



Prime Time Animation

Television animation and American culture

Edited by

Carol A. Stabile and Mark Harrison

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PRIME TIME ANIMATION

An overview

Carol A. Stabile and Mark Harrison

DURING ITS FIVE-YEAR RUN (1992–97), *BEAVIS AND BUTT-HEAD* became the focus of a number of controversies over the effects of television on viewers: from accusations that the program caused a child to set fire to his trailer home, resulting in the death of a sibling; to rumors that frat boys were imitating some of the duo's more idiotic stunts. By and large, the mass media missed out on the fact that *Beavis and Butt-Head* was in many ways a protracted commentary about media effects and the role of media in late twentieth-century US society.

“The Pipe of Doom” (May 1994) is just one of many examples of this aspect of the program. In the episode, Beavis manages to wedge himself in a drainage conduit at a construction site. The media immediately converge on the scene, broadcasting images of Beavis' scrawny legs and posterior around the world. After being rescued from the pipe, Beavis is whisked off by emergency personnel and the media, leaving Butt-Head alone at the now-abandoned construction site. Envious of the attention that had been showered on his friend, Butt-Head wriggles into the pipe, and in one of those remarkable lapses in judgment so typical of these characters, he only gradually realizes that no one remains to hear his cries.

This episode illustrates the deftness with which this animated sitcom frequently functioned as a wider cultural critique. The media frenzy that follows from Beavis' mishap explicitly draws upon the Baby Jessica story from 1987, when an 18-month-old girl fell down a well in Midland, Texas. The major networks turned this unfortunate situation into an around-the-clock media

event, broadcasting live from the site for more than two days. The final scene of “The Pipe of Doom,” in which Butt-Head imitates Beavis, suggests that it is the media’s fetishization of such incidents (rather than comedic representations of them) that encourage mimicry. This kind of self-consciousness was evident throughout the program’s run, where it often took the shape of various warnings to viewers at the beginning of the program. One episode carried the statement: “Warning: If you’re not a cartoon, swallowing a rubber full of drugs can kill you” (“Way Down Mexico,” May 1993).

Beavis and Butt-Head, along with the renaissance in television animation inaugurated by *The Simpsons* in 1990, offers a rich site for understanding prime time television and the effects of cable television on the wider field of cultural production. That so little critical attention has been devoted to this genre attests to its doubly devalued status: as the offspring of a conventionally devalued medium (television) whose cultural products have only recently been considered worthy of scholarly scrutiny, and as the odd recombinant form of two similarly degraded genres – the situation comedy or sitcom and the cartoon.¹

This volume provides readers with a framework through which to understand television animation in its cultural and historical context. Because of television animation’s unique position in the field of television production, an investigation of the form has much to tell us about the nature of the television industry in the latter part of the twentieth century, as well as that industry’s future. The volume itself is divided into two sections. The first section considers prime time animation within the context of the institutions that produce this programming, while the second features specific readings of prime time animated texts.

The essays that comprise these two sections cover a vibrant and diverse chunk of this inexhaustible form, ranging from Paul Wells and Jason Mittell’s work on the history of cartoons to Allen Larson’s political economy of children’s programming to Brian Ott’s essay on *South Park* cybercommunities. The animated television sitcom has an odd genealogy that mixes, as Jason Mittell puts it, a number of genres rather than hewing more strictly to a single genre. Unlike live-action sitcoms, which have their precedent in radio, animated sitcoms draw on both film and television codes and conventions. The remainder of this introduction provides a brief historical backdrop for the individual chapters that follow.

Cinematic animation

The history of animation might be imagined in terms of three primary epochs: cinematic, televisual and digital. The essays in this volume deal primarily with televisual animation, with the notable exception of Alice Crawford’s contribution, which directly addresses the impact of digital technologies on animation. As

several of the essays point out, however, there is a fair amount of overlap between the first two eras, both in the sense that most of early television's animation programming consisted of shorts originally created for the cinema and in the sense that the production of animation for the big screen, while greatly curtailed, did not cease with the 1948 Paramount Decision and the rise of television as a medium (on which, see Chapter 2 of this volume). Cinematic animation constitutes a pre-history for the animation that was to emerge in a televisual context. This pre-history will be treated here in brief, focusing on experimental, early commercial and industrial moments in the medium's development.

The advent of cinema per se was preceded by the development of various devices with such classically intoned names as thaumatrope, phenakistiscope and kinematoscope. In 1877, Emile Reynaud patented his praxinoscope, a modification of which (dubbed "théâtre optique") he would later use to project his animated drawings at the Grévin Museum – a wax museum which also staged variety programs. Beginning on 28 October 1892, Reynaud was to screen his *pantomimes lumineuses* for the next eight years, ending in March of 1900 when he was replaced by English marionettes and a Gypsy orchestra.

In the US, Stuart Blackton and Albert E. Smith stumbled upon the technique of stop-action animation, in which three-dimensional objects or drawings are shot frame-by-frame, slightly adjusting the position of the object between frames – thus creating the illusion of motion. Blackton and Smith used this technique to create a series of shorts, culminating in the live action film, *The Haunted Hotel* (1907), in which "haunted" effects were created via stop-action. It was this film that was to serve as the inspiration for the man generally considered to be the first "true" animator, Frenchman Emile Cohl, whose first animated film *Fantasmagorie* was screened at the Théâtre du Gymnase on 17 August 1908. "Worried about verisimilitude, Blackton was always careful to introduce or justify the presence of a cartooned world next to a real world. On the contrary, the Frenchman jumped into the graphic universe, animating the adventures of autonomous characters" (Bendazzi 1994: 9).

Blackton and Smith modeled their early animation after the chalk-talks of vaudeville, during which performers would quickly draw caricatures of audience members or modify drawings over the course of a monologue. As an example of the latter, the vaudeville act of Winsor McCay, an early American animator, often included a performance of *The Seven Ages of Man*, in which he sketched two faces and progressively aged them via modification. McCay serves as a transitional figure, from early independent animators-cum-inventors to the next phase in which the *business* of animation begins to take shape. This was a transition which McCay was later to lament – "Animation should be an art, that is how I conceived it. But as I see what you fellows have done with it is make it into a trade ... not an art but a trade ... bad luck" (quoted in Bendazzi 1994: 18).

McCay was based in New York, the home of the emergent businesses of both film and animation production. McCay drew on both of the primary sources of early American animation: vaudeville (in addition to McCay's use of the chalk-talk, he used his vaudeville act as the venue for early presentations of what is generally considered his animation masterpiece, *Gertie the Dinosaur*) and newspaper-based comic strips (McCay completed animated versions of both of his most well known, and still revered, strips – *Little Nemo in Slumberland* and *Dreams of a Rarebit Fiend*). His animated shorts were exhibited both in a vaudeville context and in movie theaters. The transition from newsprint to celluloid, initiated by McCay, was repeated by, among others, *Mutt and Jeff* and *The Katzenjammer Kids*, both of which were owned by the Hearst syndicate. Hearst went so far as to open the International Film Service in 1916, in part for the express purpose of producing cinematic versions of his syndicate's more successful strips. While the IFS was to close within two years, its creation was indicative of both animation's increasing commodification and its increasingly industrialized mode of production.

Over the course of the first two decades of the twentieth century, new technologies and studios emerged. As to the latter, perhaps the most notable were the Fleischer studio, which set up shop in 1921, and the Pat Sullivan Studios, which opened in 1915. Sullivan Studios is best remembered for its *Felix the Cat* shorts. Originally created for Paramount's newsreel, *Screen Magazine*, by Otto Messmer in 1919, the rights to Felix were acquired by Sullivan when *Screen* discontinued production. Felix (who reversed the trend of characters from the "funnies" moving from the page to the screen by appearing first as an animated character and *then* as a comic strip) was the first animated character to establish a highly lucrative half-life as licensed merchandise – appearing as and on toys, stuffed animals and other items.² This strategy of merchandising was later to be perfected by Disney Studios and continues today with the vast proliferation of *Powerpuff* and *SpongeBob SquarePants* paraphernalia (see Larson, Sandler, and Fuqua in this volume for more on merchandising and the related phenomena of "branding" and "synergy").

Fleischer Studios (originally known as Out of the Inkwell Studios), run by brothers Max, Joe and Dave, would later make their mark with *Betty Boop* and *Popeye*. In 1924, they formed Red Seal Distribution (which closed after two years with Paramount picking up distribution for the brothers) to circulate their catalogue of *Koko the Clown* shorts, documentaries, comedies, and live-action shorts. Red Seal also distributed the Fleischer's *Song Car-Tunes*. These shorts provided animated texts for audience sing-alongs, another vaudeville standby. With music provided by orchestra or pianist, these films introduced the "bouncing ball," a device destined to become a standard for audience sing-alongs in the cinema, to highlight the lyrics on screen. After the full arrival of sound film, the *Car-Tunes*

were followed by Walter Lantz's color *Cartune Classics*, Ub Iwerks's *ComiColor Cartoons*, Warner Brothers' *Merry Melodies* and Disney's *Silly Symphonies*, all of which pursued an increasingly naturalized relationship between animation and music. Of them all, it was Disney's shorts that proved the most influential.

Walt Disney had started his animation career as an employee of the Kansas City Film Ad Company. Resigning in 1921, Disney formed Laugh-O-Gram films which, nearing insolvency, led to his Hollywood exodus in 1923. The series that he had begun in Kansas, *Alice in Cartoonland*, turned out to be a success and served to bankroll future endeavors. Disney Studios was to become immensely influential, shaping both the form and industry in ways that continue to reverberate. One of the fundamental changes brought about by the practices of the studio was the full industrialization of the production process. One element in rationalizing animation production was the creation of model sheets that fully and finally determined the physiognomy and kinetic style of each character, ending the restless morphology that previously accompanied a given character's passage through the hands of different artists and directors. Thus Disney standardized the presentation of characters. Disney further streamlined production by creating teams who served different functions in the process – with a primary demarcation between writers and artists. The element that most abetted the separation of the tasks involved in the animation itself was the adoption of the cel technique as standard practice. Patented by Earl Hurd in 1914, cel animation exploded one of the main barriers to rapid, assembly-line-style production. Prior to the advent of cel production, the animator had to redraw the whole of the background for each frame. The use of overlapping cellophane sheets allowed the artist to draw a particular background once, superimposing the character over that background. While cels had been in use for some time, it was Disney that established them as an industry standard along with an attendant division of tasks among colorers, buffers, “in-betweeners,” and various other levels of animators.

The other primary innovation of Disney's was perhaps more subtle but just as far-reaching. Earlier animation had largely resided in a purely graphic universe, where any object might potentially become any other object – the teapot becomes alarm clock becomes a daisy, etc. By and large, animation did not strive for verisimilitude, but rather was characterized by a plasticity and mobility of graphic forms, a style that was reflective of the medium's native potential. In a filmic universe that is graphically rendered, anything is possible and this possibility is reflected by the anarchic sensibility operative in much early animation. Disney strove to create believable characters who behaved in believable ways in believable environments. In short, Disney brought the constraints and devices of drama and narrative to bear on the field of animation, containing the exuberance of earlier examples of the form by privileging story and character over the inherent plasticity of the form (Bendazzi 1994).