

Pars Pro Toto

Character Animation and the Work of the Anonymous Artist

Everyone does his or her task on the conveyor belt, performing a partial function without grasping the totality.

—SIEGFRIED KRACAUER¹

The single frame is the basic unit of film just as bricks are the basic unit of brick houses.

—ROBERT BREER²

DELIBERATE MISTAKES

In late March 1937, in order to meet the booming demand for Popeye cartoons, the management at Fleischer Studios called for the production process to be sped up. In-betweeners, the animators tasked with drawing the stages of movement that come in between key poses, were expected to double their daily output, from twenty sketches per day to forty.³ But tensions between management and labor at the studio were running high, and the in-betweeners did not comply. Instead, they countered with a “slowdown” strike, which meant, effectively, continuing to produce drawings at the regular rate.⁴ In the month that followed, fifteen animators were fired for participating in the slowdown, and on May 6 the Commercial Artists and Designers Union authorized a full walkout of the studio.

The story of what happened next has already been told, as have the stories of other labor conflicts in the US animation industry—most notably, the 1941 strike at Walt Disney Studios.⁵ But I want to focus on what *didn’t* happen. By this I do not mean a counterfactual history, at least not in the traditional sense of the term. Rather, I wish to imagine what is left unsaid in these narratives, which tell us only what went on behind the scenes. How did in-betweeners contribute to the visual style of cel animation? How, if at all, would their absence have been

felt? What would be the *aesthetic implications* of the slowing down or stoppage of work?

Let's pretend, for instance, that management had simply ignored the in-betweeners' act of resistance and gone ahead with producing Popeye cartoons with only every other drawing completed. What would such a film *look* like? The difference, in truth, would be subtle. Popeye and Olive Oyl would still move—they would still be animated and hence animate. But they would move less fluidly. With the transitions from one key pose to the next abbreviated, the key poses would have to shoulder the burden of conveying the dynamism of each character. If before, little gestures and secondary actions—whether a detail of personality, such as Popeye pushing up a shirtsleeve as he prepares to throw a punch, or a detail of physicality, such as the fabric of his sleeve wrinkling at the elbow—helped give weight to these ink-and-paint figures, a cartoon with fewer in-betweens would instead have to make the most of its individual static compositions. We wouldn't see Popeye wind up his arm, lift his leg for leverage, and then shoot his fist forward to make contact with his opponent's face, every step of the action working in tandem to communicate his presence and power. Instead, it would be the very lacuna in the action—such that we witness only Popeye *before* and *after* the punch—that would serve to underscore the forcefulness and speed of the elided swing.

What I am envisioning is something like “limited” animation, a technique that would come to dominate US animation in the 1950s, thanks largely to the influence of the upstart studio United Productions of America (UPA). Unlike “full” animation, in which there are twenty-four unique drawings per second, or even animation done “on twos” or “on threes” (which use, respectively, twelve or eight unique drawings per second), limited animation forgoes most in-betweens by relying heavily on “holds,” in which characters do not move. If a character turns his head, we are given only profile and frontal views of his face—no intermediate position is offered. The movement is staccato, and the character is sapped of mass and volume. But the abruptness of the animation and the flatness of the characters have their own aesthetic appeal, insofar as they flaunt “the graphic, non-perspectival possibilities of the medium” of animation.⁶ Noting these possibilities, a contemporary critic praised the UPA style for its “emphasis is on line rather than modeling, line used for stringently expressive drawing.” UPA cartoons are but “the distillate of an image,”⁷ much like the work of Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Saul Steinberg, and Amedeo Modigliani. Thus limited animation reduces labor costs, but not at the expense of creative expression.

An early example of limited animation, which predates the foundation of UPA, is *Dover Boys at Pimento University*, or *The Rivals of Roquefort Hall*, a 1942 Warner Bros. short directed by Chuck Jones. Throughout, characters freeze dramatically in place, holding their positions for several seconds at a time. When they finally continue on their way, they are not animated in a succession of poses. Instead, several discrete movements are welded into a single image, creating bizarre



FIGURE 3.1. Smears in *Dover Boys at Pimento University, or The Rivals of Roquefort Hall* (Warner Bros., 1942).

“smears”—heads that arc like rainbows, noses that stretch across the screen (fig. 3.1). The effect produced, as an animator writing for a contemporary art journal remarked, is “an expressive pattern integral to the picture.”⁸ Indeed, the result is comic, strange, and often beautiful—and wholly unlike the animation of contemporary films by even Jones himself. Animators delighted in testing limited animation’s temporal and spatial rhythms. As Ward Kimball, a Disney animator who exploited the technique in such films as *Toot, Whistle, Plunk and Boom* (1953), explains, “My contention was there were certain types of comedy staging that were best done with limited animation. A *lack* of movement would put over the gag.”⁹

We might, then, briefly entertain the notion that labor unrest at Fleischer Studios could have been averted had management simply embraced the in-betweeners’ slowdown, regarding it not as a threat to their commercial productivity but rather as a fresh opportunity to expand the expressive possibilities of limited animation. Well, we can dream, at least. What is more likely (or, of course, not likely at all, given that we are still in the realm of the counterfactual) is that the animation would have looked awkward, stilted, not quite right—but then again *not quite wrong*, either. For this scenario, we have at our disposal extant Popeye cartoons, namely the colorized frame-by-frame remakes produced by Turner Broadcasting in the mid-1980s. Turner delegated the task of converting of 120 Popeye shorts to color for television broadcast to Entercolor Technologies, whose head, Fred Ladd, had pioneered the colorization of black-and-white cartoons in the late 1960s. Among his earliest projects was the entire Betty Boop catalogue. The actual colorization of the shorts was undertaken at a studio in Korea, where technicians went frame by frame through 35mm prints, extracting the foreground elements of the still image (those parts that had originally been painted on cels a half century earlier) from the background and then enlarging each element separately. After color was applied to the separated elements, the

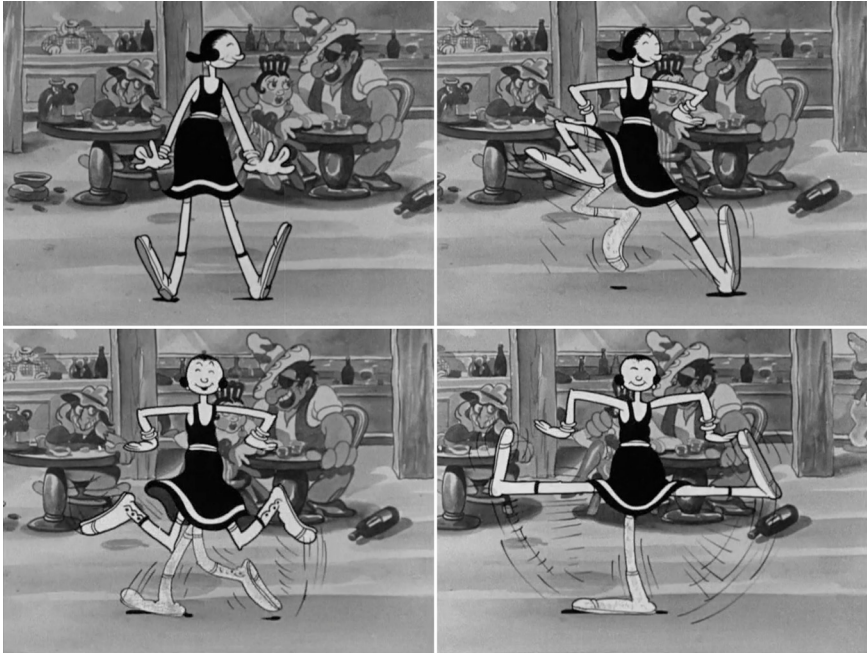


FIGURE 3.2. Frames from Olive Oyl's dance in *Blow Me Down!* (Paramount, 1933).

final image was reassembled under a camera. The head of operations in Korea had come to colorization from the publishing industry, and he focused most of his attention on the precise registration and calibration of colors. Ladd would later characterize the method as the “fusion of two disciplines that ordinarily do not meet each other in the light of day—animation and printing.”¹⁰ But shortcuts were taken. Fleischer cartoons were usually animated on twos, so the Korean technicians typically colorized every other frame, which could then be photographed twice to preserve the original frame rate. This meant, however, that those instances in which the animation was done on ones—instances in which animators wished to achieve especially rapid and/or fluid motion of characters or props—were, when colorized on twos, drained of their original pacing, specificity, humor, and even causal logic.¹¹

A frame-by-frame comparison between a dance performed by Olive Oyl in the black-and-white *Blow Me Down!*, first released by Paramount in 1933 (fig. 3.2), and the same dance as it appears in its remake from 1985 illustrates just what was lost in the colorization process. In the original cartoon, Olive holds a pose—her arms and legs straight and her hands and feet lifted upward—for seven frames (just under a third of a second) while the background is incrementally moved behind her. The contrast between her taut limbs and the way in which she appears to float effortlessly down the dance floor is comical. In the next frame, her knees bend toward

each other and her arms lift at the elbows. Out of her right knee she sprouts a third leg. This is what is known as a “multiple,” and, like the smears in *Dover Boys* described above, is another means by which animators simulate motion blur. The actions that follow are animated on ones: (1) her elbows and knees bend at right angles (her third leg still protruding downward); (2) her entire body lifts upward, two of her three heels nearly touching her hips; (3) she does a split in midair; (4) two of her three legs return to the ground while her left leg remains bent; (5) her right leg and its multiple lifts up while her left leg hits the ground; (6) she grows four legs, two bent upward, near her hips, and two as if mid-stride on the floor; (7) three of her four legs are pulled straight, her fourth bends at the knee; and so on. This series of dramatic poses continues for another full second. Some are recycled, but each frame is distinct from the one before it. After more than thirty such contortions, Olive resumes the pose she held at the start of the sequence—before once again launching into her paroxysmal dance. The dance achieves a perfect rhythm, milking the tension between the calm of her stillness and the unhinged antics of her angular legs. The remake, by contrast, lacks any such control of time. While the blue of Olive’s dress, the tan of her skin, and the brown of her shoes may be precisely calibrated to the contours laid down fifty years before, her movements are helter-skelter. She holds her pose for only four frames, and then moves her legs wildly for a mere three frames, before once again assuming her held pose. The eighth of a second in which her limbs are akimbo barely registers as “dance.” Instead, it reads as nothing more and nothing less than a spasmodic twitch.

The difference between the two possibilities I have sketched above, in which the number of unique drawings between key poses is significantly reduced, seems to reside in *intention*. The stylized, limited animation of a UPA short or *Dover Boys* is artistically successful because of a top-down, coordinated effort both to exploit the comic possibilities of stillness and to ramp up the speed of the intervening movements. Labor might be saved along the way, but it is in service of a grander creative vision, one that marries form and function. The colorized Popeye shorts are unsuccessful because the work performed is ad hoc, with no sense of the film as a whole: the technicians’ only task was to colorize as efficiently as possible, and in their frame-by-frame reviewing of the cartoon at hand they neglected to see the forest for the trees. The aesthetic consequences of this method are unintended; they are imperfections, mistakes, disturbances, and anomalies of the same category as those I detailed in the previous chapter.

What I wish to draw out of this quasi-counterfactual exercise is a larger claim about the importance of noncreative labor, such as in-betweening, to the visual aesthetics of cel animation. To be sure, in the hierarchy of most animation studios, in-betweeners were of higher rank than the inkers and painters—it was their animation sketches that inkers traced and painters opaqued. But their primary job was to adhere to the designs dictated by the directors and

head animators. They were selected not for their artistry per se—that is, if we understand artistry as personal expression—but for their ability to copy the style of another. And the work, like that of the camera technicians and the inkers and painters, was repetitive. “That, to me, was like an assembly line,” former in-betweener Walt Peregoy recalls.¹² “Where is the creativity in obsessively crouching over light boards, tracing and flipping, flipping and tracing, all day, every week?” asks the animation historian John Canemaker, reporting on the production of Richard Williams’s *Raggedy Ann & Andy: A Musical Adventure* (1977). Canemaker observes that the in-betweener Sheldon Cohen “occasionally resorts to caricature to relieve the ennui,” which provides him a necessary release from “mindlessly tracing somebody else’s spontaneous drawings until all the life is gone from them and nothing remains but an impersonal, inert sketch.”¹³ Yet as taxing and tedious as this work might be, it nonetheless has a significant impact on the final film—hence the effectiveness of the slowdown strike initiated by in-betweeners at Fleischer Studios, hence the salient stylistic differences between works of full animation of the 1930s and 1940s and limited animation of the 1950s.

On the one hand, the division between creative and noncreative labor in animation production is obvious. There is some circularity to the logic undergirding this division, of course (to wit: above-the-line workers are paid more and are credited for their work, which is how we know they are above-the-line workers), but that doesn’t mean there aren’t qualitative differences in skill and talent between a head animator and an in-betweener, or even between an in-betweener and an inker. On the other hand, it is only through the efforts of tens, if not hundreds, of noncreative workers that the creative vision of the singular director can be realized. Moreover, it is *their* work that makes it on-screen: the anonymous camera technician took that photograph of that stack of cels, each of which was painted by an anonymous painter, working from a sketch by an anonymous assistant animator or in-betweener.

“Somebody built the pyramids,” Mike LeFevre, a steelworker, tells the journalist Studs Terkel in a famous interview. He continues:

Pyramids, Empire State Building—these things just don’t happen. There’s hard work behind it. I would like to see a building, say, the Empire State, I would like to see on one side of it a foot-wide strip from top to bottom with the name of every bricklayer, the name of every electrician, with all the names. So when a guy walked by, he could take his son and say, “See, that’s me over there on the forty-fifth floor. I put the steel beam in.” Picasso can point to a painting. What can I point to? A writer can point to a book. Everybody should have something to point to.

What can an inker point to? What can an in-betweener point to? Did they ever have the desire to stop the film and say, “That’s me”? The frame-by-frame method of looking at animated cartoons gives the viewer, at least, something to point to. But

what is the aesthetic status of the single frame? “Sometimes, out of pure meanness, when I make something, I put a little dent in it,” LeFevre confesses to Terkel:

I deliberately fuck it up to see if it'll get by, just so I can say I did it. . . . A mistake, *mine*. Let's say the whole building is nothing but red bricks. I'd like to have just the black one or the white one or the purple one.¹⁴

I have not, in all my viewing, found anything that I can recognize as a deliberate mistake on the part of, say, the inkers or painters.¹⁵ Take the work of the animator Al Eugster, who started as a painter for Pat Sullivan Studios in the 1920s. “That was a mean job,” he recalled. “But it was part of cartoons, so I accepted it.” To break up the monotony, he would sometimes “furtively draw tiny cartoons of his own devising inside Felix [the Cat]’s lines before blackening them in.”¹⁶ But blacken them in he ultimately did. No vestigial Eugster originals are preserved on film, although the twists of the paths broken by his brush might be visible on the reverse side of the original sheets of paper, were they still to survive.¹⁷ Yet the *potential* exists.

Part of the issue is that mistakes are, by definition, unintentional—inevitable, perhaps, but accidental nonetheless. But a “deliberate mistake” is more than an oxymoron. It poses an epistemological quandary: When is a mistake not a mistake? Is everything in the image potentially meaningful? Perhaps among the imperfections I catalogued in the second chapter are traces we were supposed to find. Moreover, the very possibility that a mistake might, in fact, have been made on purpose strikes at the supposedly rigid boundary between creative and noncreative labor. Once again, the epistemological uncertainty engendered by our spatial and temporal remove from the film’s production dovetails with our experience of its aesthetic effects. In this case, however, it is not the uncertainty itself that becomes a site of aesthetic pleasure, as it was in the previous chapter. Rather, it stands as evidence of the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of determining intention after the fact.

We might, then, link this conundrum to the Marxist dream that there will one day be no division between creative and noncreative labor. “In a communist society,” claim Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in *The German Ideology*, “there are no painters but at most people who engage in painting among other activities.”¹⁸ Needless to say, US animated cartoons were not produced in a communist society—but we might still think of animation as masonry, bricklayers as animators. That is, the question of artistic intention—the “creativity” of the laborer—as determining the aesthetic merits of the final artwork can be put aside. Conversely, the fact that a steelworker like LeFevre hungers for the recognition of his singular contribution invites us to do the same with the work of below-the-line laborers at animation studios. Work is work, no qualification necessary. “We declare that architects, sculptors, and painters are workers of the same kind as engineers, metal workers, textile workers, wood workers,” the Russian avant-garde artist and critic Osip Brik proclaimed in 1921. “There is no basis for the designation of their labor

as creative in contrast with other noncreative sorts.”¹⁹ It matters not how any given inker or painter might respond to Brik’s agenda. Even if she didn’t think of her work as creative, we still can—and vice versa. For every Sadie Bodin, an inker at Van Beuren Studios who was the first person in the industry to be fired for unionization activities, there is a Charlotte Darling Adams, a “friendly” witness to the House Un-American Activities Committee. Adams testified that, in all her time at Warner Bros., she “was never at any time a creative artist.”²⁰ We cannot know why some painters joined the 1941 animators’ strike at Disney (read one sign, “Girls who fink, don’t think!”) and others snuck into the studio through a storm drain (leading those walking the picket line to call them “sewer rats”).²¹ What we do know, however, is that not one of these women worked under the conditions envisioned by Brik: “We want each worker to know why he renders an object in a particular form and a particular color,” he writes. “We want the worker to cease being an executor of some plan unknown to him.”²² The fact remains that these women were separated from the creative process, even as what they produced was intrinsic to the final product. It is *their* work that fetches high prices as special auctions. It is the traces of *their* hands that we see on-screen.

Yet still we speak of Walt Disney, of Dave Fleischer, of Chuck Jones, of Ward Kimball, of Richard Williams, of Fred Ladd—partly because these names can function synecdochically for the entire production apparatus, human and machine alike, behind the cartoons that bear their authorial stamp, but partly because it is just *easier* to analyze an artwork if we think it coheres, if we take it to be the full expression of a creative imagination powerful enough to override the mechanization of the production process. But animated cartoons are inherently fragmented. This fragmentation is built into the cel animation technique in both its production and its form. It is manifested in the bodies of the workers in the animation studio, their hands separated from their minds, and in the bodies of the cartoon characters, their limbs painted on one cel, their torsos on another: thus a bored camera technician might get lost in thought and Bugs Bunny might lose his head for a single frame. The animated cartoon comprises thousands of individual frames, each corresponding to an individual photograph of an ephemeral composition, each consisting of multiple cels, each painted by a separate member of the production process. Can we analyze not just the single frame, as I have done in the first two chapters, but the single cel? And what would that mean for an aesthetic account of the cartoon as a whole—indeed, for animation proper?

It is with these questions in mind that this chapter will trace what Thomas Elsaesser has opted to call a “possibilist history,” whereby one thinks “into history all those histories that might have been, or might still be.”²³ Consider the memories of Jeanne Lee Keil, a former Disney inker: “I hated Mickey Mouse because I couldn’t do the ears in one stroke with my pen.”²⁴ But *what if*, on just one frame out of an entire film, she’d put down only a single stroke and then moved on? One frame. One twenty-fourth of a second. No one would be able to tell. Mickey

Mouse would still move. But in that single frame—that single cel—one discovers, as Tom Gunning has said of early cinema more broadly, “the shards of a future discarded or disavowed,” a future rich with untapped potential.²⁵ In that one cel, would Mickey Mouse still be Mickey Mouse?

This chapter approaches this question in three ways. First, it examines how the two thinkers pivotal to this book, Walter Benjamin and Sergei Eisenstein, understood the relationship between the art and the labor of collective production, that is, the work of the anonymous artist. It then focuses on the genealogy of women’s work to which painters belong, offering a means by which we might offer a critical account of their art. Particularly potent are those cels that, while not mistakes, nonetheless stand out like black bricks in a wall of red. These are the cels in which motion blur is simulated, in which characters are distorted beyond all recognition, in which they are but a mere streak of paint, in which they are defamiliarized by an extreme close-up, in which they are electrocuted, in which they explode—in which representation falls apart. There lurks in these moments of glorious abstraction the threat that every frame could have looked this way, had the painters only organized. Instead of slowing down their work, as the in-betweeners at Fleischer Studios did, they might have collectively decided that each of them should express her individuality. But what would such a cartoon look like? And what would it mean for a creature at once as plasmatic and as resilient as Mickey Mouse?

THE HANDS OF THE COLLECTIVE

On April 2, 1944, Eisenstein wrote a note to himself in English: “Emphasize the importance of the fact that Mickey is a self-portraiture of Disney.”²⁶ Like so many of Eisenstein’s fragmentary comments on Disney, which were never published in his lifetime, this remark is cryptic and incomplete, hinting at many possible meanings. (What he *doesn’t* mean is perhaps clearest: he is not suggesting that there is a physical resemblance between the two icons.) It resonates with several of Eisenstein’s preoccupations, particularly a claim he made three years earlier: “What Disney does is connected with one of the deepest traits of man’s early psyche,” namely, his propensity for animism.²⁷ In the animistic imagination, every object has a double existence—as itself and as something else. Neither trumps the other, nor do the two alternate. Rather, they are at once unified and yet discrete. Animism thus exhibits “the principle of internal contradiction” that Eisenstein saw wherever he looked—in dialectical montage, in the drawings of Honoré Daumier, in puns—a principle in which, as Yuri Tsivian explains, “the smallest indivisible unit always consists of two things, not one.”²⁸ Animated drawings, by bringing to life “that which is known to be lifeless,” are animism’s “most direct manifestation.”²⁹ But Mickey Mouse is animistic not only because he exists both as a drawing

as such and as a living creature. He is also both mouse and man. In him, subject (that is, man, the artist, Walt Disney) and the object (a mouse) cohere.

Thus Mickey Mouse, understood as Disney's self-portrait, returns Eisenstein to the origins of artistic representation itself. Mickey, as the fusion of subject and object, man and mouse, evokes the preconscious state of our prehistoric ancestors—and even our prenatal selves—in which there is a total unity of thought and action. To see—to mimetically trace the contours of an object with one's eyes—was already to represent, and the hand followed along without question. Eisenstein grounds his theory, which has its own double existence as history, in everything from Chinese philosophy to Soviet neuropsychology to Marxist theory, from memories of an illness to Engels's *Dialectics of Nature* (1883) to William Hogarth's *Analysis of Beauty* (1753):

The contours of drawings in Altamira or Lascaux are not quite “abstracted lines,” but simply the reproduction of the very first response to vision: *the trace of the eye's movement around the contour of the object*.

There is *not yet a differentiation* between the movement of the eye and the movement of the hand as it draws.

(See the complex reaction of the infant in the womb, which, when irritated, reacts by retracting its entire body. Our experiments with [Alexander] Luria. See also the lack of differentiation between *thought and action*—thought *is* movement and movement is the manifestation of thought—my post-delirium state in Batumi in 1932.) . . .

The *movement of the object itself* and the *movement of the eye around the outline of the object* do not yet have any fundamental distinction! The subjective is equal to the objective!³⁰

In this preconscious period, when man saw no difference between himself and the world around him, all art was necessarily self-portraiture. That Mickey Mouse could be Disney's self-portrait was, for Eisenstein, an indication that it was still possible for artists to recover that earlier state.

With Mickey Mouse, Disney had managed to achieve what Eisenstein long dreamed of doing with his own filmmaking: unifying subject and object. In Eisenstein's case, he wanted the spectator, the viewing subject, to become one with the object of their vision, his films. A work of art should, he writes, force the viewer “to follow the same creative path that the author followed when creating that image” and hence experience “the dynamic process of the emergence and formation of the image in the same way the author experienced it.”³¹ But Eisenstein is by no means saying that he wants the viewer to experience the *labor* that went into the film's making. He maintains that art, be it a single drawing or a work of celluloid animation, is ultimately the creative expression of a singular genius—thus Mickey Mouse is Walt Disney's self-portrait and thus Mickey Mouse cartoons,

while collaboratively produced “by the dozens of hands of [Disney’s] collective,” are ultimately the fruits of Disney’s imagination alone.³²

It is easy to dismiss Eisenstein’s view as naive or uninformed. After all, he visited the studio in 1930, when it was still a relatively small operation—a far cry from what it would become in the months leading up to the release of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), with its staff of more than twelve hundred, many of whom were contracted from rival studios.³³ He cherished a panel from the March 7, 1930, installment of the Mickey Mouse comic, which Disney had autographed for him (“To my friend Sergei Eisenstein”). The strip’s actual artist, Win Smith, went uncredited.³⁴ And then there’s the oft-repeated fact that Disney could not draw Mickey Mouse, even if he tried, dirt that Richard Schickel dishes with relish in *The Disney Version* (1968):

Disney was continually, if mildly, irked because he could not draw Mickey or Donald or Pluto. He never could. Even Mickey Mouse was designed by someone else, namely Ub Iwerks, an old friend from Disney’s pre-Hollywood days. Iwerks actually received screen credit for so doing on the first Mouse cartoons. In later years Disney was known to apply to his animators for hints on how to render a quick sketch of Mickey in order to oblige autograph hunters who request it to accompany his signature. Even more embarrassingly, he could not accurately duplicate the familiar “Walt Disney” signature that appeared as a trademark on all his products.³⁵

Incidentally, following the theories of the graphologist Raphael Schermann, Eisenstein believed that one’s signature functioned as a “graphic self-portrait.”³⁶ What would he have made of the fact that Disney’s trademark signature was pure artifice?

In Eisenstein’s defense, his investment in Disney’s original and final authorship is absolutely in keeping with the dominant contemporary discourse on the man.³⁷ An article published in 1938 in *American Cinematographer* is perhaps most exemplary of this tendency. Although the studio is figured as a plant “where over three hundred men and women labor enthusiastically to transform fantasy into tangible Technicolor that can be viewed on the world’s screens,” the article stresses that, “above all, each of the three hundred workers functions like an extension of Walt’s hands and mind. For despite this huge force, the Disney studio is essentially a one-man organization.”³⁸ A few years earlier, the left-wing critic Mack Schwab had openly praised the “uniquely communalistic method” in place at Disney Studios: “It is doubtful whether (even in Soviet Russia, where group effort is paramount) there is any form of artistic activity comparable to that in the Disney studio,” he wrote in the pages of *Cinema Quarterly*, “in which heterogeneity of effort achieves so successfully homogeneity in its accomplishment.” But in spite of the studio’s commendable cooperative model, Schwab still asserted that it was Disney’s “sensitive and imaginative spirit” that permeated the production process through and through—Disney deserved all the credit he received.³⁹ Indeed, as labor tensions at

the studio were coming to a head, journalists continued to assert Disney's creative authority. "Disney needs to spend no nights lying awake worrying about star salaries," Paul Hollister reported in his hagiographic profile of Disney, published in December 1940, "for Disney's stars are in his head, and in his eyes."⁴⁰

At the same time, there were notable detractors from this rhetoric, even in the 1930s. These critics included the playwright William Kozlenko, who reasoned that "the final creation of every cartoon is the result, not of one man—Walt Disney—but of the collective efforts of more than a hundred men who work with him." This argument was also taken up by the painter Jean Charlot: "The drawings are manipulated by so many hands from the birth of the plot to the inking of the line that they are propelled into being more by the communal machinery that grinds them out than by any single human being." Alberto Cavalcanti, the director of *Rien que les heures* (1926), was even blunter: "Any one who still has the idea that Disney is an isolated, individual genius should forget it. . . . There is so much work in a cartoon that it would be absurd to attribute it all to one man."⁴¹

An especially fierce critic of Disney was Eisenstein's compatriot and colleague, the film director Mikhail Kalatozov. Kalatozov traveled to the United States as a representative of the Soviet Union in 1943, during which time he met with the former Disney animator David Hilberman, a cofounder of UPA.⁴² In an account of his visit written for a popular audience, Kalatozov related the causes and effects of the 1941 animators' strike—as filtered through Hilberman:

In essence Disney was never an artist. It was just all-powerful marketing that made him one. Disney had talent only as a businessman. At the start of his work, he gathered a group of talented artists and enchanted them with his bold views on art and life. They believed in the sincerity of the progressive statements made by this huckster of cinema, and Disney became the soul of their creative community. These artists had talent and faith in the future. They did not have money. They sought to create a community of free artists with the aspiration that their art would serve higher ideals. Disney convinced them that he wanted this, too.⁴³

Once Disney's true (read: capitalist) motives were revealed, however, the real source of his studio's success left in droves. This, at least, is the story Kalatozov relates. The films released in the wake of the strike suffered as a consequence. "After these events his studio has not developed a single great film," Kalatozov concludes. "Now Disney spends colossal sums of money in order to attract new artists, thinks up technical innovations of all kinds, but does not think to mention that it was the talent behind his films that had created 'Walt Disney' Studios."⁴⁴

The quotation marks Kalatozov places around Disney's name offers one way of discussing the studio's output: they gesture at the anonymous collective that is concealed behind the imprimatur of another.

But Kalatozov's appraisal of Disney's post-1941 films, while more or less in keeping with the critical consensus of the time, fails to acknowledge that they,

too, were made by anonymous workers, even if the collectivist energy of the pre-strike era had flagged. These films have their own aesthetic appeals that still warrant attention. Moreover, not all of studio's employees were ever considered "talented" or "free" artists, and it is with their work that this chapter is concerned. Completely lost in these debates are the contributions made by the workers at the bottom of the studio hierarchy, the anonymous women of the Ink and Paint Departments. Inkers were responsible for tracing the cleaned-up pencil drawings of animators, assistant animators, and in-betweeners onto the cels. These inked cels were then sent to the Paint Department, where painters would apply uniform strokes of gouache on the reverse side of the cel. This practice kept the contours intact, as well as helped to conceal the individual brushstrokes (hence the "goopi-ness" of the exposed underside of the cel on which Daffy Duck is painted in *Porky Pig's Feat* [Warner Bros., 1943], discussed in the previous chapter). The colors the women used were prescribed by what was known as a "color key" or "color chart," which also dictated the exact amount of time it should take to paint the corresponding cel.⁴⁵ Unlike women in related industries, such as textile manufacturing, painters were not paid a piece rate, but they were expected to reach a certain quota per day. While inkers were considered more skilled than painters, both were distinctly below-the-line laborers. None was ever credited on a film of the classical era; Mickey Mouse would never have been understood as the self-portrait of an inker like Jeanne Lee Keil.

In the past two decades, film historians have made notable efforts to give voice to these women. The late Martha Goldman Sigall, who worked in the industry for more than fifty years, published a memoir and provided voice-over commentary for several *Looney Tunes* DVDs. The fifteen (and counting) volumes of Didier Ghez's self-published *Walt's People: Talking Disney with the Artists Who Knew Him* has included interviews with inkers like Joyce Carlson, Grace Turner, and Evelyn Coats, and painters like Retta Davidson, Becky Fallberg, and Carla Fallberg. And a recent feature in *Vanity Fair* drew on the accounts of such hitherto forgotten Disney staffers as Reidun Medbey, Marcellite Garner, and Yuba Pillet O'Brien to provide an alternative history of the studio's golden years.⁴⁶ These popular efforts are complemented by the ongoing research of the film scholar Kirsten Moana Thompson, whose work has even explored the material history of the paints devised by Disney Studios.⁴⁷

And, to be sure, the women of Ink and Paint were never ignored in "official" studio histories. Sections about their work appear in Robert D. Feild's *The Art of Walt Disney* (1942), Bob Thomas's *Walt Disney: The Art of Animation* (1958), and Ollie Johnston and Frank Thomas's *Disney Animation: The Illusion of Life* (1981). But these discussions ultimately serve to push the studio's female employees further to the margins. Their work, Feild informs us, "is an essential part of production." Nonetheless, it "cannot be considered creative in the generally accepted use of the word." The later histories are no better. "The Ink and Paint Building at

Disney's is a cool feminine oasis," Bob Thomas reports, while Ollie Johnston and Frank Thomas, both former animators, helpfully remark, "We loved those girls."⁴⁸ Most infamously, Robert Benchley flirts with some of the women of the "Rainbow Room" in the Disney-sponsored film *The Reluctant Dragon* (1941), a "behind-the-scenes" look at the studio's Burbank operations. Benchley's tour serves to highlight the state-of-the-art facilities and the seemingly porous boundaries between labor and play that come with animating cartoons. In one revealing sequence, Benchley quite literally stumbles into a life drawing class, where artists are struggling to capture the essence of their model—an elephant. "She's the only model we have the boys don't ask out for dinner," the instructor explains, as a befuddled Benchley weaves his way through the easels. "Does their boss know that all this is going on?" Benchley asks. "Oh, sure, this is no picnic," the instructor replies. "It's all part of their work."

Benchley is shocked: "*Work?!?*" Indeed. Released in the midst of the animators' strike, the film was met by protests and coordinated boycotts. Animators walked the picket line carrying signs that read, "Who's Reluctant? I'm Mad!" and navigated a giant dragon through the streets of Los Angeles. Some observers were shocked. "Most people would give away their right arms just to get to work with Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck," an editorial in the *Los Angeles Times* opined.⁴⁹ But the irony was not lost on all critics. As a *Variety* reviewer of *The Reluctant Dragon* noted, "Dr. Goebbels couldn't do a better propaganda job to show the workers in Disney's pen-and-ink factory a happy and contented lot doing their daily chores midst idyllic surroundings."⁵⁰

Some of the inkers and painters were happier and more contented than others, certainly—but that is not the point. The puzzle they present is how to integrate the sheer fact of their labor, such as it was, into an account of the visual aesthetics of cel animation. Kirsten Moana Thompson's study of the scenes of spectacular color in *The Reluctant Dragon* and *Snow White* offers one model, and is in keeping with the current efflorescence of scholarly literature on aesthetics of color in general and of color film in particular.⁵¹ Donald Crafton provides another possibility, one that revises his identification of the trope of the animator's self-figuration in early animation. He suggests that we might begin an investigation of anonymous labor by looking at "all those cartoon assembly lines showing synchronized communities producing useful things" on the grounds that "those tireless toon workers figure the women's tedious, repetitive work, where the job is making films about laborers who whistle while they work at their tedious, repetitive jobs."⁵² Crafton's suggestion is useful, particularly insofar as it points at a homology between cultural epiphenomena (cartoons that feature assembly-line manufacturing) and the underlying social structures this visual motif makes manifest (assembly-line manufacturing per se). We could, then, conceive of these cartoon assembly lines as another iteration of the "mass ornaments" famously diagnosed by Siegfried Kracauer: they are "surface-level expressions" that "provide unmediated access

to the fundamental substance of the state of things.”⁵³ Like the elaborate patterns made out of the bodies of the Tiller Girls, they make conscious the hitherto repressed labor of a female collective.

One possibility, then, would be to treat the inkers and painters as a *collective*. Their individual anonymity is necessary for the success of the whole. We might align their work with that of the Soviet Productivists Varvara Stepanova and Lyubov Popova, fashion and textile designers whose commitment to the principles of mechanized industrial manufacturing led them, as Christina Kiaer has detailed, to forswear “the individual touch of painting and craft.”⁵⁴ The female members of the Bauhaus Weaving Workshop, contemporaries of Stepanova and Popova, likewise turned away from the sensuality of one-of-a-kind handicraft in favor of large-scale manufacturing.⁵⁵ These examples from the Soviet and German avant-garde allow, too, for the potential reclamation of marginalized crafts (namely, textile work) as *art*, to be theorized and debated as rigorously as painting, photography, and sculpture—and cinema. A clear genealogy thus emerges: the women of the Ink and Paint Departments are the heirs not only to the women who painted lantern slides, picture postcards, and ceramics and who hand-colored and stenciled early motion pictures, but also to women of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory and the cotton mills of Lawrence, Massachusetts—as well as the women long tasked with the weaving of ribbons, the plaiting of straw, and the making of artificial flowers, cigars, gloves, buttons, candy, and lace.⁵⁶ Ultimately, however, a turn toward the valorization of collective art as such does not satisfy the “possibilist history” introduced at the beginning of this chapter. For one thing, it defers the question of authorship; by taking in the whole instead of its constitutive parts, it effaces both the individual worker and the single frame. Comparisons to Soviet Productivism and the Bauhaus Weaving Workshop, meanwhile, might help us “elevate” the menial work performed by the women of the Ink and Paint Departments, but that distorts the reality of their jobs, which were, in fact, low-paying, relatively deskilled, and dead-end. It is as if to say their work is only of aesthetic interest if it can be understood as nascent artistic practice.

At the same time, what they worked on *was* art, albeit popular or mass art—and only a tiny portion thereof. Inking and painting therefore share affinities not only with forms of “women’s work,” but with other anonymous arts and crafts more generally. Here the art historian Eduard Fuchs, much admired by Benjamin and Eisenstein alike, provides a useful model. Eisenstein met Fuchs a couple of times, and in September 1929 he paid a visit to Fuchs’s country house, where he marveled at his host’s vast assortment of prints by Honoré Daumier.⁵⁷ Their mutual passion for Daumier, as well as the illustrators Paul Gavarni and J. J. Grandville, was just one of their commonalities. Eisenstein used Fuchs’s volumes on erotic art, such as *The Erotic Element in Caricature* (1904) and *The Illustrated History of Manners from the Middle Ages to the Present* (1909–12), as reference materials for his pornographic doodles in the 1930s and 1940s.⁵⁸

But Eisenstein and Fuchs were committed to the serious study of mass art for very different reasons. While Fuchs offers an understanding of culture and history *in toto*, Eisenstein seeks to comprehend the individual artist as the *pars pro toto*. The distinction between Fuchs and Eisenstein becomes clearer when one considers Fuchs's interpretation of a speech Eisenstein gave during his stay in Germany. At one point, Eisenstein declares that *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) was written not by him alone but rather by the entire Russian people. Fuchs took Eisenstein's words as a testament to the lasting power of collective production, as he explains in "The Origins of Creativity," a chapter from his final work, *The Great Masters of the Erotic: A Contribution to the Problem of Creativity in the Arts*.⁵⁹ Eisenstein, in turn, was tickled to discover that he had been quoted in such "an altogether unexpected" book—to have his film inducted into Fuchs's catholic canon of popular and folk art, where his words share the page with a painting by Dosso Dossi of a satyr and a nymph locked in an amorous embrace.⁶⁰ But while Eisenstein did claim to "believe very strongly in the principle of collectivism in work," his ultimate interest was in the singular genius, in the great man: "What the sound film requires is man with the vision, initiative and courage of Henry Ford," he remarked in an interview given less than year after he spoke in Berlin.⁶¹ However "utterly wrong" it might be "to crush the initiative of any member of the collective," he nonetheless held that there "are sometimes cases where the director's 'rod of iron' is not only legitimate, but necessary."⁶² It is thus creative visionaries like Leonardo da Vinci or Rockwell Kent (or Walt Disney) who are primarily responsible for great works of art, and the social context in which each of these figures worked is a secondary concern. Eisenstein does not wish to analyze how the Russian people wrote *Potemkin*, but rather how, say, Vladimir Mayakovsky, that "monumental egocentric exhibitionist," emblemizes the cultural ethos of the post-1917 moment in Russian history.⁶³ Eisenstein holds a belief quite contrary to that of Marx and Engels, who argue in *The German Ideology* that "the exclusive concentration of artistic talent in particular individuals, and its suppression in the broad mass which is bound up with this, is a consequence of division of labor."⁶⁴ For them, and for Fuchs, it is the social context that determines what is considered art. For Eisenstein, Fuchs's turn toward "the face of the collective," as Eisenstein characterizes it, eclipses the face of the creator.

As Benjamin explains his late essay "Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian" (1937), Fuchs's numerous books on popular art's varied instantiations—from political caricature and erotic illustration to Roman currency and Chinese roof tiles to Renaissance wares and Japanese masks—"cleared the way for art history to be free from the fetish of the master's signature."⁶⁵ Eisenstein, by contrast, fetishized the master's signature—his own, especially. Like Eisenstein, I am not entirely prepared to abandon the fetishized signature. But Fuchs, at least as Benjamin understands him, provides an alternative, one that marries an attention to noncreative labor with a continued investment in art's capacity for creative self-expression.

For Benjamin, this move to devote “such attention to anonymous artists and to objects that have preserved the traces of their hands” holds out utopian potential, offering as it does an alternative to “the cult of the leader.” As to whether the historiographical model provided by Fuchs’s collections of mass art will, in fact, “contribute . . . to humanization of mankind,” Benjamin remains agnostic—yet it remains a provocative question.⁶⁶ Even if it cannot be satisfactorily answered, it is at least a challenge worth tackling.

Consider Chuck Jones’s remarks about the background painter Phil DeGuard, who often worked in conjunction with the layout artist Maurice Noble. According to Jones, DeGuard received *too* much credit for the work he did, work that should have been attributed to Noble instead: DeGuard “bears the same relationship to the layout man [Noble], in preparing a picture, that a contractor does to an architect in constructing a building.”⁶⁷ But what would an aesthetic appraisal of a building that attends not to the architect but to the contractor look like? Or what about one that examines each and every brick? To look at cartoons brick by brick—or frame by frame—is to acknowledge, as Fuchs said of Chinese turrets, “that they are the product of an anonymous popular art.”⁶⁸ And, occasionally, one finds a brick that sticks out—a brick that preserves the traces of the hand that touched it, a brick that bears the signature of an unknown name, a brick that is a self-portrait of an anonymous artist.

THE LIMITS OF REPRESENTATION

Mass ornaments, those intricate patterns produced by groups of women moving in unison, Kracauer writes, “are composed of elements that are mere building blocks and nothing more. The construction of the edifice on the size of their stones and their number.” The women are not individuals, but “parts of a mass.”⁶⁹ Should any one of these women think of herself as an individual, the edifice crumbles. The same might be said of the frames of a filmstrip. “Animation is a chorus of drawings working in tandem,” Chuck Jones has argued. “If a single drawing, as a drawing, dominates the action, it is probably bad animation, even though it may be a good drawing.”⁷⁰

Yet the frame-by-frame examination of almost any animated cartoon will uncover at least one drawing, one cel, that seems out of place. It may, in the flow of the action, go unnoticed—but in isolation it is too puzzling, too wonderful, and often too abstract to be ignored. Perhaps it is the flurry of brushstrokes that seizes one’s attention, or perhaps one is seduced by its radical minimalism or overwhelmed by its cacophonous colors.

A tornado of feathers whipping through the air in Disney’s *Birds of a Feather* (Burt Gillett, 1931), removed from their context, becomes a dizzying swirl of jet-black droplets against a blank background; a blustery blizzard in *Now That Summer Is Gone* (Frank Tashlin / Warner Bros., 1938) is depicted as a stream of

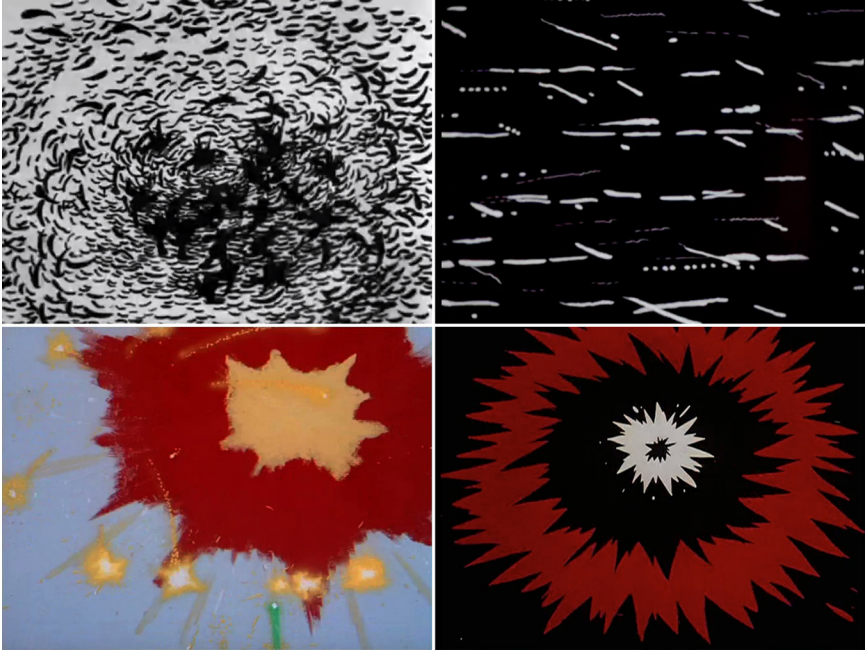


FIGURE 3.3. Clockwise from top left: frames from *Birds of a Feather* (Disney, 1931), *Now That Summer Is Gone* (Warner Bros., 1938), *The Hams That Couldn't Be Cured* (Universal, 1942), *Three Little Pups* (MGM, 1953).

dots and dashes, nonsense lines of Morse code; the bangs with which *Three Little Pups* (Tex Avery / MGM, 1953) and *The Hams That Couldn't Be Cured* (Walter Lantz / Universal, 1942) go out look like they've been pilfered from Robert Breer's *Blazes* (1961) (fig. 3.3). An overflowing bathtub in *Bathing Buddies* (Dick Lundy / Universal, 1946) is rendered in a milky, translucent wash of varying shades of turquoise, while in *Daddy Duck* (Jack Hannah / Disney, 1948) a jet of water gushes toward the putative camera, filling the entire frame with starbursts of blues, whites, and teals (fig. 3.4).

Even more arresting are those cels we know to be representations of bodies, but which, when taken on their own, operate on another aesthetic register altogether. That is, these are not cartoon bodies as we have come to expect them. Perhaps they are too big for the shot's relative scale or are positioned too close to the putative camera, such that too much of them is cropped out of the frame—and all that is visible is pure color and shape. In Disney's *Tall Timber* (1928), for instance, Oswald the Lucky Rabbit falls toward the camera. For a frame, we see his face in extreme close-up: the black point of his widow's peak, the two vertical black ovals that are his eyes, the horizontal black circle that is his nose, and the top half of a giant

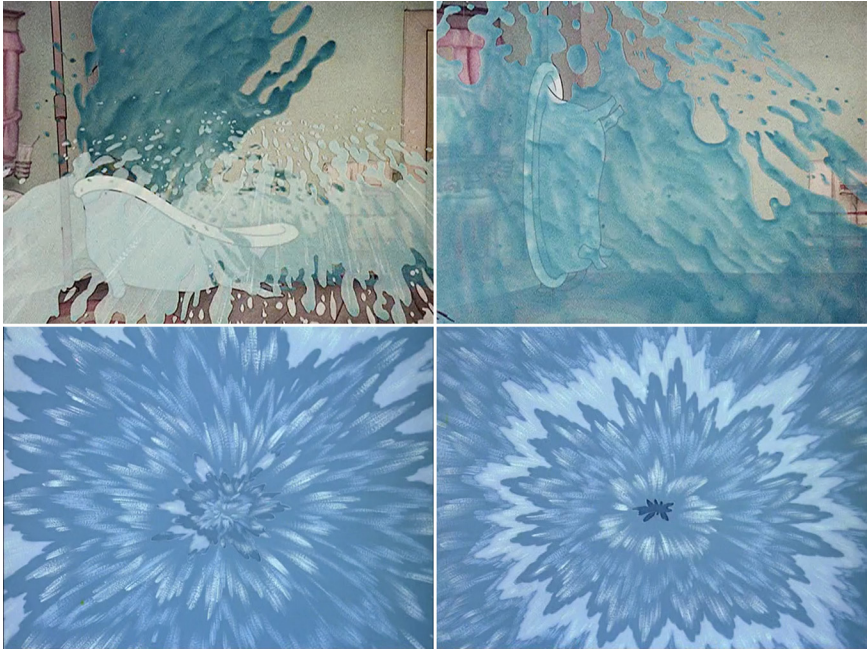


FIGURE 3.4. Frames from *Bathing Buddies* (Universal, 1946) (top) and *Daddy Duck* (Disney, 1948) (bottom).

black oval that is his mouth. The same gag is repeated beat for beat in *The Chain Gang* (Burt Gillett, 1930), only this time with Mickey Mouse—but he, in extreme close-up, is nearly identical to Oswald (fig. 3.5). The faces of these pen-and-ink creations do not afford us the hypnotic, poignant experience of *photogénie*. They are resolutely flat, spare, devoid of detail, cleanly geometrical. But their simplicity provides its own fascination. The face that Oswald and Mickey share looks like a fractal of their bodies, which, we remember, are also made out of nothing more than black ovals. In Disney's *Touchdown Mickey* (Wilfred Jackson, 1932), meanwhile, a cat's tail in close-up is the sole occupant of the frame: a black, jagged crescent that stands in sharp contrast to the background's white expanse. The image is meaningless on its own, yet it assumes new visual power when placed alongside another frame from a later Disney film, *Donald's Camera* (Dick Lundy, 1941), in which Donald Duck, in a burst of anger, turns into a curved bolt of lightning. The two shapes, both bent, both serrated, echo and almost negate one another, the lightning bolt smaller, black on white instead of black on gray (fig. 3.6).

Even though we know, for Béla Balázs tells us, that Felix the Cat and a question mark share the same substance—the graphic line—and that one can become the other at a moment's notice, nothing can prepare us for what a body mid-transformation

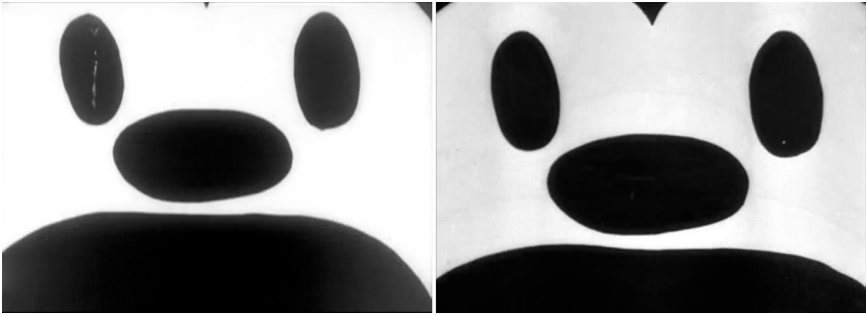


FIGURE 3.5. Oswald the Lucky Rabbit in *Tall Timber* (Disney, 1928) (left) and Mickey Mouse in *The Chain Gang* (Disney, 1930) (right).

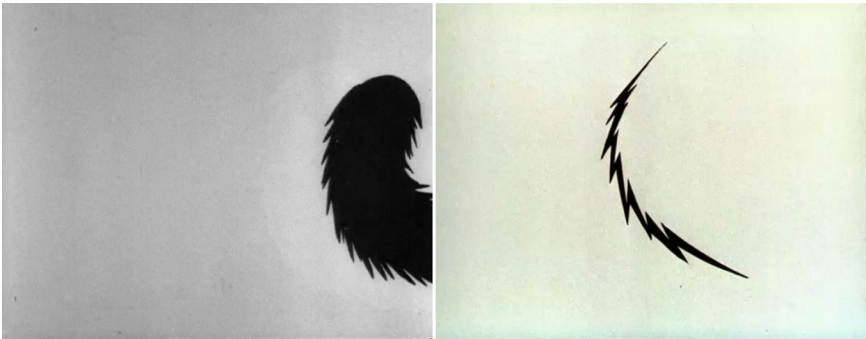


FIGURE 3.6. Frames from *Touchdown Mickey* (Disney, 1932) (left) and *Donald's Camera* (Disney, 1941) (right).

will look like.⁷¹ Think of what happens when Mickey Mouse falls directly on his face in *The Plowboy* (Disney, 1929): for six whole frames, one quarter of a second, he is just a black blob—no head, no shoes, no tail, a mere puddle of ink. He cannot stay this way forever, of course. Soon enough, that blob sprouts legs, then arms, and finally a head, out of which Mickey's face comes into view. But something curious happens if we *do* linger over one of those intervening frames, and others like it. The precise shapes Mickey assumes are imperceptible when viewing the film at a normal rate of projection, but that does not mean they do not exist. Uncovering them produces the sort of “aha!” moment of Eadweard Muybridge's photographs of a horse at full gallop. Tom Gunning has argued, “The positions of the horses' legs in Muybridge's images were considered absurd, ungainly, and impossible.”⁷² Instantaneous photography yielded positions and postures that disturbed the viewer's sense of bodily integrity. One could not believe what one was seeing. “It was not simply the incredible fact that all four horse's hooves left the ground simultaneously that caused disavowal of Muybridge's images as the absolutely unaccustomed

contours these legs took, crumbled under the horse's belly like the dangling legs of a crushed spider," Gunning writes. "This was a formal position unseen in any previous visual representation, and judged to be frankly ugly."⁷³ By studying such serial photographs, animators learned how to construct absurd, ungainly, impossible, and ugly bodies, if only for a frame or two. As the film theorist Imamura Taihei claimed in 1941, "The process of 'animating' in Disney's films means the [dual] process of decomposing a certain motion into photographs and of translating this observation into pictures. The imagination of this new mode of animation is based on the photographic record of reality."⁷⁴

Animators analyzed the motion studies conducted by Muybridge and Étienne-Jules Marey, as well as created their own, working through them frame by frame on a Moviola or printing them as large photostats. By the mid-1930s, as a result of this work, the principles of "character animation" were codified at Disney Studios: entire bodies react physically to external forces; large movements are preceded by smaller anticipatory movements; all actions come with secondary actions, such as a jowl that lags just behind the swing of a head. By following these principles, animators imbue characters with fixed weight and volume. If their cheeks expand, their chest deflates. If they are hit on the head with an anvil, their entire body crumples. They are also given personality. An action as simple as talking on the phone, as Mickey does in *Lonesome Ghosts* (Burt Gillett, 1937), requires him to puff out his chest in excitement, stomp his foot for emphasis, and purse his lips for long vowels—three seconds of screen time, somewhere around fifty individual cels. The work required mathematical precision. In 1936, Imamura remarked,

For the imaginative energy of the animated sound film to hold our interest it must increasingly be calculated mathematically. Movement and form grow more fantastic the more strictly they are calculated. . . . Making Mickey walk like a human requires an analysis of human walking and movement. Thus, the foundation of animation lies in the scientific observation of real objects.⁷⁵

From their research, animators also learned to generate representation through abstraction. Thus, scattered throughout animated cartoons are instances in which Mickey Mouse becomes something other than Mickey Mouse: in *Wild Waves* (Burt Gillett and Walt Disney, 1929) his outline is replaced with a dotted line, his body with a series of stripes; in *Gulliver Mickey* (Burt Gillett, 1934) he is a mass of jittery black curls that exceed his usual contours; in *Shanghaied* (Burt Gillett, 1934) his feet become a gray spiral; in *The Pointer* (Clyde Geronimi, 1939) he has three legs. Each of these examples is meant to simulate motion blur, the visual effect produced by a body moving faster than the "click" of a camera. These mark animators' various attempts at mimicking the codes of photographic representation. Significantly, conventional cinema reverses the relationship between abstraction and representation. As we saw with Robert Breer's *Jamestown Balloos* (1957) in the first chapter, a rapid whip-pan can make a legible image indecipherable: fast

movement turns photographic representation into graphic abstraction. Were an animator to reconstruct this kind of brisk movement, whether of the camera or of the bodies before it, it would be by way of graphic abstraction—out of which a sense of photographic representation would be produced. By turning Mickey into an array of dots, stripes, curls, or spirals, animators aim to connote the photographic inscription of speed.

Animators spent the better part of the 1930s and 1940s perfecting the extremes of movement. They developed a whole arsenal of techniques that both built on and undermined the principles of character animation, pulling and pushing bodies into positions that went well beyond what should have been their physical limits. One such technique was “staggering,” in which the same image is moved to and fro in succession, producing a movement akin to the vibrations of a plucked bow or the reverberations of sprung-from springboard. A body animated in this way is at once highly mobile and yet comically rigid. Another technique was smearing, that hallmark of Chuck Jones’s films of the early 1940s, in which bodies seem not to *stretch* of their own accord but rather to be *smear*ed by some outside force. Other directors developed their own signature styles. Tex Avery, for one, took extremes to the extreme: eyeballs pop out of sockets, tongues unspool, lips leap across an entire room. The animator Rod Scribner, who worked closely with the director Bob Clampett, perfected a loose style of drawing for key poses. He modeled his penmanship on that of the contemporary illustrator George Lichty, whose inky tangles of lines manage to summon up recognizable forms almost in spite of themselves.⁷⁶ And, as Tom Klein has shown, Eisenstein’s theory of montage inspired Shamus Culhane to employ stroboscopic editing patterns, through which he broke apart time while simultaneously dismantling Woody Woodpecker’s body in space.⁷⁷

Yet *knowing* about these techniques is not the same as *seeing* them. When Donald Duck transforms into a horizontal band specked with blue, white, and yellow in *Donald’s Lucky Day* (Jack King / Disney, 1939) or when Woody Woodpecker rockets upward in streaks of red, blue, and white in *Fair Weather Fiends* (Shamus Culhane / Universal, 1946) or when Daffy Duck becomes a black V and a vertical stroke of orange, ringed by a spiral of white, in *Daffy the Commando* (Friz Freleng / Warner Bros., 1943), or when Bugs Bunny dissolves into a spectral spray of gray in *The Case of the Missing Hare* (Chuck Jones / Warner Bros., 1942), we come face-to-face with one of Mike LeFevre’s black or purple bricks (fig. 3.7). These are not deliberate mistakes, but they are startling deixes that declare, *Look at me*. The paint has been applied to the cel in unusual patterns and textures, distilling iconic cartoon characters into pure color. Robert Stam has warned us that cartoon bodies “can be bifurcated and just as easily reunited” and “a fleeing cat reduced to a tail and a vertiginous blur,” but sometimes all we are given is that furcated fragment, that blur, freed from the need to represent anything but itself.⁷⁸ Manny Farber was one of the first to praise Tex Avery’s vulgar surrealism for “proving nothing is



FIGURE 3.7. Clockwise from top left: Donald Duck in *Donald's Lucky Day* (Disney, 1939), Woody Woodpecker in *Fair Weather Fiends* (Universal, 1946), Bugs Bunny in *The Case of the Missing Hare* (Warner Bros., 1942), Daffy Duck in *Daffy the Commando* (Warner Bros., 1943).

permanent,” but often that means that what we have before us is impermanence, or, indeed, nothingness itself; Kristin Thompson has noted that the performance of “frantic movements” may require characters to “grow extra hands, feet, or heads,” but such a description does little justice to the bizarre Cerberuses and centipedes that result.⁷⁹ These bodies in these moments are more than plasmatic, the term Eisenstein gives to the movement of figures in early Disney cartoons for their “rejection from once-and-forever allotted form, freedom from ossification, [and] ability to dynamically assume any form.”⁸⁰ No, these bodies are formless. No single line can bound them. They exceed even what Scott Bukatman has deemed the “nearly infinite pliability” permitted by cartoon physics.⁸¹

There is narrative justification for the multifaceted Pluto of *Put-Put Troubles* (Riley Thompson / Disney, 1940), the crayon-like rendition of Babbitt in *A Tale of Two Kitties* (Bob Clampett / Warner Bros., 1942), and the reverberating Sylvester of *Tweety Pie* (Friz Freleng / Warner Bros., 1947), but the bold paintings demand that we *look* at them, even as they flit on-screen for only a frame or two (fig. 3.8). Their invocation of movement invites comparison to Giacomo Balla’s *Dynamism of a Dog on a Leash* (1912) or Marcel Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* (1912), their forceful brushstrokes to Abstract Expressionism. But we do

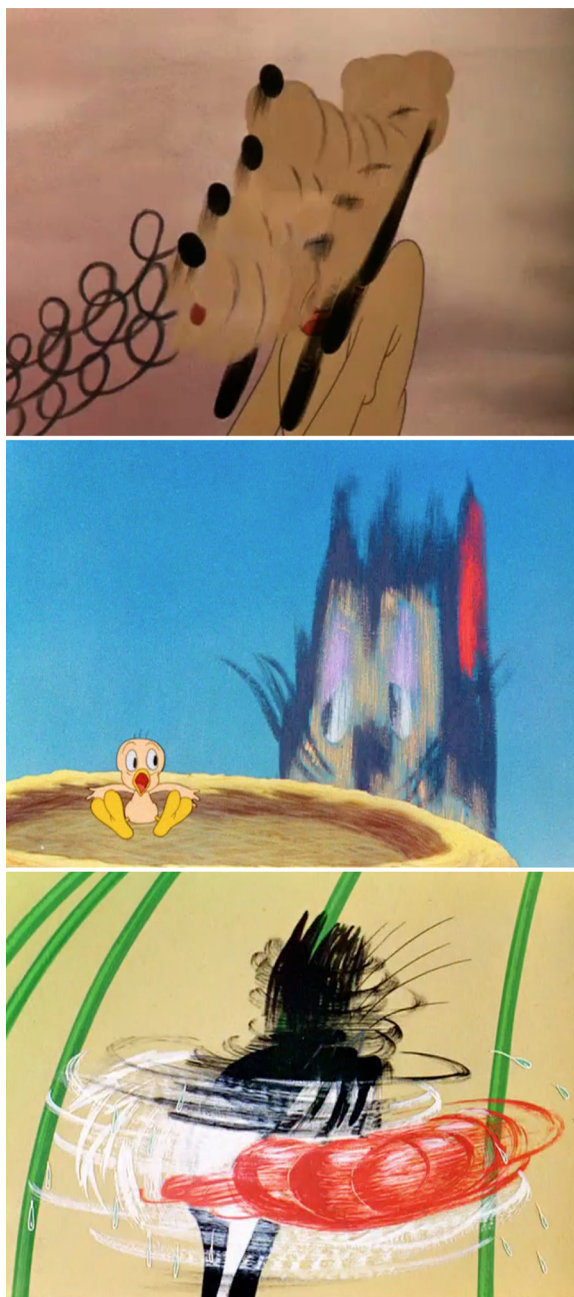


FIGURE 3.8. From top: Pluto in *Put-Put Troubles* (Disney, 1940), Babbitt in *A Tale of Two Kitties* (Warner Bros., 1942), Sylvester in *Tweety Pie* (Warner Bros., 1947).

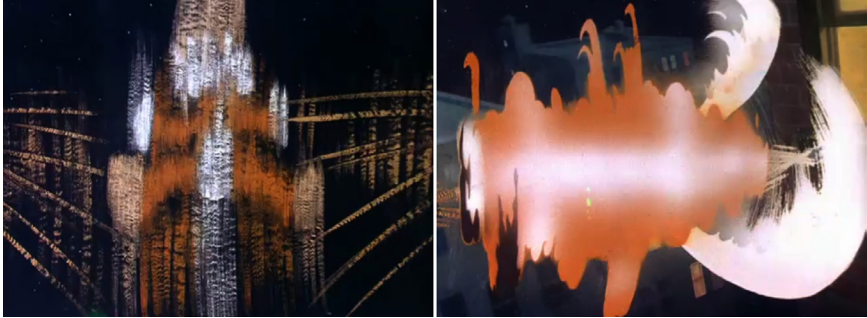


FIGURE 3.9. A dog in *The Hep Cat* (Warner Bros., 1942).

not know who painted them, nor do they exist as paintings per se. They survive only in their photographic reproductions, set against a background painted by another. Someone—some woman—made thick vertical trails with a dry paintbrush in order to suggest a dog flailing on a clothesline in *The Hep Cat* (Bob Clampett / Warner Bros., 1942). And someone—some woman—rendered that same dog, spinning on that same clothesline, in thick, opaque splotches (fig. 3.9). Who? Speed here is, as Karen Beckman has said of similar passages in Disney’s seminal motion study *The Tortoise and the Hare* (Wilfred Jackson, 1935), “visually indexed.”⁸² Visually indexed, too, is the anonymous artist. These frames give her something to point to.

And gestured at, in turn, is a possibility: What if every frame looked like one of these frames? What if every brick, every tile, bore the traces of the hands that touched it? Kracauer argues that the mass ornament cannot be assembled out of “those who have withdrawn from the community and consider themselves to be unique personalities with their own individual souls,” on the grounds that the larger pattern would not be able to transcend its constitutive parts.⁸³ Would the same be true of an animated cartoon that does not cohere around the vision of a single author? Answering this question requires imagining a cartoon that does not exist, one in which figures are not stylistically standardized, in which painters were not provided with a color key, and in which each cel is a self-portrait of the woman who inked it.

The final section of this chapter will broach this “What if?” through an examination of one cartoon character in particular, the most iconic of icons: Mickey Mouse. If, in 1940, Eisenstein praised the animation of Mickey Mouse for testing “the limits of representation,” then what happens when representation turns into total abstraction?⁸⁴ If, in 1931, Walter Benjamin wrote, “Mickey Mouse proves that a creature can still survive even when it has thrown off all resemblance to a human being,” then what happens when Mickey Mouse throws off all resemblance to himself?⁸⁵ What are the limits of Mickey Mouse?

WHAT MICKEY MOUSE PROVES

There are many Mickey Mouses. There is the Mickey Mouse of *Orphan's Benefit* (Burt Gillett, 1934), with his white face and black ovals for eyes. There is the Mickey Mouse of *Orphans' Benefit* (Riley Thompson, 1941), with his peach-colored face and white eyes with black pupils. There is the Mickey Mouse of *The Pointer*, with his delicately rouged cheeks, and the Mickey Mouse of *Just Mickey* (Walt Disney, 1930), who grins and grimaces and purses his lips and knits his brow. There is the Mickey Mouse of *Croissant de Triomphe* (Paul Rudish, 2013) and *Get a Horse!* (Lauren MacMullan, 2013): the former a stylized reimagining of Mickey's classic "retro" look, his ears jauntily ovoid, a pie slice cut out of his eyes, the latter a careful imitation of Mickey circa 1929 who then steps out of the putative screen and assumes bold colors and three dimensions. In *The Grocery Boy* (Wilfred Jackson, 1932), he is a grocery boy; in *The Delivery Boy* (Burt Gillett, 1931), he is a delivery boy; he is a jockey and a construction worker and a farmer and a sorcerer's apprentice; in *Mickey's Gala Premier* (Burt Gillett, 1933), he is a movie star. There are all the Mickey Mouses of the cultural imagination: metonym for a multinational corporation and also "one of the best known pejorative adjectives in the English language"⁸⁶ and also "the crystalline, concentrated quintessence of that which is peculiarly the motion picture"⁸⁷ and also a verb describing the precise synchronization of sound and image.⁸⁸ And *then* there are the countless Mickey Mouses in a single Mickey Mouse cartoon, anywhere from twelve to twenty-four distinct Mickey Mouses per second, one for every—or every other—frame of film, which upon projection cohere into a single, unified, moving Mickey Mouse.

Artists as varied as Gary Panter, Lane Smith, William Steig, Claes Oldenburg, Michael Jackson, Andy Warhol, R. Crumb, Keith Haring, and Milton Glaser have all drawn their own versions of Mickey Mouse.⁸⁹ In the two-page comic *Luna Toon*, published in the second issue of *Zap Comix* (1968), the graphic artist Victor Moscoso pulls Mickey's face apart, sending inky black bubbles floating through a psychedelic dreamscape formed out of Mickey-shaped portals and protuberances. Moscoso's Mickey is entirely his own, yet it is also unmistakably Mickey. And, in 1935, none other than Sergei Eisenstein drew Mickey Mouse. The sketch appears in a book of signatures collected by Herbert Marshall on his graduation from the All-Russian State University of Cinematography.⁹⁰ With a red pencil Eisenstein jotted down a brief note to his former student and, on the facing page, scribbled a quick caricature of his former student, who was known for his curly red hair. Mickey is at Marshall's side, drawn in blue pencil. Eisenstein's doodle is at once Mickey and yet not Mickey. His ears are too big (with their dangling lobes, too human), his snout too pointy (lacking rotund cheeks, not human enough). But his over-size clogs and large hands, suggestive of white gloves, give him away, as does the dynamism of his pose. In the upper left-hand corner, floating above Mickey's head,

intersecting in parts with the swirls of Marshall's hair, is Eisenstein's signature: a large open loop enclosing a three-pronged squiggle. The proximity of drawing and writing, of image and text, reminds one of an anecdote Ivor Montagu relates in *With Eisenstein in Hollywood* (1967):

I had taken Sergei Mikhailovich to cash a cheque made out to him at a bank in Leicester Square. The teller had looked hard at that dome of brow and at the incredible squiggle—it was a sort of Japanese-style pattern he was very fond of—and said:

“Is that your signature, sir?”

Eisenstein could only answer: “Yes.”

“Then, sir, would you mind kindly *drawing* your name.”⁹¹

The joke here, of course, is that Eisenstein's signature was so baroque, so studied, so mannered, as to render it entirely illegible. His writing was no longer writing—it was drawing. And, conversely, in order to write legibly, Eisenstein would have to draw. So is Eisenstein's Mickey Mouse drawn, or written? Does it function as a self-portrait, or is it a signature in its own right? To what extent is Eisenstein's Mickey Mouse Mickey Mouse, and to what extent is it Eisenstein? These questions push Mickey beyond himself, as if to see how far he can go before he becomes something else entirely.

And yet he endures. For, indeed, in spite of this multiplicity, there is but one Mickey Mouse. He is a fictional character whose characteristics have, in legal terms, been “sufficiently delineated” to protect him under United States copyright. And, thanks to the Sonny Bono Copyright Term Extension Act of 1998, also known as the Mickey Mouse Protection Act, he will not enter the public domain until 2023.⁹² Yet all one needs to produce a reasonable likeness is a pair of dimes (for ears) and a quarter (for the head), a testament to Mickey's iconicity. As John Updike has observed, Mickey is like yin and yang, the crucifix, the Star of David.⁹³ He might bear a striking physical resemblance to earlier cartoon stars, including Felix the Cat and (as we have seen) Disney's own Oswald the Lucky Rabbit, and his signature features (his white gloves, his oversize eyes and mouth, his musicality) might be vestiges of blackface minstrelsy, but he stood apart from his contemporaries almost immediately. While competitors and knockoffs like Foxy and Flip the Frog floundered, Mickey quickly achieved worldwide renown. In 1931, Walt Disney successfully sued a rival cartoon studio, Van Beuren, for deliberately infringing on Mickey and Minnie. As he testified in court, the rodent stars of Van Beuren's *Big Cheese* (1930), *Office Boy* (1930), and *Circus Capers* (1930) “were in all cartoon characteristics the same as Mickey Mouse and Minnie Mouse”—down to the buttons on the trousers—“with the sole exception that the said characters were inartistically and poorly drawn and the animation was jerky and amateurish.” But Disney didn't stop there. “Many of the frames evidence undue haste in draftsmanship,” he asserted, and “the said characters were handled in such a manner as to be ugly, unattractive, and lacking in personality.”⁹⁴ Mickey Mouse, we can therefore

infer, is none of those things. He is cute, adorable, and bursting with life, expertly drawn and animated down to the last frame.

The animation of Mickey is virtuosic, and as a result, Mickey can do anything, or even *become* anything. The early Mickey Mouse is particularly immune to the laws of physics. One tug of his tail makes it a rope, another tug a crank. His shoes grow of their own accord. If you pull his head, his neck elongates, and can be plucked like a guitar string. This is a Mickey still clearly indebted to Felix the Cat, who once manufactured chairs made of the typographical transcription of his own laughter. The world through which this Mickey moves is equally pliable and unpredictable—cars are as likely to be anthropomorphized as animals. But even as the “rubber hose” style of animation on display in these early films was superseded by character animation that hewed more closely to the principles of human locomotion, Mickey’s body remained elastic. Given his plasmatic-ness, we might wonder exactly what the limits of Mickey Mouse even are. In his testimony against Van Beuren, the Disney animator Joe D’Igalo described a scene in *The Big Cheese*:

During the continuity of said motion picture a character, drafted so as to create the impression of being a large animal, struck the character resembling Mickey Mouse upon the head, turning, knocking and punching the said mouse character until its head became blackened and flattened so as to resemble a phonograph record. The large animal thereupon picked up the mouse’s tail placing the tip thereof in juxtaposition to said phonograph record, in the same manner as one would place a phonograph needle upon the record. The head of the said mouse was thereupon caused to play a musical tune in such manner.⁹⁵

But is said mouse still a mouse when his head resembles a phonograph record (fig. 3.10)? Or, more pointedly, as E. M. Forster asked in 1934: “But is Mickey a mouse?”⁹⁶ Yes, of course. Felix has small pointy ears, Foxy has large pointy ears, Bimbo has short floppy ears, Oswald has long thin ears, and Mickey has large round ears. Q.E.D.! It is disturbing to see Mickey Mouse perform cunnilingus on Minnie Mouse, as he does in the notorious underground comic *Mickey Mouse Meets the Air Pirates* (1971), not only because he is an innocent, sexless figure we associate with childhood, but because it is *unnatural*. For him to have a human penis and testicles is grotesque. Then again, he does wear pants—to cover what, exactly? In *When the Cat’s Away*, released on May 3, 1929, he is approximately mouse-size, but in *The Plowboy*, released the following month, he is large enough to steer a horse through a field and milk a cow. This anthropomorphic Mickey is the most familiar one—somewhere between human and animal, mouse and Everyman (or, as Eisenstein would have it, Walt Disney).

Certain peculiarities are inevitable, however. In *Mickey’s Good Deed* (Burt Gillett, 1932), for instance, he surveys the dilapidated house of an impoverished single mother. A panning point-of-view shot reveals her cupboards to be bare, save for cobwebs and broken china, and overrun with tiny mice that scramble

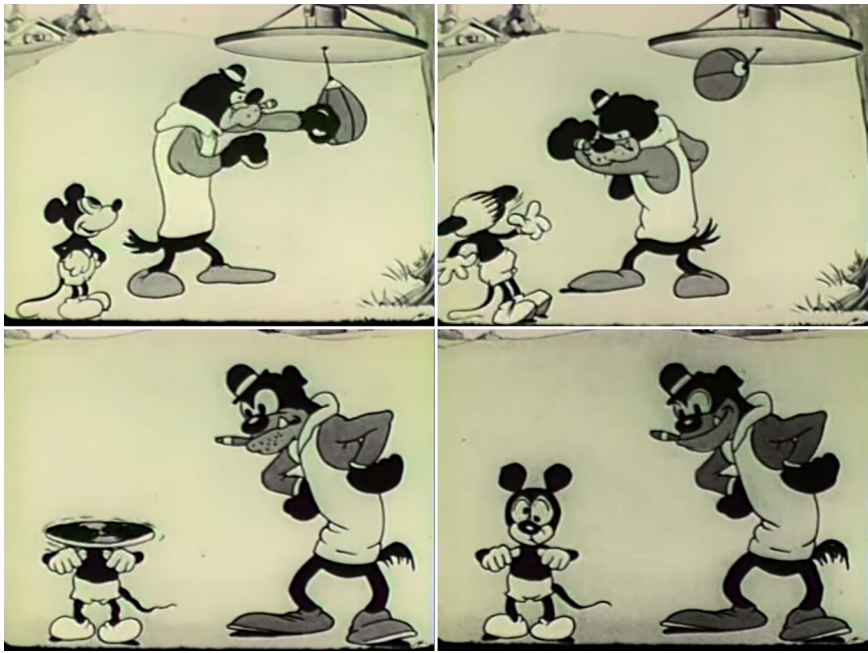


FIGURE 3.10. An ersatz Mickey Mouse turns into a phonograph player in *Big Cheese* (Van Beuren, 1930).

from shelf to shelf. In *The Worm Turns* (Ben Sharpsteen, 1937) he twice briefly shares the frame with another mouse—a *mouse* mouse, with brown fur, whiskers, and an antagonistic relationship with a (much larger) cat. Both instances are staged as if shot with a wide-angle lens, such that both the extreme foreground and extreme background are in focus (fig. 3.11). This simulated depth of field allows Mickey to occupy the plane closest to the putative camera and the mouse another, distinct plane far away from both him and us. While they are side by side in the two-dimensional image, they are a considerable distance apart within the three-dimensional space of the diegesis, making it impossible to judge their respective sizes.

Other Disney shorts of the 1930s, like the *Silly Symphonies* installments *The Flying Mouse* (1934), *The Country Cousin* (1936), and *The Three Blind Mouseketeers* (1936), all directed by David Hand, star mice something closer to proper mice, in that they are small, brown, and bewhiskered. But none of them *move* like mice. Instead, like Mickey, they are bipedal, their movements modeled on human locomotion. For a mouse that scurries, leaps, darts, and shivers like a real mouse, consider the one that runs for cover from the rain in the “April Showers” sequence in *Bambi* (1942). Pausing beneath the cap of a mushroom, he looks this way and that; in just two frames his head swivels from left to right. He then dashes toward

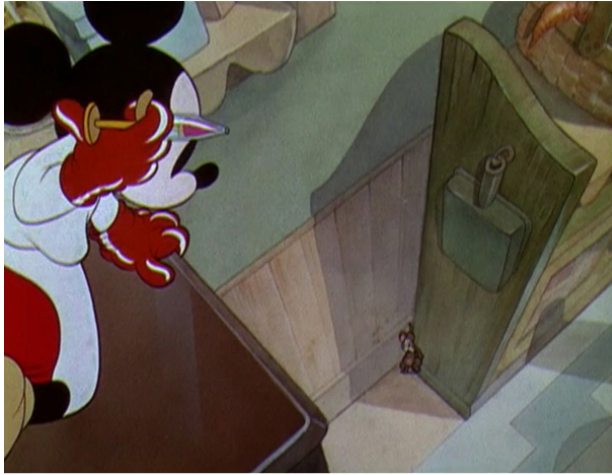


FIGURE 3.11. Mickey Mouse shares the screen with an actual mouse in *The Worm Turns* (Disney, 1937).

a larger mushroom. As he clears a puddle, his body first contracts into a compact ovoid, and then extends from nose to tail into an arch. Across less treacherous terrain, he is able to complete a single run cycle (contraction-extension-contraction) in a mere five frames—that is, until he reaches a slippery spot, at which point his paws flail beneath him, and he can do little more than run in place. There is no doubt that this is an *animated*—that is, a cartoon—mouse, one whose design is necessarily simplified and schematized, but he is most recognizable as a mouse when he is animated. It is movement that imbues him with mousiness.

It is in this respect that Mickey is most obviously *not* a mouse. He dances, trudges, and strolls: he is human. So while he may look at least somewhat like a mouse, he moves more or less like a man. But Mickey's step is bouncier than any human's because he is fundamentally happier than any human. His movements are exaggerated. When a ghost startles Mickey in *Lonesome Ghosts*, his whole body is pulled taut: his back arches, his feet lift off the ground, and his ears reach upward, turning from perfect circles into long ovals. Within a few frames, however, he has snapped back to his usual proportions. This hyperbolic physical reaction is visible on-screen for only a split-second, but it wordlessly communicates Mickey's rapid-fire psychological response to the unexpected.

For this reason, it seems inaccurate, and perhaps even unfair, to analyze just a single frame of an animated cartoon—the character resides not in the instant, but in the *succession* of instants (Gilles Deleuze: “[the cartoon film] does not give us a figure described in a unique moment, but the continuity of the movement which describes the figure”).⁹⁷ In *Blue Rhythm* (Burt Gillett, 1931) Mickey Mouse is plunking out a tune on a piano when suddenly the lights of the theater start

to flicker. The on-off-on-off effect is simulated through the insertion of an all-black card between each frame of the animation. When the “lights” turn “on,” we see Mickey in mid-action; when they go off, all we see is black. Yet even though Mickey is only visible in every other frame, we in no way suspect that he is *absent* from those all-black frames. One might initially attribute our intuition that he persists, despite visual evidence to the contrary, to the sequence’s musical accompaniment, which continues unabated even in the moments of black. But the effect is the same when the sequence is played silently: the action has a stroboscopic pulsation, but it does not destroy the sense that Mickey exists across time. Yet it would be dishonest to remove one of the black frames from this context and to claim that it, on its own, represents Mickey Mouse. No. Mickey Mouse is more than the sum of his parts. Thus a poorly drawn Mickey Mouse can still be Mickey Mouse, provided that the Mickeys that come before and after him are animated properly. Johnston and Thomas recall how Mickey’s body, particularly in the early cartoons, posed a difficult problem for novice animators:

The characters were black and white, with no shades of gray to soften the contrast or delineate a form. Mickey’s body was black, his arms and his hands—all black. There was no way to stage an action except in silhouette. How else could there be any clarity? A hand in front of the chest would simply disappear; black shoulders lifted against the black part of the head would negate a shrug, and the big, black ears kept getting tangled up with the rest of the action just when other drawing problems seemed to be resolved. Actually, this limitation was more helpful than we realized: we learned that it is always better to show the action in silhouette.⁹⁸

And, indeed, Mickey’s movements are always legible. A Mickey Mouse in silhouette—featureless, expressionless, without his characteristic shorts or gloves—is still Mickey Mouse thanks to movement.

It is owing to movement, too, that the inevitable mistake cannot destroy Mickey Mouse. Consider a frame in *Mickey’s Man Friday* (David Hand, 1935), in which his nose is painted white instead of black. This is a mistake at the level of painting—a completely understandable mistake, the reasons for which we can easily reconstruct. Mickey’s gloved hands, the tips of his fingers bent, are lifted beside his head in a “voilà!” pose, with his right hand slightly obscured by his face. While that hand is a small detail of the cel painting, if isolated from the drawing as a whole it amounts to little more than a series of curved lines, into which the oval of Mickey’s nose easily blends. Were one to glance at the original drawing, it would be quite easy to read his nose as a finger. It is no wonder, then, that for that one cel his nose is painted white.

What this example in part reveals is the fundamental *strangeness* of the painter’s task: to decipher the components of a pencil sketch (or its tracing on a cel) out of context. Completely severed from the creative process, she had to treat the contours before her as a series of closed loops to be filled. As Johnston and Thomas



FIGURE 3.12. Mickey Mouse as he appears in several frames from *Lonesome Ghosts* (Disney, 1937).

recount, this posed a problem even for a studio as regulated as Disney: “On drawing after drawing there are little areas that could be anything: part of the flowing hair, the skirt, a tail, a ribbon, or even a hand behind the back in the middle of an action. Looking at the drawing itself, there is no way of telling what it might be, or what color should be put on it.”⁹⁹ In this case, it is Mickey’s nose that “could be anything”—a phrase that one would expect to encounter in a description of his plasmatic-ness. But in looking at the single frame in this piecemeal way—not alongside the frames that come before and after it, not at the composition as a whole, not even at the single cel, but rather at a portion of the cel—one sees afresh the inherent abstraction of cartoon figures: they do not exist in three dimensions, they are but strokes of paint applied to two sides of a transparent sheet of cellulose nitrate or acetate. When inkers ink and painters paint him, they are not inking and painting *him*, they are merely inking and painting. And yet, in the final film, there he is.

If movement is indeed so powerful, perhaps Mickey Mouse need never *look* like Mickey Mouse at all. What makes Mickey Mouse Mickey Mouse are the principles of character animation that animators derived from conducting motion analyses. Thus they need only provide him with a basic armature or silhouette

that hops, skips, and jumps like Mickey Mouse. Inkers and painters could then fill in his body however they wished. He could look always like he does in several frames of *Lonesome Ghosts*, an elongated, greasy blur of black, red, and yellow (fig. 3.12), or he could look like Eisenstein's signature in one frame, like the handiwork of Jeanne Lee Keil in the next. His body could change form and style with every successive frame. So long as he moves like Mickey—so long as he is animated—he will remain himself. In movement, in animation, Mickey doesn't just live. He *survives*.

CODA

Robert Breer's *Rubber Cement* (1976) does not star Mickey Mouse. It does, however, briefly feature a figure that looks an awful lot like Felix the Cat—five frames, to be exact, each punctuated by a frame consisting only of a small black square or (in one instance) a brightly colored pattern (fig. 3.13). The effect is stroboscopic—he is there, and then not there, and each time he reappears he has moved a little bit farther to the right. The individual drawings are deliberately crude. In the first, Felix is little more than a squiggle, over which his features (ears, eyes, nose) have been only roughly jotted in. In the next frame, there are significant gaps between his outline and his blackened-in body. In some, he looks to consist of crayon wax; in others, of the ink from a fat marker. Never does he fully coalesce into anything like the familiar Felix. Otto Messmer, were he to have seen Breer's tribute to his creation, might have dismissed the animation of this Felix as “jerky and amateurish,” drawn in “undue haste.” Yet somehow, in spite of the crudeness with which he has been rendered, in spite of the regular interruptions to his rightward progression, in spite of the relative brevity of his appearance, he still registers as Felix.

Rubber Cement thus makes visible the dialectical structure of film, as Benjamin identifies it: “Discontinuous images replace one another in continuous sequence.”¹⁰⁰ Benjamin here plays on the homology between the processes of cinema and the principles of Taylorism, which both dissect human movement into discrete parts; the filmstrip and the assembly line alike then reconstitute the parts into a whole. In this chapter, I have considered those parts as wholes unto themselves, as individual components that arrest our attention, taking us out of the flow of the patterned movements to which they are intrinsic. I have done this in order to imagine an alternative aesthetics of cel animation, in which noncreative laborers are granted the freedom of artistic self-expression they had hitherto been, by definition, denied. There is a deep romanticism to this possibilist history, insofar as it remains invested in an Eisensteinian belief in the individual's capacity for genius. But it also tries to see the mass ornament from above, dreaming always of the harmony of the whole—of the film that could be made out of those frames, the house out of those bricks, the movement out of those poses, the animation studio out of those workers.



FIGURE 3.13. Felix the Cat's cameo appearance(s) in Robert Breer, *Rubber Cement* (1976).