From 19th century print cartoons to 20th century animated cartoons
How caricature shaped animation aesthetics

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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)

Characteristics of 19th century caricature include implified 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

But there is quite a difference between a caricature of the late 19th 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 19th 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 has 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

But the print cartoon drawing style, even simplified was still too complex for early animators, and the result was usually not very exciting.

True, but some, did try to improve the quality of their work. According to Michael Barrier (1999), Charles Bowers 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 a character design based of curves, as in A.W.O.L (1919), which made the characters easier and therefore faster to draw and to animate. (Barrier, 18-20)

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 and with a full black body that facilitated the animation, and white eyes and mouth that, by contrast, enhanced the expressiveness of the character.

By the late 1920's Disney was showing an ambition to improve the quality of his animation. In 1927 he launched his Oswald the Lucky Rabbit series (1927-1928) 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 extend and fully established rubber hose animation

So animation was born in caricature but then moved away from it …

Actually what happened is that animators really increased the simplification and exaggeration of their creation. So basically they took the essence of cartooning and adapted it to the new medium that ws animation.

Once the link between animation and print cartoon, is established, the great advantage is that print cartoon reception and esp. caricature reception has already been largely studied and if one compiles research lead in the fields of cognitive psychology, neurosciences, ethology, art history, etc. as Stéphane Collignon did in his "Why Leap Over, Redefining the banks of the Uncanny Valley" (Swansea Animation Days 2008)[1], one can forge a new understanding of animation and most importantly of why cartoony, unrealistic, over the top characters are, despite all odds, so efficient at triggering audience emotion. Moreover, this cross media approach encourages the idea that rather than being separately studied in their usual respective fields (Art History, English, Film Studies), Caricature Studies, Comic Studies and Animation Studies might gain by being understood as part of one global corpus.

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1   Available at http://ulb.academia.edu/StephaneCollignon