changes to Betty dancing; rather than transitioning between the two parts smoothly, as the sound does between the other acts, it is rather abrupt.

cartoon is dedicated to this exhibition, with no attempts at a story (aside, perhaps, from the orienting bookends showing the theatre, and the audience). The format itself is directly taken from the variety format of vaudeville, a tradition which included acrobats and short films such as those shown in the cartoon. It seems that every facet of *Stopping the Show* is related to vaudeville.

In fact, many Betty Boop cartoons take a variety show type format. Often they primarily consisted of a string of gags, and would only stop the gags to watch a song and dance number. Norman Klein also notes that in Betty Boop cartoons “the backgrounds are inspired by vaudeville,” based on painted scrims and curtains against blank walls.⁵² For about a year (mid-1933 to mid-1934) the title sequence of Betty Boop cartoons even featured theatre like curtains, framing Betty. All of these things were common to most cartoons from this time period, but what makes them even more similar to vaudeville in the Betty Boop cartoons is the use of a recurring personality (as opposed to the non-recurring characters of series like *Screen Songs* [Fleischer Studio, beginning 1929] or *Silly Symphonies* [Disney Studios, beginning 1929]). The appeal of vaudeville was not simply the acts (although obviously it played a large part), it was also the ability to see certain characters. Hank Sartin writes, “Cartoons of the twenties and early thirties similarly depended on a limited character typology.”⁵³ By having pre-established characters, even less narrative setup is required to justify gags. For example, Betty’s sexuality is already well-known, so when it gets her into a complicated situation (as it does in *Boop-Oop-a-Doop*), the main conflict can be presented immediately without much set-up.

⁵² Klein, *Seven Minutes*, 62.

⁵³ Sandler, *Reading the Rabbit*, 71.

It is unsurprising there is such a connection between vaudeville and early sound cartoons. Norman Klein writes of this period that, “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.”⁵⁴ The two are intertwined in content, form, and their relationships with their audiences.

Even into the thirties our visual culture was more accustomed to live entertainment than to the cinema, but soon that switched and cinema became the default form of entertainment. After realism and narrative integration took hold in animation, the original attractions were no longer as prominent as they once were. Instead, they seem to have been assigned to the silly side of animation, so that when a character or situation is not meant to be taken seriously, then the popular forms of entertainment begin to reappear. For instance, during the production of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* the Disney studio brought in vaudeville entertainers to loosely model the dwarfs after.⁵⁵ But, again, these were only side characters and the central characters were more akin to actors in a live-action film. The dwarfs could resemble vaudeville entertainers because they were comic relief, while the main characters had to focus on driving the story. Pratfalls were distractions.

In an article titled “In Vaudeville: A Short History of This Popular Character of Amusement” published in *Midway* in 1905, the author describes vaudeville in the following

⁵⁴ Klein, *Seven Minutes*, 21.

⁵⁵ Klein, *Seven Minutes*, 142.

way: "Joyously, frankly absurd, it represents the almost universal longing for laughter, for melody, for color, for action and for wonder-provoking things."⁵⁶ This is the function of both the films of Gunning's cinema of attractions and early sound cartoons as well.

Vaudeville, circuses, minstrel shows, amusement parks, sideshows, all of these things were popular entertainment, meant to be accessible to all classes of people, and so were cartoons. These attractions helped to distract audiences from their daily hardships, especially during the Great Depression, and this is a function shared with rubber hose animation. Original attractions and early sound cartoons are both focused on exhibition – showing the audience something – and they aren't afraid to forego a story and directly address the audience to achieve that.

⁵⁶ Lewis, *From Traveling Show to Vaudeville*, 319.

CHAPTER 3

RUBBER HOSE ANIMATION

Perhaps the most noticeable – or at least, unique – aesthetic aspect of this early sound era of animation is what has been deemed the “Rubber Hose” style of animation. Rubber hose cartoons exist in a plastic world, both literally and figuratively. *Everything* in these worlds has the potential to mold or shape into something else, and yet that potential isn’t always realized. These cartoons do not exist in a world bound to the laws of physics, nor do they live in a world without those laws. Rather, they exist in a world in flux, constantly varying between those two poles.

Rubber hose style animation is named as such due to the way the limbs of the characters move. Their arms and legs resemble a rubber hose in that they are uniform in width throughout and bend as a curve, rather than at a joint. Occasionally joints and shapely limbs are discernable, but it largely depends on the type of character, particularly based on the character’s weight. Overweight or muscular characters have shapely legs and noticeable joints to enhance that aspect about them, while most “average” sized characters have extremely thin limbs, as described above. The bodies of these characters can also stretch like rubber so that when, for instance, a monkey in the *Aesop’s Sound Fable* called *Radio Racket* (Fables Studios, 1931) takes a spoonful of medicine, he simply stretches out his tongue several feet, molds one end into a spoon and puts the whole thing back in his mouth (fig. 22). This style does not only exist in the bodies of characters: the entire space of the cartoon is drawn in this style. Huntly Carter wrote in 1930 that it “is simply the caricaturist playing with line that has the elasticity of gas. It shrinks and expands, collapses

and recovers, behaves like a spring winding and unwinding, and at the same time assumes the shapes and characteristics of human beings, animals, insects, of animate things, and inanimate ones made animate.”⁵⁷ Everything in the space of the cartoon world can stretch and shrink at will, and this characteristic is most pronounced in the limbs of the characters but can also be found in practically anything within the frame.

This stylistic trend is all about showing the audience something entirely impossible, and in this way it is exhibitionistic. What ties rubber hose animation so closely to the concept of the cinema of attractions is, as Gunning would say, that it directly “solicit[s] the attention of the spectator,” in this case through the amazing way these characters’ bodies move.⁵⁸ The style has no narrative function, aside from an excuse for more gags. Rubber hose animation is purely meant to display the impossible for the viewing pleasure of the audience.

Development

The ability to transform the objects in the cartoon world started at least as early as the Emile Cohl film *Fantasmagorie* (1908), which features a line that turns into a box, a bottle that turns into a flower, and an elephant that becomes a house, among other things. However, the rubber-hose style seems to have been refined with Felix the Cat, specifically in a redesign of Felix carried out by William (Bill) Nolan.⁵⁹ Nolan drew Felix from about 1922-1924, and in that time rounded out his shapes, in part to make Felix’s movements

⁵⁷ Carter, *The New Spirit in the Cinema*, 29.

⁵⁸ Gunning, “The Cinema of Attraction[s],” 382.

⁵⁹ Barrier, *Hollywood Cartoons*, 19.

seem more natural and also to make the act of drawing him easier and faster.⁶⁰ Felix's world consisted of objects to be manipulated, so that not only could he stretch, shrink, and bend, but so could everything around him.⁶¹ If he needed a cane to walk with, his tail would become one. If he needed a skyhook, there was always a question mark to be used.

The style had enough advantages to make it a mainstay, and it became even more exaggerated with the application of sound. With sound came sound effects (or at least uniform sound effects across all theaters) and those sound effects made the rubber hose style stand out even more. A stretching arm may be paired with a slide whistle, or a bounce with a spring sound.

It seems that, for whatever reason, this style was most significantly pronounced in the animation from the Van Beuren Studio. I would speculate the reason for this is that the Van Beuren Studio was one of the lower budget studios of the time (particularly in the 1928-1932 time period), and because of this it was more likely to align with the popular style at the time, as it had little room for risks. Disney, on the other hand, made a concerted effort to shift toward realism and full animation, which, had it backfired, likely wouldn't have bankrupted the studio. Rubber hose animation was popular through the 1920s and the 1930s, before being replaced by full animation, a change primarily spearheaded by the Disney Studio.

⁶⁰ Barrier, *Hollywood Cartoons*, 19.

⁶¹ Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands*, 22.

Plasmaticness

Erwin Panofsky called the style of rubber hose cartoons “a chemically pure distillation of cinematic possibilities.”⁶² Similarly, the great director and theoretician Sergei Eisenstein referred to this style of animation as “plasmaticness.” Eisenstein describes plasmaticness as, “a being represented in drawing, a being of a definite form, a being which has attained a definite appearance, and which behaves like the primal protoplasm, not yet possessing a ‘stable’ form, but capable of assuming any form and which, skipping along the rungs of the evolutionary ladder, attaches itself to any and all forms of animal existence.”⁶³ That is to say, plasmaticness is a state in which objects, particularly the body, are solid and yet can mold into different shapes at will. He states that this is possible in any body, human or animal.

Obviously the word is derived from both “plasma” and “plastic,” both of which come from the Greek word “plassein” meaning “to mold.” But the meaning goes beyond this surface level. Eisenstein refers to “the primal protoplasm.” Protoplasm is described by Merriam-Webster as, “the organized colloidal complex of organic and inorganic substances (as proteins and water) that constitutes the living nucleus, cytoplasm, plastids, and mitochondria of the cell.”⁶⁴ “Protoplasmic” seems to be an apt way to describe this style; the very core of every cell in these cartoons has the ability to mold and shape at will. The reference to plastic is a bit more complex, though. The term “plastic arts” was common in referring to any art form with a physical presence, primarily sculpture and ceramics. Each character seems to be a sculpture themselves, changing shape at the hands of their

⁶² Talbot, *Film: An Anthology*, 23.

⁶³ Taylor, *The Eisenstein Collection*, 101.

⁶⁴ Merriam-Webster, “Protoplasm.”

creators. Plastic is also a substance that is easy to melt and mold, a common component to mass-produced items.

Eisenstein traces plasmaticness through several sources, beginning with Disney. He then discusses the part of *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll in which Alice stretches and shrinks, and the fear she has because of it. Next he mentions “drawings of the German caricaturist, Trier. The adventures of a little boy with a super-long arm.”⁶⁵ He continues to find plasmaticness in other various sources, including 18th century Japanese etchings. Plasmaticness, then, is not *just* about Disney and cartoons, it is a visual style that repeats itself throughout history and across cultures.

Plasmaticness is, at least partially, about our relationship to our prenatal stages when our bodies could have developed in any number of ways (and sometimes do, as seen in birth defects). It also relates to the theory of recapitulation or, as it is more popularly thought of, “ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny.” This theory states that in-utero a fetus will develop in a similar fashion as the entire species has developed. Thus, a fetus may appear to have a tail early on which then tapers off, much as it (assumedly) did for the entire species over thousands of years. So, in many ways plasmaticness is about potential. A fetus has the potential to shape into many different forms, and based on the theory of recapitulation, many different stages in evolution.

It is important to note that plasmaticness, as Eisenstein describes it, is different than rubber hose animation, although they are closely related. Plasmaticness is focused on malleability – as is rubber hose animation – but rubber hose animation includes *anything*, while Eisenstein’s description of plasmaticness focuses on the body. Rubber hose

⁶⁵ Taylor, *The Eisenstein Collection*, 98.

animation can manifest in the stretching, shrinking and shaping of anything in the cartoon world, and everything has the potential for life. On the other hand, plasmaticness is primarily about the stretching and shrinking of limbs only. Plasmaticness is not exactly the same as rubber hose animation (as I have defined it), yet it is still a useful tool in considering the style of these cartoons.

Examples

Rubber hose animation does take on rather specific forms, though. A prime example of the style comes in a Tom and Jerry cartoon from 1932 called *Pencil Mania* (Van Beuren Studios).⁶⁶ From the beginning the limbs of the cow dancing across the screen immediately evoke the meaning of “rubber hose animation.” Her arms move like curves, bending in all directions, and there is only a slight bend in her legs indicating a knee. This curvature also rounds out her movements to make her seem more graceful in her dancing than it normally would seem. This is true of all of the characters of the rest of the cartoon as well, as each bends and stretches at least nominally to create more fluid and exaggerated movements. The same types of movements continue in Tom as he paints on an easel, with his arm and paintbrush bending in sync (fig. 23). Suddenly his once stationary easel comes to life and dances with him. This is only the beginning of the literal animation of traditionally inanimate objects. Jerry soon comes along with a pencil that sucks up some of Tom’s paint, and with it he begins to draw things in the air. From the pencil (an obvious metaphor for the pen and ink of the animator’s hand) Jerry creates an egg, shoes, a saxophone, geese, vegetables which sing before turning into people, a car, and a railroad which disappears

⁶⁶ See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TkQ6X7g25H0>

while Tom (and the audience) watch in amazement. All of these items not only appear in the “real world,” but cause major changes in it. The objects transition into one another largely with sleights of hand (fig. 24). For instance, Jerry sharpens the pencil, the pieces of wood fall into place as shoes, and suddenly they multiply in his hands; it looks very much like the trick of a magician. This particular example is forthright with its constantly shifting objects (making it an easy example), but most often the changes are seamless and appear natural. An example of the naturalness of these changes can be seen in the cartoon *Red Riding Hood* (Van Beuren Studios, 1931), when the wolf is sneaking up behind Red in his car and the tires of the car “walk” like a dog.

A more literal example can be found in the Betty Boop cartoon *Betty Boop's May Party* (Fleischer Studio, 1933).⁶⁷ The first two-thirds is a fairly basic set up: Betty and Bimbo are somehow a Queen and King, and they are on a boat with their subjects, going to a May party on a shore. They arrive (after the boat literally climbs down a waterfall), and the people immediately begin celebrating and riding the fairground rides. There are many sight gags that play off of the animals, such as when a swinging animal lands on the back of an elephant, turning it into a two-hump camel. The world of this cartoon is quintessentially in the rubber hose style, with reshaping limbs and Ferris wheels that become claws to pick up passengers. What is most interesting about this cartoon, though, is the last third, when an elephant lodges his tusks into a “Rubber Tree.” Once he pulls them out rubber sprays out of the tree and onto everything in the cartoon. The already rubber-like world of the cartoon becomes extremely malleable, to the point of self-parody. The giraffe, whose neck was already twisted into a slide and molded into an escalator, now can stretch his neck into

⁶⁷ See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B5VDz6ZKznM>

the clouds. A trolley car, rather than bouncing excessively, now rides on a track that, rather than acting as a bridge, acts as a rubber band, stretching and straightening out to ridiculous lengths (fig. 25). Bimbo and Koko do a dance in which their various body parts stretch and shrink in turn (fig. 26). The rubber hose style becomes literal by being as extreme as possible, and is parodied by the self-reflexivity of the cartoon. In many ways, this loose storyline points directly to the “normal” world of the first two-thirds and compares it to the “rubber” world of the last third. One is simply more extreme than the other, though neither is necessarily better than the other.

The entire world of a cartoon from this era is malleable and alive – literally animated. Often objects come to life and grow limbs at the most opportune moment, or consciously change direction. For instance, in *Wot a Night* (Van Beuren Studios, 1931) there is a storm raging when Tom and Jerry enter an old castle. A cloud above the castle forms a human face and begins to play the castle like a pipe organ, and then the trees form faces and begin to play the flute on their own boughs (fig. 27). Their consciousness is not that of Tom or Jerry, though. The inanimate objects of these cartoons usually only have awareness to achieve one, usually quite specific, goal (for instance, play music). They do not have intricate wants and needs, they don’t often express emotion, and usually their presence is only fleeting. Another example of this can be found in the Toby the Pup cartoon, *The Museum* (Mintz Studio, 1930). In the beginning we see a lion sleeping at his desk, and suddenly his pen jumps up, its pen tip separates into two feet, and it dances on the inkwell, then on the lion’s foot, before spraying ink all over the lion to wake him up. This functions much in the same way as the anthropomorphism of animals.

One cartoon in which the bodily rubber hose style can be found is the Tom and Jerry short, *A Spanish Twist* (Van Beuren Studios, 1932).⁶⁸ In it Tom and Jerry are washed up on shore in Spain, and a woman dressed as a flamenco dancer begins to dance for them. The body of the dancer is almost uncomfortably rubbery, as she swivels her hips and moves her arms. Not a single joint is noticeable on her entire body, although her legs do bend in the proper direction (fig. 28). Instead she is completely made up of round shapes, her arms almost becoming grotesque in their fluidity. That is, until she suddenly seems to take shape, and I would suspect this is because this new portion of the dance has been rotoscoped (fig. 29). Her elbows and knees appear, and her legs and arms become more shapely and straight. When Tom and Jerry suddenly find themselves in a bullfight, what appears to be the same woman throws them roses, this time again with her noodle-like arms.⁶⁹ This shows the contrast between the rubber hose style (as seen in the first dancer) and the more realistic style that would take hold later (as seen in the rotoscoped portion), all embodied in one character.

This sort of style is not an either/or type of distinction, but like most categories represents one end of a sliding scale. Some cartoons only use the style for the limbs of some of the characters, and the rest of the world stays fairly solid (which aligns more closely to Eisenstein's definition of plasmaticness), while for others it is the opposite. Regardless of the degree, any stretching, shrinking or molding of traditionally solid objects is done in a way to hold the audience's attention and intrigue them by the possibilities of motion.

⁶⁸ See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mMqkbEOKAp0>

⁶⁹ Interesting to note, this cartoon ends with Tom and Jerry finding out about the repeal of Prohibition and promptly returning to the US, despite being released several months before the official repeal.

Attractiveness

As Eisenstein says, “The attractiveness of this process is obvious,” and indeed Tom Gunning’s conception of the cinema of attractions is at least a partial extension of Eisenstein’s usage of the term “attraction.”⁷⁰ There is something lively and exuberant about rubber hose animation, and although it isn’t always addressed specifically, critics writing about cartoons from the early sound period have often identified it. In talking about animation in 1930, Huntly Carter wrote, “We are shown Man and his companions (in the Darwinian sense) continuously undergoing metamorphosis, battered into real shapes by surroundings, circumstance, and contact. Such shapes touch the primitive and subconscious in us, and move us to gargantuan laughter.”⁷¹ Though he doesn’t call it by its name, it is clear he is describing the joy he receives when watching rubber hose animation. Writing in 1934, Erwin Panofsky says of these cartoons, “No object in creation, whether it be a house, a piano, a tree or an alarm clock, lacks the faculties of organic, in fact anthropomorphic, movement, facial expression and phonetic articulation,” and also, “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.”⁷² Rubber hose animation is the fulfillment of the potential of animation. No other medium can play with the physics of space in the same way (or at least as well) as animation can, and this unique ability is best highlighted by rubber hose animation.

The style of rubber hose animation is simply attractive in its literal visual appeal. The curving lines and bouncing shapes capture our attention, as do the constantly shifting

⁷⁰ Taylor, *The Eisenstein Collection*, 101.

⁷¹ Carter, *The New Spirit in Cinema*, 172.

⁷² Talbot, *Film: An Anthology*, 23-24.

states of inanimate objects and space. It calls to mind more historical entertainment forms, such as the shows of contortionists, twisting their bodies for the pleasure of the audience, or ballerinas, doing the same but in a more “high art” form. There is a dynamism present in rubber hose animation that is lost with full animation.

There has also been a long history of sideshow acts using people with incredibly elastic skin (the scientific name for which is Ehlers-Danlos syndrome). Much like the trapeze artists of the circus, we marvel at the defiance of gravity and the (seemingly) natural movements. Contortionists are another example of performers pushing the limits of the human body for the visual pleasure of the audience. In fact, most sideshow acts can be seen as an extension of this idea. For instance, little people, giants or obese people are examples of the extreme sizes the human body can take on. Or, hermaphrodites, amputees, and “pinheads” can also question what is normal. The limits of the human body are their own spectacle, both in real life (through sideshow and circus acts) and in cartoons (through rubber hose animation).

Often the style is used as a joke referencing a metaphor, as Eisenstein points out. He lists several examples of such metaphors (“surprise – necks elongate,” “panicked running – legs stretch,” and “fright – not only the character trembles, but a wavering line runs along the contour of its drawn image”) and then goes on to say that “it become[s] a comical embodiment of that which occurs as a sensuous process in the cited metaphors.”⁷³ Take, for example, the butterfly that appears in Disney’s *Alice in Wonderland* (1951): it is made up of two pieces of buttered toast that are the wings. We are reminded of the true relationship between the word (*Butterfly*) and the object (the actual butterfly); the disjuncture between

⁷³ Taylor, *The Eisenstein Collection*, 142.

them is literalized and made humorous. The humor arises from the indication of “the unity of oppositions,” so although we may feel as if our legs stretch in panicked running, we are confronted with the fact that it is only a metaphor through the visualization of literally stretched legs. Eisenstein sums up this idea by saying, “Essence and form are dissected,”⁷⁴ meaning the idea and the object itself are shown to be two separate entities. This type of humor continues throughout the history of animation to today, though bodily jokes like this were much more common during the era of rubber hose animation. After that era, the jokes were mainly in the form of language (ie. a bunny proposes with a “1 karat” ring shaped like a carrot), and molding and shaping became limited.⁷⁵

In live-action films there is often a temptation (if not a demand) to adhere to the “laws of reality.” Thus, in a fiction film attempting to create suture, a shot-reverse shot that has a character begin in one space and end in another without the movement indicated would be called a “goof.” In animation the audience accepts many more unreal aspects as reality. If Felix simply appears it isn’t questioned because the suspension of disbelief is extended, nor is it questioned when Goofy Goat in *Goofy Goat Antics* (Van Beuren Studios, 1931) keeps walking across a seemingly endless stage.⁷⁶ There is an affront to reality that entices the viewer without alienating him/her, which is inherent to animation. It is a fantasy, much like the fantasy of flying or having super speed. We may know we cannot stretch our arms around an entire building, but the idea is nonetheless fascinating.

Eisenstein attributes the attractiveness of plasmaticness to “the sight of such ‘omnipotence’ (that is, the ability to become ‘whatever you wish’),” particularly with the

⁷⁴ Taylor, *The Eisenstein Collection*, 143.

⁷⁵ *Bunny Mooning*, Fleischer Studio, 1937.

⁷⁶ See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1IEKkChcnDA>

way he describes the United States of America as having “such a mercilessly standardized and mechanically measured existence.”⁷⁷ This is an idea echoed by Huntly Carter, who writes, “They exhibit man in society caught in a network of events undergoing or trying to escape the consequences. They are in fact a comment, a very witty instructive and biting comment on the absurdities of Man and other living things seen in the light of materialism. At the same time they are human, tragic and comic.”⁷⁸ Part of the reason rubber hose animation can capture our attention so well is it physically manifests a psychological desire. We want to be able to do anything we want, like Felix or Tom or Jerry can (to some extent). We want to be able to escape the “daily grind.” We want to live in a world of pure fun and possibility. But we can’t, so instead we watch these cartoons that represent that desire. This is especially important considering the historical context in which these films were made. The Great Depression began in late 1929, not long after this style was popularized, and continued until America entered the war in 1941 and the recovery began. Part of the reason these cartoons may have been so popular is the escapism and potential they represent. In a world of modern alienation and hardship, rubber hose animation gestured toward a utopia of glee and unlimited possibilities. That, perhaps, is where the joy comes from.

The attractiveness of rubber hose animation comes directly from its ability to show the audience that which is impossible, yet still believable. The cinema of attractions is focused on these sorts of exhibitionistic tendencies. Rubber hose animation functions similarly to a Méliès film by capturing the audience’s attention through astonishment at the

⁷⁷ Taylor, *The Eisenstein Collection*, 103.

⁷⁸ Carter, *The New Spirit in Cinema*, 30.

spectacle on screen. Of course these exist in very different contexts, but the focus on the image and the illusion tie them together.

Downfall

The end of this style, or at least the extreme version of it, can be tied fairly directly to the Disney studio. There was a move away from the pliability of earlier cartoons and “a realist injunction was now invading the look,” as Esther Leslie writes.⁷⁹ The end for rubber hose style was *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), after which, Leslie writes, “the cartoons turned illusionistic, and the feature-length films to which the Disney studio devoted its time were striving consciously to produce an animated imitation of realist cinema – in terms of content and form and morality... The feature-lengths, from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* onwards, reinstitute the laws of perspective and gravity.” (fig. 30)⁸⁰

Disney had been moving toward this for several years before the release of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. Many developments in the techniques of animation aided the transition by allowing for greater depth-of-field – therefore further hiding the two-dimensional mechanics of animation – and rotoscoping allowed for realism in movement.⁸¹ In 1934 the Disney Studio released a Silly Symphony titled *The Goddess of Spring*, which marked the “first attempts to draw realistic movement,” and was meant as practice for *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*.⁸² *The Goddess of Spring* is not total realism (and neither is *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*), but the human characters are remarkably different

⁷⁹ Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands*, 32.

⁸⁰ Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands*, 121.

⁸¹ Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands*, 147-148.

⁸² Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands*, 148. Holliss, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, 12.

from most human characters of the era (fig. 31).⁸³ The protagonist, Persephone, looks more akin to a woman in an Alphonse Mucha poster than Minnie Mouse,⁸⁴ and though there are some remnants of the rubber hose style in her movements, she adheres to the basic laws of physics unlike most characters at the time (including her own dwarf-like attendants). In fact, Disney seems to have been influenced by Art Nouveau when he began experimenting with new character drawing styles in 1932.⁸⁵

In his book, *Seven Minutes*, Norman Klein looks at three cartoons from 1936 as examples of the transition away from rubber hose animation into what is called “full animation.” In summarizing this analysis he says,

In different ways, each cartoon has been stripped of throwaway gags. Instead of fast slapstick, they each orchestrate music and characters more like miniature dramas. Backgrounds look considerably more lavish. Characters are more restricted by their environment... than in cartoons from these studios only four years earlier. You will recall that cartoons earlier often had all objects made of the same all-purpose substance, a rubberized cartoon plasma. All air was rubber; the gags tried to show how many ways difference could look the same. Now, that had been reversed. Now, the table of elements has gotten much more complex. Some were harder, or softer, denser, fuller, even vaporous. Characters had to fight the elements more, be changed by the atmosphere.⁸⁶

I quote at length because I find this a well-written description of what the transition to full animation meant aesthetically. There was a direct move toward animation as a drawn form

⁸³ See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lqQuNK68F98>

⁸⁴ Interestingly, after writing this I found almost the exact opposite sentiment in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs and the Making of the Classic Film* which states, “the heroine, Persephone, moved awkwardly and had wax-work features and rubbery arms that were more akin to Minnie Mouse than to any real girl.” Holliss, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, 16.

⁸⁵ Klein, *Seven Minutes*, 113.

⁸⁶ Klein, *Seven Minutes*, 120.

of live-action film. The animism unique to animation was given up and replaced by didactic storytelling and realist aesthetics.

The rubber hose style of animation was by no means completely phased out after the transition to full-animation, although it did become much more rare. After Disney made the push for more and more realistic animation – ultimately culminating in the fantastical, although aesthetically realistic, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* – rubber hose style only appeared in very specific cartoons, and usually only in a limited role. Warner Bros.’ cartoons often use this style, allowing Bugs Bunny to stretch his arms beyond their limit. Rarely does an object in Bugs’ world mold with ease though, so it is more aligned with plasmaticness than rubber hose animation. Similarly, relatively new television shows such as *Ren and Stimpy* (Spümcø, beginning 1991), *The Misadventures of Flapjack* (Cartoon Network Studios, beginning 2008) and *Adventure Time* (Cartoon Network Studios, 2010) are notable for their distinct use of rubber hose limbs for their characters. These examples, however, seem to use the style as a reference to the earlier animation, rather than to exist as an attraction. At times it may be attractive, such as when a character waves his or her arms in the air in an s-shape, but for the most part it seems referential.

One example of the rubber-hose style persisting as an attraction is through superhero cartoons. There have been several characters whose “super-power” is to have the ability to lengthen their limbs at will. Some examples include *The Plastic Man Comedy-Adventure Show* (Ruby-Spear Productions, beginning 1979), Stretch Armstrong (which only existed as a toy, but a movie is in the works) and Mr. Fantastic of *The Fantastic Four* (who appears in many animated series and several films). These examples are qualitatively different as well, because by labeling them “super-powers” an excuse is given for the

spectacle and it is narrativized. The world of *The Fantastic Four* is not a rubber hose style world, and only Mr. Fantastic has those abilities. There is a more democratic nature to the rubber hose style seen in a cartoon like Tom and Jerry. Anything and everything is malleable and stretchable, not just one man.

It goes without saying that this style is largely unique to animation, even though it functions similarly to the non-actuality films described by Gunning in "The Cinema of Attractions." There are some famous examples of live-action attempting to stretch or bend the limbs of real humans, and aside from the live-action versions of superheroes such as those above, often this is to create horror. For instance, in *Nightmare on Elm Street* (Craven, 1984) Freddy Krueger's arms stretch along the road, acting as a trap (fig. 32). Or, in *Beetlejuice* (Burton, 1988), the ghosts that live in the house stretch their faces to scare the humans (fig. 33). It is interesting that in animation the fluidity of the body is used for humor, especially when paired with the new technology of synchronized sound effects, while in live-action it most often becomes scary or grotesque. Interesting, but unsurprising. In live-action we see a human body not unlike our own, and we have a natural inclination to identify with it. Disfiguration of the body alludes to the disfiguring of our own bodies, and so makes us feel uncomfortable. But in animation there becomes an extra layer that diffuses identification. The viewer both identifies with the cartoon characters and knows they are nothing like him/her. This separation allows the audience to play out the fantasy of stretching limbs and pliable objects through the characters on screen, without having the uncanny and grotesque effect there would be if it occurred in a live-action film.

Rubber hose animation represents the possibilities of transcending physical limitations, especially when paired with the ubiquitous human-animal hybrids in these

cartoons, which call into question what delineates the human body from the outside world. Overcoming obstacles is simply a matter of literally reshaping the world, and this is an especially important metaphor during the time in which these cartoons were made. The Great Depression was going on and daily people were reminded of the restrictions of the modern, real world. Through the rubber hose style, cartoons represented a fantastical way of overcoming modern alienation. Eisenstein relates plasmaticness to attractiveness and freedom in the following way: “a single, common prerequisite of attractiveness shows through in all these examples: a rejection of once-and-forever allotted form, freedom from ossification, the ability to assume dynamically any form.”⁸⁷ The style of early sound cartoons represented the ability to free oneself from the restrictive world of the Great Depression in America.

⁸⁷ Taylor, *The Eisenstein Collection*, 101.

CHAPTER 4

ANIMALS

Animals have been the subjects of film from the very beginning. Perhaps the most famous example of the use of animals in early film would be *Electrocuting an Elephant* (Edison, 1906), Thomas Edison's famous anti-Tesla propaganda film. Animals in film are often victims, companions, and omens, but the animals in animation are quite different. In animation, animals are often the only inhabitants of the world and they exist as both humans (in their actions) and animals (in their appearance, albeit idealized). They are anthropomorphic to an extreme, and yet often they live side by side with animals that act like natural animals. This play between anthropomorphized and natural animals is unique to animation. A talented animator can hybridize any two things (such as a human and an animal) in a believable way, but in live-action this isn't as easy to do. In the past, it has been attempted through careful training and puppetry, though not nearly as effectively; for example, the *All Barkie Dogville Comedies* (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer) which ran from about 1929-1931, use a form of puppetry to have dogs act out stories, and these have a limited, strange quality to them (fig. 34). More recently, using makeup and CGI (which itself is arguably a form of animation), it is certainly possible to create animal-human hybrids, but they are rarely very believable. Generally the animal-human hybrids created with the use of make up or CGI appear more grotesque than natural, while in animation these hybrids seem a perfect extension of the cartoon universe.

Extremely anthropomorphized animals act like humans ostensibly so the audience may identify with them, and yet they are still "other." The line between what is human and

what is animal is so thoroughly blurred in early sound cartoons featuring these characters, that they almost inadvertently call into question the very nature of what is human. Does Bimbo have the face of a human or a dog? Does Mickey think in an inherently different way than the parrot in *Steamboat Willie* does?

These early sound cartoons feature both human-animals and cute-animals, which I define as animals that act like humans and animals that act like animals. Often both types exist in the same film, creating a strange sense that there is an invisible division between, say, Mickey and Pluto, to make each act the way they do. By vacillating between something with which the audience identifies (Mickey) and can enjoy as if at the zoo (Pluto), the animals of early sound cartoons function as a cinematic attraction.

Humans and Animals

Simply having animal characters in these cartoons is a sort of spectacle, as there is a desire to look at animals that cartoons may, on some level, satisfy. We gain a special pleasure in looking at animals; as Steve Baker wrote in *Picturing the Beast*, “People, it seems, just like looking at the image of animals.”⁸⁸ Zoos have been around for centuries, providing people with a designated space to look, and there are some pets that seem to be kept with the express purpose of looking, such as fish or birds. There is an entire channel on television dedicated to watching animals (Animal Planet) and countless documentaries and television series which do the same (*March of the Penguins* [Jacquet, 2005] and *Planet Earth* [BBC Natural History Unit, beginning 2006], to name a few). The desire to look has been well documented by film theoreticians, and the desire to look at animals has been well

⁸⁸ Baker, *Picturing the Beast*, 121.

documented as well. They can represent the self and the other at once, and our society's perceived dominance over them puts them in the perfect position to be looked at. In his essay, "Why Look at Animals?" John Berger writes, "The fact that they can observe us has lost all significance,"⁸⁹ noting that part of the pleasure in looking at animals is the (perceived) idea that they can never know they are being looked at. The guilt that comes with voyeurism is lessened by the belief that the tiger in the cage is unaware of your gaze, when in actuality they almost certainly are.

This increased desire to look at animals came at a time of urbanization, when fewer people spent their daily lives surrounded by animals. The effect of urbanization on our relationship with animals has been explored extensively by John Berger, and he argues that in the 1700s and especially 1800s animals ceased to have such a central place in the daily lives of most humans (at least in "industrialized" nations). Rather than riding a horse to work, we began to drive cars; rather than using a cat to catch mice, we had mousetraps; rather than milking our own cow for milk, we bought it at a store. This leads to his next argument, in which he says, "Zoos, realistic animal toys and the widespread commercial diffusion of animal imagery, all began as animals started to be withdrawn from daily life. Yet in reality the innovations themselves belonged to the same remorseless movement as was dispersing the animals... The reproduction of animals in images – as their biological reproduction in birth becomes a rarer and rarer sight – was competitively forced to make animals ever more exotic and remote."⁹⁰ It is unsurprising, then, that animals so quickly became the focus of early films and early animation. Further, he says that animals "have

⁸⁹ Berger, *About Looking*, 14.

⁹⁰ Berger, *About Looking*, 24.

been co-opted into the *family* and into the *spectacle*.”⁹¹ Our alienation from animals has led them to become interesting as pets, or simply in their image and their existence. Thus the ability to go into a movie theater and watch an animal on screen became its own attraction, one which may not have existed had the cinema been around 400 years ago when humans and animals lived not only side by side, but as Berger says, “They were with man at the centre of his world.”⁹² This centrality may have died out in the real world, yet in the cartoon world it lives on; this is especially true of Betty Boop who, for a period of time, was the only true human in a world full of animals that acted like humans.

Watching an animal act like a human reminds us of how often we in fact act like animals (or at least our cultural conceptions of what an animal acts like). It is particularly interesting to consider this in relation to Betty Boop, at the stage when she was a human character surrounded by human-like animals.⁹³ Betty has always been a sex symbol, even after the Production Code forced modest clothes onto her and ensured they would stay on. We often associate animals with sexuality, with phrases such as “animal magnetism,” and “cougar.” So, when Betty sings a song on stage and the lustful crowd around her is composed of dogs and bears and various other indiscriminate animals, they are reflecting the animalistic desire of the audience in the theater. Betty is a woman in a world of animals in which she is the main object of desire, both on screen and in the theater. The audience of the theater identifies (whether consciously or not) with the animal audience of the screen.

⁹¹ Berger, *About Looking*, 13.

⁹² Berger, *About Looking*, 1.

⁹³ Betty Boop began her life in 1930 as a poodle surrounded by other animals, became a human surrounded by animals by 1932, and finally was a human surrounded by humans starting in 1934. Further description below.

Naturally, the extreme anthropomorphism is unrealistic, yet regardless humans often must use identification to facilitate comprehension, so even in the real world we assume animals have human traits. To see this one simply has to go to a zoo and listen to the ways parents describe animals to their children, saying the animal is “sleepy” or “misses his Mommy.” The anthropomorphized animals of animation may be unrealistic, but that does not mean we don’t find them believable.

Human-Animal and Cute-Animal

It seems there are two common types of representations of animals in this era of animation: what I will dub the human-animal and the cute-animal. The human-animal would be an animal whose behavior is almost exclusively that of a human. He/she may walk on two legs, talk, wear clothes, and generally does what a human character would do, but still has the face and body shape of an animal. A cute-animal, on the other hand, would theoretically be realistic, although they are practically always overly idealized in their appearance (usually infantile) and retain some human behaviors (like jealousy or pride). But when compared to the human-animal, the cute-animal functions as a real, natural animal would.

In this era of animation the human-animal is most common; an example of this would be Felix, who is described by Paul Wells as “only nominally a cat, especially given that his upright stance and signature pacing portray him as intrinsically human, but nevertheless, Felix’s identity, reinforced by many Felix toys and dolls, became one of

domestic familiarity.”⁹⁴ Occasionally the audience is reminded of the animalness of the character, often to elicit laughs. For example, Wells references a joke in which Felix says “I’d give eight of my lives for a square meal.”⁹⁵ The joke plays on the dual nature of Felix, both cat and human.

Human-animal characters were new to neither film nor animation during the early sound period of cartoons, and with the addition of sound came the direct impact of hearing an animal talk. Steve Baker writes that, “The animal story’s invitation to pleasure is invariably an invitation to a subversive pleasure. It is the simple fact that everyone, including quite young children, knows that animals don’t really talk which prompts such genuine delight in the anomalous convention of the talking animal.”⁹⁶ This added a different dimension that had a more direct impact than the gesturing of Felix or the written words of Peter Rabbit.

The cute-animal is generally simply a side character, and these animals have little to no agency. Generally, in the earliest period of animation the human-animal was most common. Later, when full animation and realism became a goal, the cute-animal began to represent a more practical (though still highly fictional) image of animals. Sometimes both types exist in the same cartoon, such as Mickey (human-animal) and Pluto (cute-animal), so that the separation is made within the world of the cartoon as well. Although they are in theory both animals, and in the real world a dog is probably smarter than a mouse, Mickey has abilities Pluto does not, a fact that is never directly explained.

⁹⁴ Wells, *The Animated Bestiary*, 36.

⁹⁵ Wells, *The Animated Bestiary*, 36.

⁹⁶ Baker, *Picturing the Beast*, 159.

A prime example of the use of human-animals and cute-animals in early sound cartoons is the Fleischer Brothers' Betty Boop cartoons. The titular character began her life as a French Poodle, though the only noticeable difference was a set of ears, and those ears turned into earrings by 1932. After this point Betty was the only human aside from Koko, a clown, who didn't really seem human. The most important recurring character aside from Betty was Bimbo, a dog that acted like a human and was Betty's boyfriend. Any other characters, such as extras or crowd fillers, were human-animals, dressed in clothes and acting like humans. These animals could fill any role needed for a gag. So in *Betty Boop's May Party* (Fleischer Studio, 1933) an elephant is essentially a human, until his tusk becomes stuck in a "rubber tree" and his animality becomes a joke.

At times both humans and human-animals exist side by side. A great example of this is the duo of Bimbo and Betty Boop. For a period of the Betty Boop series, Betty is human, while Bimbo is a dog; however, this doesn't stop them from having a romantic relationship. Though their relationship isn't ever very central to the cartoons, they are often seen together, such as in *Minnie the Moocher* (Fleischer Studio, 1932) where they run off together, hand in hand. Their relationship may be strange but it is not unique: Paul Wells writes, "Cross-species coupling is an endemic and unnoticed currency of the animated cartoon – innocent, innocuous, banal – or looked at another way, shocking, boundary-pushing, camp, queer, subversive.... are they like Kong and Fay? Or does something occur that prevents them from being animal or, indeed, human, when singularly located within an animated form?"⁹⁷ The boundary between human and animal is always called into question

⁹⁷ Wells, *The Animated Bestiary*, 4.

in early sound cartoons featuring human-animals, and especially when humans and human-animals interact with each other.

However, this shifted and in 1934 the Betty Boop cartoons changed their format; Betty Boop's world was suddenly populated by other humans. Very soon after that they also added a new animal character, Pudgy. Pudgy wasn't human-like, instead he was a small, especially cute puppy. He certainly had many human characteristics, but unlike Bimbo Pudgy walks on four legs, doesn't talk, and plays with bones and toys. Pudgy is the ultimate example of neoteny (described by Elizabeth Lawrence as follows: "Roundness is the essence of the neotenous configuration – round heads, round cheeks, short rounded limbs, and plump, rounded bodies characterize juvenile forms in both man and animals").⁹⁸ He embodies the "cute animal" aesthetic, with giant round eyes and soft features. He's tiny, a perpetual puppy. This is still a form of spectacle, but instead of appealing to impossibility and identification (as is the case with human-animals) it appeals to the human instinct to nurture, and specifically to nurture our young. The shift, then, seems to have been away from animals as humans and towards narrative continuity, with animals as animals. By taking out the extremely anthropomorphized animals of cartoons, the spectacle of animals was lessened, though not completely done away with.

Of course this distinction I have proposed is not black and white: historically there have been many exceptions. What is important about this distinction is the fact that in this time-period of animation animals were in almost every short, and they were almost exclusively human-animals. These animals were full-blown characters, often providing all of the action and dialogue. This, then, was an attraction in and of itself: to be able to watch

⁹⁸ Baker, *Picturing the Beast*, 181.

an animal acting like a human. Through animation the audience could be fully engulfed in a world in which animals and humans interact in new ways and act as equals. Paul Wells writes that, “Simply, *animated* films can sustain the suspension of disbelief despite their apparent inconsistencies because of its illusionist and the phenomenological status as a text. Audiences are not watching a wildlife documentary; they are viewing an animated fairytale that can play with generic orthodoxies and real world expectations.”⁹⁹ This, then, was its own sort of attraction: the attraction of watching something impossible, animals acting like humans.

Attractiveness

A connection may be drawn between the animals of the original attractions – the elephants and lions of the circus, for example – and the animals of the cartoons. Elephants and lions are exotic in their origins, while talking mice and dogs and rabbits were exotic in their impossibility. Rather than a lion tamer there are animators who tame them, while staying out of sight. Traditionally “exotic” animals are used in these cartoons (when their type can be distinguished), but their “exoticness” is never emphasized. For instance, in *Betty Boop’s Crazy Inventions* (Fleischer Studio, 1933), Boop’s audience seems to be composed of a mixture of animals, from hippopotamuses to dogs to giraffes to bears to other various indistinct animals (fig. 35). The breed of the animal doesn’t seem to matter, simply that they are human-like. This can be paralleled further to the circus by considering the use of trained dogs. The lions of the circus are trained minimally, going up onto platforms and opening their jaws, and because they are “exotic” that is sufficient. However,

⁹⁹ Wells, *The Animated Bestiary*, 49.

when dogs are used their training is elaborate and their acts are detailed because they are not exotic. Like in animation, the appeal of dogs in a circus is what they can do, not what they are.

It seems that audiences want to gain a better understanding of themselves through what they see on screen, and non-human animals have always been a strong point of identification for humans. Animals provide enough similarity to be identified with, in their faces and body shapes, while still being “other.” Desmond Morris, who surveyed British children on their favorite animals, argued that the reason children gravitate towards the animals they prefer (the top ten according to his survey being Chimpanzee, Monkey, Horse, Bushbaby, Giant Panda, Bear, Elephant, Lion, Dog and Giraffe) is because those animals have more similarities to humans than other animals.¹⁰⁰ They are all mammals, many with the ability to function on two legs and manipulate objects deftly with their hands or paws (or in the case of the elephant, nose). The child identifies with these animals specifically because they look and act more human. Audiences do not have these same connections with inanimate objects, and so have less interest in watching cartoons with a spoon as the central character than with a bear as the central character. One prominent exception to this would be the toy, as with the *Toy Story* films (Pixar, 1995-2010). Yet even in these exceptions, the audience identifies with the toys because they all look like (or act like) humans.

Thus animals have become the primary non-human type of cartoon characters. Because they are not human they are more interesting, and only animation can represent them in a human-like way. Animation could do the same for inanimate objects and does

¹⁰⁰ Wells, *The Animated Bestiary*, 78-79.

(such as the soup in *Pots and Pans*), but the audience tends to have less interest in something so far from the self. Instead the inanimate objects become supporting characters, helping drive the gags and increase the dreamlike character of cartoons.

On the other hand, it is unsurprising that Betty herself wasn't a dog for very long; creating such an obvious sexual symbol and having it represent bestiality would cause quite a bit of confusion. There has been a long tradition of tying animality with sexuality, though this tie is always only in *reference* rather than image. A Playboy bunny is still just a woman with a pair of ears, but to consider an actual bunny (or image of one) to be sexual is a taboo. Betty could dress up in a dog costume and the audience would still know she was a woman and that their desires were not a form of bestiality. But, if she is meant to be perceived as an actual dog then the root desire is one of bestiality. It is acceptable to watch a character on screen that appears to be an animal but in every other way acts as a human, except when that animal elicits desire; in that case, the attractive nature of the character seems only acceptable in a human form. Minnie Mouse is cute yet not sexual, and thus remains unproblematically animal, but Betty Boop is much more successful as a sexual woman than a sexual poodle. The attraction of watching an animal onscreen is lost in the confusion of desire. This idea may easily be called into question by the more recent *anime* phenomenon, in which all forms of characters become the locus of desire for young men, though that is another issue entirely.

The use of animals in animation is certainly not unique to the early sound animation time period. There are the mainstay characters of Disney (Donald, Mickey, Pluto, etc.) and Warner Bros. (Bugs, Road Runner, Wile E. Coyote) and there are countless examples of

television shows with anthropomorphic animals in the lead (*The Rocky and Bullwinkle Show* [Jay Ward Productions, beginning 1959], and more recently, *Johnny Test* [Teletoon Productions, beginning 2005] whose sidekick is a talking dog). We must consider this within the context. Today children are so accustomed to animation and CGI that the striking impossibility of what they see on screen is all but lost. There may still be a sense of wonderment, but it must coexist with a sense of apathy. One must imagine, though, that in the 1920s and 1930s, the audience would have still marveled at the sight of a hippo pushing a baby carriage, or a dog painting a house.

Many of these shorts contained animals as main characters for practical reasons, as it would free animators in what content they could use. Maltin writes of Paul Terry's *Aesop's Film Fables* "that using animals in this way practically eliminated the possibility of offending anyone in the audience through ethnic stereotypes of human improprieties. This gave the series a good reputation with theatre owners."¹⁰¹ Of course, cartoons were often offensive and rarely shied away from ethnic stereotypes, but there is a displacement that occurs by using animals instead of humans in that any statement about race is only *implied* and is never literal. Thus if an animated African American person is made the subject of a joke about lack of intelligence, this would be offensive to many viewers (especially today), but if the character was an anthropomorphized goat it would theoretically be less offensive. Of course this neglects the fact that the animal is given an implied race, yet the displacement still exists in that the animator can say "but he is an *animal* not an African American."

¹⁰¹Wells, *The Animated Bestiary*, 183.

Animals and animation seem to be a natural fit, and as Akira Lippit says, “As a genre, animation – from Oskar Fischinger’s spermatic ballets to Walt Disney’s uncanny horde – encrypted the figure of the animal as its totem.”¹⁰² Humans have an innate desire to look at animals because they reflect the self in a unique way. They are like us yet different, allowing us to keep distance while questioning our own animality. This can be accomplished through nature documentaries and other forms of live-action films, but it seems that by being able to truly integrate human and animal behaviors, animation is uniquely poised to put animals in a position to be looked at. Wells says, “it may be the case that animators have a specific and particular engagement with animals and a special sense of the ways in which animals are used to both represent and relate to the human condition.”¹⁰³ This seems especially true of this time period when a rather large portion of both central and supporting characters were extremely anthropomorphized animals.

This trend would continue after the early 1930s, although to a lesser extent after a shift towards more realistic storytelling. In *The Fleischer Story* Leslie Carbaga writes, “A direct, Disney-influenced change in the Fleischer’s style became apparent in 1934. Perhaps the most noticeable difference was the disappearance of the giant talking animals that had been Betty Boop’s playmates. From then on her only animal pals were mute pets.”¹⁰⁴ The animals were still present and human-like, but often made to look simply cute and reside within the bounds of reality. In a time before CGI and many of the special effects we have grown accustomed to today, the ability to see something non-human act like a human must have been a rather fascinating event. As Gunning says, these animals would have “directly

¹⁰² Lippit, *Electric Animal*, 197.

¹⁰³ Wells, *The Animated Bestiary*, 34.

¹⁰⁴ Cabarga, *The Fleischer Story*, 76.

solicited spectator attention, incited visual curiosity, and supplied pleasure through an exciting spectacle.”¹⁰⁵ Talking animals and objects were out of dreams and fairytales, and to see them on screen would have been quite a spectacle in this period when sound was still so new.

¹⁰⁵ Gunning, “The Cinema of Attraction[s],” 384.

CHAPTER 5

SOUND

Animation had unique abilities to showcase sync-sound technology, which it used primarily through music and sound effects. This use of sound is related to Gunning's theory of the cinema of attractions in its showcasing ability as well as its ability to keep the eyes of the viewer engaged with the spectacle on screen rather than the story. That is to say, where live-action film largely used the new sound technology to add dialogue and extend the plot, animation used sound to enhance the visual spectacle already present on screen, ignoring its narrative potentialities. The use of sound in cartoons from 1928 to about 1937 is unique to both film and animation, and the ways that it is unique directly correspond to the cinema of attractions. A spectacle is not necessarily purely visual, but can come from the union of sound and image or sound alone.

The transition to sound was awkward at best. Despite years of failed or partially successful experiments, when the adequate technology was finally discovered Hollywood was still quite unprepared (although this is unsurprising, given the large scale of the transition). Noisy cameras had to be placed in stationary booths, and in the very beginning single-track recording meant music and sound effects could only be added during the original filming. As Donald Crafton writes in *The Talkies* (specifically of films from 1929), these live-action films were "long static takes, badly written dialogue, voices not quite in control, poor-quality recording, and a speaking style with slow cadence and emphasis on

‘enunciated’ tones, which the microphone was supposed to favor.”¹⁰⁶ Famously mocked in *Singin’ in the Rain* (Kelly and Donen, 1952), the amendment of these issues was not easy. However, according to Crafton, “by around 1931 an ideal of an acoustically and pictorially unified cinema was more or less achieved,” and he attributes this to “multi-camera work and planar sound tracks.”¹⁰⁷

“By contrast, the sound cartoon was liberated,” Norman Klein writes.¹⁰⁸ In having frame by frame control and necessarily post-dubbing all sound, animation easily by-passed the hurdles faced by live-action films of the era. It was still a difficult and expensive process, but the results were generally much more advanced, both aesthetically and aurally. Movement wasn’t stunted but rather was enhanced; the soundtrack wasn’t simple but rather could integrate many different aspects. While live-action films were hampered creatively by sound at first, cartoons could work around the limitations of early sound technology.

Dialogue in cartoons was rather minimal while music and sound effects were used extensively from the very beginning. I believe that eschewing dialogue also made the sound of cartoons seem superior to the sound of live-action films. It is my suspicion that the ear is more attuned to variations in the human voice than in a sound effect or music. Take, for instance, foley, which is the process of making sound effects in a studio using various objects.¹⁰⁹ Any number of sounds can be reproduced through other means, and although they often sound different to some extent, the audience accepts the sounds. But if it were

¹⁰⁶ Crafton, *The Talkies*, 14.

¹⁰⁷ Crafton, *The Talkies*, 249.

¹⁰⁸ Klein, *Seven Minutes*, 3.

¹⁰⁹ Note that the term “foley” only came into use after the 1950s.

attempted to create voices without using actual voices, it would fail. Granted, this is in part due to the complexity of the human voice, but it is also due to our familiarity with the human voice. In not relying on dialogue (and not having to), animation was relieved of the scrutiny which may have been applied to the sound quality of live-action films, which used a fair amount of dialogue.

Of course, the fallacy of the term “silent cartoons” must be addressed, as almost all films of the silent period were accompanied by some sort of music and/or sound effects despite the lack of sync-sound technology. Unlike most live-action films of the silent period, cartoons rarely came with their own unique arrangements. Nevertheless, an in house musician would have improvised some sort of music for each cartoon.¹¹⁰ Also, the Fleischer Studio had been making “Car-Tunes,” which were sing-alongs, since 1924 when *Oh, Mabel* premiered.¹¹¹ This is why synchronization is so key, especially given animation’s minimal use of dialogue. Sync-sound cartoons were primarily distinguished from silent cartoons by the coordination between sound and screen, as silent cartoons had also used both music and sound effects already.

I’ve chosen to focus this chapter on the very earliest sound cartoons, with none later than 1930. While the rest of this thesis focuses on 1928-1937, only between 1928 and 1930 is the difference in sound quality between animated and live-action films so distinct. After 1930 the technology of live-action sound recording began to catch up to that of animation. It also marks a time in which sound films were still a novelty, and an attraction in and of themselves. Mervyn Cooke writes in *A History of Film Music* that, “Because synchronized

¹¹⁰ Goldmark, *Tunes for Toons*, 4-5.

¹¹¹ Cabarga, *The Fleischer Story*, 15.

and realistic sounds were initially a gimmick, they often drew attention to themselves in a manner that today seems both obsessive and naïve.”¹¹² This pejorative use of the term “gimmick” can in some ways be seen as a synonym for “attraction” (and of course, many traditional attractions from fairs and the like are similarly considered “gimmicks”). It also marks the era in which live-action sound films were most notably stunted by the new technology. I’ve chosen 1930 as the end date because this year seems to be the strongest turning point in the advancement of sound capabilities to again allow for creativity in live-action; as I’ve already noted, 1931 saw the application of new technologies to close the gap between animation and live-action. By this time sound films were becoming ubiquitous, and the novelty had largely worn off.

It may seem counterintuitive to describe sound as an attraction. This is in part due to the era commonly associated with the cinema of attractions, which was before the popularization of synchronized sound. Also, sound is often used to create a more “realist” aesthetic, making it seem opposed to a spectacle-driven mode of filmmaking. However, cartoons make a direct effort to use sound in a non-realistic way, particularly in this pre-1930 timeframe. Maurice Jaubert, a French film composer, remarked in an article titled “Music on the Screen,” from 1937 that, “Driven by the absence of speech to a lengthy method of visual paraphrase in order to make the story clear, the silent film built up for itself, little by little, a special idiom designed chiefly to compensate for the silence of the actors... But as soon as speech came to destroy this early convention, the cinema – although hardly anyone recognized it at first – changed its character. It became, it is, and it remains

¹¹² Cooke, *A History of Film Music*, 59.

realistic."¹¹³ Live-action film and its methods of storytelling had to shift entirely after sound technology was popularized, because they were primarily in the business of telling stories. Rather than conveying the story through brief title cards, formal elements, or actors' expressions, the story could be literally *told*, and this allowed for, and ergo pushed toward realism as a primary goal. This new method of storytelling seemed to take filmmaking a few steps backwards in terms of creativity. But, as David Bordwell writes in *On the History of Film Style*, "For many observers, Walt Disney's cartoons showed that talking pictures could properly integrate the pictorial *dynamism* of the silent cinema into an audiovisual unity."¹¹⁴ Animation wasn't as concerned with the story and therefore could retain some of the heightened expressionism of silent film, while eschewing dialogue. Auditory realism wasn't expected in animation because the only aspects of sound that were used extensively, music and sound effects, are the least realistic. This is not to say that realism and attractiveness are diametrically opposed – they can add to each other through contrast or vice versa, depending on the context – but it would be wrong to believe that the addition of sound could detract from attractiveness through realism.

The unique ability of cartoons to utilize sound technology creatively, especially in and before 1930, allowed cartoon sound to become a spectacle in itself. Furthermore, the way sound was used enhanced the already present visual attractions by tying them directly to the soundtrack through synchronization. Sound effects and music also added to the spectacle in their own ways, engaging the viewer through sound.

¹¹³ Davy, *Footnotes to the Film*, 106.

¹¹⁴ Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style*, 18.

Synchronization

As I've stated, the key difference between so-called "silent" films and the "talkies" is synchronization. No film is silent – even the sounds of the whir of the projector or the audience shifting in their seats are part of the experience. Most films had some sort of music, whether arranged specifically for the film or improvised by an in-house musician. Some even had sound effects or dialogue, added by employees of the theatre at key moments. So, it is not the content that is inherently different (ie., sound and image) but rather the form in which it is presented. That is to say, the new era brought the ability to synchronize and unify all of those disjointed sounds previously added at the theatre, uniting them both within the individual film and across theatres. Standardization was gained, though the live aspect was lost.

Therefore, synchronization of non-dialogue sounds can be an attraction in itself, much in the same way Gunning describes actuality films in "The Cinema of Attractions."¹¹⁵ Constant synchronization (as when every step of a cartoon character matches with a beat in the soundtrack) shows off the ability to synchronize sound and image in a unique way, and live-action is unable to do this as it is seen as unrealistic. In a 1931 article in the *Hound & Horn* journal, Kenneth White wrote that "The very precise, pert relation that must obtain between sound and images in the animated cartoon so that they click together like the point of a good joke and the immediate laughter can have little use in the movies proper, unless the movies are to copy directly the methods of the cartoon."¹¹⁶ Musical numbers present an obvious exception to this, where the diegetic world on screen can interact with

¹¹⁵ Gunning, "The Cinema of Attraction[s]," 383.

¹¹⁶ White, "Animated Cartoons," 105.

the non-diegetic music (before, after, or while the music *becomes* diegetic). Showcasing extreme synchronization, as is done in early sound cartoons, is simply not an option for live-action films.

Animation also had the advantage of frame-by-frame control over both sound and image. While a foley artist on set today may do his best to hit the clapboard at the precise moment, the early animation studios could mark at which frames to begin and end the sound. The exact number of frames could be counted out for every action and sound; this allowed the animators to set up a steady and consistent rhythm. There were several systems to aid the conductor in keeping to the beat of the pre-made film, including one patented by Walt Disney which used a bouncing ball on the edge of the film stock to keep the conductor on beat.¹¹⁷

The term “Mickey Mousing” has long been used pejoratively to describe the intense syncopation so common to the early era of sound cartoons. But really, the negative connotation seems to be associated with the technique’s lack of realism, an aspect cartoons before *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* were not primarily concerned with. It is no wonder that the term for such synchronization would come directly from Disney, as the sound of the *Silly Symphonies* and Mickey Mouse cartoons prove to be some of the best examples of this technique. As Donald Crafton writes, “Disney planned his films with motion, composition, and character centered on sound properties.”¹¹⁸ He sought for a unification between sound and image, until it got in the way of a newer goal: realism.

¹¹⁷ Crafton, *The Talkies*, 391. Crafton, *Before Mickey*, 213.

¹¹⁸ Crafton, *The Talkies*, 391.

The *display* of sync-sound technology is only one way in which animation's use of sync-sound can be seen as an attraction. Aesthetically, it serves to engage the viewer with the motion of the screen in a more encompassing way. The audience must take notice of each individual movement when it is accompanied by a sound. In silence, or without a beat at each movement, a character dancing across the frame is simply that. When notes are paired with the steps, each step becomes (or at least seems) more important. The action is broken down into its respective parts, like a collection of Eadweard Muybridge photographs: it becomes both a fluid motion and a fractured one. In this way the eye is engaged with the screen in a unique way.

Early sound cartoons display an unlimited amount of synchronization between sound effects, music, and image. The resulting effect is that the image on screen has an increased grasp on the attention of the audience, forcing them to engage in a way they may not normally. Our eyes are drawn to specific movements and gags based on their synchronicity with the sound of the film, and the spectacle of the cartoon is heightened.

It is about motion through rhythm (the rhythm between frames) or, as Philip Brophy writes in "The Animation of Sound," it "keys us into the *mobilization of dynamics*: where space and time are in essence *rhythmic reinforcements of each other*."¹¹⁹ To unpack this a bit, animation is focused on the relationship between time (1/24th of a second) and space (one frame) in the creation of movement, and there is nothing that underscores this as well as synchronized sound.

¹¹⁹ Cholodenko, *The Illusion of Life*, 73.

Sound Effects

The use of sound effects is most important through its enhancement of the gag. Norman Klein writes that with sound, “New visual gags were possible. Inanimate objects could not only look alive, they could sound alive as well. Animals became as versatile as Felix’s tail. A turtle was sprung like a couch; trees could mumble to each other in the wind; skeletons could tap out xylophone music; knees could shake rhythm to a tinny rag.”¹²⁰ Gags were no longer limited to that which can be visualized.

An interesting aspect of sound effects is they are only rarely true to life sounds. When paired with sharp synchronization the disjunction between sound and image becomes a different effect. The loud “smack” accompanying a fall is a spectacular choice in sound because it is so different from the actual sound that would come from a fall. It is unbelievable, and thus the sound itself becomes a gag.

Another aspect of sound effects in cartoons was the exaggerated relationship between sound and image. This idea relates to that of rubber hose animation, in that the ability to stretch, shrink, and shape objects correlated, at times, to that object producing sound. Part of synchronizing sound and image seemed to be making the action as significant as the sound. So, if a policeman were blowing his whistle it could not simply be a matter of putting the whistle to his lips; he must puff up his chest to an unbelievable size and deflate all the way to a single line as he blows the whistle, as happens in *Goofy Goat Antics*. This technique makes it so that the viewer’s eyes are never given a chance to pause; there is something to engage with visually, when there otherwise wouldn’t necessarily be. This was explicitly described in a manual of the Fleischer studio given to its artists, which

¹²⁰ Klein, *Seven Minutes*, 11.

says that, “the action itself is the important thing. This does not mean that mouth actions should be slighted. They *must* be on the ‘nose’ (accurate) and convincing, but perfect mouth-actions mean nothing if the action itself is not convincing.”¹²¹ The example that follows this description is of “preparatory gestures,” which extend the action so as to highlight it. The sound effect itself isn’t enough, the action must have very clearly caused the sound.

Philip Brophy has said, “The sound cartoon world is one where every mark and squiggle is energized by rhythm, vibrating in reaction to the soundtrack.”¹²² This is why sound effects are so important, they have the ability to give auditory life to everything on screen. “Animation” comes from *animare*, to instill with life. The cartoonist may make any object on screen dance and move, but when paired with sound effects they can also creak, breathe, sigh, squeak. The impact of each movement is heightened, and the life of each object is felt through sound effects.

Music

There is a fair amount of writing focused on the music and composers of animation, especially in relation to the amount of academic writing on other aspects of early cartoons. Two of the books that are exclusively about the matter are *Tunes for ‘Toons* (2005), by Daniel Goldmark, and *The Cartoon Music Book* (2002), edited by Daniel Goldmark and Yuval Taylor. Both books seem to consider the subject from both a film studies and musicology standpoint, addressing many visual, auditory, and historical aspects.

¹²¹ Furniss, *Art in Motion*, 84.

¹²² Cholodenko, *The Illusion of Life*, 78.

The music designed for cartoons filled many roles. It provided a backdrop for the constant synchronization between sound and image, gave a loose reasoning behind the actions on screen, and supplanted the need for a traditional storyline, in many instances. When a new character enters and the music becomes dark, we know he/she will be the villain character. Sometimes the music even *was* the story, such as when different styles of music battle each other (notably the later cartoon, *Music Land* [Disney Studios, 1935] featuring a battle between classical and jazz).¹²³ Less story time means more gag time, and therefore more spectacle.

Music is at the core of the display of synchronization, as it makes the synchronization seem purposeful. Hank Sartin writes, “The close synchronization of movement in these cartoons, long after Mickey’s miraculous pulsing in *Steamboat Willie*, continues to emphasize the very fact of the recorded music, making that recorded music the occasion for a spontaneous, interactive relationship between audience and spectacle.”¹²⁴ Music has always been central to cartoons, and at the time these cartoons were made music was still somewhat rare, rather than today when every store, car, and waiting room plays music on a loop.

An interesting common practice of cartoons from the early sound period was to display the entire world as if every object could be a potential instrument. Much like how the relationship between sound and image is exaggerated, the potential for a musical note to come from an object is also exaggerated. Animals, bones, pots, flowers, practically anything within the cartoon world may be “played” by a character, should the mood strike

¹²³ Goldmark, *The Cartoon Music Book*, 107.

¹²⁴ Sandler, *Reading the Rabbit*, 79.

him.¹²⁵ Visually it is fun to watch; like rubber hose animation in which every object can come alive, every object can produce music. What is most important about this practice, though, is that it functions to increase synchronization. Rather than simply showing a relationship between sound and image, it seems that the sound is literally coming from the image. What is on screen is, in this way, made to seem simultaneously livelier and less realistic. The viewer knows teeth do not sound like xylophones, so it is less realistic. Yet it appears as if the character is, in fact, making those noises by playing the teeth, so it seems livelier. Part of the spectacle is the overly musical world of the cartoon.

Though the use of music in these cartoons is interesting, the music itself generally wasn't original and was a compilation of free songs, either found in the public domain or already owned by the studio. This is generally because these films had to be as cheap as possible, but also Warner Bros. created its cartoon studio with the intent of promoting songs from its own library.¹²⁶

It is no surprise that animation grabbed onto this use of sound so quickly. Animation is precisely about enlivening that which is not alive, and music heightens the feeling of life. In some ways, music is the auditory equivalent of the visual cartoon. Both are quite abstract and constructed, while also being lively and joyous.

Examples

Although not necessarily the first (and the attempts to denote a "first" are pointless anyway), *Steamboat Willie* (Disney Studios, 1928) was perhaps the most important of the

¹²⁵ Or her, although there are notably few main female cartoon characters in this time period aside from Betty Boop.

¹²⁶ Goldmark, *The Cartoon Music Book*, 7.

earliest sound cartoons (fig. 36).¹²⁷ Its impact is clear, and its immense popularity cannot be overlooked. *Steamboat Willie* has a rather simple story: Mickey Mouse is working on a steamboat and meets Minnie when he picks her up from the port (well, the shore after she misses the boat). She is carrying a ukulele and sheet music which a goat promptly eats; in typical, literal fashion, the goat becomes a hand-cranked music box, and the rest of the cartoon is spent listening to “Turkey in the Straw” as Mickey dances and plays along using kitchen utensils and animals as instruments.¹²⁸

The sound of the film largely consists of sound effects and music, with small amounts of “dialogue,” although this only really consists of grunts (primarily the parrot, whose voice is supplied by Walt Disney himself). The sound effects are what would become standard later: slide whistles for things flying through the air, all major actions accompanied by a sound, etc. Unlike some later cartoons, not *every* action follows a beat, and there is background music faintly playing throughout, which doesn’t have a very strong, set rhythm as the later cartoons do. Regardless, by the end of the film, the spectacle of the music is the main focus.

The synchronization was a direct decision from the beginning. In *The Talkies*, Donald Crafton quotes a story sketch from *Steamboat Willie* that says that Mickey has “his body keeping time with every other beat while his shoulders and foot keep time with each beat.”¹²⁹ The potential of heightened animation (in the literal sense of the word) was seized

¹²⁷ See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BBgghnQF6E4>

¹²⁸ “Turkey in the Straw” was originally named “Zip Coon,” a popular song for blackface performers (as Mickey himself may be categorized) to sing.

¹²⁹ Crafton, *The Talkies*, 391.

upon by Disney from the very beginning though, as I mentioned, it would only increase in time.

A slightly later example is *The Skeleton Dance* (Disney Studios, 1929), which is the first *Silly Symphony* and features much more synchronization.¹³⁰ *The Skeleton Dance* is a very simple cartoon about skeletons that come to life and dance around late at night, until they return to their graves right before sunrise (fig. 37). It was the most popular cartoon of its time, a sensational hit. According to Crafton, "Its long runs matched those of prominent studio features: four weeks at the Carthay Circle in Los Angeles, a long engagement at the Fox in San Francisco, and an unprecedented rebooking at the Roxy."¹³¹ In terms of sound, almost every single movement on screen is paired with musical notes or sound effects to highlight it. A prime example is of the cats that fight in the beginning of the film. The cats screech and then spit, and the spit is punctuated by a note. They then pull each other's noses, which is accented with both the cats' noises and music. They spit at each other, again with notes marking the movements, before a skeleton comes up from behind a grave with a rising sound. The cats leap and their fur jumps off of them, both actions correlating with the music.

The story of *The Skeleton Dance* and other *Silly Symphonies* (and the similar series of *Merrie Melodies* and *Screen Songs*) is "an afterthought to the interpretation of music," as Hank Sartin has said.¹³² In some, it seems that the animation is specifically tailored to the music, a possible precursor for what would later become *Fantasia* (Disney Studios, 1940).

¹³⁰ See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h03QBNVwX8Q>

¹³¹ Crafton, *The Talkies*, 393.

¹³² Sandler, *Reading the Rabbit*, 68.

The unique way early sound cartoons used sound was a spectacle in itself, in part by taking the cartoon farther from the story and closer to the gag. This is an idea echoed by Norman Klein when he writes, “Sound enhanced the broken narrative within the cartoon. The characters could be stopped in mid-crisis by a shift between voice and music: a sort of Tin Pan Alley alienation device.”¹³³ Often, the sound took over any need for story through “Mickey Mousing” and a central score. The soundtrack was used as a sort of shortcut, allowing the animators to setup the gags as quickly as possible.

In the earliest sound cartoon period, the new technology itself was a spectacle, much like the cinematograph would have been to its first audiences. Music and even some dialogue were often paired with so-called silent films, but synchronization was only available with the new sound-on-disc and sound-on-film technologies. Though live-action film seized this new technology as quickly as animation did, it was at a great disadvantage. While live-action films needed microphones on set, music to be played during the initial recording, stationary cameras and other impediments, animation had none of these problems. Surely, making sound cartoons was not easy at first, but the product *seemed* effortless and flawless. Furthermore, cartoons could match every action on screen to a beat, a technique which would soon fall out of favor due to its “silliness.” At the beginning, though, constant synchronization seemed to best highlight the potentials of sound film – potentials which live-action film would not meet until after several years of technological innovations.

It is no surprise, then, that critics at the time would write things such as the cartoon “is the only type of American film that has consistently shown a correct application of the

¹³³ Klein, *Seven Minutes*, 10-11.

function of sound in relation to the visual image,” as Barnet G. Bravermann wrote in 1931.¹³⁴ In viewing a silent cartoon and a sound cartoon in succession, the difference is plain to see. Though silent cartoons feature many of the same structures, characters, and images of sound cartoons, the added element of sound seems essential to the vitality of animation. Where live-action silent films seem more expressive than their sound counterparts, the opposite seems true for early animation; silent cartoons are less dynamic than sound cartoons. This is because the sound was used so that “energy moved outward an acknowledged spectator rather than inward towards the character-based situations essential to classical narrative,” as Gunning writes.¹³⁵ Sound was used in 1920s and 1930s animation to create spectacle rather than story.

¹³⁴ Klein, *Seven Minutes*, 26.

¹³⁵ Gunning, “The Cinema of Attraction[s],” 384.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Tom Gunning's idea of the cinema of attractions relates the style of early film to exhibitionism and what I have called "attractiveness." As Gunning says, this is not entirely unique to pre-1906 cinema and it resurfaces later in other films, including, as I have argued, early sound animation. Early sound animation also focuses on the act of display and showing the audience something, and it does so through the original attractions, rubber hose animation, animals as characters, and the unique use of sound found in these cartoons.

Although Gunning's conception of the cinema of attractions largely ends in 1906 – he argues that the cinema of attractions was primarily phased out by 1914 – it seems it exists in another form, popular American animation, from about 1928 to 1937. The release of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in 1937 is the clearest indication of the end of this style of animation. It certainly wasn't an abrupt change, and the turning point may be 1934. Though his argument is different, Norman Klein uses similar ideas as I have in his book *Seven Minutes*. He strongly argues for 1934 as the year cartoons moved toward realism and narrative, based on several factors. For instance, he says "By 1934, Disney had decided emphatically to move away from gag storytelling."¹³⁶ He also claims that the anarchy of the early period of animation is "very muted" in a sort of Victorian revival which begins after 1934 and, I might add, culminates with *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*.¹³⁷ So Gunning

¹³⁶ Klein, *Seven Minutes*, 30.

¹³⁷ Klein, *Seven Minutes*, 48.

describes 1907 to 1913 as “the true *narrativization* of the cinema, culminating in the appearance of feature films which radically revised the variety format,” and I would describe the period of 1934 to 1937 in the same way for animation.¹³⁸

Unique to the pre-1937 period of animation is the complete lack of plot in most of the cartoons. Generally, if there is any discernible storyline it comes from a well-known source, so it serves more as a backdrop than a true narrative. For instance, *Red Riding Hood* (Van Beuren Studios, 1931) is a cartoon that is supposed to follow the same story as Little Red Riding Hood, but in fact only does so loosely. Instead, it uses the association to play off of the character archetypes present in the original story and string gags together. Having a set story – Little Red Riding Hood – actually *detracts* from the narrative potential of the film because the filmmakers assume the audience already knows the story and just focus on the spectacle. Other cartoons with “original” storylines are usually just excuses for chaos and gags. There is a setting, something happens, and usually some amount of resolution comes at the end, but rarely does it become more complex than that. Some series, such as Silly Symphonies, only center around a specific place (a graveyard, a forest, hell) and function to perform a song, with practically no overarching storyline.

Early sound cartoons relate to what I have deemed the “original attractions,” a concept that focuses on the historical sources of the cinema of attractions. Original attractions are mostly popular forms of entertainment centered around simply showing the audience something. These include the traditional entertainment forms of the circus, minstrelsy and vaudeville. The circus and minstrelsy primarily add to the content of these films, providing an excuse to perform acts for the audience. Also, early sound cartoons

¹³⁸ Gunning, “The Cinema of Attraction[s],” 385.

share elements of form with vaudeville, especially in that they are performative, despite animation being necessarily pre-recorded and not live. They each appear staged, either literally in vaudeville or figuratively in cartoons. And of course, the centrality of the gag is important to both forms of entertainment.

Visually, the use of rubber hose animation (which was the popular style during this time period) can certainly be seen in conjunction with the cinema of attractions. Primarily, rubber hose animation relates to the cinema of attractions through the impossibility of the style. Bodies and objects are malleable, stretching, shrinking and molding in totally unrealistic ways. It is showing the audience the impossible, and also rubber hose animation is simply aesthetically pleasing. The bounciness and fluidity are more attractive to the eye than the jerkiness of earlier animation and the simplicity of later animation. Furthermore, the viewer is engaged with the image rather than what little story exists. This relates to Sergei Eisenstein's idea of plasmaticness, which is also about stretching and shrinking, though his conception is much more centered on the body. Nevertheless, plasmaticness provides an important mirror to rubber hose animation and the ways in which it is attractive.

In place of stories the audiences witness spectacle, and part of this spectacle comes from animals. The simple fact that animals are consistently present hearkens to a desire to look at animals. But the animals in cartoons are not just animals; rather, they are almost always anthropomorphized to some degree. Some of these characters are anthropomorphized minimally, retaining their animality, and others seem closer to human-animal hybrids. The human-animal hybrids present the attraction of seeing an animal act like a human (walking, talking, dressing in clothes), something that is impossible in real life.

Through a play between identification and spectacle, the animals of early sound cartoons become an attraction.

Finally, the distinct use of sound in these cartoons can also be seen as a connection to the cinema of attractions. This can be understood in two ways; first, the potentialities of sync-sound film are put on display. Much like the actuality films of the Lumière brothers where, according to Gunning, the abilities of the technology become a spectacle, the abilities of sync-sound were quickly exploited in cartoons. Second, the use of sound highlighted the action on screen, heightening the exhibitionistic nature of these films. Primarily this was through constant synchronization, which engaged the viewer in an ostentatious way.

Through these four components, it is clear that early sound animation, from 1928-1937, functioned in the same way as the films described by Tom Gunning in “The Cinema of Attractions.” Rather than focusing on telling a story, as later films and cartoons would, these were about showing the audience something. That “something” could be the technology itself – as in actuality films or constant synchronization – or a particular spectacle – as in non-actuality films or rubber hose animation.

This is only a small portion of work on a largely neglected area of film studies. Animation as a whole is rarely written about from a critical, theoretical standpoint, and it is important that as researchers we don’t fall into the trap of overlooking certain areas because they aren’t taken seriously. The separation between “high art” and “low art” is not only problematic, it is entirely constructed by those who have historically applied such labels. In order to eradicate this false distinction we should strive to treat popular films as seriously as “art” films.

The cartoon characters that came out of the early sound period of animation seem to have had the most staying power. Betty Boop, Popeye, and Mickey Mouse are still printed on all sorts of merchandise, and were all debuted to the public between 1928 and 1933. More than seventy-five years later they are still household names, attesting to the immense talent of the animators of the early sound period of animation. All three characters are constantly being reprinted on different items, and their marketability hasn't decreased with time. The primary difference, though, is they are now more like icons than characters. Betty represents female sexuality through Americana, Popeye represents American power (especially military power), and Mickey Mouse represents all things Disney (which in turn represents wholesome, family values). However, their lives were not simply relegated to merchandise after the end of their original series. Betty Boop reappeared on screen as late as 1988 in the film *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (Zemeckis and Williams, 1988), with the same voice actress who had played her for many years, Mae Questel (though now eighty years old) (fig. 38). Popeye got his own live-action film, named *Popeye*, directed by Robert Altman and starring Robin Williams, in 1980 (fig. 39). And, of course, Mickey Mouse has continually been used as the logo for the Walt Disney Company since he was popularized in 1928. Today he appears in *Mickey Mouse Clubhouse* (Walt Disney Television Animation, beginning 2006), a 3-D animated television series still in production on the Disney Channel, among countless other series dedicated to him and his friends (fig. 40).

In thinking critically about these films, I hope I have called attention to a largely forgotten art form: the early sound cartoon. Many of these are now a part of the public domain and are fairly accessible on the internet or through inexpensive compilation DVDs.

Perhaps they will be rediscovered in the digital age, where their exuberant humor and short format seem to fit perfectly into the YouTube model.

The great film theoretician, filmmaker, and source for much of this thesis, Sergei Eisenstein, had a great passion for cartoons, specifically those from the Disney studio. He wrote sporadically on Disney, never unifying the writings, though they were compiled later. In one such writing, dated “21 September 1940,” Eisenstein beautifully summarizes these cartoons in the following way: “He who takes it into his head to bite hold of Disney by the usual analysis and yardstick, the ordinary requirements, the standard norms, inquiries and demands of ‘high’ genres of art – will gnash his teeth on empty air. And still, this is a joyful and beautiful art that sparkles with a refinement of form and dazzling purity. As much a paradox in the community of the ‘serious’ arts, as the unprincipled but eternal circus, as the singing of a bird – lacking any content, but infinitely exciting in its warbling.”¹³⁹ These cartoons may not qualify as serious, but there is no doubt as to their beauty and captivating powers.

¹³⁹ Taylor, *The Eisenstein Collection*, 94.

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FIGURES

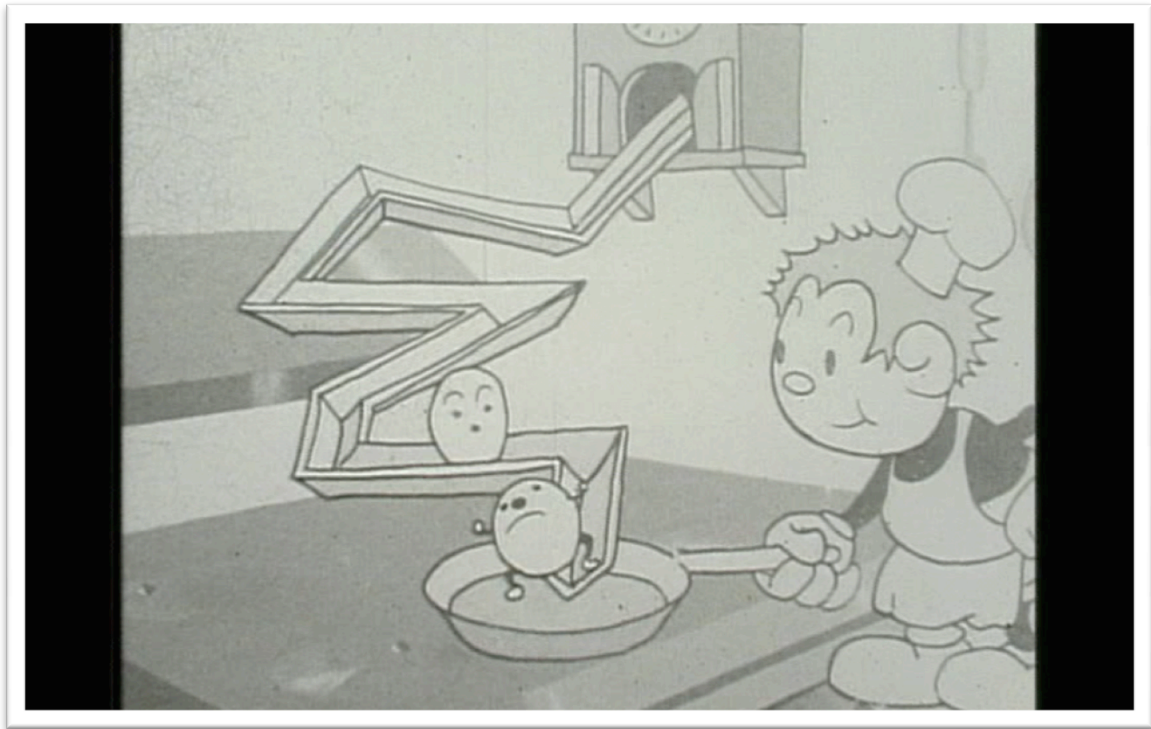


Figure 1. *Pots and Pans*, 1.



Figure 2. *Pots and Pans*, 2.



Figure 3. *Pots and Pans*, 3.

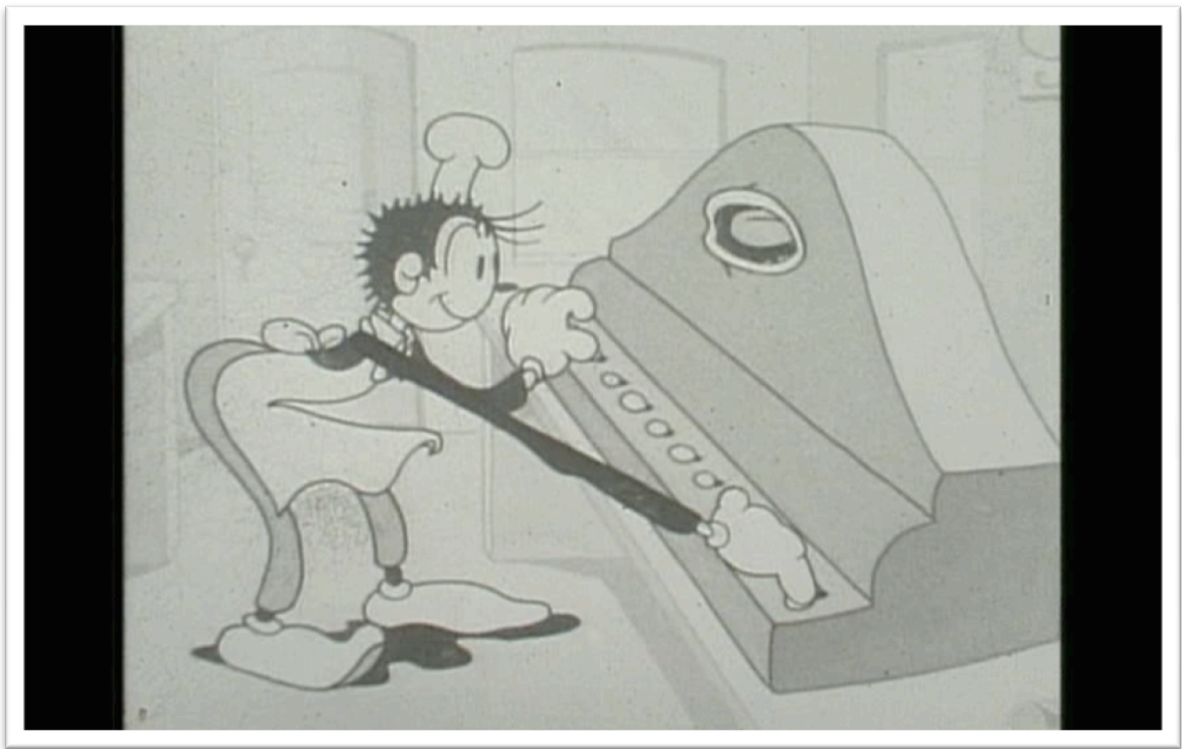


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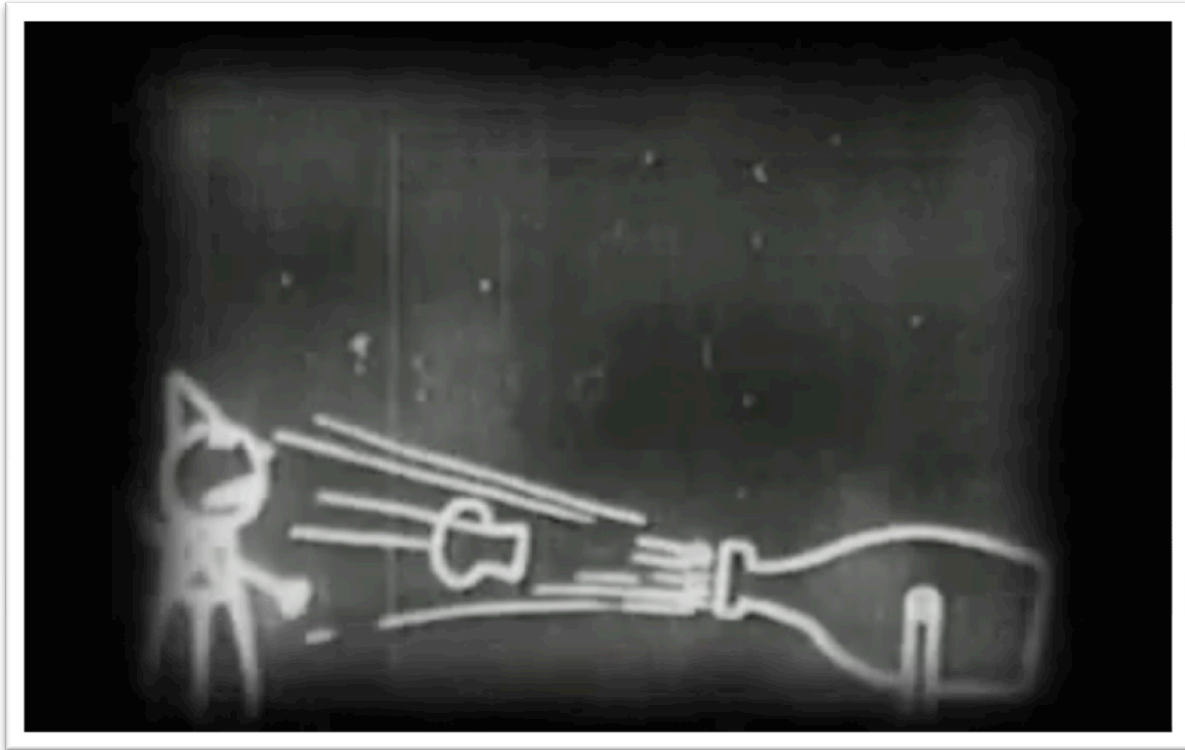


Figure 5. *Fantasmagorie*.



Figure 6. *Boop-Oop-a-Doop*, 1.



Figure 7. *Boop-Oop-a-Doop*, 2.

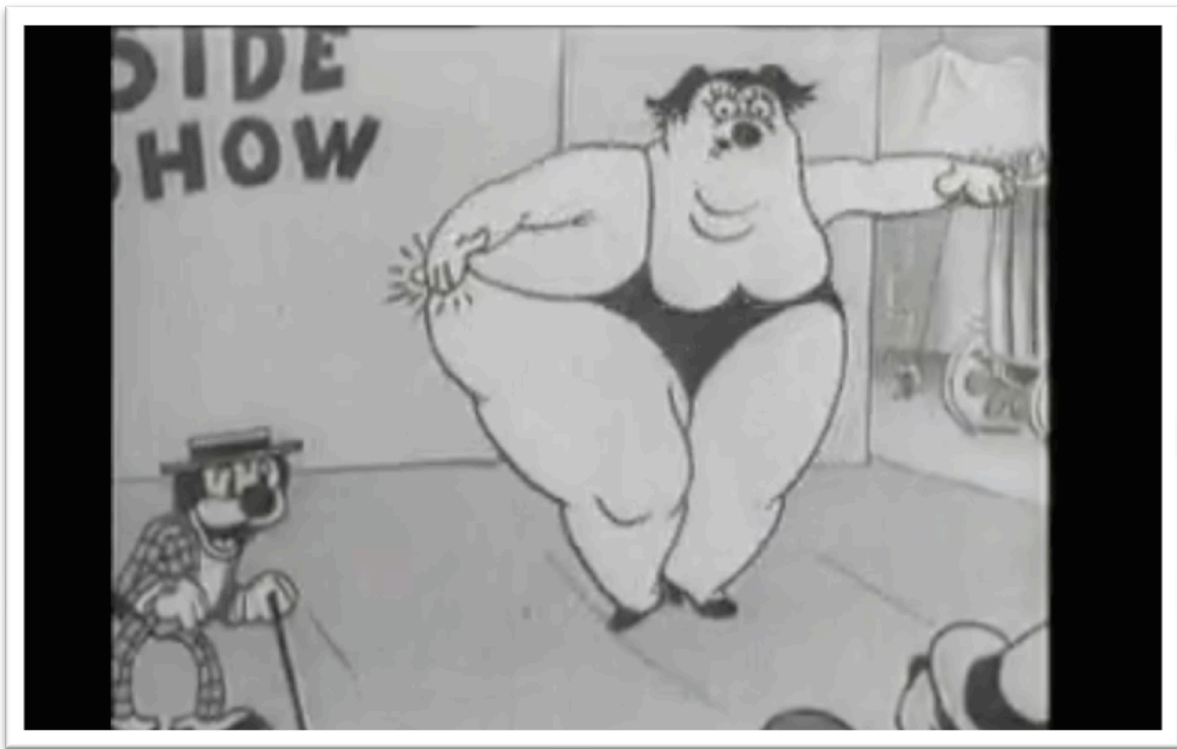


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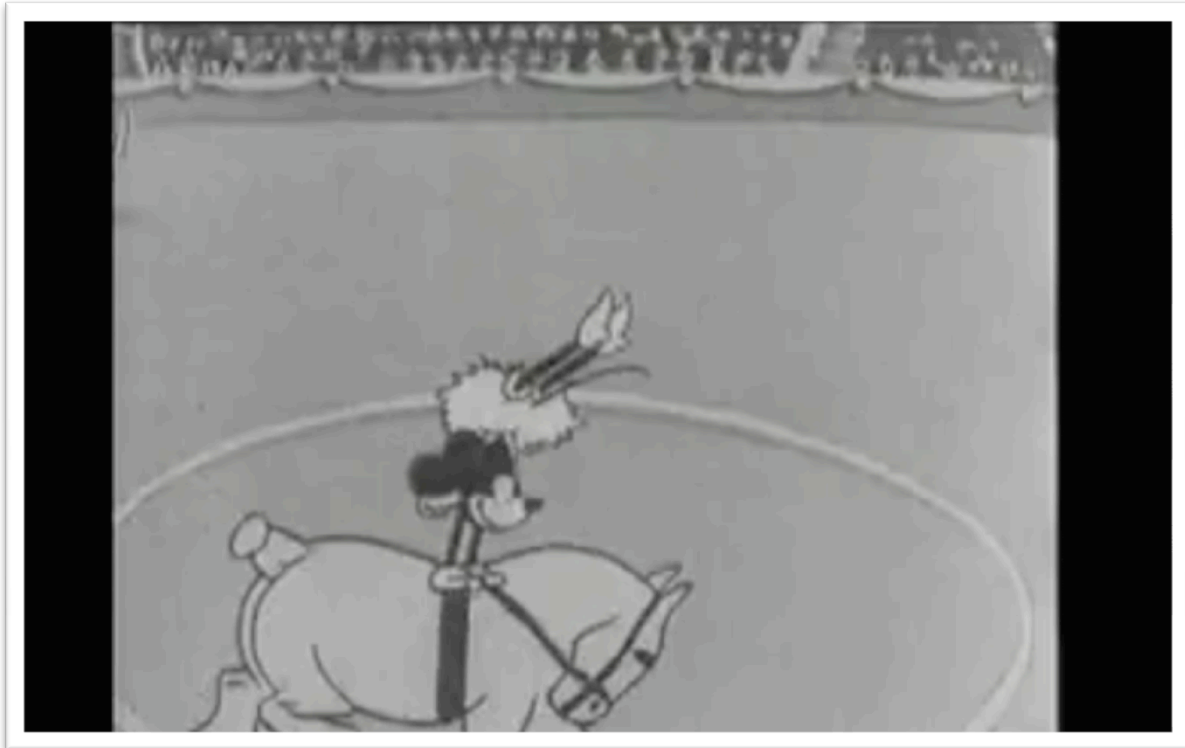


Figure 9. *Circus Capers*, 2.



Figure 10. *Circus Capers*, 3.



Figure 11. *The Jazz Singer*.

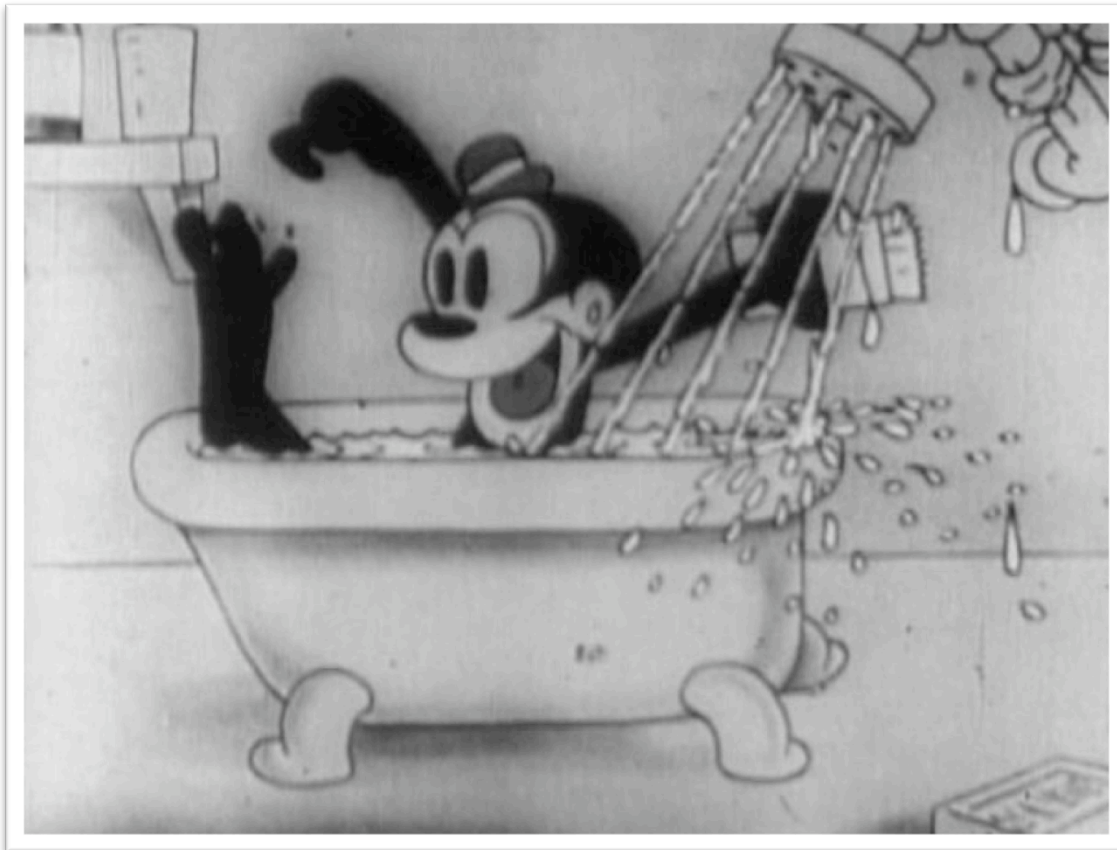


Figure 12. Bosko.

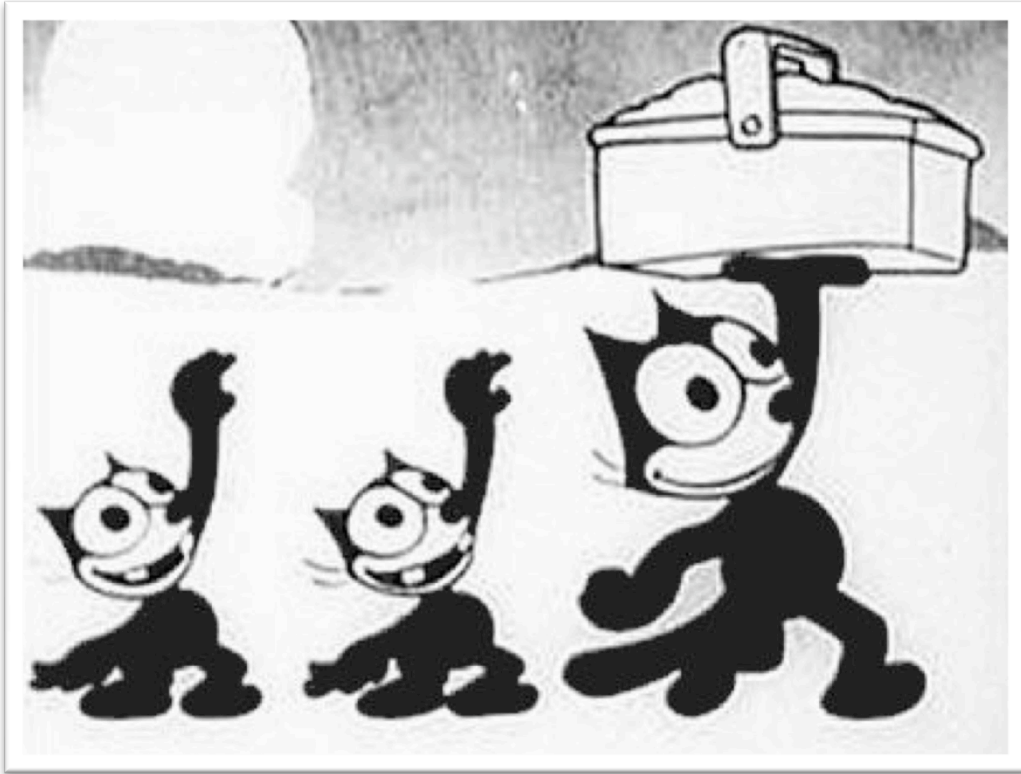


Figure 13. Felix the Cat.

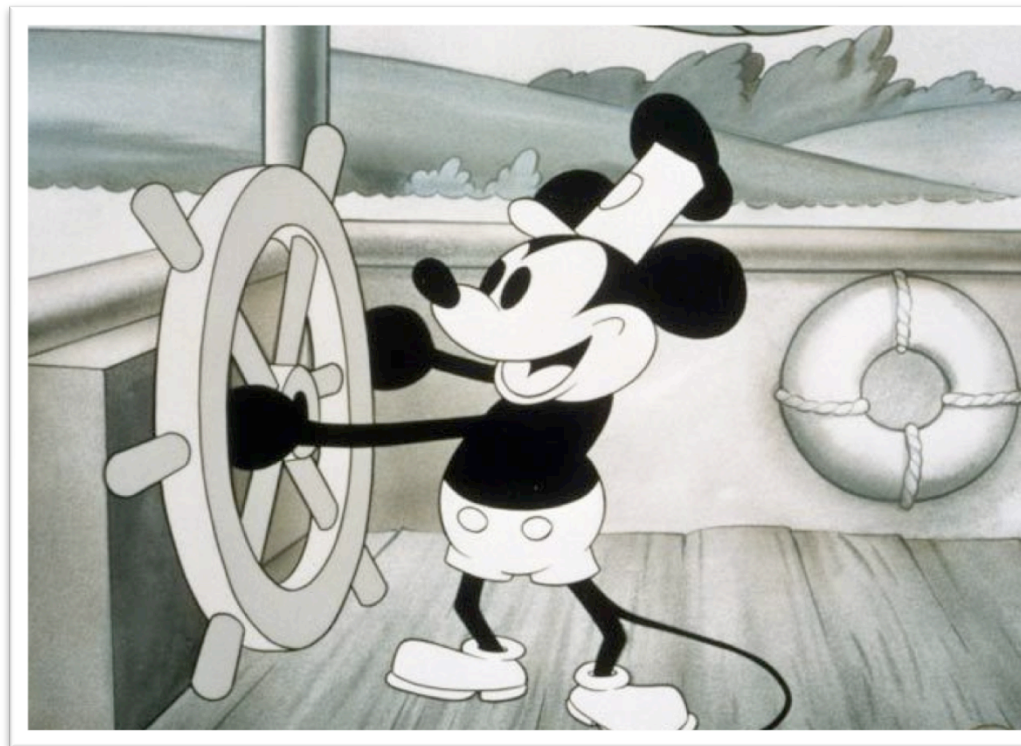


Figure 14. Mickey Mouse.



Figure 15. *Plane Dumb*, 1.



Figure 16. *Plane Dumb*, 2.



Figure 17. *Plane Dumb*, 3.



Figure 18. *The Tuba Tooter*.



Figure 19. *Plane Crazy*.



Figure 20. *Stopping the Show*, 1.



Figure 21. *Stopping the Show*, 2.



Figure 22. *Radio Racket*.

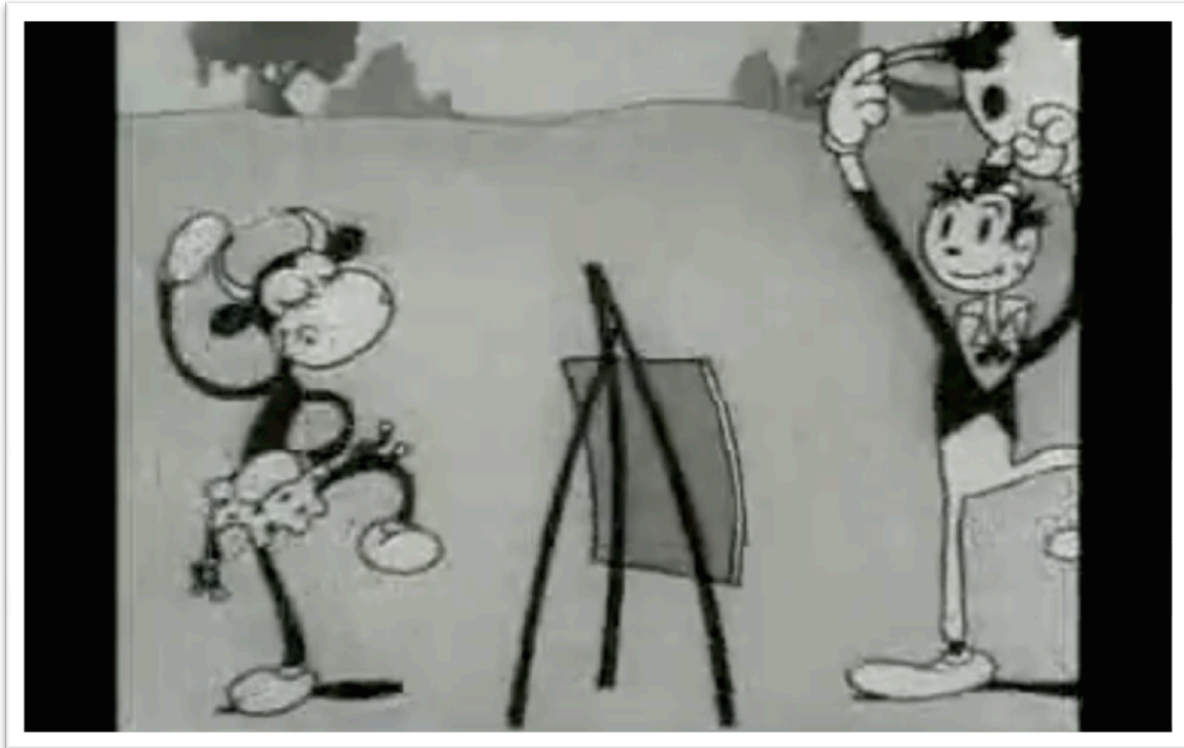


Figure 23. *Pencil Mania*, 1.

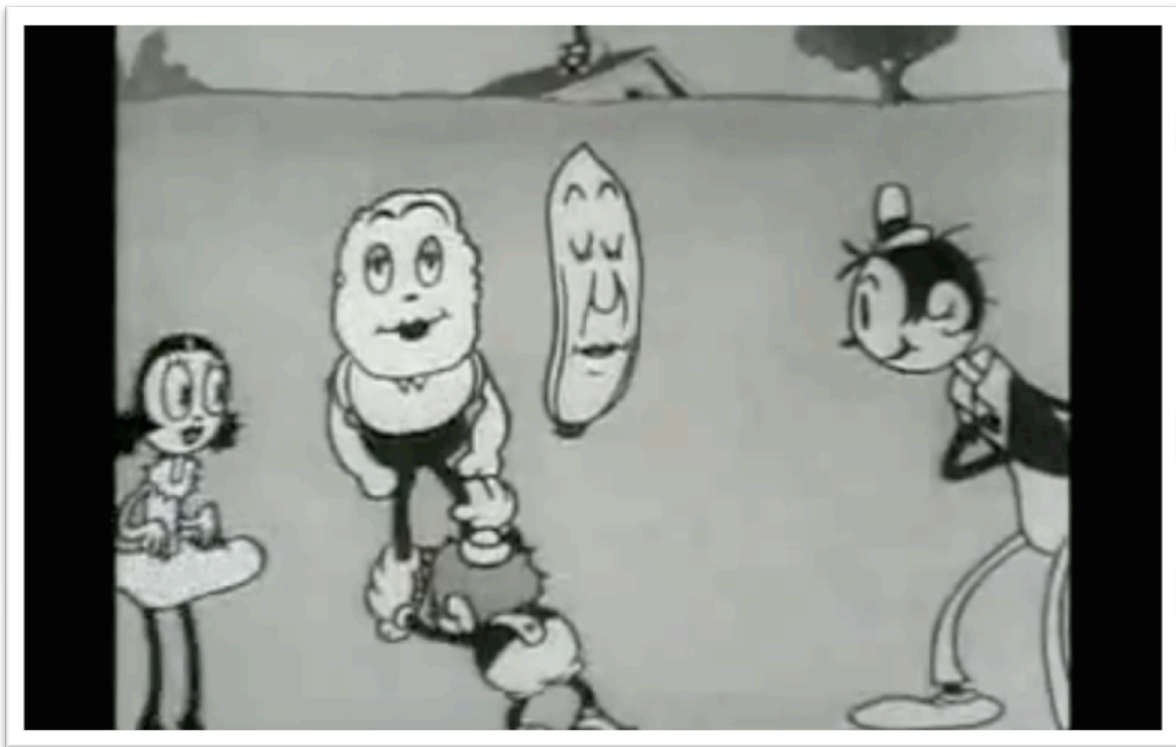


Figure 24. *Pencil Mania*, 2.

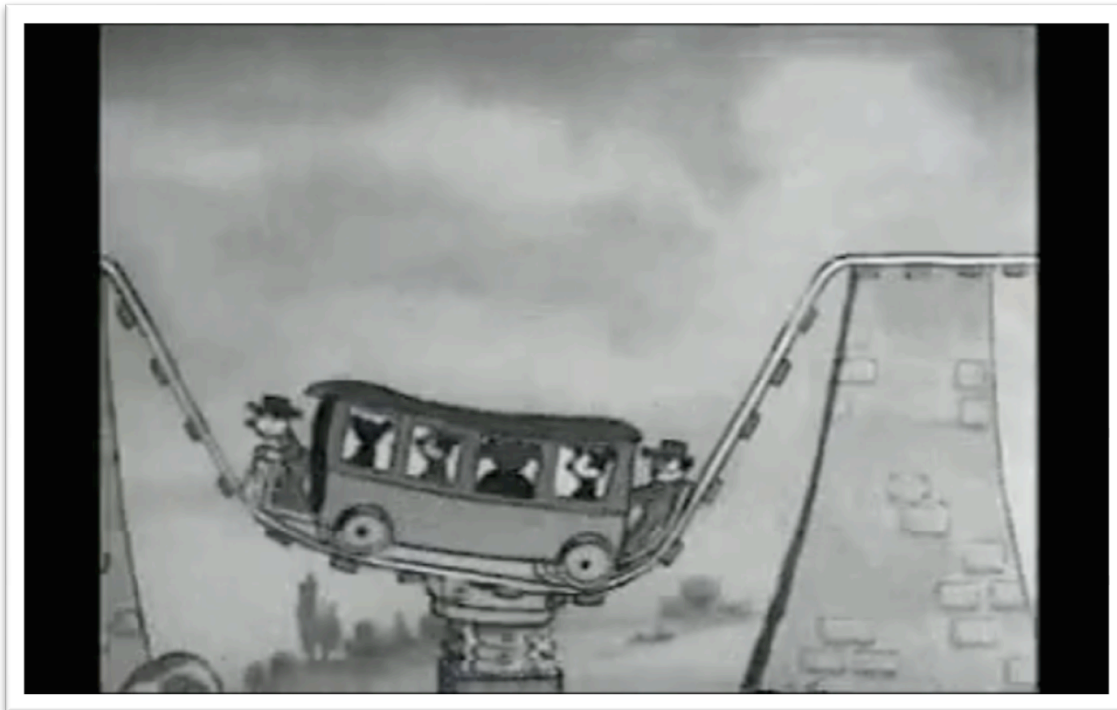


Figure 25. *Betty Boop's May Party*, 1.



Figure 26. *Betty Boop's May Party*, 2.



Figure 27. *Wot a Night*.



Figure 28. *A Spanish Twist*, 1.



Figure 29. *A Spanish Twist, 2.*



Figure 30. *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs.*



Figure 31. *The Goddess of Spring.*



Figure 32. *Nightmare on Elm Street.*



Figure 33. *Beetlejuice*.



Figure 34. *All Barkie Dogville Comedies*.

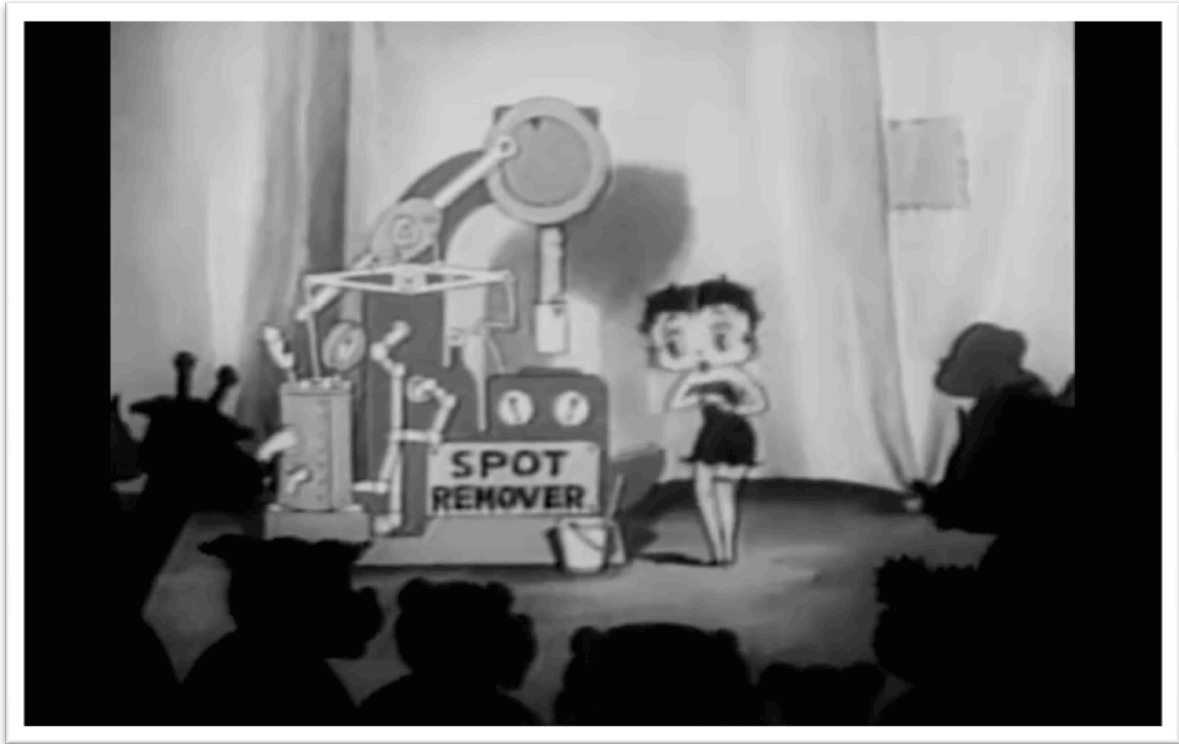


Figure 35. *Betty Boop's Crazy Inventions*.

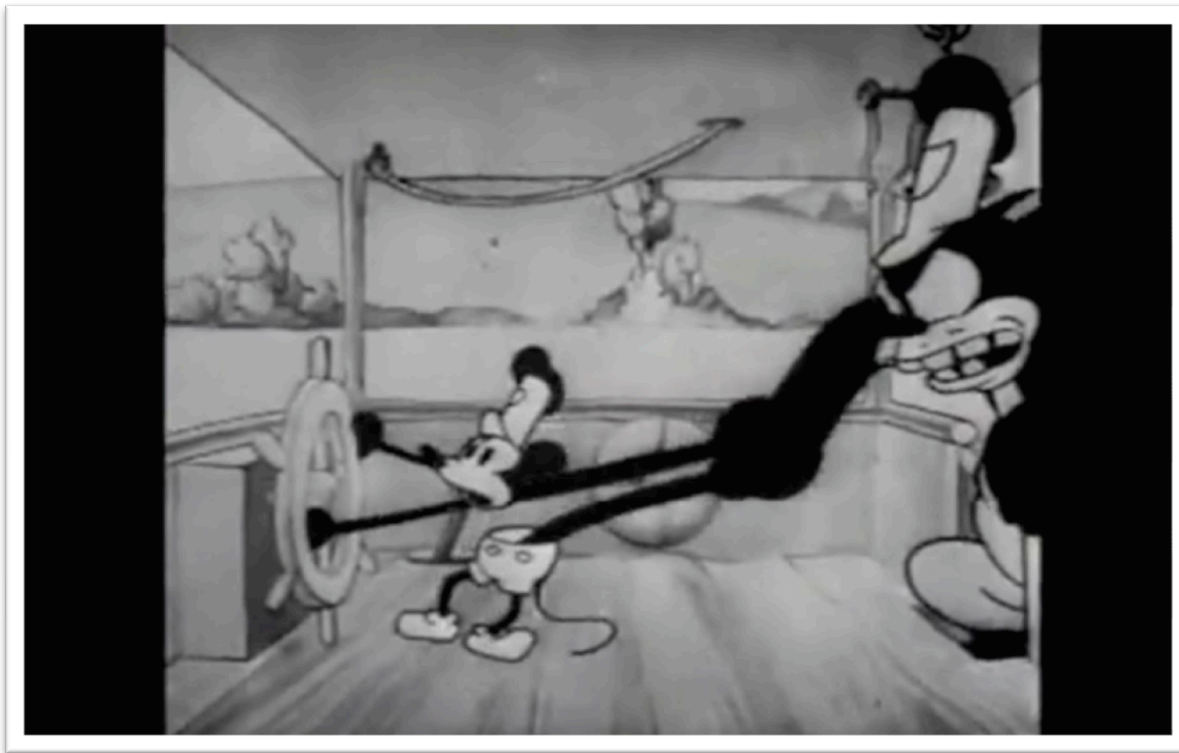


Figure 36. *Steamboat Willie*.



Figure 37. *The Skeleton Dance*.



Figure 38. *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*.



Figure 39. *Popeye*.



Figure 40. *Mickey Mouse Clubhouse*.