

# From print cartoon to animated cartoon

How 19th century caricature shaped 20th century animated film



UNIVERSITÉ LIBRE DE BRUXELLES, UNIVERSITÉ D'EUROPE

MuCiA research unit  
Muriel Andrin (Dir.)

Stéphane Collignon.  
<http://ulb.academia.edu/StephaneCollignon>

## **Abstract:**

In this paper the author aims to show the specific historic and stylistic connections that existed between 19<sup>th</sup> century caricature and early animated films. By doing so and by accepting caricature as the essence of animation, the author hopes to shed new light on some of the specificities of animation as an art form and especially its ability to create hyperreal figurines or even, supernatural figurines. That is, not only fantasy characters that look real, but “cartoony” characters that have the ability to come out as more realistic than less distorted, thus truly more realistic, representations.

When reading books or papers on the origins of animated film, one will usually find the wide panoply from cinema prehistory: optical toys, lanterna magica, shadow theatre, etc. Actually what one finds in most writings is that animated film stemmed from a large ensemble of multiple influences which, while very true, makes it fairly difficult for the scholar to point out the aesthetic specificity of the art form; what the images are actually made of. The author does not intent to over simplify the genesis of an art form born at the crossroads of multiple cultural and industrial phenomenon at a particularly booming time in the history of “pop culture”. However it is the author's belief that animation, as most art forms or styles can be thought of as the direct heir of a preceding art form or style. By finding this “ancestor”, one can thus much better understand the mechanisms that lay at the foundation of animation and how it is received by its audience.

In his Before Mickey, the animated film 1898-1928 (1982), Donald Crafton explains that the beginning of animated film mostly revolved around the Vaudeville tradition, especially the Lightning Sketch act<sup>1</sup>. One has to admit that a film like Humourous Phases of funny faces (1906) by Stuart Blackton is quite literally a filmed lightning sketch routine. Crafton also mentions comic-strips, acknowledging that they did offer plenty of stories and ready made characters to early animators. (Crafton, 48-57) Others, such as Charles Solomon, add many ingredients into the scholarship such as advertising, journalism, pulp novels, press cartoons, caricature, etc. (Solomon, 13) As Solomon says in his The Art of Animation, An Anthology (1987), there was quite a “bouillabaisse” of mixed influences. But there is one ingredient that seems more potent than the others; one that actually underlies several of the others: caricature. Caricature is at the origin of press cartoons and comic strips, it is the basis of lightning sketch drawing style, some famous caricaturists produced shadow theatre shows, etc. In one word, the author argues, caricature, in essence, is the main ingredient of the “bouillabaisse” out of which animation was born. Caricature is the starting point of animation.

However caricatures, or “print cartoons”, seem to have generally not been given enough consideration by scholars perhaps more interested in the independent, modern plastic art oriented, animation. A corpus that can appear worthier than “lesser” commercial animation where the connection with caricature seems more obvious. Yet, one cannot dismiss the fact that because it was the first to be industrialized and distributed on a global scale, and through the sheer number of film produced, those very commercial, US, “animated cartoons” were pretty much the start of it all. It is within those studios of the first 3 or 4 decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that animation was forged as a specific art form and it is this process and how it relates to caricature that needs to be explored.

The connection between animated films and caricature is actually not a new discovery. One may find arguments in Maurice Horn's World Encyclopedia of Comics (1999). Horn argues that animated cartoons are literally cartoons that are animated, and a cartoon, a print cartoon is a caricature. (Horn, 35) The case is also found in Lo Duca's (1948) book on the history of animation and most importantly in E. G. Lutz 1920 Animated Cartoons, How They Are Made. In this book, Lutz says that the first animators were all originally what he calls comic graphic artists. He adds that their work was know as “cartoons” and that when they moved into making films with drawings, it only seemed natural to call those films animated cartoons. (Lutz, viii-x) And Crafton (1982) and Stephenson (1987, 27-28) agree on the fact that all those pioneers had indeed learned their craft as cartoonist for the press, or comic-strips artists and that they were bound to bring with them into animated films, what they had learned in the print cartoon trade. (Stephenson, 34)

Indeed, Stuart Blackton started as a caricaturist for the New York Evening World in 1896 (Crafton, 44), Émile Cohl was a pupil of André Gill, one of late 1800's most important caricaturists, and was himself a known caricaturist when he moved into animation. Winsor McCay was an other famous comic strip artist. (Crafton, 125) John Randolph Bray, who founded one of the first animation studio was a prominent New York graphic humorists (Crafton, 140) and the list goes on

---

1 An artist draws and rapidly modifies drawings on an easel pad before an audience, accompanying this with a stream of talk nearly as rapid

with Paul Terry and the rest of the Bray, studio but also Gregory La Cava, Walter Lantz, or Max Fleischer who claimed he earned his first buck drawing for the Brooklyn Daily Eagle (Duca, 104). As Robert Vrielynck (1981) writes, this many examples can only back up the theories of those who believe animation owes everything to the printed image. Those print cartoonists are the artists who forged what came to be known as animated films and made them something entirely different from trick films. They gave animated films plots, narrative structure and an iconography that audiences came to identify with animated films. (Crafton, 9) It is thus interesting to study caricature to understand exactly what it is that print cartoonists brought over to animated films.

There are plenty of more or less complex definitions of what a caricature is whether one looks at a dictionary, an encyclopaedia or scholarly books on the topic. For the sake of this research, and to keep things clear and simple while at the same time broad enough, this author proposes a personal definition of caricature as a simplified and or exaggerated representation of a person (but also of an animal, plant, objects or other), often drawn through simple line drawing. This author insists on the term representation because, unlike the genre of grotesque, which is based on distortion for distortion's sake, caricature is a drawing of someone (something) that the reader is supposed to be able to recognise. And this is important because one of the main goals of caricature is to make a drawing that somehow looks more like the real thing than an actually realistic depiction.

But let us for now focus on the plastic characteristics of caricature. The term “aesthetics” would be incorrect here as caricaturists are not usually trying to achieve “beauty”<sup>2</sup>, instead, they try to create efficient representation. “Efficient” can be defined here as:

- how easy and quickly the drawing is understood
- how strong of an affective response can it trigger
- how verisimilar (lifelike) does it feel despite being unrealistic *stricto sensu*.

With those objectives in mind, we turn to analyse the type of representations that were produced by caricaturists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and to try and summarize the global plastic characteristics of the genre.

One of the main problem caricature artists had was their lack of academic training. They therefore had to develop tricks to counter any eventual weakness their drawing skills might show. In particular, they had two specific problems: perspective and accurate rendering of the human body. Perspective was especially tricky since the scale of the character depicted was often a clue as to how to recognize the character itself. Gillray, for instance would often draw Napoleon with Lilliputian proportions and that often was enough to recognise the French emperor. (Patten, 335). Cruikshank, another famous 19<sup>th</sup> century caricaturist, avoided the problem all together by setting his caricatures in a shallow box set. He therefore created a space with very limited perspective and arranged his characters in a frieze fashion. If need be he would slightly tilt the box so that the characters in the back would be slightly higher thanks the view angle. (Patten, 335-336)

When it came to anatomy, caricaturists also found ways to get around their weaknesses. Clothing is such a strong clue for identification that it could be used as a good substitute for the correct rendering of one's specific anatomy, especially when set in motion. (Patten 337-338) Baggy clothing especially served that purpose. Hiding the hands by giving them something to hold or putting them in gloves were also common tricks to avoid drawing this difficult to render part of human anatomy. (Patten, 338) Clothing was also very useful when trying to caricature a whole class of individuals, presenting the reader with an archetypal view, (Roberts-Jones, 89) such as found in the famous caricatures of Bourgeoisie by Honoré Daumier.

Of course, caricature would not be caricature without exaggeration and distortion, some

---

<sup>2</sup> Aesthetics in the most literal sense being a branch of philosophy dealing with the creation and appreciation of beauty.

times for distortion's sake. (Roberts-Jones, 89-90) Actually, by the 1860's one could almost find a sort of "classical" style of caricature which consisted in adding largely inflated heads on top of tiny bodies so that the disproportion between the two would add to the comical effect already obtained by the distortion itself. (Roberts-Jones, 94-95)

Some caricaturists also offered variations. Duradeau for instance did not focus on head to body disproportion but would play with the character's shadow to create a comical effect. (Roberts-Jones, 95) Carlo Grippa would, add a series of caricatural drawings depicting the life and personality of a person around a simple photograph of that person. (Roberts-Jones, 96) André Gill reduced his art to its essential core, avoiding details to embrace the detail, the movement or the attitude that would offer a complete synthesis of its subject while still giving a strong rendering of his character's personality. (Roberts-Jones, 104)

And, off course, anthropomorphisation of animals, plants and objects was always fertile ground for caricaturists such as Grandville, Busch or Alfred Lepetit. (Roberts-Jones, 97)

Those are all the tricks, the plastic characteristics that late 19<sup>th</sup> century print cartoonists where to bring into animation. If one takes time to think of it: simplified line drawing, large heads, gloved hands, exaggeration, anthropomorphic creatures, shadows moving on their own, state of consciousness materialised around the head of the figurines, etc. are all characteristics that have since become staples of what we have come to know as traditional animated cartoons. But one might argue that there is quite a difference between a caricature of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and, for instance, a rubber hose animated film of the 1930's. Well, perhaps not as big as one might think. But to understand why a film seemingly so stylistically different from a 19<sup>th</sup> century cartoon as an Oswald or early Mickey film is still an animated caricature, it is important to see how one evolved into the other.

When one looks at the first studio produced animated films in the 1910's, it is difficult to argue that we are not quite literally watching a print cartoon set in motion, films such as the Keeping Up with the Joneses series (1915-1916) show characters and background drawn exactly in the comic-strip/print cartoon style of the time, and are barely animated. Most of the titles of the 1910's actually are adapted from famous comic strips and, as the "WATCH ME MOVE" cry appearing on top of Flip's head in McCay's Little Nemo (1911) just before it gets animated clearly shows, the point of those early films was merely to see old favourite comic-strip characters moving on a big screen.

But the print cartoon drawing style, even though simplified was still too complex for early animators, especially given the number of films they were expected to produce every year. The overall result was, therefore, usually not very exciting. Some, however, did try to improve the quality of their work. According to Michael Barrier (1999), Gegory La Cava was one who tried to advance the quality of his work. He increased the number of drawings in his films, slowly stopped using speech balloons and introduced, probably along with Charles Bowers depending on the sources, a character design based of curves rather than the fairly angular usual print cartoon/comic strip characters. These more curvy characters had two important qualities. They were easier and therefore faster to draw, and they were easier to animate. (Barrier, 18-19)

A series like Bobby Bump (1915-1923, 1925), originally animated by Earle Hurd shows the quick progress that has been accomplished in only 2 to 3 years. Bobby Bumps Opens a Lodge (1916), for instance, shows much rounder characters and an animation which, if not completely fluid, does not resort to cycles and repeats as much as earlier animated films did.

In the early 1920s new studios emerged, particularly the Fleishers' and Paul Terry's. But The Fleishers where mostly interested in the technical aspects and, while the rotoscoping greatly improved their animation, they did not bring much change when it came to animated film design. And Terry's work had always mostly been about cutting the costs, rather than pushing creativity.

The main evolution of the 1920s is to be found with Felix the Cat. Started in 1919, the series introduced a whole new breed of characters. Felix was extremely simplified, extremely curvy

(though not in his first appearance) and with a full black body that facilitated the animation<sup>3</sup> and, by contrast, white eyes and mouth, enhanced the expressiveness of the character. But more than everything, Felix was the first character specifically conceived for cinema. He was not an adaptation from an existing comic strip.

The 1930s mostly showed an expansion of the industrialisation of animation, through Paul Terry's work among others, and most importantly the rise of Disney. The Alice Comedies series (1923-1927) does not really bring anything new by comparison to what Terry was already doing, but Disney quickly showed an ambition to improve the quality of his animation. In 1927 he launched his Oswald the Lucky Rabbit series (1927-1928)<sup>4</sup> and introduced his audience to characters that were over simplified, round, and fully black, like Felix, but the animation of which is much more fluid. Disney introduced distortion and exaggeration to a new extent and fully established rubber hose animation.

Most used readers of animation essays will obviously be familiar with the quick history of animation drafted here and it is interesting to review how animation moved away from caricature and towards establishing itself as an independent art form. But did it really move away from caricature? Felix, Oswald, etc. the first full fledged animated characters were simplified and exaggerated characters, animation itself was all about simplification and exaggeration. But as seen earlier, caricature as defined by the author is exactly that: a simplified and exaggerated drawing. So, in essence, animation never moved away from caricature. It took the essence of caricature and made it its own. And once the link between animation and caricature is established, the great advantage is that caricature reception has already been largely studied before and if one compiles research lead in the field of cognitive psychology (esp. the work of Gillian Rhodes) and ethology, as the author did in his "Why Leap Over, Redefining the banks of the Uncanny Valley" paper (Swansea Animation Days 2008)<sup>5</sup>, one can establish the three major strengths of caricatural, "cartoony" design over realistic design:

### 1) Speed of recognition

In her research, Rhodes (1996) has discovered that within a certain range of distortion, caricatures were thought by her experimental panel to be more like the real person they were depicting than an actually more realistic (and less distorted) portrait. The panel also had a tendency to recognise caricatures twice as fast as realistic portraits and four times as fast as anti caricature (i.e. a portrait that is distorted but towards the norm rather than away from it). (Rhodes, 92) To explain those results, Rhodes uses a model based on an absolute average face that would be located at the centre of our mental space (the same goes for objects, etc.). Caricatures are thought to be more lifelike than the real thing because they exaggerate precisely the features we use to recognise a face. They are also recognised faster because, by departing from the average at the centre of our mental space, they find themselves in a much less crowded space and therefore stand out much more easily. Rhodes also argues, based on experiments conducted by Gibson (1947)<sup>6</sup>, that caricature might better fit our actual mental representation of an object. (Rhodes 86)

### 2) Strength of affective response

In the field of ethology, research has consistently shown that exaggerated stimuli triggered a proportionally stronger response. While most ethologists study animal behaviour some have focussed their research on human reactions to specific stimuli. For instance, after Lorenz (1965) established the typical features that make one find babies cute and pretty (large heads, bigger eyes, puffed cheeks, shorter more cylindrical limbs, a more elastic consistency and uneasy movement –

---

3 for instance you only have to animate half a walk cycle since you can't tell the back leg from the front, and less lines to draw altogether)

4 In 1928 the series will be taken out from Disney by its distributor and will be continued until 1938 with one final appearance in 1943.

5 Available at <http://ulb.academia.edu/StephaneCollignon>

6 Gibson asked soldiers to draw planes they were trained to recognise and found out that the soldiers systematically drew caricatures of the planes

not incidentally the characteristics of the typical animated cartoon character) (Lorenz, 354-355), Gardner and Wallach (1965), found that by exaggerating those features you could create supercaricatures, that is babies that were thought more babyish than realistic babies. Accordingly, Sternglanz et al (1977), found that baby caricatures were systematically preferred over realistic portraits. (Sternglanz et al, 108-115) And as Lorenz explained this does not only work with baby features, similar results can be obtained for the whole range of human affective responses not just the cute and pretty. (Lorenz, 356-357)

### 3) Strength of simplicity

Already in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a caricaturist named Rodolphe Töpffer claimed that it was perfectly possible to come up with a pictorial language without any references to nature. To him, line drawing was a purely stylistic convention that is immediately understandable. Gombrich (1960) adds, that the viewer will always fill in the blanks. According to Gombrich, the fact that a drawing does not have to be realistic to be lifelike works because, along with the acquired experience of artists, the viewers have learned to accept simplified drawings because thanks to lack of complexity they also lacked contradictory clues. (Gombrich, 417) In a word, it is more efficient not to include a detail than to include it wrongly.

By showing the specific historic and stylistic connections that existed between 19<sup>th</sup> century caricature and early animated films and by accepting caricature as the essence of animation, one can thus shed new light on some of the specificities of animation as an art form. This author does not imply that animation is simply a *print* cartoon set in motion, early animators from the 1910s and 1920s did create *animated* cartoons in their own right. But because animation kept caricature as its essential core, it is possible to use the vast corpus of research and theories on caricature to try and understand the efficiency of animated cartoon and especially its ability to create hyperreal figurines or even, supernatural figurines. That is, not only fantasy characters that look real, but “cartoony” characters that have the ability to come out as more realistic than actually less distorted, thus more realistic, representations and trigger stronger affective responses.

### **Bibliography**

BARRIER, Michael, Hollywood Cartoons, American Animation in its Golden Age, Oxford University Press, 1999

COLLIGNON, Stéphane, Why Leap Over, Redefining the banks of the Uncanny Valley, in Swansea Animation Days 2008

CRAFTON Donald, Before Mickey: The Animated Film 1898 – 1928, The MIT press, Cambridge, London 1982 (new edition 1984)

DUCA, Lo, Le Dessin animé – Historique, esthétique technique, éditions d’aujourd’hui, 1982 (first edition, Prisma, Paris, 1948)

LUTZ, Edwin George, Animated Cartoons – How they are made, their origin and development, Applewood Books, Bedford Ma, 1998. (première édition: Charles Scribner’s Sons, New York, 1920)

GARDNER Beatrice T., WALLACH Lise, Shapes of Figures Identified as Baby's Head, in Perceptual and Motor Skills, February 1965, vol 20, pp 135-142

GOMBRICH, E.H., (traduit de l’anglais par Guy Durand), L’art et l’illusion, Psychologie et

représentation picturale, Gallimard, 1971 (original edition, Phaidon, 1960)

HORN, Maurice, World Encyclopedia of Comics, Phaeton, 19XX

LORENZ, Konrad, Essais sur le comportement animal et humain, 1965 (éd française 1970)

PATTEN, Robert L., Conventions of Georgian Caricature, in Art Journal, Vol 43, n°4, The Issue of Caricature, (hiver 1983)

RHODES, Gillian, Superportraits: Caricatures and Recognition, Psychology Press, 1996

ROBERTS-JONES, Philippe, La caricature du Second Empire à la Belle Epoque 1850-1900, Le Club français du Livre, Paris, 1963

SOLOMON, Charles (Dir), The Art of Animation, An Anthology, American Film Institute, 1987

STEPHENSON, Ralph, The Animated Film, Tantivity Press / A.S. Banes and co., 1973, 206p

STERNGLANZ, GRAY, MURAKAMI, Adult performance for infantile facial features, in Animal Behaviour, 1977, vol 25, issue 1 p 108-115

VRIELYNCK Robert, Le Cinéma d'animation avant et après Walt Disney – Un panorama Historique et Artistique, Les Ateliers d'arts graphiques Meddens , Bruxelles, 1981

### **Filmography** (chronological)

BLACKTON Stuart, Humourous Phases of funny faces, Vitagraph Company of America, 1906

McCAY Winsor, Little Nemo, 1911

PALMER Harry S, Keeping Up with the Joneses, Gaumont, 1915-1916

HURD Earl, Bobby Bumps Opens a Lodge, Bray Studios Inc., 1916 (series 1915-1923, 1925)

DISNEY Walt, Alice Comedies, MJ Winkler, (series)1923-1927

DISNEY Walt, Oswald the Lucky Rabbit, MJ Winkler, Charles Mintz, (series 1927-1928)