

CARTOONS AIN'T HUMAN: REFLECTIONS ON THE USES AND MEANINGS OF
ANTHROPOMORPHISM IN MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY AMERICAN ANIMATED
SHORTS

A Dissertation Submitted to the Committee on Graduate Studies in Partial Fulfillment of the
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ABSTRACT

Cartoons Ain't Human: Reflections on the Uses and Meanings of Anthropomorphism in
Mid-Twentieth Century American Animated Shorts

Rick Cousins

Why show things that aren't people acting like people? In the field of animation, it's a surprisingly big "why?", because it's a "why?" that doesn't lead to any sort of doctrine of ontology, of inevitability, of manifest destiny, or of anything like that. But it does lead to another "why?"—"why did anthropomorphic depictions of animals and non-human entities come to define an entire era of American short-form animation?"

When we think about 'classic era' cartoon shorts, the first names that come to mind are likely to be those of anthropomorphic animal characters—Mickey Mouse, Bugs Bunny, and a list of others so numerous that any machine Wile E. Coyote tried to build to count them all would probably explode. This can make us lose sight of the fact that human characters had their place as well in these films: Bugs and Daffy regularly tangled with Elmer Fudd; the studio that made cartoon stars of Betty Boop and Popeye produced no famous animal characters at all in its heyday.

And yet, it's the animals that steal the show in the animated shorts produced by major studios in America from the 1920s through the 1960s. Part of their appeal lies in the fact that they were useful and recognizable substitutes for humans. Without making things too 'personal' for the audience, they could be used to examine and deconstruct social practices in the full-speed-ahead period that took America from World War I to the war in Vietnam.

Animals weren't the only ones to get a full-on anthropomorphic treatment in these shorts. Machines and other artefacts came to life and became sites of interrogation for contemporary anxieties about the twentieth century's ever-expanding technological infrastructure; parts of the natural world, from plant life to the weather, acted with minds of their own in ways that harken back to the earliest animistic folk beliefs.

No matter when or how it's being used, anthropomorphism in animation is a device for answering, not one big "why?", but a lot of little "why?"s. What you're about to read is an exploration of a few of those little "why?"s.

Keywords: Animation, Cartoons, Anthropomorphism, America, Popular Culture, Deconstruction

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Thanks are due to many people—most real, some fictional—for helping to turn this project from what's referred to in animation circles as 'a plausible impossible' into a downright, actual, and cartoon-filled reality.

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Mike Epp, who came in off the bench to assume the role of supervisor, took the helm and guided me not only through mixed metaphors like the one you just read, but through the sometimes anthropomorphically stormy seas of life as a doctoral student. Add Daniel Mroz of the University of Ottawa to Mike and Ian, and you get a tremendous internal committee who provided valuable insights on prose that occasionally looked like it belonged in a cartoon script rather than a doctoral dissertation. (To quote a cartoon anthropomorphism not mentioned in my dissertation, Super Chicken, Daniel "knew the job was dangerous when he took it"—he'd been my supervisor for an MA thesis about the surreal, logic-shattering comedy of Spike Milligan's radio series *The Goon Show*.)

Thanks as well to my two external readers, David McGowan of the Savannah College of Art and Design, and Paul Manning of Trent University. I'm also grateful to Paul for allowing me

to take over a course he created—The Anthropology of Animation—and adapt it to my own nefarious ends. I have spoken with Paul via email, and he was present via Zoom at my defense, but not on camera—but one of these days we’ll meet face-to-face. Of course, he may actually be a disembodied voice, which would be even cooler, since my early cartoon heroes—Daws Butler, Paul Frees and Mel Blanc—were (as far as I could tell at the time) disembodied voices that only later received embodiment from animators.

I also owe a debt of gratitude to the students of the first edition of *The Anthropology of Animation* that I taught here at Trent. Without knowing you were being used as cartoon guinea pigs, you allowed me to try out quite a few of the ideas that wound up in the final version of *Cartoons Ain’t Human*. You were a tough room, but a good room... actually, a lot of rooms, since we only ever met in the semi-disembodied world of virtual learning. Thanks as well to Rodney Fitzsimons, chair of Trent’s Anthropology department, for giving me a chance to cut my cartoon teaching teeth, and to the indispensable Judy Pinto, Trent Anthropology’s administrative assistant.

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To use a word borrowed from Greek, an extra-special kudos to Catherine O'Brien, administrative assistant for Trent's Cultural Studies graduate program and a perpetually dependable source of practical guidance. You helped me stay on top of all the important details that someone rehearsing for the job of absent-minded professor has to deal with...including writing these acknowledgements. Thanks as well to everyone at Trent's Graduate Studies office—Erin Davidson, Laurie Collette, Stephanie Belfry, Sharon Moloney and Jane Rennie—for your help and forbearance...and for helping me snatch the victory of OGS funding from the red-inked jaws of debt-filled defeat.

Other organizations and institutions deserve a shout-out for their part in all this, too. The Humanities Education and Research Association (HERA), the American Humor Studies Association (AHSa), and the Canadian Association for American Studies (CAAS) all allowed me to present conference papers on material which wound up in the pages that follow. So did Trent University's own Symons Seminar Series. HERA's journal *Interdisciplinary Humanities* let an article of mine appear in its pages, and AHSa has given me books which guided my thoughts and research, in the form of review copies for its journal *Studies in American Humor*. Additional and special thanks go out to Lee Ann Westman, editor of *Interdisciplinary Humanities*, who invited me to speak to the Honors College of Rutgers University about Bugs Bunny's complex relationship with rights, governments and law.

Finally, a few personal thanks to add to the professional ones. My wife Alison and my daughter Ruby are first and foremost in these—they've offered care, support, and a preview audience for a good deal of what you're about to read...and what you'll be reading about. Ruby's highly personal (and highly kinetic) takes on old cartoon violence were a regular feature in *The Anthropology of Animation*, and Alison has had to listen to more serious talk about silly things than any sane adult should be forced to. Speaking of family (and I still am), my brother Steve Cousins, my sister Jan Guimond, and Alison's family the Williamses—her father Lorne, her mother Vicki, and her brother Kevin—have all been in the peanut gallery rooting for me.

One member of this cheering section—my mother Lillian Cousins—passed away in July 2019 at age 94, when work on this project was roughly halfway done. My father Bob Cousins, my first go-to source for pop culture references found in old cartoons, has been in what I hope is Cartoon Heaven since 1993. If I know him, he's using the strings of his harp to launch arrows at the backsides of the more sanctimonious angels he may meet there.

To François Svenbro, classmate and friend—like the castaways in the 1943 Bugs Bunny cartoon *Wackiki Wabbit*, you and I are all that's left of the Good Ship Cultural Studies PhD Class that set sail in 2017. Your turn to reach the safe haven of a doctorate is next; don't make me have to send my cartoon friends out in lifeboats after you. For one thing, none of them can swim.

Speaking of cartoon friends, thanks to Frank and Roger, whom you're about to meet. They made the cut as emcees for this academic extravaganza from a zoo-load of cartoon animals I've drawn over the years, largely on the strength of their successful pairing explaining storyboards for Television Studies. My apologies to all the rest of you—you'll get your chance eventually. Right now, it's Frank and Roger's turn, so I'll hand it over to them...

CARTOONS AIN'T HUMAN

Reflections on the Uses and Meanings of
Anthropomorphism in mid-twentieth century
American Animated Shorts



RELAX, ROGER--I'VE GOT THE GOODS
ON HIM...TURN TO PAGE 23 IF YOU
DON'T BELIEVE ME.

ARE WE ONLY ON THE COVER, FRANK?
IS HE TRYING TO GIVE US A CAMEO,
THEN DITCH US?

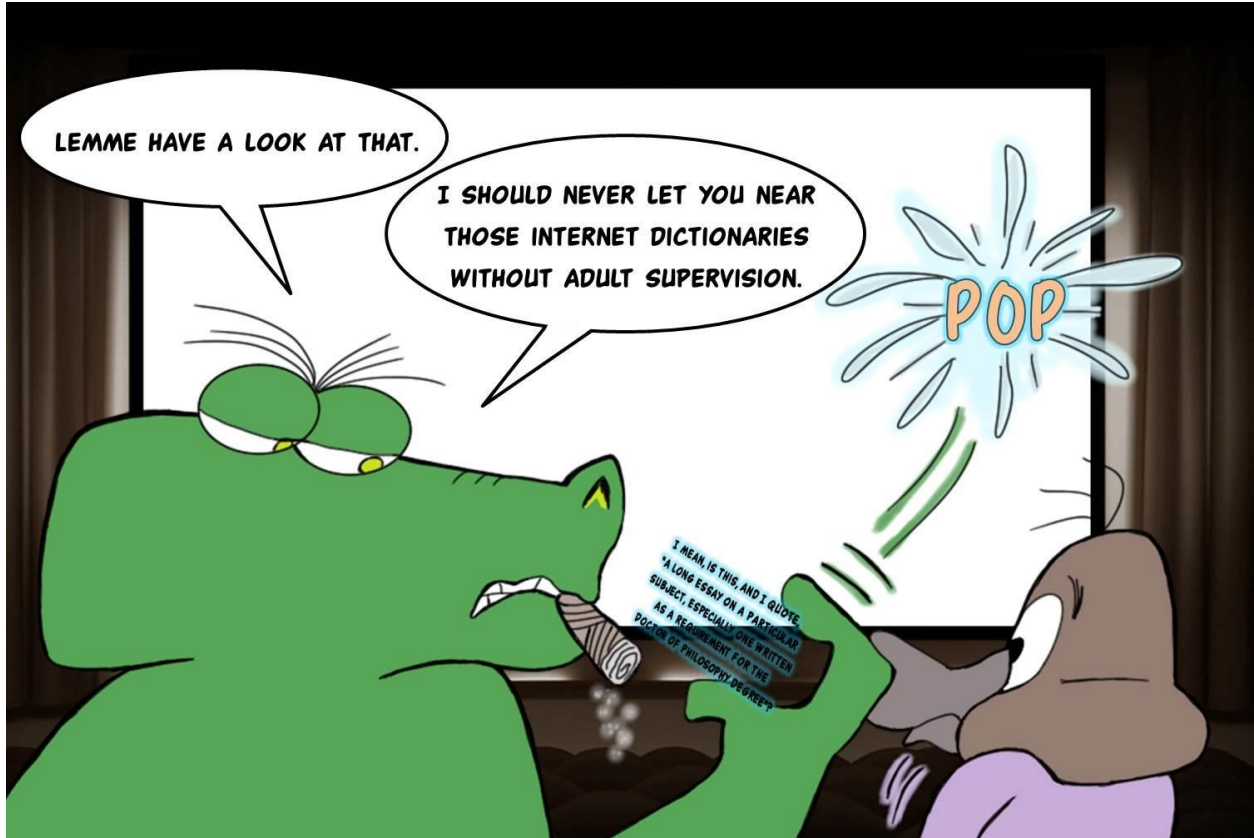
by Rick Cousins

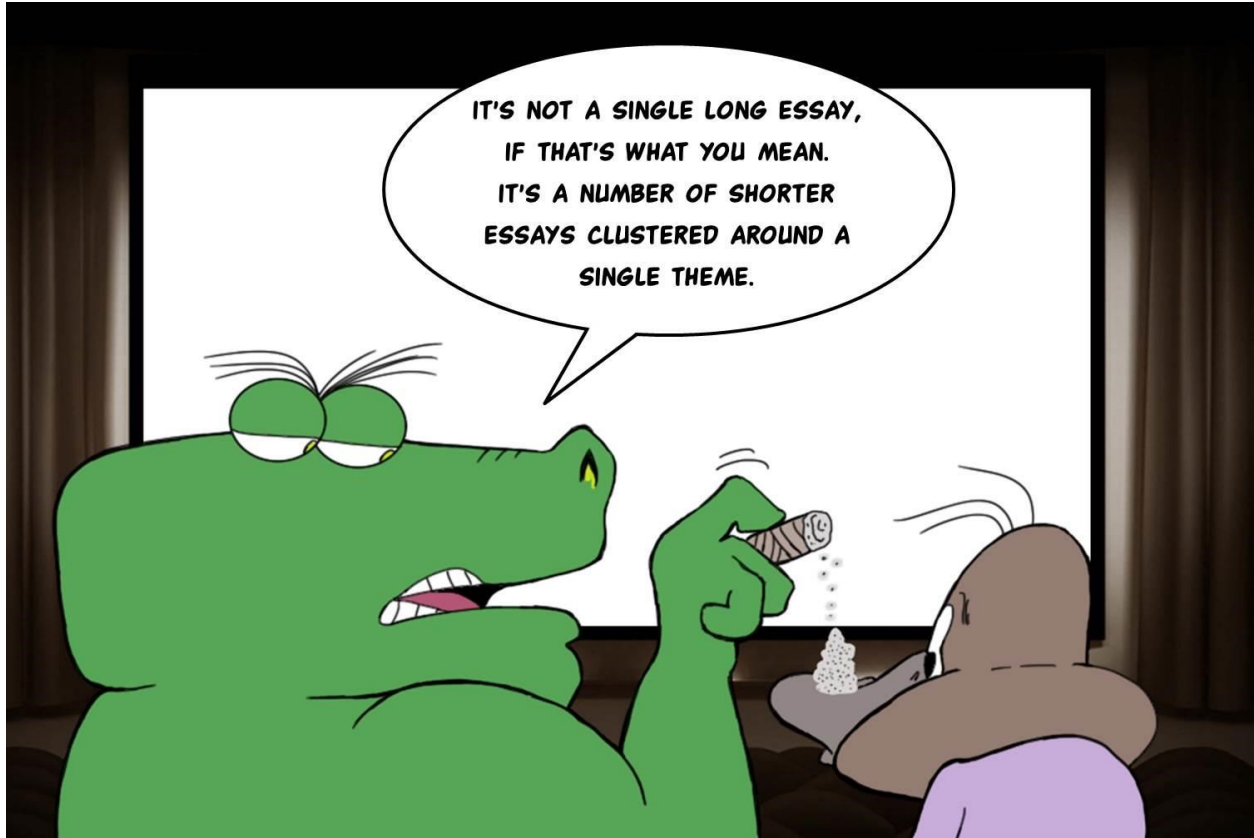
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OVERTURE:

A SELECTED SHORT SUBJECT



WELL, THIS IS META.

SSSSH--
IT'S ABOUT TO START.

What you've just been looking at is this project's ideal form. Well, part of that ideal form, at any rate. Given less limited resources of money and personnel, the four years it took me to complete *Cartoons Ain't Human* would have been ample time to turn it into a short series of animated essays about the whys and wherefores of depicting things that aren't people, but that act like people nonetheless. In the dream world I'm describing, it would have been pitched successfully to some worthy educational broadcaster, to take its place well off to one side of the classics of TV series-form discursive documentary by scholar/performers, such as Jonathan Miller's *The Body In Question* and Terry Jones' *Medieval Lives*.

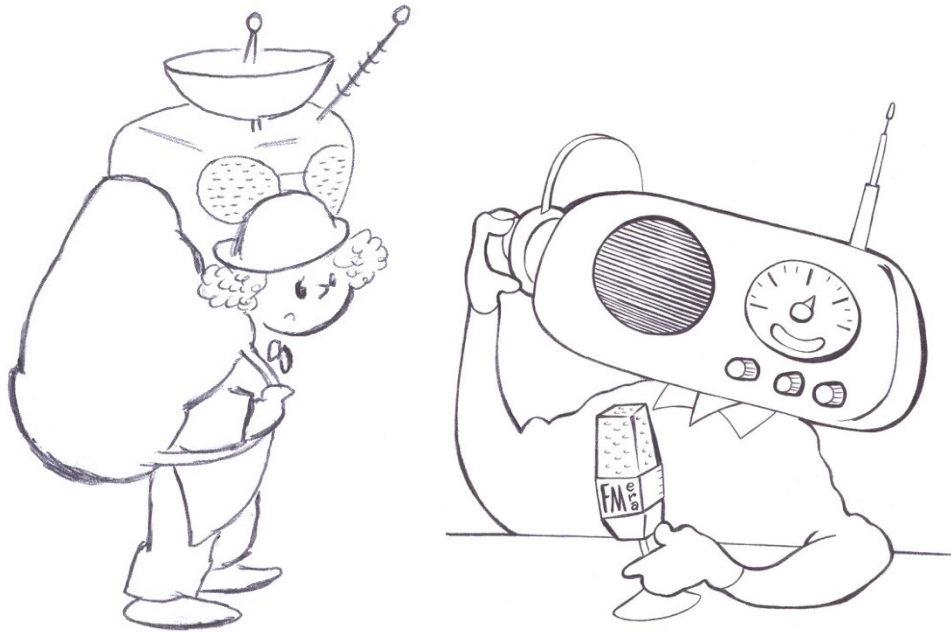
And, as you saw from the cartooned prologue, the series would have featured talking cartoon animals talking about what makes talking cartoon animals...well, what makes them talking cartoon animals. There would also have been segments on how anthropomorphism animates products of technology, plant life, rocks, hills, mountains and other features of the landscape, and everything else under the sun...not to mention the sun itself. Think of the prologue as a fully-rendered storyboard which would have been part of the preparatory process for such a project.

Some degree of research creation of this nature was part of the plan for this project from its early stages. Gradually, however, the traditional social distance between research and creation began to close, causing the two components to emulsify. Subject matter and author acted as catalytic agents on each other, in a manner that was perhaps inevitable. As long as I can remember, I've been fascinated with cartooned anthropomorphisms: just old enough to be exposed to Walt Kelly's animation-inspired comic strip *Pogo* in the daily newspaper, I read it aloud, making up voices for Pogo Possum, Albert Alligator, and the rest of the strip's gang of swamp critters, feeling it to be (as one of these critters might put it) 'the fitten' thing to do'.

And, of course, I watched (as current instant messaging slang would put it) ****ALL**** the cartoons. I'm fully aware of what this says about me, but my earliest and most lasting role models were Bugs Bunny and other cartoon animals who turned out to have more cultural staying power than a goodly number of the live-action stars whose films followed the cartoons at American movie houses. (To name one example of this: well into the 1950s, Bugs Bunny did imitations of movie gangster George Raft's signature coin-flipping gestus¹—Raft's appearance in 1959's *Some Like It Hot* notwithstanding, it was something that already required explanation for the younger members of the audience.) Part of the appeal of these characters is that, to invoke Bugs Bunny again with words he spoke in 1949's *Hare Do*, they seemed to “have more fun than people” (5:41-5:43).

This dissertation, then, is about anthropomorphic animals having more fun than people, having fun at the expense of people, having fun in spite of people, and having fun in the absence of people. It's also about trees that do the hula, suns that beam by smiling broadly as well as by emitting light, waves that grow hands to wave at you and machines with just enough artificial intelligence not to care whether anyone thinks they shouldn't be alive. It's founded on a scholarly approach, but because its author is a bit of a cartoon character himself, it evinces a strong degree of empathy with the trials and triumphs of animated anthropomorphisms. The images on the next page may not offer conclusive proof of this self-identification, but they do shed a little light on the matter:

¹ The one that comes immediately to mind is from the 1956 short *Bugs' Bonnets* (5:02-5:15). Bugs also turned an imitation of Gary Cooper's laconic gunslinger persona into a minor running gag in his B-Western themed encounters with Yosemite Sam; this also carried over into his one-off pairing with Sam-cognate Colonel Shuffle in the 1949 short *Mississippi Hare* (*Hare Trigger* 3:13-3:25; *Rides Again* 1:39-1:53; *Wild and Woolly* 2:12-2:20; *Mississippi* 2:26-2:30).



Two cartoon versions of me (and by me) from 2006, used in publicity for my solo Fringe theatre festival show “Off My Wavelength”. In the one on the left, I’m carrying a portable DIY radio station; in the one on the right, I *am* the radio station.

To put it succinctly, I’m a frequent visitor to Toontown, and am familiar enough with its main drags and side streets to be able to take you on a guided tour without recourse to any of the official literature, be it scholarly or not. Toontown is, I grant you, a fictional place—one first described in Gary K. Wolf’s 1981 novel *Who Censored Roger Rabbit?* (which is, ironically, about comic strips, not animation), then memorialized into metonymy by the 1988 film *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*. Fictional or not, the word ‘Toontown’ has become a marker of a historical moment and the social practices which shaped it, in the same sense as phrases like ‘Haussmann’s Paris’ and ‘Christopher Wren’s London’. Like these and other partly real, partly conceptual spaces, the more wholly conceptual space of Toontown is dotted with what Pierre Nora refers to as *lieux de mémoire*—nooks and crannies which serve as repositories of a cultural heritage assumed to be shared by all, if not always equally appreciated by all.

Part of this cultural heritage is a tone which in turn reflects an outlook on life. To say that studio-era animated shorts display a decided tendency towards the ludic—that is to say the playful, the ridiculous, and the just plain silly—is an understatement of cosmic proportions...or perhaps, under the circumstances, what I mean is *comic* proportions. In this body of work, there is a marked propensity for thumbing one's nose at everything in sight—an attitude which has become reified when practiced by the likes of Diogenes, but is put on a rather lower pedestal when practiced by the likes of Daffy Duck.

But is this fair? Is the cynicism of Diogenes inherently more worthy of reification than the (as he himself would pronounce it) 'thynithithm' of Daffy? The godfather of studies of all things ludic, Johan Huizinga, wouldn't say so. Here's what Huizinga has to say about how we should approach all this nose-thumbing: "(a)ll the terms in this loosely connected group of ideas—play, laughter, folly, wit, jest, joke, the comic, etc.—share the characteristic which we had to attribute to play, namely, that of resisting any attempt to reduce it to other terms" (6).

What the visitor to the *lieux de mémoire* of Toontown has to do, then, is to learn to speak the language of its avenues and alleys, to understand its ludic spirit by adopting it, to play along with the playfulness by resisting the reductionist urges of serious scholarship, and to analyze what comes into view on something approaching its own terms. For the purposes of the scholarly journey I embarked on four years ago, this also meant recalibrating the journey's trajectory and, in doing so, its teleology. A tour of any group of *lieux de mémoire* is perforce more about the stops along the way than the final destination, more about the connections between the successive points on this trek than about a linear path that can be cleanly and clearly traced through them all. It's a little like trying to follow a string of gags in a seven-minute cartoon, but

then again, seven-minute cartoons are the main focus of my study, and seven-minute cartoons are often excellent collections of excellent gags excellently strung together.

All kidding aside, as Rebecca Solnit has recently reminded us, such a journey is “not without structure or direction”. “Why not understand by analogy,” she says, “decenter the narrative, seek patterns of resemblance in parallel, explore the terrain rather than cutting a swathe through it? Why not meander and see what lies alongside?” (“In Praise of the Meander”). The scholar’s journey, after all, is about the discoveries made along the way: it is principally descriptive, rather than prescriptive or proscriptive. Prescriptions and proscriptions may get you from Point A to Point B a little faster, but the speed they whip you through the scenery tends to blur the details, and lessen the chances you’ll discover anything new along the way.

What you’ll discover in the pages that follow this introductory chapter is a look at a few points of interest that lie alongside the more well-trodden narrative paths that weave between the collectively created constructions that accreted through abutment to form the cultural development that is Toontown. Its focus is the focus of the cultural magpie who is your tour guide: I’ve assembled a collection of shiny things that caught my interest, and arranged them in little piles which obey and generate forms of logic all their own. Part of this logic involves the discursive practices of Toontown’s own resident magpies. Like Heckle and Jeckle of Terrytoons fame, I speak in a dual, antiphonal voice which alternates between being cultured and crude, between being courtly and coarse, between erudition and eructation. The Heckle in me heckles myself frequently, and sometimes Jeckle heckles Heckle back. The Bakhtinian back-and-forth of this dialogism is in keeping with what it’s being used to discuss. If I take pains to deflate my own pretensions by interrupting my authorial voice with another frequently rude, occasionally obscene, and always slangy one, it’s worth remembering that the scholarly Jeckle and the snarky

Heckle in me are both looking at material which talked to its audiences in slang, was frequently rude, and came as close to obscenity as contemporary censorship practices would allow.



It may also be worth remembering that my internal Heckle and Jeckle's reaction to what I'm doing is something along these lines.

A TRIP THROUGH TOONTOWN (OR, WATCH WHERE YOU STEP)

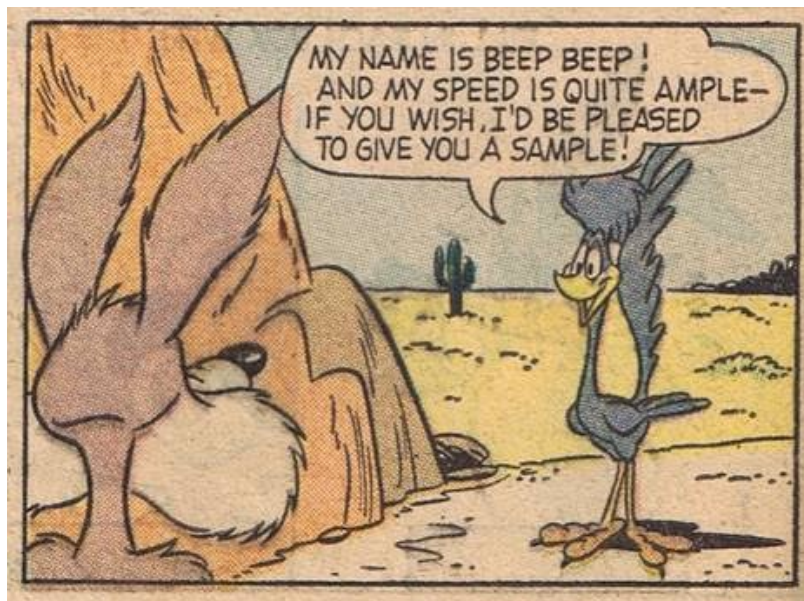
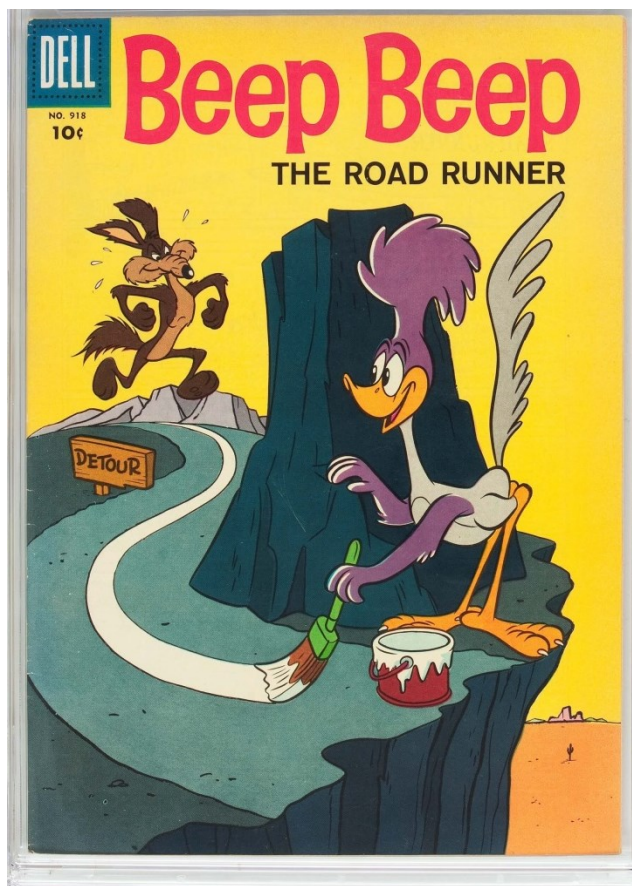
One of the challenges involved in strolling through Toontown's *lieux de mémoire* is that contemporaneity is impossible to recapitulate. As with an old neighbourhood undergoing a constant process of urban renewal, the initial Toontown infrastructure has been subject to facelifts, demolitions and infill, some of which would make it unrecognizable to those who visited it in its heyday. It's like walking past a row of hundred-year old houses and trying to figure out which parts of them still have the original coat of paint.



This is due to factors which are at once more obvious and more insidious than the simple deterioration of Toontown's building materials. While it is true that a good many films that could help to establish creative lineages and lines of influence are missing or in degraded condition, far more significant adulterations to the public archive of narrative surrounding American animation have been produced by those who have taken it upon themselves to restore its foundations and spruce it up. One of the inherent risks of undertaking any form of scholarly interpretation (including the present study) is the pitfall of unconsciously privileging the second-hand experience of analysis over the first-hand facts of primary source material. To take myself as the most obviously handy example, I want you, the reader, to watch all the cartoons I refer to, but this desire has two consequences we both have to be constantly aware of. If you haven't seen a particular cartoon, your first viewing of it may be coloured by the impressions I've left with you.

If you have seen it already, my impressions may be calculated to get you to view it with a fresh eye—but at the same time, I have to be careful not to let my impressions come on so strong that they come across as facts rather than suggestions. Otherwise, I'd be talking on behalf of entities that are perfectly capable of talking for themselves—the actual films. In doing so, I'd be talking over the head of the archive, talking down to the archive, and talking over your head and talking down to you.

Another problem I've frequently encountered when reconnoitering the route I want to lead you along is that Toontown doesn't have a regular garbage pick-up. The paths that you and I will be walking in the chapters that follow are strewn with the detritus of flawed memory and competing agendas—hearsay, the Mandela Effect, and ancillary materials which can make the authenticity of the original silver screen creations an open question. My childhood was the site of an existential struggle with one highly illustrative and less than sterling example of the ways that merchandising tie-ins, publishing, and other efforts to cross-pollinate the image of cartoon characters into the world of broader culture can undercut the personae projected by those characters in the cinema. There was a time when I had yet to see a Road Runner cartoon, but was an avid reader of Road Runner comic books in which the Road Runner not only spoke, but spoke exclusively in rhyming couplets. I never met a collectible I didn't like, but once I'd seen what a Road Runner cartoon actually was, the comic books wound up where my baby Benjaminite mind believed they belonged—in the trash.



What's wrong with these pictures? 'Beep Beep' the Road Runner, star of Dell Comics, shamelessly lifts Wile E. Coyote's material (top) and speaks in greeting-card-grade doggerel (bottom). The rhymed dialogue may have a revered cultural antecedent in the comedies of Molière, but it's hardly likely the comic books' writers took their inspiration from that.

And yet, it's easy to mistake an ersatz Road Runner named 'Beep Beep' who talks like a Hallmark card for the authentic, auratic 'meep meep' of the genuine article. After all, they *look* the same. The problem with granting similar status to things based on similarity of appearance is that it quantifies the unquantifiable, proliferates the conversation between archival materials into the muddy babble of an overcrowded cocktail party, and absolves the scholar from the responsibility of sorting out signal from noise amidst the cacophony of voices. Eventually, one kind of voice and one kind of image has to be brought into the foreground, so some sense can be made of the statements made by and about it. All the same, the consequence of any focussed scholarly reading—of animation, of anything—is that, through the necessity of turning one's back on the totality of available materials, the scholar curates a personal sub-archive, a record of events edited and redacted for the purpose of assembling a specific narrative. Granted, we all have to do this, but we'd all do well to remember what Wolfgang Ernst has to say on the subject: while these “secondary narratives give meaningful coherence to [an archive's] discontinuous elements”, whoever creates these narratives ultimately “performs fiction, figuring dead letters in the mode of rhetorical prosopopoeitics (naming dead things ‘alive’)” (48).

WHOSE ANTHROPOMORPHISM IS IT, ANYWAY?

And here, thanks to Ernst, we encounter a concept I mention in the latter stages of this document—*prosopopoiea*. The prosopopoeitic impulse—the desire to put a living face on something that is only alive in a conceptual sense—lies behind the practices of anthropomorphism. It's a set of practices that spreads, like an anthropomorphized film of algae, across the still, deep waters fed by streams of cultural endeavour too numerous to mention here.

One of the most important reflections I've made on the uses and meanings of anthropomorphism in animation concerns the myriad ways others have reflected on these uses and meanings. No-one has taken on the task of sketching out a cohesive and exhaustive poetics of animated anthropomorphism, I suspect in part because the undertaking would prove less Aristotelian than Sisyphian. Just when you thought you'd brought your argument to a satisfying peak, back down it would roll over you, like a boulder pancake-squashing Wile E. Coyote.

Paul Wells, whose 2009 book *The Animated Bestiary* is so far the most comprehensive look at the subject, admits as much very early on in his discussion. After identifying the blind spot all of us have to reckon with—“(t)here is an almost a taken-for-granted sense about animals in animation such that their status as the leading dramatis personae of the cartoon has scarcely been questioned”—he offers up the prospect of a paralyzing vista of possibilities once we take the blinders off (Wells, *Bestiary* 2). Wells' view of the problem is panoramic, to the point of being dizzying:

I see animated characters in the first instance as phenomena and, consequently, able to carry a diversity of representational positions. At one and the same time, such characters can be beasts and humans, or neither; can prompt issues about gender, race and ethnicity, generation, and identity, or not; and can operate innocently or subversively, or as something else entirely. (*Bestiary* 3)

In other words, animation and the anthropomorphisms that frolic within it are anything and everything. But does this property of being (at least potentially) all things to all people also make them (as a wise old teacher of mine once reminded me) nothing to nobody? Wells prudently steps back from the abyss this kind of thinking could plunge you into, in order to look at the specifics of (as J.L. Austin might have entitled a book on the semiotics of this subject matter) how to do things with anthropomorphisms.

Implicit in any such ‘how to’ is an answer to the question ‘what for?’. Wells’ *Animated Bestiary* and other recent scholarship on anthropomorphism in performative media (including, but not limited to animation) spend considerable time looking at a ‘what for?’ that is very much *le dernier cri* in the humanities. The tangible and lasting effects of human activity on the planet—climate change and the extinction of species foremost among them—have lent a tone of eco-millennarianism to all manner of scholarly discourse, so it’s no surprise that this tone has become a keynote of discussions about something as tangible but as ephemeral as the psychosocial effects of animated film. The question seems to be no longer what making animals and things act like people says about people, but what it says about animals and things. At the very least, the question of the moment is what this activity says about people’s relationships to animals and things, as defined by the animals and things themselves.

Questioning the merits of human exceptionalism is more than just a fashion—by now, it may be a survival mechanism—but old humanist habits die hard. That’s why you’ll see things like this quick pivot by Wells from old-school Protagoran ‘Man is the measure of all things’ language to full-on posthumanism:

The animal story has proved attractive to animators and animation storytellers because it inevitably works as part of a surreal, supernatural, or revisionist reinvention of human experience, *but perhaps even more importantly* has reflected the ways in which social and cultural intervention in relation to animals has evolved and developed historically.

(*Bestiary* 60, italics and boldface mine)

Looking at all this from the point of view of the animals in the stories, perhaps this way of thinking isn't so newfangled after all. I'm reminded of the tagline to *Sink Pink*, a 1965 short which marked one of the rare occasions in his cinematic career when the Pink Panther used a voice to express his opinion:

“Why can't Man be more like animals?” (6:06-6:10)



Why, indeed? The verbal gauntlet the Pink Panther dropped five and a half decades ago has been picked up by other recent scholarship on anthropomorphism, and has tended to become its focus. Claire Parkinson's 2020 *Animals, Anthropomorphism and Mediated Encounters* frames the encounters around the non-human beings under observation rather than around the human beings observing them. In other words, animals and anthropomorphisms are the measure of all things, at least such things as pertain to them. Parkinson's primary goal is to "move away from a concern with representations of other animals as having only or mainly symbolic value in service to our understanding of human identity" (2).

Part of this move involves engaging with older and more clearly anthropocentric representations and analyses. Donna Haraway's ideas about the comprehension gap between humans and animals crop up at regular intervals in *Animals, Anthropomorphism and Mediated Encounters*. Parkinson also casts a glance at John Berger's watershed 1980 essay "Why Look at Animals?" to help fill out the background of her argument with human supernumeraries. For the most part, however, animals and those who make common cause with them are her concern. In common with Wells (who also features as a source of inspiration for her thoughts), Parkinson relies heavily on Erica Fudge's Montaigne-like "que sais-je?" outlook on the human/animal divide. Parkinson, Wells and Fudge alike share a viewpoint that involves looking at "the status of the animal on its own terms and conditions, in what Fudge notes is a "redrawing of the human"" (Wells, *Bestiary* 29).

This, does, however raise one uncomfortable question: *which* animals and *what* terms and conditions? I ask this as someone whose life experiences have been coloured by one particular animal species with a distinctly checkered history of anthropomorphism in animation. On the one

hand, Gabby Gator trying to eat Woody Woodpecker is hilarious (in no small part because voice actor Daws Butler used his Huckleberry Hound voice for Gabby)...



From *Greedy Gabby Gator* (1963).

...Alfy Gator trying to eat Yakky Doodle is hilarious for Daws Butler's offbeat vocal take on Alfred Hitchcock and because, frankly, Yakky is an emotional blackmailer who has it coming...



“Good eevening [*deep breath*]...this is a still [*deep breath*] from *All's Well that Eats Well* [*deep breath*]... from 1961...[*deep breath*]. We now return you [*deep breath*]...to your regularly scheduled dissertation.”

...but (to risk dropping whatever scholarly gravitas this passage has left) this image from the title sequence of Hanna-Barbera's *Abbott and Costello Show* scared the living shit out of me the first time I saw it in the late 1960s:



It still does, too...so much so that I'm going to change the subject away from alligators as quickly as possible—but not before pointing out that maybe, just maybe, some animals have status based on terms and conditions that we really don't need to worry about sympathizing with.



It's clear, then, that although a lot has been said about anthropomorphism in animation, a lot remains to be said. Given that, the strictly academic viewpoint isn't always as helpful as it might be when you're looking for a tourist's guide to Toontown, particularly if you plan on strolling through its anthropomorphic neighbourhoods. The best-constructed scholarly work often imbricates its well-researched truths with unintended falsehoods: the biggest whopper among them is one that sucks the oxygen out of any room where anthropomorphism is discussed, like an unacknowledged (and possibly anthropomorphic) elephant. You'll find it phrased in some way or another, no matter where you look to avoid it. Parkinson's wording of it is the most recent, and will do as well as any other: "(t)he overexpression of similitude between humans and other animals has become synonymous with Disney" (1).

Let that sink in for a moment:

SYNONYMOUS.

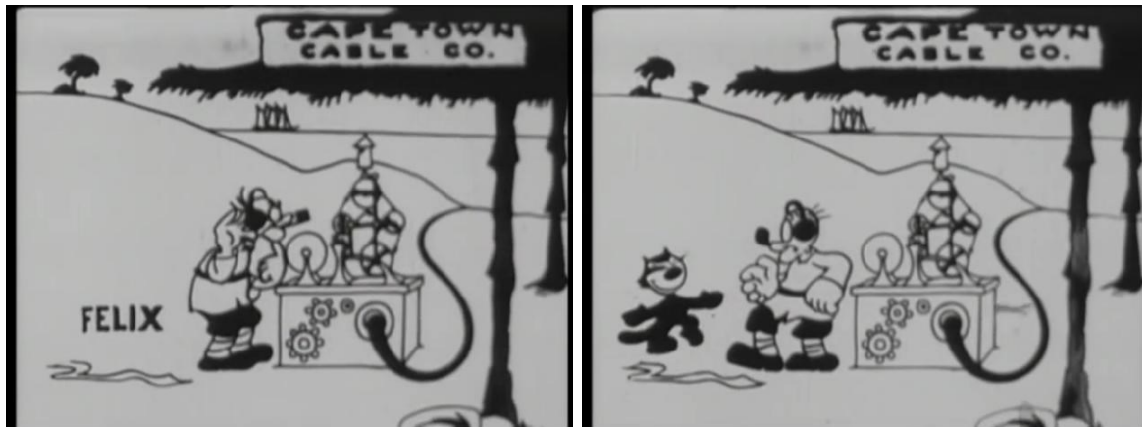
WITH.

DISNEY.

Now go watch some Looney Tunes and remind yourself how synonymous it *isn't*.

The trouble with statements like this one is they're truisms that aren't true enough to be truly useful. If you don't think too hard about what "synonymous with Disney" implies, it *seems* right, in the same way that it *seems* right to say that the sun comes up and goes down while the earth stands still. Knowing all the evidence against it doesn't stop people from using it in casual conversation, and in the process giving words power over facts.

However, this is not the place for a lengthy response to this oft-repeated assertion. In this case, if a picture is worth a thousand words, two pictures, one with a very important word in it, should be more than enough.



From *Felix Doubles for Darwin* (1924).

Felix is the Galilean *eppur si muove* to the contestation that the anthropomorphic animated universe revolves around Disney's world. If anything, Disney is and always has been in the gravitational pull exerted by Felix. In Walt Disney's mid-1920s "Alice" films, which combined live action and animation, the bulk of the comedy heavy lifting fell to a cat named Julius who borrowed his style of comic business and some of his character design from Felix. The imitation was more than sincere flattery. In his biography of Disney, Neal Gabler notes that "(a)t one point the likeness between Julius and Felix was so close that Walt warned his staff that they were flirting with copyright infringement" (88).

Felix is still a household name, and Julius was never a name outside the household of the Disney studio, and that brings up a point which further helps to delineate the parameters of this project. Questions of temporal primacy often get wrapped up in questions of qualitative primacy:

what's implied in the statement "synonymous with Disney" is that Disney does it best, and always has, because they did it first. At issue in these pages is not whether the Disney version of anthropomorphism is better than any other studio's, nor how it's different from or similar to other studios' versions. What *is* important is that others were doing anthropomorphism before Disney, which helps create the raw materials for my study's time frame.

ANTHROPOMORPHISM SINCE WHEN?

Like any frame, the temporal frame for *Cartoons Ain't Human* establishes the limits of the picture plane so an observer can concentrate on the details in the picture. This isn't quite as cut-and-dried as I've just made it sound, because the historical timeline of animation sprawls a bit, and its eras, movements and moments blend into one another like sections of an animation background painting. To keep both parts of my subtitle 'in frame'—the 'anthropomorphism' part and the 'mid-twentieth century American animated shorts' part—I have to establish conceptual boundaries by answering two questions:

1. What part of the twentieth century qualifies as 'the middle' for the purposes of studying American animation?
2. When does anthropomorphism begin to become a recognizable defining feature of the American animation aesthetic?

The answer to the first question begins with a close reading of the title of one of the benchmarks of animation scholarship: Michael Barrier's 1999 survey *Hollywood Cartoons: American Animation in Its Golden Age*. Subsequent scholarship has engaged with the idea of

what a ‘Hollywood cartoon’ is, as well as the idea of a ‘Golden Age’ in which it flourished. David McGowan begins his 2019 study *Animated Personalities: Cartoon Characters and Stardom in American Theatrical Shorts* by describing this particular filmic form as “(s)tudio-era theatrical animation with recurring characters” and “short cartoons for theatrical exhibition” (1). For his part, the dean of American animation scholars, Donald Crafton, defines the form by immuring it in a structure of feeling based on praxis:

“Hollywood cartoon” signified a mode of production and was shorthand for an attitude, a certain style, a suite of techniques, specific types of stories and reception expectations and even a standard length of seven minutes (give or take a couple). (*Shadow* 1)

This definition, too, requires a little parsing to tease out its hidden assumptions about time frames. One of these involves a phrase McGowan uses—“for theatrical exhibition”. When thinking about what sort of material to fix my gaze on for this study, I initially fell back on this assumption, which had become somewhat baked by the practices of my youth. Not only am I old enough to have been in cinemas to watch the product of the last waning years of major-studio-release animated shorts, but I understood that shorts from certain studios that aired on television had been shown on what used to be called ‘the big screen’ long before they appeared on my small screen at home. I couldn’t reliably tell you, for example, whether my first viewing of the 1966 Robert McKimson Road Runner cartoon *Sugar and Spies* was in my hometown’s small second-run cinema or on *The Bugs Bunny Road Runner Hour*. That said, a childhood’s worth of television watching gave me a rough-and-ready sense of the medium that any given cartoon I was watching had been made for.

However...if you capitalize ‘rough and ready’ and render it as ‘Ruff and Reddy’, the definition of ‘Hollywood cartoon’ becomes ever so slightly confounded. Crafton’s criteria of “an attitude, a certain style, a suite of techniques, specific types of stories and reception expectations”—and even the standard give-or-take length he offers—are met just as well by a goodly amount of early made-for-TV animation as by its studio-era theatrical counterpart. Add to the continuity of approach a continuity of personnel and the discursive boundaries become still more blurred. The series I alluded to at the beginning of this paragraph—*Ruff and Reddy*—launched the television careers of William Hanna and Joseph Barbera, directors (and later, producers as well) of the multiple Oscar-winning *Tom and Jerry* series of theatrical animated shorts from 1940 to 1958. During the early years of the Hanna-Barbera TV cartoon studios, the staff was drawn from Hanna and Barbera’s old animation unit at MGM and the animation units of other movie studios, most notably Warner Brothers.

Though emblematic of the unities between studio-era and early television cartoons, Hanna-Barbera was hardly an isolated case. David Perlmutter notes that “in the first two decades of television animation’s existence...the personnel consisted largely of theatrical animation veterans, and much of the humorous ambience had strong roots in the prior form” (5). Even with reduced animation budgets enforcing a greater emphasis on dialogue to carry the humour, early broadcast cartoons tended to look like the result of people doing what they knew best. To take one example of a theatrical animation veteran carrying tried-and-true praxis over into their television work, scriptwriter Larz Bourne’s stories for Terrytoons’ *Deputy Dawg* TV show often revisit situations and premises from cartoons he wrote for Paramount/Famous Studios. The *Deputy Dawg* segment entitled *Physical Fatness* (1963) echoes a theme from the 1955 Herman and Katnip theatrical short *A Bicep Built for Two*: although the latter cartoon is by no means a

copy of the former, the momentum of the physical comedy in both films is maintained by one character exploiting another's exercise regimen to satisfy a self-serving personal agenda. As well, both films display Bourne's flair for writing to the talents of in-house voice casts—at Paramount/Famous, Arnold Stang, Jackson Beck and Mae Questel; at Terrytoons, one-man gang Dayton Allen.

All this is by way of saying that settling the question of this project's time frame came down to a personal choice based on experience and instinct. If, as Perlmutter says, "(a)nimation came to embrace television sooner than other aspects of the film industry did for a simple reason: it needed to survive", the relationship between film and early TV animation sets a tricky challenge for the researcher (34). At what point had this marriage of convenience settled into a comfortable domestic routine? It's easier to establish this through an overall sense of things being somehow different than through specific dates and events. Despite the quality of the first half-decade of veteran Warner director Friz Freleng's career as an independent producer of animation for theatrical release, his cartoons featuring The Pink Panther, The Ant and the Aardvark, The Inspector and others were quickly recycled onto television, making their original creation as films seen in cinemas seem almost a footnote to their life story. Similarly, the last creations of the brief reincarnation of Warner Brothers' animation house in the late 1960s — characters such as Merlin the Magic Mouse and Cool Cat—didn't have long to wait in Cartoon Limbo before their oeuvres joined those of Daffy Duck and other bigger names in broadcast packages syndicated by Warner. No matter what character's name had the best drawing power, it had long since become apparent that television was the place where an animated character was eventually going to *be*, whether it was originally created for the big screen or the small screen.

Television had become the force in popular culture that defined and legitimated short-form animation, and that set its given circumstances and expectations.

Where and how to do the cut-off work that's essential to maintaining focus, then? The interlaced career arcs of Freleng and the Warner Brothers cartoon studio offer a clue about ways and means. A longtime Warner director, Freleng set up his own animation studio in 1963, on the premises of the recently-closed Warner animation plant. While it is contentious to suggest a definitive date for the changeover from cinema to television as the primary home of American short-form animation, the middle third of the 1960s does suggest itself as an important transition period. By that time, the stripped-down production methods of studio releases were clearly echoing practices honed to a fine science by Hanna-Barbera; with Hanna, Barbera and their staff being the kind of industry veterans that Perlmutter speaks of, cinematic-release animated shorts that emulated the Hanna-Barbera model tended to set up a feedback loop, reproducing the basic contours of the product of an earlier time, but with considerably fewer of its defining details.

At the risk of making an obscure pop culture pun, I'm tempted to refer to this thematic feedback as a 'Loopy De Loop', in reference to the star of the only series of shorts Hanna-Barbera produced specifically for the cinema. Nowhere near as well-known as his Hanna-Barbera TV contemporaries Huckleberry Hound and Yogi Bear, Loopy appeared from 1959 to 1965 in a comparable number of shorts to Huck and Yogi. These shorts were comparable to Huck's and Yogi's in terms of quality as well as quantity—their visual style, writing, voice casting and production values made them indistinguishable from Hanna-Barbera's television output of the time.



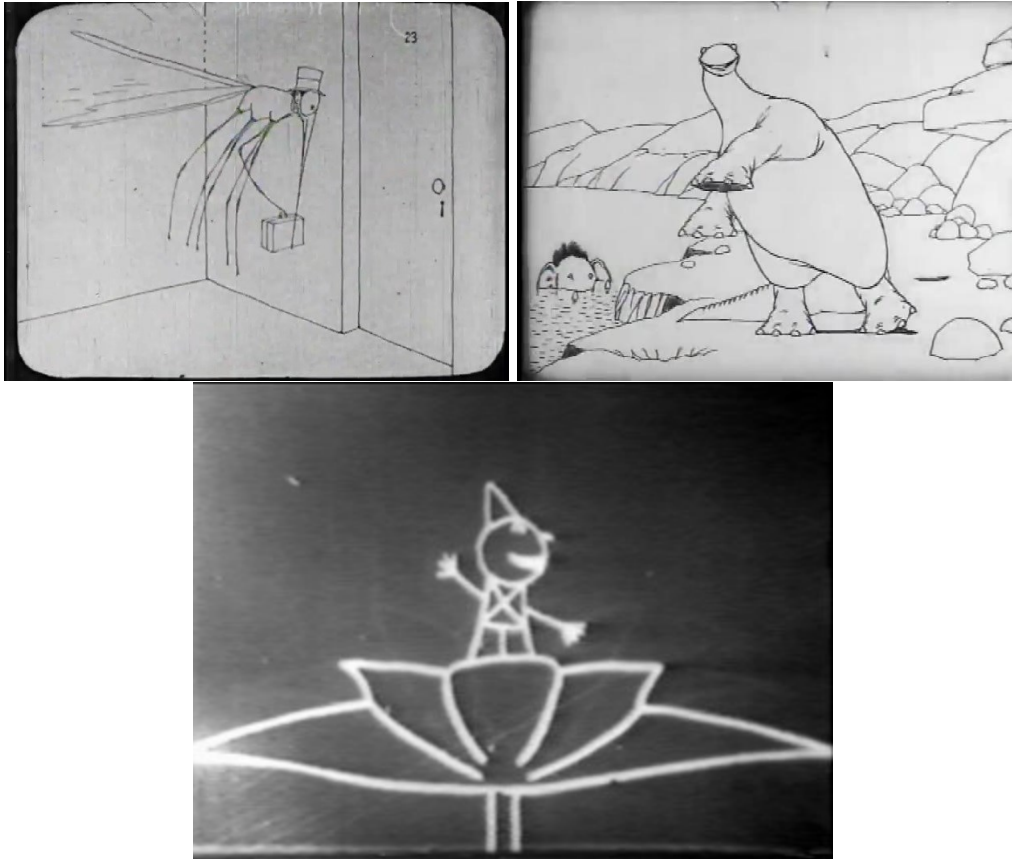
“I am ze how-you-say denizen of ze rubbish heap of culture, no?” Loopy De Loop, whose defining character trait is that people are instantly repulsed by him simply because he’s there. If that sounds more than a little like *Pepé Le Pew*, it’s worth noting that the basic template for Loopy was devised by Mike Maltese, the writer who developed the basic template for *Pepé Le Pew* at Warner’s.

With all that in mind, I refrained from committing to a hard-and-fast end date for the era under study, but rather set myself a semi-strict ground rule. Unless it was particularly illustrative of a concept I was discussing, I avoided any film from 1965 or later, or any type of film that appeared on television. I must confess that I came to this rule only after a little trial and error, and with some regret. The shorts from *The Huckleberry Hound Show* featuring Mr. Jinks the cat had a place in an early draft of my chapter about the material and affective labour involved in the life of house cats; a more focused and intensive study of Jinks, and Jinks alone, is now a labour for another time.



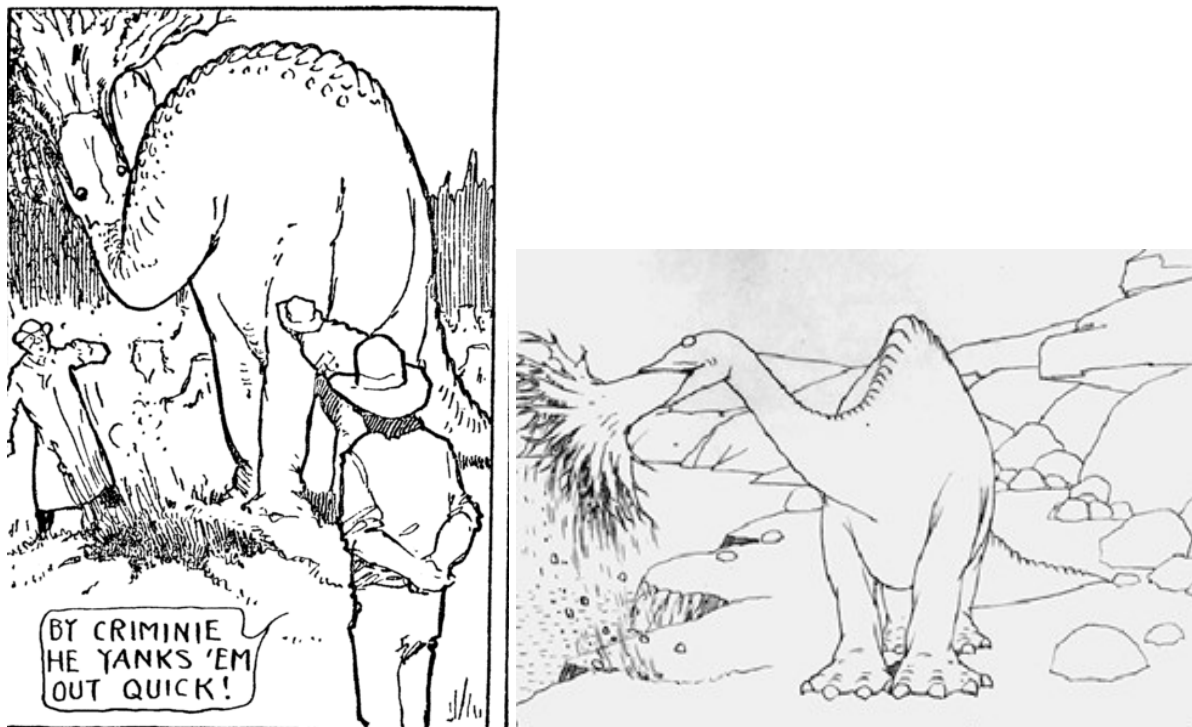
Mr. Jinks in action. If this whets your anticipation for a future study of his doings, think of it as the better mousetrap which will have the scholarly world beating a path to someone's door.

On the subject of other times, it's time to move on to the question of where to establish the beginning of the Toontown era of American animation, and with it, the origins of anthropomorphism as an identifiable element of Toontown's architectural style. Animation's earliest experiments have traits which prefigure the "Hollywood cartoon" mode of production that Crafton describes: anthropomorphism is, of course, one of them. Hindsight, coloured by the watching of cartoons from a variety of eras, can very nearly convince you that anthropomorphism was always *the* defining feature of animation. My own visual memory of films I've watched from the first two decades of the twentieth century tends to drift more to images such as the titular characters of Winsor McCay's *How a Mosquito Operates* (1912) and *Gertie the Dinosaur* (1914) than to Fantoche, the Pierrot-like stick figure from Emile Cohl's *Fantasmagorie* (1908) and subsequent films.



The protagonists of *How a Mosquito Operates* (1912), *Gertie the Dinosaur* (1914) (top, L and R), and *Fantasmagorie* (1908) (bottom).

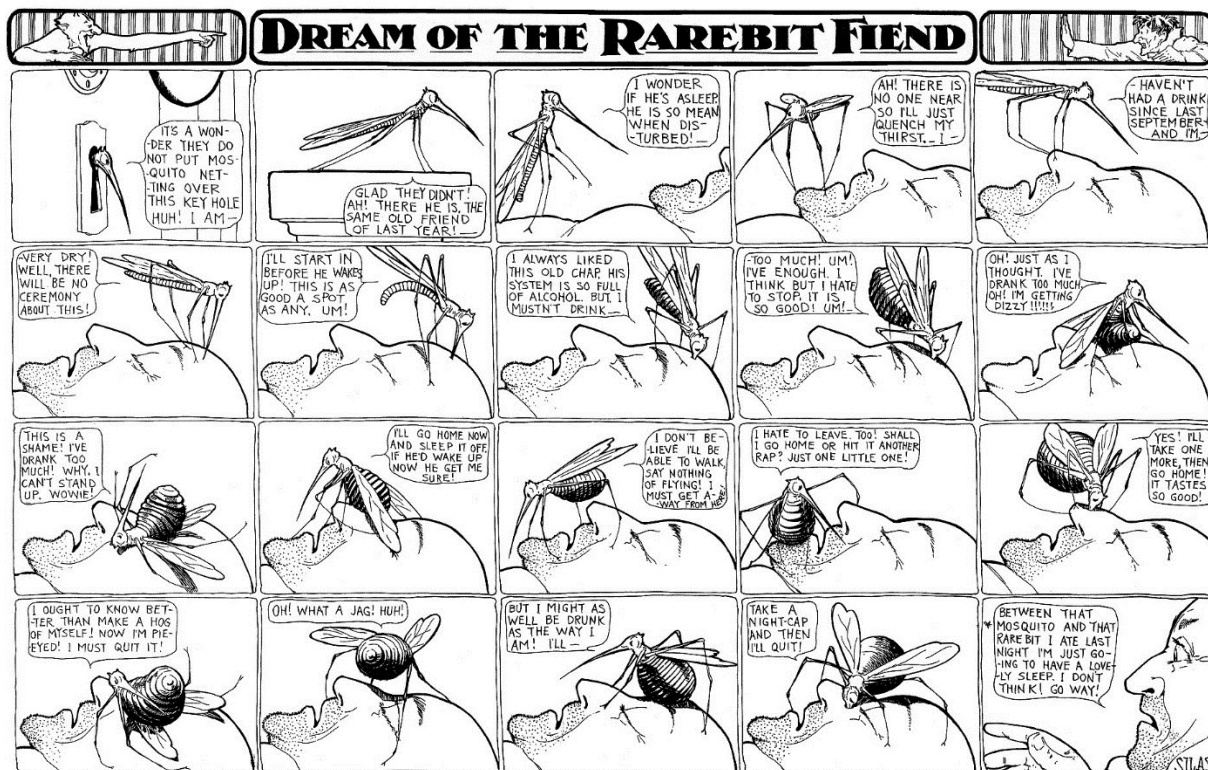
I'm not the only one to have been swindled by this kind of memory cheat: the Encyclopedia Britannica's article on Winsor McCay claims that "Gertie was the first featured character created specifically for the new medium" ("Winsor McCay"). Unfortunately for Britannica, there's visual evidence to contradict this statement. Dinosaurs were a part of the pen-and-ink repertory company that McCay used in his 'day job' as a newspaper comic strip artist, well before Gertie: one of these living fossils even rehearses a bit of business that would later become one of *Gertie's* most memorable moments by devouring a tree ("It Was Only a Dream").



An unnamed dinosaur from a Winsor McCay comic strip (L) and Gertie (R) doing what Donald Crafton has recently described as “literally eating the scenery” (“Out of the Cave”). The comic strip version predates *Gertie the Dinosaur* by a good two years—its date of publication is variously given as 1910, 1911 and 1912.

How a Mosquito Operates isn't a one-off for the cinema, either. A ‘dry run’ for it can be found in a 1909 instalment of McCay's strip *Dream of The Rarebit Fiend*. The settings in this version are less varied, with the main action taking place in a close-up view of a sleeper's head; unlike his filmic counterpart, the mosquito is unclothed and (as is typical of McCay's newspaper characters) talks nineteen to the dozen—something which would have brought onscreen action to a dead stop every time a speech balloon or intertitle had to appear. Still, the basic idea is consistent in both iterations—a mosquito drinks blood to the point of uncomfortable satiety. McCay altered the payoff to this sequence for the animated mosquito, in a way that may explain why it's more memorable than its print predecessor. In the newspaper strip, the blood binge is

likened to a spree of alcoholic debauchery, with alternating wordy fits of remorse and relapse; on film, the mosquito becomes silently spherical, and then explodes.



McCay's earlier, unclothed, garrulous version of *How a Mosquito Operates*—from June 5, 1909's instalment of *Dream of the Rarebit Fiend*.

What these examples suggest is that, no matter how (to use Crafton's descriptor) "adorable" Gertie is, or how spectacularly unsettling an exploding mosquito may be, such characters aren't truly *sui generis* ("Out of the Cave"). Rather, they point to newspaper comics as a key source of inspiration for the given circumstances of early animation, and one at least as influential as the inherent possibilities of the medium of film. This is borne out by the work of those who, in the words of McCay's famous lament, made animation "not an art, but a trade" (qtd. in Canemaker 199). Early American commercial animation drew its aesthetics, its staging conventions, and its personnel from what used to be referred to as 'the funny papers'. The

animated characters who gained an early foothold in the cinemagoing public's imagination were stars of existing comic strips, or created to fit the pattern established by the stars of comic strips. Bud Fisher's carousing ne-er-do-wells Mutt and Jeff, Frederick Burr Opper's tin-can-hatted hobo Happy Hooligan, and George Herriman's Krazy Kat (among others) enjoyed noteworthy film careers as supplements to their newspaper fame; characters created specifically for animation, such as Colonel Heeza Liar, Bobby Bumps, and Farmer Al Falfa, had animated adventures that made the idea of a crossover into the comics pages of daily newspapers quite a plausible one.

Of the list of comic strip stars and comic-strip-like animated stars I just gave you, the outlier, as usual, is Krazy Kat. This time, though, Krazy's 'outlierliness' comes from something other than George Herriman's vividly oneiric imagination. Krazy is the odd one out this time by virtue of being an anthropomorphism: all the other names on my list are (to borrow a phrase from Nietzsche) human, all too human. Faced with this sobering information, the same hindsight that turns McCay's mosquito and Gertie into iconic figures of early cinema prompts me to ask the question "why?". There's no apparent reason for Krazy's regular concussions via bricks tossed by Ignatz Mouse *not* to have translated to the screen with great effect: McGowan characterizes the recurring 'Krazy + Ignatz = brick to the head' shtick as "an established formula for the movies", albeit one which was largely unexploited by animators (37). There's also no apparent reason why the frequently alcoholic antics of Tad Dorgan's anthropomorphic comic strip dog Judge Rummy didn't give rise to an animated series that lasted longer than the four-year span from 1918 to 1922—the judge's boozy escapades are of a piece with Mutt and Jeff's. The skirt-chasing element of Mutt and Jeff's gadding about *should* have had competition from the self-sabotaging lechery of Jimmy Swinnerton's philandering human/tiger hybrid Mr. Jack. Nothing at all should have stood in the way of Sidney Smith's *Old Doc Yak* making a successful

leap from the comics page to the animated screen: a casual glance at this particular strip reveals situations and gags that look all too familiar to those of us who were raised on a steady diet of Looney Tunes.

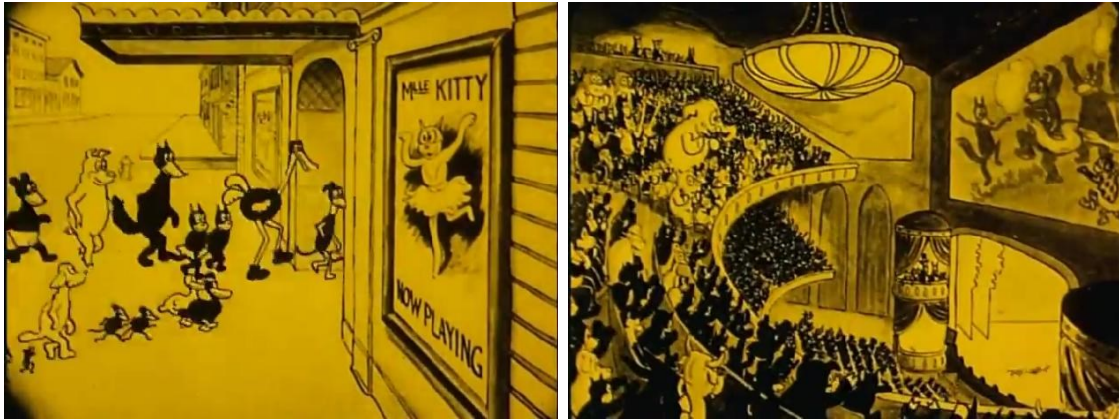


It's also worth mentioning that the world of *Old Doc Yak* is populated with anthropomorphic animals, in a way that makes it look strangely ahead of its time for the pre-World War I era of its newspaper run. Ultimately, it may be a question of timing that answers the “why?” concerning American animation’s slowish adoption of anthropomorphism. The image on below dates from some time after Smith abandoned *Old Doc Yak* in 1917, but, like Smith’s strip, looks for all the world like someone left the cages open at the zoo.



The lone human in the image is one of those made-for-animation characters I've already referred to. Farmer Al Falfa had been a film fixture for over a decade by the 1927 release of *Small Town Sheriff*, the short from which the still on the previous page is taken. He'd moved with his creator Paul Terry from John Randolph Bray's studio when Terry set up shop for himself under the Fables Studio banner in 1920. To say that Terry's cartoons (with or without Farmer Al Falfa) were ubiquitous from then on in is something of an understatement: Crafton remarks with grudging admiration that "'Aesop's Fables', thanks to production shortcuts and little concern for quality or originality, never once missed its weekly release schedule" (*Before* 191).

The 'Aesop' that formed part of the title of the Terry Fables series of animated shorts offers a clue about the series' casting practices. As with Aesop, a goodly proportion of Terry's *dramatis personae* were animals endowed with human characteristics. When he appeared in a Terry Fable, Farmer Al Falfa was not necessarily the only human around, but he and the other humans were generally well outnumbered by the animals. Designed along simple, easily repeated lines (the better to facilitate the grind-'em-out pace of one-a-week deadlines), Terry's animals filled every conceivable role—from the familiar ones their species filled according to human agendas to full-fledged substitutes for the humans of early twentieth century America. In a Terry Fable, a cat or mouse could be everything from a household pet or pest to an acclaimed variety performer entertaining houses packed with animal patrons, and quite often held the liminal status of part-animal foil to Farmer Al Falfa or some other human.



A selection from Paul Terry's menagerie: Mlle. Kitty and her multispecies audience in *Henry's Busted Romance* (1922) (top, L and R); a dog stands guard over ducks in *The Dog and the Thief* (1922) (middle); Farmer Al Falfa and his cat make their own cartoon in *Barnyard Artists* (1928) (bottom).

The proliferation of Terry Fables, and the proliferation of animal characters in them, would have helped to normalize anthropomorphism as an expected feature in American animated shorts. This in turn makes it a little easier to propose a starting point for the period I'm putting under scrutiny. It's made easier still by the emergence of a character who's already been mentioned in these pages, one referred to by McGowan as "the quintessential animated star persona of the silent era" (46)...



...the one and only Felix the Cat.

Crafton places Felix on the cover of *Before Mickey* as an indexical representation of silent-era animation, referring to the cat's silent body of work with the same word used by McGowan—"quintessential" (301). Felix attained indexical status at roughly the same time that Paul Terry's animated animals attained ubiquity—the early 1920s—which certainly makes any animated film that appeared after the inauguration of Warren G. Harding fair game for my analysis.

A member of Harding's administration puts a small-font exclamation point on my chronology. By 1923, Felix had 'made it' sufficiently for his creator to consider him worth the personal attention of Will Hays, former Postmaster General and current president of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America. Otto Messmer could have made Felix audition for a caricature of a studio executive like Thomas H. Ince, or a director like D.W. Griffith in *Felix in Hollywood*, but instead the cat shows off his acting range for a caricature of Hays, the film industry's in-house conscience and head censor. Though it was likely an unconscious choice, having Felix seek the approval of an official whose word could get him banned from the business is a cunning stratagem for asking whether Messmer's cat was fit to stay in motion pictures. In a way, it asks the same question on behalf of all anthropomorphic characters in Hollywood animation.



ANTHROPOMORPHISM IS WHERE YOU FIND IT: MY SOUVENIRS FROM TOONTOWN

I hope I've made it apparent by now that the temporal and conceptual boundaries which determine when Toontown was truly Toontown are a little fuzzy, and have to be traced as much by feeling as by fact. The fact produced by my feeling is along the lines of a travel notebook of Toontown's anthropomorphic neighbourhoods: while making sure to address the full gamut of anthropomorphized beings in studio-era animated shorts, I've concentrated less on categories and degrees of anthropomorphism than on interesting problematics created by specific uses of anthropomorphism as a rhetorical and narrative device.

The first chapter in this notebook, "Rebel Rabbit With A Cause", explores an issue that Elmer Fudd never suspected he was raising the first time he stuck a gun down Bugs Bunny's hole. Bugs considers the hole to be not just his home, but his private property, because he considers himself to be a rights-holding member of the body politic...or, if you prefer, the *bunny* politic. Seeing himself as a loyal stakeholder in American society, he'll go to any lengths to assert, defend and preserve his rights as a citizen while remaining true to his heritage as a rabbit. Not only that, but his attitudes and actions may have struck a chord with many members of the original audiences of his films, who found themselves, like Bugs, having to strike a balance between retaining their own cultural identities and adopting the culture of a broadly-conceived 'America'.

The chapter that follows that is entitled "Ducking Responsibility", and is a case study of a character who will adopt any identity, provided it isn't an identity that others want him to adopt. Unlike Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck sets himself at odds with every expectation that society places

on the citizen-subject. Even as his character evolved from an unbridled zany to a curmudgeonly cynic, Daffy's stance towards what others thought he ought to be doing with his life remained consistent. Never content with staying in one place long enough to be pinned down, he drifted from one game to another and one job to another, constantly skirting the margins of failure while constantly redefining success.

Success is rarely something enjoyed by cats in classic-era cartoons, particularly those cats for whom success is defined by the ability to catch mice. "Working at cat-and-mouse", the third chapter of this study, uses a feline goldbrick named Dodsworth as its initial inspiration. In common with more famous cartoon cats like his Warner stablemate Sylvester, Tom of *Tom and Jerry*, and (occasionally) Felix, Dodsworth finds his worth is measured by both his instrumental and emotional value to a household. For all of them, rodent disposal is a primary occupational task, but it often takes a back seat the emotional labour of being a dutiful and subservient household companion.

A different type of companionship is the subject of the following chapter, "What big roving eyes you have". After letting its gaze settle for a while on Tex Avery's censorship-defying 1943 short *Red Hot Riding Hood*, the narrative lens pans across the series of cartoons which featured Avery's highly sexualized fairy tale heroine and her unexpectedly complex relationship with the anthropomorphized wolf who ineffectually attempts to seduce her. In the process, it also lifts the riding hood off other animated takes on this relationship, and traces the origins of Avery's fascination with this and other fairy tales through what could be termed a not-entirely-non-sexual prepubescent phase.

Another type of hood gets lifted in “Mouse in the Machine”. As this chapter’s subtitle will tell you, this is a look under the hood at anthropomorphism in animated shorts. To be more precise, it’s a look under the hood at some of the implications of anthropomorphizing anything that has a hood to look under, ranging from pure machines to machine/creature hybrids. The investigation isn’t limited to things with moving parts, either: tools, utensils and other simpler forms of technology were frequently anthropomorphized in cartoon shorts, in ways that interrogated their place in the greater human community and foregrounded animation itself as an activity governed by a variety of mechanical contrivances.

Living things return to centre stage in “Ain’t Nature Grand”, a chapter devoted to entities whose lives involve standing in one spot long enough to be anthropomorphized. Of course, once trees, plants, fruits and vegetables get the anthropomorphic cartoon treatment, they’re as mobile as any human: they sing, they dance, and in a way that’s uncomfortably human, they sometimes demonstrate chilling sang-froid when putting members of their own kind to the torch, or handing them over to be processed into foodstuffs. Mind you, not all anthropomorphized plant life has traitorous intentions: sometimes entire ecosystems band together and operate as symbiotic anthropomorphized units.

My final chapter, “Casting Shadows”, takes a step beyond ecosystems to the forces that govern them. Although not alive in any biological sense, wind, rain, and sunlight all have effects upon living matter that invite an anthropomorphic view of their existence. The movement of bodies of water tempts us to view them as bodies first and water second, their actions upon us seemingly the product of determined volition rather than indeterminate fluid dynamics. If anthropomorphized water in animated shorts often seems governed by caprice, anthropomorphized fire often seems governed by spite. No matter how much anthropomorphized

natural phenomena may seem to have it for anthropomorphized animals and human cartoon characters, they're frequently depicted in ways that shift our sympathies towards them, and away from the more properly 'living' characters they bedevil.



I mean, look at this cute little fella from *Red Hot Rangers* (1947). It's hard *not* to root for him...even if his mommy *was* a forest fire.

But it's time I let *you* decide who to root for—Bugs, Daffy, Red Hot Riding Hood's wolfy would-be boyfriend, and/or any of the rest of the anthropomorphisms that grace the pages ahead. So, without any further ado, on to our feature presentation ...

Chapter 1

REBEL RABBIT WITH A CAUSE

Bugs Bunny's struggles for recognition of citizenship rights



I HEAR YOU...
THAT'S KIND OF MORE OF A THING FOR
CHAPTER 4, THOUGH.

I WAS KIND OF HOPING WE'D SEE HIM
IN DRAG AGAIN, PUTTING THE MOVES
ON ELMER FUDD.



The still you see above these words and the one on this section's title page are from a 1949 Bugs Bunny short entitled *Rebel Rabbit*. Described by Joe Adamson as “outrageous”, it features a one-man (or rather, one-rabbit) campaign of terror whose acts of shock and awe include “turning off the water at Niagara Falls...giving Manhattan back to the Indians, cutting Florida adrift, stealing the locks from the Panama Canal, and tying railroad ties [sic] in a Windsor knot” (70). It stands as something of an anomaly in the Bugs Bunny canon, a film in which Bugs is the aggressor, attacking rather than counter-attacking. The sequence from which these two pictures are taken is at the culmination of another bit of *Rebel Rabbit's* uncivil disobedience: Bugs has just finished festooning the Washington Monument with a barber-pole pattern (3:35-3:40).

And yet there's more to this act of vandalism than the simple silly joy of dolling up a piece of public statuary like a giant peppermint stick. The stripes on the newly-painted

monument recall the ones on the American flag, and in a way that was probably unintended, remind us of what Bugs Bunny's rebellion is about. *Rebel Rabbit's* shot heard 'round the world is kind of a trifle: Bugs finds out that other game animals have large bounties on their heads, while he and other rabbits are priced at a measly two cents apiece (0:38-1:14). It doesn't seem like much to make a fuss about, but in a nation where worth is measured in dollars and cents, Bugs has been told he doesn't measure up. To add insult to injury, Bugs hears from no less an authority than the federal Game Commissioner that "rabbits are perfectly harmless" (*Rebel Rabbit* 3:07-3:10). That does it—not only is Bugs devalued in a monetary sense, but his capacity for the kind of red-blooded aggression on which America was founded is considered negligible. What follows is not "deviltry" (*Rebel Rabbit* 4:32) for its own sake, but an enacted Petition of Right in the interest of commanding—or commandeering—due and appropriate respect from authorities deemed to have overstepped their legally constituted bounds.

Seen in this light, Bugs' actions in *Rebel Rabbit* seem a bit less out of character. Injustice is being done, and since it's being done by the institutional heirs of Lexington and Concord, what better way to address and redress it than with a vigilante hit-and-run Minuteman approach? Ethan Allen and the Green Mountain Boys would be proud. As the oft-quoted saying goes, it's not the money, it's the principle of the thing: the principle at stake is whether Bugs (or anybody else) should be considered a second-class citizen as a result of who or what they happen to be. It's simply un-American—Bugs may be a two-cent rabbit, but he's a two-cent *American* rabbit, and Americans stand up for their rights. In Bugs Bunny's case, this means availing himself of the right to use the U.S Postal Service, mailing himself to Washington and airing his grievances, flinging fountain pens around and slamming the glass out of office doors to punctuate his protest (*Rebel Rabbit* 1:14-3:22).

THE BUNNY POLITIC: BUGS' MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY AMERICAN ETHNOSOCIAL CONTEXT

Bugs' predicament in *Rebel Rabbit* would have been familiar to the American cinema audiences of his time. It's one a lot of them had been faced with. Like many recent arrivals to America and their children had been doing for half a century, Bugs is claiming a place in the world that others seem reluctant to concede to him. He demands respect, not by virtue of what he does, what he owns, or who he knows, but by virtue of his sometimes inconvenient existence. In this sense, he's like a refugee, or like one of the host of European immigrants who arrived in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to get their piece of The American Dream and were immediately asked what they'd done to deserve it. Hannah Arendt wasn't writing about America in general or Bugs Bunny in particular, but Bugs is like a lot of the new Americans of his time whose families had lived through a period of statelessness in their travels and had gotten a general sense that they "were welcomed nowhere and could be assimilated nowhere" (*Origins* 267).

Not that Bugs particularly cares about being assimilated. His primary claims are to a specific and narrowly defined notion of the basic rights to person and property: the right not to be molested and the right to a place that's safe from anyone who might still want to molest you. There's a parallel here to a key component of Arendt's conception of rights in a world keen on clawing those rights back from the individual. Property rights are coequal with the right to the integrity of one's person due to a simple and undeniable fact of life: "the body becomes indeed the quintessence of all property because it is the only thing one could not share even if one wanted to" (Arendt, *Human* 112). In addition to this, the rights Bugs claims are ones specific to the unique sense of identity that comes with his particular body: he wants the freedom to enjoy

all the privileges that come with walking like a human, talking like a human, and being smarter in human terms than almost any human he encounters, while having the freedom to live like a rabbit.

This freedom implies the freedom to live, not as a freak or an outsider, but as a fully accepted, unremarkable member of society. The state of grace that Bugs is looking for is the one Arendt describes as “a right to have rights” that is part and parcel with “a right to belong to some kind of organized community” (*Totalitarianism* 296-297). Unfortunately for Bugs, the human communities he finds himself in tend to categorize him in a way that puts him outside their protection. He is (to bastardize Giorgio Agamben) *lepus sacer*, the rabbit “who *may be killed and yet not sacrificed*” (*Homo Sacer* 12). His is the *zoē*, “the realm of bare life...situated at the margins” (Agamben *Homo Sacer* 12) of a world of human and soi-disant human characters that sees him as disposable, a nuisance, fit maybe to occupy a cage as a docile house pet, but more frequently fit for the dinner table or for simple extermination, regardless of the paltry price put on his head.

Agamben’s distinction between modes of life can be seen as a defining theme in *Rebel Rabbit* and many other shorts featuring Bugs Bunny. The *bios*, “the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group” (Agamben *Homo Sacer* 9), that tacitly agreed-upon cluster of citizenship’s rights, freedoms and privileges, typically belongs to everyone *but* Bugs at the start of a Bugs Bunny cartoon. Among those rights claimed by *bios* as its due, the one which impinges most often upon Bugs is the right to hunt—quite frequently, this implies the right to hunt wastefully, for sport rather than for food.

This is how Bugs started his filmic life in 1940, with Elmer Fudd poking a gun through the entranceway of his home in *A Wild Hare*. The fact that Elmer never saw fit to offer an

explanation for precisely why he was “hunting wabbits” (*Wild Hare* 0:45-0:46) adds the insult of being undervalued to the injury (and worse) of being shot. From Elmer’s point of view, his own life is *bios*, but Bugs’ life is *zoē*: therefore, whenever their paths cross, it’s Wabbit Season. Small wonder then, that Bugs Bunny’s main goal in life—to get Elmer and others to recognize the equivalence of his *zoē* and everybody else’s *bios*—parallels what Agamben sees as the central project of modern democracy: each member of the state, no matter how it may be viewed by others, is “constantly trying to transform its own bare life into a way of life” (*Homo Sacer* 13).

**HOLE-HEARTED ACCEPTANCE: THE RIGHTS OF HOME AND PROPERTY, AS
INTERPRETED BY ONE LITTLE GREY RABBIT**

Zoē doesn’t need to be staring down a gun wielded by *bios* to know that the disparity between the two of them is a problem. Wabbit Season or no Wabbit Season, Bugs habitually finds himself in situations where he takes it upon himself to assert his rights. Whether or not anyone—game commissioners, hunters, you name it—considers that these rights are truly his to assert is almost beside the point. His bodily presence alone suffices as an assertion. Bugs never bothers to cite precedent for this position, but Arendt traced its roots back to at least the 17th century: “[John] Locke founded private property on the most privately owned thing there is, “the property [of man] in his own person” ” (*Human* 111).



“Guess who?” “Um...John Wocke?...Bawuch Spinoza?...Fwançwois de wa Wochefoucauld?” This *isn't* how the gag played out in *A Wild Hare* (1940), but Bugs Bunny's actions often seem to be quoting from a venerable tradition of philosophy about what it means to be human and to have human rights.

Other cartoon rabbits don't invite a comparison to the cornerstones of early modern Europe's Edifice of Deep Thoughts, and they certainly don't insist upon their rights as citizens, much less as rabbits. Take Oswald—whether as a prototype for Mickey Mouse in silent Disney cartoons or as the fuzzy-wuzzy little twerp he eventually developed into under Walter Lantz. Rights? He's too busy trying to conform. He's got his head down, doing his best to hold down a decent job—in public transit (in *Trolley Troubles*, 1927), as a Mountie (in *Northwoods*, 1931), as a construction worker (in *Sky Scrappers*, 1928)...the list goes on. When Mr. Oswald goes to Washington in the 1933 short *Confidence*, it's to beg President Roosevelt to do something to make the Great Depression stop, not to harangue him on the defects of the system than led to it in the first place.

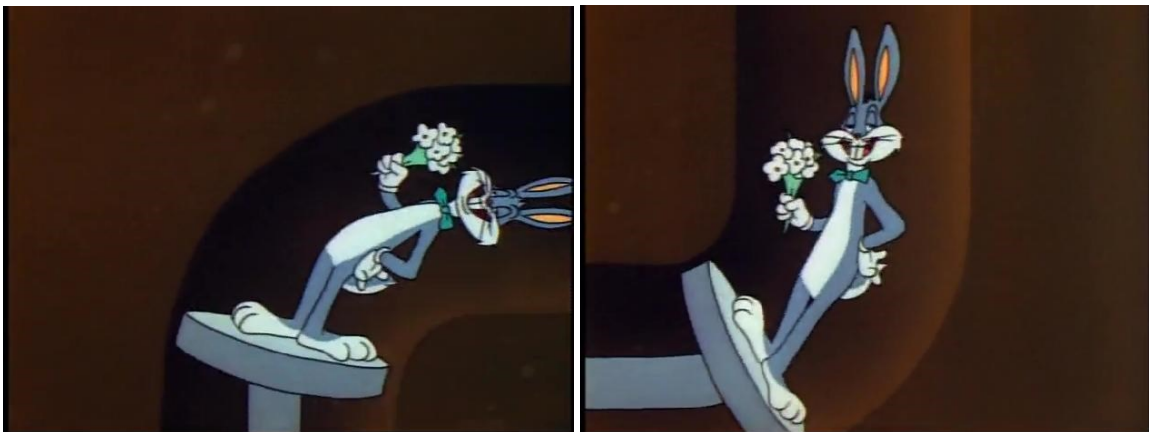
Meanwhile, away from the hustle and bustle of capitalism, cartoon rabbits who made their home in the great outdoors certainly never took a stand for what Bugs does. They may run and hide, or they may play upon the sympathies of the hunter by inventing a fake sob-story about a nonexistent brood of baby bunnies to sentimental musical accompaniment by a rabbit string duo. Both of those strategies are old enough in cartoon terms to have been done by Walt Disney in a 1925 entry in his silent live action/ animation 'Alice' series (*Alice Gets Stung* 0:19-0:45;

1:43-3:15). A different rabbit may pull a stunt later used by Tex Avery's Screwy Squirrel, and give a dog's detached nose a healthy smack, as the quarry of the title characters in the 1932 Van Beuren short *Rabid Hunters* does (3:23-3:27). Yet another rabbit might even do a snake-charmer's routine (with an ethically-sourced snake) to steal Felix the Cat's picnic lunch (*April Maze* 6:47-7:18). None of them makes a federal case of the cash value set on their lives by bureaucrats; none of them ever questions the right of total strangers to invade their home and hearth to disturb, stalk and hunt them.

This is because the concept of 'home and hearth' doesn't seem to exist for creatures such as these. Bugs Bunny is another animal entirely. Laconic though he may often be, his attitude is fiercely territorial, ready to defend not just the space that he inhabits, but the right he has to inhabit that space and use it as he pleases. Bugs differs from most other hunted cartoon animals in one important and defining respect: while the others are generally shown in a natural *habitat*, from the outset of his film career Bugs has had a *home*. This pattern is established even before we see Bugs' face in *A Wild Hare*, when the film is barely a minute old. When Elmer Fudd first encounters him, Bugs is at home—in a rabbit hole—rather than hopping around in a clearing or diving for cover behind a tree (*Wild Hare* 1:01-1:14).

Bugs' home is more than just a burrow dug for temporary convenience in whatever location comes to hand. It is a residence in the human sense of the word, a fixed abode whose owner expects its comforts to have some degree of permanence. To qualify this 'human' element just a little further, it derives its fundamental contours from a pragmatic Lockean sense of private property. Paraphrasing Locke a little more than somewhat, Arendt characterizes this connotation of 'home' as "primarily a place in the world where that which is private can be hidden and protected against the public realm" (*Human* 115).

It didn't take long for Warner directors to drop hints that Bugs' hole contained more than needed protection from the general public than just dirt. At the end of *A Wild Hare*, Bugs exits upstage while imitating the fifer from Archibald Willard's painting *The Spirit of '76*, moving downward into his hole in a fashion that strongly suggests the presence of a conveniently-placed staircase (7:59-8:08). The interior of Bugs' home would not be depicted for some time yet, but further indications were coming that it had more infrastructure than should be expected from such a place. 1941's *The Heckling Hare* shows Bugs rising from his hole while standing atop a platform reminiscent of the freight elevators that were still a common sight on America's downtown sidewalks (2:45-2:47). The ascent is not accompanied by the 'elevator' sound effect which would be a feature of subsequent appearances of this sight gag, but the implication that Bugs has a few mechanical appurtenances tucked away in his home is just as clear without it.



Bugs' custom-built elevator in *Hare Splitter* (1948) is a model of flexibility...on the part of its designer, its materials, and its user.

By the time *Hare Splitter* was released in September of 1948, the idea of Bugs using an elevator to enter and exit his home had become enough of a convention that Friz Freleng's unit took the time to reveal some of the device's workings. This particular version of the elevator employs a very flexible hydraulic lift built to negotiate the intricate twists and turns of Bugs'

subterranean warren before delivering its rider to the surface (1:20-1:28). *Rabbit Seasoning* in 1952 added a further twist: Bugs' hole, previously depicted in the cartoon as unfurnished, develops an elevator to deliver Bugs to the surface dressed in form-fitting drag, the better to tease Elmer Fudd into a desire to do something other than hunt (5:03-5:05). As Bugs arises from the hole seen by Elmer, who is too besotted to question how such a thing could have happened, a question arises concerning him (or her, if you take Elmer's point of view). Do the technological (and other) conveniences of advanced industrial civilization appear in Bugs' home at moments when we most need (for reasons that have nothing to do with Elmer Fudd's infatuation) to view him as more human than animal?

**“WHAT’S THIS? A LETTER—B. BUNNY—FOR ME!”²: ADDRESSING THE
QUESTION OF A RABBIT GETTING ‘HARE MAIL’**

There is another subtle but nonetheless strong clue in the early scenes of *Rabbit Seasoning* that this may be the case. Elmer approaches what turns out to be the front entrance of Bugs' home and characteristically brandishes his shotgun over the opening without evening bothering to notice the mailbox standing beside it (*Rabbit Seasoning* 1:39-1:42). The irony behind this bit of scenic decoration almost isn't an irony at all: the “B. Bunny” of the mailbox assumes (even if certain dimwits with shotguns don't) that he has a sufficient stake in civilized human society to warrant setting out an indicator that he possesses a valid postal address registered with the proper authorities. Such individual is meant to be (or wishes to be) viewed as a citizen with rights, not the target of a hunter's gun.

² These are the words spoken by Bugs as he spies the errant draft notice in *Forward March Hare* (1:31-1:36).

Citizenship can be a mixed blessing, as the 1953 short *Forward March Hare* makes all too clear. Wafted on a cloud of mail truck exhaust, a draft notice for a certain “B. Bonny” floats out of the proper mailbox and into Bugs’ hole—past a mailbox labelled “B. Bunny” (*Forward* 0:53-1:06). Bugs’ exclamation “holy cats—I’ve been drafted!” may express surprise at the timing of his conscription, but his subsequent attempts to fit in with army life and his offer to perform some other service that “a patriotic rabbit could do for his country” once discharged indicate that the circumstance was by no means unexpected or necessarily undesirable³ (*Forward* 1:52-1:54, 6:34-6:37).

Assuming himself to be eligible for selective service marks Bugs Bunny as a creature with a quality not always noted in the offscreen world of humans—an appreciation of both the obligations and the rights conferred by membership in a community. As betokened by his mailbox, one of these complexes of interwoven rights and obligations involves the possession of a fixed abode. Once you place a mailbox beside it, a hole in the ground graduates from the status of a topological feature to an *address*—a place where others can expect to contact you, even if that contact takes place at the business end of an ineptly wielded firearm. However, as the resident of a fixed address rather than a transient hole-digger, Bugs assumes the dual responsibilities of maintaining upkeep on his place of residence, and returning to it on a regular basis.

³ Nor should it have been, given his service record during World War II. After doing fundraising work for the war effort as a civilian in 1942’s *Any Bonds Today?*, Bugs turned in cape and tights for the garb of “a real Superman”—a U.S. Marine—at the close of 1943’s *Super-Rabbit* (7:36-8:03), did a tour of duty in the Pacific theatre of operations in *Bugs Bunny Nips the Nips* (1944), and worked as a sort of covert operative in Germany practising his special brand of psychological warfare on Göring and Hitler in *Herr Meets Hare* (1945).



Even when he lives in the middle of the desert, Bugs Bunny makes it clear that The U.S Postal Service owes him rural free delivery, as demonstrated in this still from *To Hare Is Human* (1956).

THE HOLE HOUSE CATALOG: BUGS BUNNY'S HOME FURNISHINGS AND APPLIANCES

Turning from the mailbox back to the dwelling beside it, *Rabbit Seasoning*'s director Chuck Jones turned the (you should pardon the expression) hole idea of a rabbit having an elevator in his home on its head in the 1956 short *To Hare Is Human*. Bugs' pursuer Wile E. Coyote begins yet another fruitless quest to obtain sustenance by installing an elevator over Bugs' hole as a means of entry (*To Hare* 0:36-0:48). This latest super-genius Coyote gadget (possibly available at the time from the Acme Catalogue) is a booth-like contrivance which unfolds like an accordion, apparently generating its own shaft through a process of visual metonymy. Its destruction by dynamite (*To Hare* 2:05-2:08) does not deter Wile E. from further attempts at home improvement to secure a rabbit dinner. Soon thereafter, he de-accordions a window complete with frame, adjoining wall and curtains outside Bugs' hole and jimmies it to gain entry by what may best be described as the complete and utter reverse of stealth (*To Hare* 2:57-3:02).

Wile E. Coyote needn't have gone to such trouble to remodel the exterior of Bugs' hole. *To Hare Is Human* shows Bugs inhabiting an underground dwelling with a host of modern conveniences and comforts. Those of us who have entertained the idea of toasting carrots for breakfast probably got the idea from seeing Bugs' specially-designed toaster in this short, and we probably got the idea that carrot juice can be made with an orange juice squeezer from the same sequence that features the carrot toaster (*To Hare* 3:21-3:31). If we were thinking of visiting Bugs for a breakfast of juice and toasted carrots and wondered if we could step outside for a nicotine fix afterwards, *Oily Hare* from 1952 lets us know that Bugs has "a cigareet lighter" (6:28-6:33) in his dresser drawer—a concession perhaps to the eventuality that the lighter's non-smoking owner will receive smokers as guests. The dresser is by no means Bugs' only furniture in this short—a background painting of the parlour area of Bugs' hole reveals an easy chair, a throw rug with a Southwest motif, a painting, a framed sampler bearing the motto "Home Sweet Home" and an end table with an electric lamp (*Oily Hare* 0:49-1:04). Presumably this last item implies that Bugs is on the local power grid, because the parlour is far more well-lit than a sunbeam through a rabbit-sized hole would manage even on the brightest day.

Such interior décor is typical of Bugs' lifestyle, and became a more and more prominent feature of the layout and background paintings in Bugs Bunny shorts as the postwar years cross-faded into the Television Age. By 1954, *Baby Buggy Bunny* revealed him to be among America's growing legion of television set owners—as well as the owner of a substantial library of printed matter on a dizzyingly high set of bookshelves (4:45-4:52; 3:33-3:37). That particular short also shows off Bugs' washing machine, a household appliance one can imagine him having owned for quite some time, given the number of covers that tend to be depicted on his bed (*Baby Buggy* 5:38-5:46). The bed is also frequently depicted in a way that establishes it as not merely a

convenience or a possession, but as a signal of prideful property ownership. Bugs' bed in *Forward March Hare* has "B. Bunny" stencilled on it, as does the bed in *To Hare Is Human*. This is *his* bed, in *his* home—to quote Robert Frost, “the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in” (165)...never mind the upkeep on all the stuff you keep there, or the fact that a rabbit with a permanent address is an easier target for hunters and other aggressors (among them utility companies that send bills for the use of toasters, table lamps, and washing machines).



Décor in Early American Rabbit: the interior of Bugs Bunny's home in *Oily Hare*, *To Hare is Human* and *Baby Buggy Bunny*. Among the home safety features in *To Hare Is Human* is a container for a banana peel, labelled "IN CASE OF COYOTE, BREAK GLASS".

The idea of home as a place one must maintain and return to brackets the 1952 Bugs Bunny short *Water, Water Every Hare*. The film begins with both home (designated by yet another mailbox) and homeowner being flooded out: as torrential rains fill Bugs' hole, they lift him still sleeping on his mattress and carry him down a swollen stream (*Every Hare* 1:36-1:44). At cartoon's end, the journey is reversed, with Bugs (asleep again, this time due to the effects of ether accidentally inhaled during a chase in a mad scientist's castle-cum-laboratory) safely deposited back in bed by the same stream that dispossessed him⁴ (*Every Hare* 6:50-6:58). Other than the continued presence of a disconcerting amount of standing water, everything in Bugs' home is as he left it, the forces of nature having returned him to a place which is as much his by natural right as natural instinct.

In contrast to Bugs' attachment to his specific place of residence, a rabbit in our flesh-and-blood world would likely abandon a flooded burrow, perhaps never to return. It's safe to assume that no such rabbit would inform visitors that they had "Moved to Drier Quarters" on a hand-painted sign with a signature to prove the authenticity of both the message and the signer's claim to ownership of the quarters in question, as Bugs has done before the action of 1957's *Bugsy and Mugsy* even begins (0:32-0:43). One of the implications of this message is that Bugs may have more than one legitimate residence, the currently drier one (never mind that it's actually a condemned building) a pied-à-terre where Bugs retains the same residency rights as in his principal dwelling.

This discussion may seem to have gone down both a literal and figurative rabbit hole, but it's done so to emphasize the concept that a fixed residence serves to fix identity, and with it a

⁴ Don't ask how this is possible. Bugs goes downstream to the mad scientist's castle, then returns home downstream *from* the castle...? The disproof of Bugs' hypothesis that "it was only a dream" by the scientist's pet monster, still shrunken from having "reducing oil" poured on him, makes this more a case of a cartoon taking a cavalier approach to the workings of gravity than a case of oneiric logic.

sense of personhood. The strategies and gestures that Bugs uses to upgrade a hole in the ground to the home of B. Bunny, Esquire act implicitly on others and produce counter-actions which confirm the validity of Bugs' claim to a stake in society through property ownership without apparent further justification. Consider the case of Baby Face Finster, alias Ant Hill Harry, Bugs' co-star in *Baby Buggy Bunny*: here, members of the jury, is a hardened criminal whose preferred method of evading capture for armed robbery is to take advantage of his diminutive stature by masquerading as an infant. Mischance (and gravity) may have dropped his latest ill-gotten gains into the hands of Bugs Bunny, but at no time does Finster entertain the notion of simply retrieving the stolen banknotes by force. No—the “kind Rabbit” to whom a letter pinned on Finster is addressed is clearly (for Finster's purposes, at least) a solid enough member of the community to qualify as a not-improbable recipient of a foundling (as impersonated by Finster, of course). It's worth noting as well that the capitalization of “Rabbit” is not a typographical error on my part: that's the way it's written in the letter, and it's not hard to read the capitalization as an attempt to deduce the proper name of the solid citizen Finster aims to hoodwink (*Baby Buggy* 2:00-2:07).

POSSESSION IS NINE-TENTHS OF THE LAW, EVEN IN CARTOONS:

BUGS BUNNY, ACE PROPERTY DISPUTANT

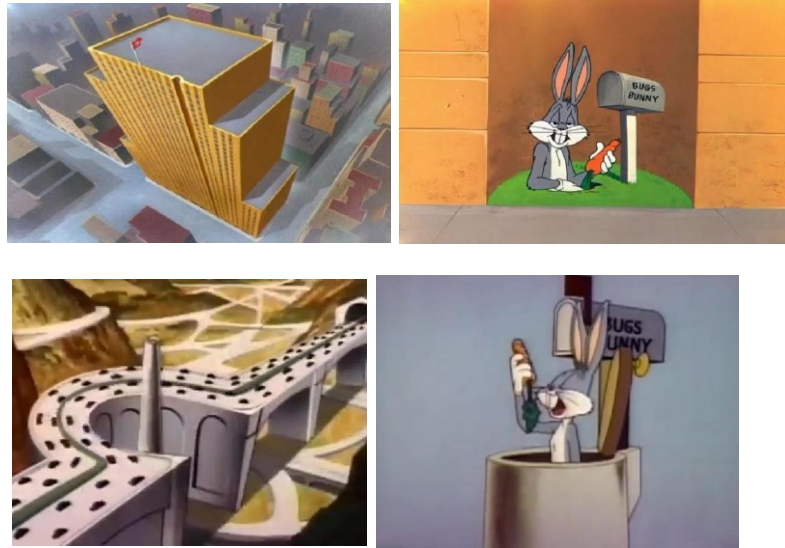
Stating one's rights to occupy real estate and own property does not in and of itself confer those rights. Knowing that saying something rarely makes it so in the eyes of the law, Bugs Bunny typically takes action calculated to establish possession through customary use. Moreover, Bugs will go to any lengths to give performative force to his maxim that “the sanctity

of the American home must be preserved [sic]" (*No Parking Hare* 6:13-6:17). Such an attitude inevitably brings him into conflict with others who are reluctant to grant his little hole in the ground (no matter how well-furnished it may be) the status of 'home', nor its occupant the status of rights-holding homeowner. The version of Bugs' home with a "cigarette lighter" for guests gets covered with an oil derrick in *Oily Hare*: the unnamed Texan petroleum magnate behind this manoeuvre considers Bugs' underground spread as just "a hole out there on my property" whose chief point of interest is that it "ain't a-gushin' oil" (*Oily Hare* 1:30-1:33). The notion that Bugs may enjoy legitimate property rights—including mineral rights—is barely entertained by the jumped-up wildcatter as a serious topic for discussion...except perhaps as an overture to deadly force: "what I've got to say, I'm a-sayin' with lead" (*Oily Hare* 4:27-4:30). At the climax of the film, nature (of a distinctly cartoon variety, and with the help of a significant amount of cartoon "dynamite" [sic]) finds in favour of Bugs' claim, the fruits of its arbitration taking the form of a gusher of carrots (*Oily Hare* 6:38-7:02). While carrots are useful to humans and crude oil would certainly prove of value to a rabbit with a full array of carbon-footprint-enlarging amenities, the spontaneous eruption of Bugs' preferred foodstuff lends significant weight to the idea that the hole (and the land surrounding it) are his property, by virtue of symbolic association.

Nature is not the only law that upholds the property claims of Bugs Bunny, Citizen. In *The Fair-Haired Hare* from 1951, Yosemite Sam builds a ranch house over Bugs' hole. Bugs pushes the ensuing property dispute to "the highest court in the country", which declares Bugs and Sam co-owners of the newly-built house (*Fair-Haired Hare* 3:19-3:46). This partial recognition of Bugs' title to both land and building is (as in *Oily Hare*) extended to fullness with the help of dynamite. When detonated, the explosives which Bugs 'helps' Sam pack into the crawlspace send the house, with Sam in it, sailing through the troposphere. After the shock of

this turn of events wears off, Sam seems a little more sanguine than one might reasonably expect from the occupant of an airborne domicile—his statement “well, whaddaya know—I got a cabin in the sky!” is open to multiple interpretations (*Fair-Haired Hare* 6:54-6:58). Is he being rocketed house and all up to a Cartoon Heaven? Is he confident that cartoon physics, having left him and his house largely intact after the explosion, will set him down safely somewhere else? Whatever the case, Bugs is left behind, securely planted on (and in) terra firma, secure in the knowledge that the terra is once again firmly and exclusively his to consider home.

In case you think Bugs is only equipped to deal with having his property appropriated by individuals, here are two examples to show that he’s equally capable of standing up to opposition that has the full force of corporate and governmental backing. *Homeless Hare* and *No Parking Hare* are variations on the theme of Bugs Bunny vs. City Hall—the city in this case being the ultimate authority granting permits for the construction of an office tower and a freeway, respectively. One thing seems to have escaped the city planners in each case...the sites of the skyscraper and the thoroughfare are already occupied, with title...as far as the titleholder, Bugs Bunny, is concerned. In both films, Bugs’ point of friction with the whims of civic government is a construction worker who dismisses the rabbit’s claim to property ownership by physical intimidation. As many a would-be bully has already discovered, however, Bugs is more than a match for any aggressor when it comes to the efficient application of violence. After a series of skirmishes leaves Bugs on top and the hostile hardhat defeated and demoralized, each cartoon cuts to a quick denouement showing the concessions granted to him by zoning officials and private contractors. In *Homeless Hare*, the skyscraper is remodeled with a semicircular cutout in its facade to accommodate Bugs’ hole (6:38-6:55); the freeway in *No Parking Hare* takes a hairpin jog around the hole (6:04-6:12).



Final Score: Bugs Bunny 2, Eminent Domain 0. These images from *Homeless Hare* (top) and *No Parking Hare* (bottom) show the consequences of using the power of the state to dispossess rabbits who know their rights.

Permit me the slight degree of license necessary to take a sight gag literally and speculate on the amount of money a city would need to keep in reserve to settle the insurance claims of drivers on the freeway in *No Parking Hare*. Any municipal coffers that well-stocked would surely have enough in them for a generous expropriation and relocation to an area with lower traffic. Assuming this to be the case, it is still not surprising that Bugs stuck to his guns and insisted on his right to retain his preferred piece of property. The idea that a violation of the security of a specific residence constitutes a violation not just of personal space but personal identity is a key to understanding how and why Bugs Bunny functions as such an effective human-substitute. By the same token, he also provides a model for understanding the negotiation between personal culture, subculture and dominant culture that continued to shape the experience of European immigrants to America even after the close of World War II. Bugs is a loyal American, but he is a hyphenated American, a Rabbit-American. His difference from his unhyphenated contemporaries such as Elmer Fudd is marked not so much by his appearance as

by his lifestyle choices, among them his choice of where to live and defend. As he put it in *No Parking Hare*, “there ain’t no place like a hole in the ground” (4:11-4:30).

HARE TRANSPLANT: BUGS BUNNY’S ASSIMILATION INTO HUMAN COMMUNITIES

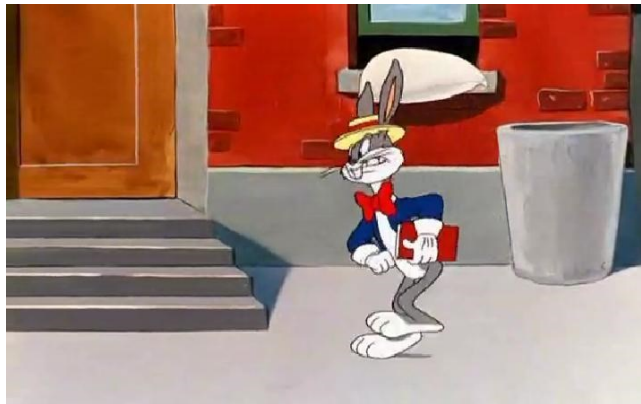
Whatever you or I may think about living in a hole, Bugs’ use of the sophisticated conveniences, furnishings and decor of a mid-twentieth century American middle-class home in a dwelling peculiar to his own species is a testament to the role of choice in his liminal status. Choosing to live in a hole helps Bugs retain the essential identity of a rabbit, while enjoying and insisting on the rights and privileges of a human being—more specifically, the rights and privileges inherent to full American citizenship. In doing so, he continually reasserts and reaffirms the designation from his film debut: he is a *wild* hare, a creature who consistently resists domestication on anything but his own terms.

This is not to say, however, that his terms are never met. In an early short which shows his personality in a transitional phase, *Elmer’s Pet Rabbit* (1941), Bugs has no misgivings about life as a companion animal—what he objects to is the relegation in status that goes along with it. And why shouldn’t he? After enjoying the home-like comforts of a pet store, the outdoor pen that Elmer plunks him in is a bit of a comedown from four solid walls, a roof and central heating. When forced to share a house with Yosemite Sam in *The Fair-Haired Hare*, Bugs opts for the creature comforts (“critter comforts”?) of a bed on the main floor, rather than remain in his extant fully-furnished hole (3:52). *Hot Cross Bunny* (1948) presents Bugs enjoying the full extent of human hospitality, in a hospital bed built for a human, not a rabbit. As a test subject in

a medical research facility, he has scarcely to lift a finger to have his needs seen to: “What a setup—the life of Riley...three meals a day...carrots by the bushel” (*Hot Cross Bunny* 1:04-1:13). Bugs’ status in *Hot Cross Bunny* splits the difference between something that would arouse the ire of PETA and the conditions experienced by the army-volunteered human subjects in Walter Reed’s research into the causes and transmission of yellow fever. He may ultimately be deemed more expendable than a human being, but the fact that his accommodations are considerably better than a cage indicates that he is considered worthy of the same respect as a member of the human race.

No matter where he lives, Citizen Bugs always benefits from the trappings of a life that is fully civilized and fully human; sometimes these trappings are ones of wealth and prestige that few humans can ever hope to attain. *A Hare Grows in Manhattan*, one of several cartoons which mockingly address Bugs Bunny’s status as a film celebrity in the non-fictional world outside the confines of the screen, opens with a slow camera pan across Movie Star Bugs’ “scrumpt-e-ous estay-ete, with its swimming pool, fine statuary, formal garde-ons, and home sweet home”... which as the panning camera comes to rest is revealed to be a hole in the ground (*Hare Grows* 0:56-1:10). This juxtaposition makes it a little difficult to sort out whether the grounds of the estate or Bugs’ hole qualifies as the true architectural folly on the property. Like Henry Ford’s reconstruction of the Dearborn Village of his youth, it serves as a reminder of where Bugs came from⁵, and where he will always reside in a spiritual if not always a physical sense—in short, his true home.

⁵ Where Bugs comes from in this cartoon is in a general sense New York City’s rough-and-tumble East Side, but more specifically and pertinently, a rabbit hole in a window box outside a tenement apartment (*Hare Grows* 1:50-2:12).



Bugs as a member of the Hollywood underground scene (top) in *A Hare Grows in Manhattan*, reminiscing about his misspent youth on the sidewalks of New York (bottom).

Because he likes living in a hole in the ground but at the same time likes to take advantages of the benefits of industrialized civilization, it's necessary for Bugs to insist upon his rights as frequently as he does. By choosing to define himself as a rabbit first and a participant in an industrialized nation-state second, he calls attention to his difference from the rest of the polity, and in so doing calls attention to the need to justify and defend his place as a member of it. As he offers up during an interview with a celebrity reporter in *What's Up, Doc?*, "I knew I was different from the other kids (...) I was a rabbit in a human world [sic]" (1:14-1:24). However, Bugs didn't necessarily *have to be* a rabbit—it's this potential for mutability that signals him as a full anthropomorphism. It also signals the difference between a partially

anthropomorphized animal granted certain abilities and characteristics peculiar to humans and a recognizably human character type dressed up as an animal.

OF FOX AND QUAIL: BUGS BUNNY'S BRIEF IDENTITY CRISIS IN THE EARLY 1940S

The character who became known as Bugs Bunny adopted other animal guises between his July 1940 debut in *A Wild Hare* before his persona and appearance became firmly fixed as a single entity. True to his habit of changing his characters to suit the purposes of his narratives, Tex Avery took the brash wisecracker he had used as a rabbit to outwit a human hunter and dressed him up as another mammal, then as a bird, to outwit a pair of hunting dogs. The first of these outings, *Of Fox and Hounds*, appeared in December of 1940. Strip away the superficial details, and the titular fox is the rabbit from *A Wild Hare*: his voice is identical in all its twangy nasal Dead End Kid tonalities to his predecessor; so is his imperturbable sang-froid. Like his leporine counterpart, the fox employs great economy of effort in dispensing with an antagonist: on three separate occasions in *Of Fox and Hounds*, all he needs to do to send his pursuer plunging over a cliff is to give him a set of complicated and misleading directions.

Even before duping his adversary in what we would recognize today as typical Bugs Bunny fashion, the fox (who, for what it's worth, gives his name as "George") tears Page One out of the Bugs Bunny Playbook. The case of misdirected identity used in *A Wild Hare* to convince Elmer Fudd that the "wabbit" who is giving him a detailed description of a "wabbit" hasn't seen a "wabbit" at all is repeated, with George substituting a fox's bushy tail for a rabbit's fluffy one as a distinguishing feature of the creature who he claims "just passed here" (*Of Fox*

and Hounds 2:12-2:19). A comparison of the two bits reveals some slight differences, but not enough to distinguish them to any great degree from one another:

BUGS. [*pointing to a hole that Elmer has been digging in with his bare hands*] What's up, Doc?

ELMER. Sssh—! There's a wabbit down there, and I'm twyin' to catch him.

BUGS. [*nonchalantly munching on a carrot as Elmer continues to dig*] What do you mean, a "wabbit"?

ELMER. Wabbits! Wabbits! You know, with big wong ears...

BUGS. [*holding his ears out from his head like an airplane propeller*] Oh, like these?

ELMER. Yeah...and a wittle white fwuffy tail.

BUGS. [*turning around and wiggling his little white fluffy tail in Elmer's face*] Like this?

ELMER. Yep. And he hops awound and awound...

BUGS. Oh, like this? [*circumnavigates the clearing in the forest, hopping on all fours*] (*Wild Hare 2:35-3:06*)

WILLOUGHBY [*the hunting dog*]. Say, George, have you seen a fox around here, George?

GEORGE. A fox?

WILLOUGHBY. Yeah-yuh. A lit-tle red one.

GEORGE. About my size?

WILLOUGHBY. Yeah-yuh.

GEORGE: [*holding his tail up for Willoughby to see*] With a long bushy tail?

WILLOUGHBY. [*getting excited*] Yeah-yuh, yeah-yuh.

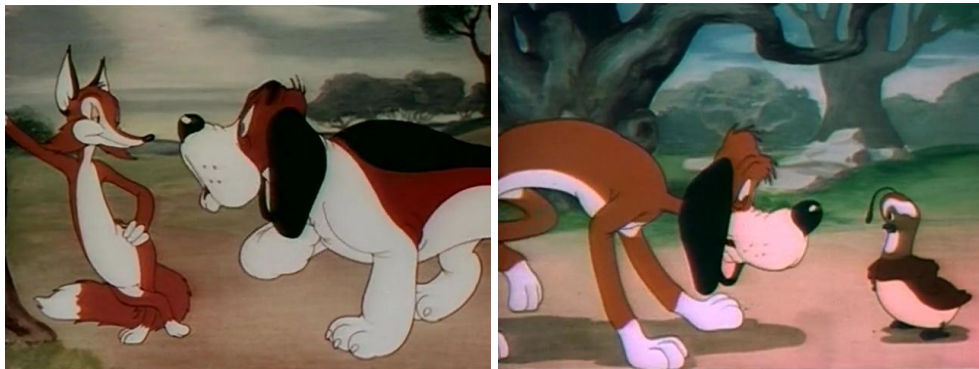
GEORGE. Oh, *him*? He just passed here. (*Of Fox and Hounds 2:06-2:19*)

To further underscore the theme of appearance and behaviour giving conflicting cues about identity, George spends a considerable amount of his screen time in *Of Fox and Hounds* dressed in a dog costume with a rather obvious zipper. He makes no effort while thus disguised to affect a different voice or set of mannerisms, and continues to refer to himself as “George”. It is interesting to note in passing that Bugs would later don an animal costume in *Foxy by Proxy* (1952), dressing up as a fox to make sport with a later and even more obtuse version of the hunting dog from *Of Fox and Hounds*.

To further confuse matters, at the same time as Chuck Jones’ animation unit at Warner’s was working on *Elmer’s Pet Rabbit*, the cartoon which would be Bugs Bunny’s first credited starring vehicle, the Avery unit was reimagining the star of *A Wild Hare* yet again. *The Crackpot Quail* was released on 15 February 1941, six weeks after *Elmer’s Pet Rabbit*. The quail of its title is to all intents and purposes the same character as *A Wild Hare*’s and *Of Fox and Hound*’s, the only discernible difference being a tic which involves blowing the plume atop its head out of its eyes with a whistling sound. The relative smallness of the quail may have been behind a decision to electronically raise the pitch of Mel Blanc’s vocal delivery: higher in register though it may be, it is recognizably the same vocal characterization Blanc used for early versions of Bugs as well as George in *Of Fox and Hounds*. The clincher that establishes *The Crackpot Quail* as another assay at finding a different physical form for the character introduced in *A Wild Hare* is the quail’s choice of vocabulary. “Doc”—a term of address that would become identified as an exclusive trademark of Bugs Bunny—pops out of his beak four times during a fifty-five second span (*Crackpot* 02:18-03:13).

It is the essence rather than the externals which gives Bugs his identity—and it is recognizable as a fully-realized human identity. The animal skin it dresses itself in merely helps

to delineate its presumed role in a society that is entirely human. Bugs is dressed as a bunny perhaps because his being a rabbit gives us more scope to interpret and identify with his place in this society. A rabbit, unlike a fox, is always prey, never predator; a rabbit is also more familiar as a house pet or an experimental test subject. There are other creatures, of course, whose existence makes we humans think about how much we are pursued, put upon, and confined by other humans—from our point of view, for example, a quail is merely something to be hunted, a convenient target for weaponry and subsequently the centrepiece of a hot meal.



What's up, Dog? George the fox and an unnamed quail play the Bugs Bunny role in a typically Bugean battle of wits against an unarmed opponent in *Of Fox and Hounds* and *The Crackpot Quail*.

But what *gestus*, what familiar personalizing bit of stage business do you give an anthropomorphized quail that makes us feel as though we're watching a *person* who has chosen to live their life as a game bird, and is embracing that life without recourse to human props or costuming? Blowing a recalcitrant topknot feather off one's forehead has its gestural limitations: as a means of defining character, it soon defines the character in question as frivolous and slightly annoying. Put a carrot in an anthropomorphized rabbit's gloved hand, though, and you have a prop appropriate not just to such a person's adopted non-human species, but one which acts manifestly as a substitute for a prop used by a familiar human character type. 'Character' in this sense functions on more than one symbolic level, indicating personages found in the

performing arts as well as in real life. Bugs' carrot stands in for the cigar used by many a vaudevillian to punctuate and guide the rhythms of their routines: contemplative chomping on a root vegetable functions as a substitute for Groucho Marx's quick puffs while considering his next wisecrack, or George Burns' smoky luftpauses while figuring out a safe question to ask Gracie Allen. It's something we take for granted now, but imagine an alternative to this which appeared in *Of Fox and Hounds*: a fox in a dog costume taking a drag on a cigarette (5:03-5:11).



RABBIT'S KIN: BUGS BUNNY'S ANTECEDENTS IN FOLKLORE

The idea that a character in an animated cartoon can possess an essence of personhood that transcends its superficial appearance raises an additional question. To what extent does this appearance act as a determinant of an implied essence, in the sense that it creates a set of expectations about this essence for an audience? Viewed in this way, Bugs furnishes an instructive case study, since his outward contours play off a constellation of contrasting expectations about what these contours represent.

A rabbit, in the folkloric tradition familiar to audiences of the first Bugs Bunny cartoons, is a polyvalent figure, a wild card long before it became *A Wild Hare*. “The Tortoise and the Hare” shows a boastful, lazy rabbit, but a less familiar Aesop fable displays a creature with a more cautious and circumspect nature. “The Hare Afraid of His Ears” presents a situation with parallels to our world of displaced refugees and identity politics: all animals with horns represent a threat to a ruling lion who orders them banished from his kingdom. Rabbits (or hares, or coney for that matter) have no horns, but they do have one distinguishing feature that may get them lumped in with the undesirables. This particular Aesop hare explains that his would-be tormentor the lion “will certainly make out that my ears are horns, no matter what I say” (“The Hare & His Ears”).

This is a rabbit seen in much the same way by its potential persecutors as Bugs Bunny is seen by other characters: an outsider who can be persecuted by virtue of its difference. Like Bugs, The Hare Afraid of His Ears is aware of the differences that make it a potential target. Another aspect seen in folkloric rabbits complements and runs counter to the wariness of Aesop's fearful hare. In *The Gift of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Du Bois recounted a version of one of the Br'er Rabbit stories which have passed into American folk heritage from West African cultures:

“ ‘Do Buh Wolf, bun me: broke me neck, but don't trow me on de brier patch.’ [...] De minnit Buh Rabbit drap in de brier patch, eh cock up eh tail, eh jump, an holler back to Buh Wolf: ‘Good bye, Budder! Dis de place me mammy fotch me up--dis de place me mammy fotch me up.’ An’ eh gone before Buh Wolf kin ketch um. Buh Rabbit too scheemy.” (163-164)

The 'schemy' Bugs Bunny has an antebellum southern cousin, but also a kindred spirit when it comes to understanding how to use difference to one's advantage. Like Br'er Rabbit, Bugs has a home peculiar to himself and to his species; both of them also understand that this home and the lifestyle it imparts are the best safeguards against assimilation or annihilation by a powerful aggressor.

All the same, Bugs takes things one step further than his two folkloric counterparts. Awareness of difference and retention of a unique way of life are tools for survival: insistence on a share of the life of a greater community while still enjoying one's differences is a play for the power and authority that are accompanied by human rights.

Although they were more or less woven into the American cultural framework by 1940, such depictions of rabbits should not be seen as specific inspirations for Bugs Bunny. Tex Avery in fact took pains to create a personal cultural context of his own for the creation of the character, citing the brash devil-may-care behaviour sometimes displayed by jackrabbits in his native Texas as the seed that eventually brought Bugs into being. If Avery had gotten his way (so one version of the story goes), Bugs would have been christened under a different name:

Jack Rabbit, or Jack E. Rabbit, was the personal choice of Tex Avery himself, since he had spent so much time hunting jackrabbits and, as he put it, "I thought it would please my Texas friends."
(Adamson 58).

For his part, Chuck Jones was wont to define Bugs' essence along more human dimensions. Under Jones' directorial hand, Bugs manifested himself as

a character with the spicy, somewhat erudite introspection of a Professor Higgins, who, when nettled or threatened, would respond with the swagger of D'Artagnan as played by Errol Flynn, with the quick-witted articulateness of Dorothy Parker. (211)

PLAYING AGAINST TYPE: WHEN IS BUGS BUNNY *NOT* BUGS BUNNY?

Coloured as they inevitably are by hindsight, none of these recollections in and of themselves do more than hint at how Bugs Bunny came to be. What they do in a more definitive sense is to demonstrate how versatile a cartooned rabbit can be as a vessel for pouring a personality into. One objection arises almost by necessity from this statement. What if you pour a different personality into that same vessel—in other words, what if something that *looks like* Bugs Bunny doesn't *act like* Bugs Bunny? Here's where a twenty-first century perspective can create a stop in the mind. The name, image, and onscreen activities of Bugs Bunny are such a familiar part of pop culture that they generate preconceived notions of identity similar to those generated around a well-known human film actor who becomes familiar for a particular style of acting or type of role. McGowan has recently explored this idea in *Animated Personalities*, arguing that just as “almost any element of an actor's persona, lifestyle, and even body could be substituted, reconstructed or fabricated”, the pre-constructed, prefabricated and frequently substituted elements of cartoon characters make them fair game to be examined in the same light as flesh-and-blood film performers (3).

The tendency when elevating a performance persona, animated or otherwise, to any level of stardom is to look for moments and roles which define by typifying, and to create a composite portrait which is not only typical of the individual in question, but also indicative of an essential nature which exists independent of any specific performance. Interrogating popular and critical appreciations of the development of Buster Keaton's film persona, Peter Kramer argued that their inherent essentialism overlooks the influence of external factors and individual heuristics, and creates the misconception that "Keaton's fundamental artistic vision is seen to be rooted in his unique personality, which is fixed at an early age" (192).

There is a similar essentialism underlying 'our' common view of Bugs Bunny. Eight decades of exposure on movie, TV and computer screens, in advertising and via a host of licensed (and unlicensed) merchandise have worked to create rough guidelines concerning what to expect from the world's most famous 'wascally wabbit'. Any depiction of Bugs without rascality, for example, seems as out of place as Buster Keaton beaming broadly under his familiar porkpie hat. Yet, as Kramer notes (191-3 *passim*), Buster *did* smile onscreen more often than collective memory gives him credit for, just as Bugs wound up bested intellectually in a handful of shorts. Chuck Jones echoes a commonplace view by singling out an early Bugs Bunny outing, *Tortoise Beats Hare* (1941), as an example where a director (in this case, Tex Avery) "forgot what Bugs was all about" and allowed his starring rabbit to be outwitted (198). Bugs' adversary in this picture, the phlegmatic Cecil Turtle, proved more than a match for him on two further occasions which explored the same Aesop-fable-racing theme—Bob Clampett's 1943 short *Tortoise Wins by a Hare* and Friz Freleng's 1947 short *Rabbit Transit*. Even so, such incidents seem as out of place as the Tang and Kool-Aid TV commercials from the 1960s in which Daffy Duck and Elmer Fudd prove cleverer than Bugs...or as out of place as Buster

Keaton smiling (“Tang”; “Kool-Aid”). It’s as easy for us to forget that Bugs is a series of filmed drawings as it is to forget that Buster was a film studio hireling, and read deviations from their characteristic onscreen behaviour as anomalies which can be attributed to “outside interference” (Kramer 191).



Bugs Bunny takes umbrage at being upstaged by his co-star Cecil Turtle in *Tortoise Beats Hare*. The two would be paired twice more, but any dynamic which relied on Bugs acting like a ‘dumb bunny’ made them an unsustainable team.

Yet Keaton appeared in costumes other than the porkpie hat and slapshoes which characterize his contemporary public imagery, and Bugs Bunny (or something as much like him as anything was at the time) strode out on screen clad as a fox and then a quail. He also made an appearance as something much less like Bugs Bunny than either of those experiments, and much less so than at any other stage of “a period of wild awkwardness [during the early and mid-1940s] before settling into the self-contained studied attitudes peculiar to him” (Jones 200). What’s more, he did so while starring for the first time under his own name.

Elmer's Pet Rabbit announces itself as a picture "Featuring Bugs Bunny" in a title card before the main action begins. For all audiences of early 1941 knew, what they watched from then on in was an elaboration on the rabbit of *A Wild Hare*, and a rough template for a character whose continuing evolution would be based on the key features of "a personality fixed at an early age"...insofar as cartoon characters can be said to age at all. Elements of the personality of *A Wild Hare's* title character certainly are present: Bugs succeeds by being far quicker on his feet (literally and metaphorically) than Elmer, rendering the question of whether he can ditch the rough shelter of an outdoor rabbit hutch for the comforts of four walls and a roof virtually academic. As in *A Wild Hare*, he's willing to overplay the consequences of an adversary's actions to gain a tactical advantage: in the first cartoon, Bugs fakes death by gunshot (*Wild Hare* 6:19-6:58); in *Elmer's Pet Rabbit*, he simulates drowning in a bathtub (*Pet Rabbit* 5:23-5:44). Bugs' generally understated performance through movement and gesture also invites comparisons with his previous screen outing (and stands in stark contrast with his studio stablemate Daffy Duck); only the absence of prominent buck teeth marks the superficial and attitudinal elements of his persona as being different in any significant manner from his debut appearance.

One more thing is missing from Bugs' mouth in *Elmer's Pet Rabbit*, though, and its absence carries a significance that operates more than just in retrospect. Bugs' voice is different, and with it, his whole mode of verbal expression, and along with that something of his sense of self. It's not to all intents and purposes a new voice, either, but a modification of an old one, a toning-down of a voice used by a rabbit in *Porky's Hare Hunt* (1938), *Hare-um Scare-um* (1939) and *Elmer's Candid Camera* (1940). While no longer as similar to either Edgar Bergen's rube ventriloquist's dummy Mortimer Snerd or to Disney's Goofy as in those other films (Adamson

51), the voice still retains a distinctly rural flavour. This son-of-the-soil sound has none of the archly mocking tone that slices into the eardrums when even a fox in a dog costume or a quail having a bad hair day use the more familiar ‘Bugs Bunny’ voice.

The critical and emotional distance which accompany mockery are likewise absent from this first screen-credited version of Bugs. The self-serving cast of his complaints about being penned up in the hutch seem to indicate that he hasn’t stepped far enough back from his situation to perceive it as one of the two predicaments in which Bugs typically finds himself: a threat to life and limb or an intellectual challenge (*Pet Rabbit* 2:13-2:59). It’s much more the latter than the former, but this particular beta-testing of Bugs reads it as an affront, a pure and simple matter of pride and dignity. Other than the low cunning of faked drowning, the Bugs of *Elmer’s Pet Rabbit* doesn’t really use his intellect at all, opting for fleetness of foot over fleetness of thought. Chased out of the house by Elmer in a blur with a furniture-sucking slipstream, he’s back in Elmer’s bed and handing out verbal abuse by the time Elmer returns to turn on the bedroom light (*Pet Rabbit* 7:16-7:37). It’s hard to imagine this slow-talking partially reconstructed bumpkin saying “think fast, rabbit”, as Bugs does in *Water, Water Every Hare* (3:43-3:45) and coming up with a thought at any speed, let alone fast.

RABBITS, RIGHTS AND REDRESS: A SUMMING-UP OF SORTS

There is, however, one moment in *Elmer’s Pet Rabbit* that should give the viewer pause, because it serves notice for all of Bugs’ future conflicts with human society. After Elmer deposits Bugs in the backyard hutch, he places a basket full of carrots, celery, lettuce and other vegetables in front of him. Informed that the basket contains his dinner, Bugs’ riposte is succinct

and impolite: “What do you think I am, a rabbit?” (*Pet Rabbit* 2:33-2:35). It may be true that Bugs has been brought home in a cardboard box from a pet store advertising him in a window display as a “rabbit”, and on top of that, a “house-broken” one (*Pet Rabbit* 0:50-0:53). However, this rabbit has a little house-breaking of his own to do: once you get him to your house, he’s going to break it to you that he has the same rights as any human, and that one of those rights is the right to demand a proper human way of life.

In the final reckoning, respect is always the main issue for Bugs Bunny: his goal is simply to prove that he’s “worth more than mangy old foxes and bears and stuff” —and certainly worth as much as any rightsholding human being (*Rebel Rabbit* 1:03-1:06). The only animal that he ever wants to be considered as is a political animal—a creature who by Agamben’s reckoning exists to put *zoē* and *bios* in constant dialogue with one another, a “living being who, in language, separates and opposes himself to his own bare life and, at the same time, maintains himself in relation to that bare life in an inclusive exclusion” (*Homo Sacer* 12).

If that idea seems to contain a certain degree of internal contradiction, well, so does Bugs Bunny, doesn’t he, Doc? Something about Bugs does rather more than transcend what it means to be a rabbit, or a human, or a humanized rabbit, or even a rabbitized human: while the whole confusing question ties itself in knots, the essence of Bugs Bunny stands off to one side and watches, casting a sidelong half-lidded eyeroll at us and crunching on a carrot. Bugs never commits to any political struggle by committing to its implied rules of engagement. He commits to it by his *presence*, pure and simple. He’s here; he’s got long ears; get used to it.

Being there because he chooses to be there, and staying there because he’s not keen on anyone telling where he can and cannot be, is what Bugs is all about. That basic fact of life—life

as defined by *zoē, bios* or what have you—applies equally whether Bugs is faced with authorities with pedigrees dating back to the Declaration of Independence, or ones which had yet to be hemmed in by Magna Carta. Drop him into the Merrie Olde England of King John’s time, and he’d send anyone keen on asserting their absolute authority running straight to Runnymede.

That’s what happened in the 1949 short *Rabbit Hood*, at any rate. Faced with imprisonment and torture by the Sheriff of Nottingham, Bugs deploys a diversionary tactic which also functions as a policy statement. He makes like the Royal Rose Garden is actually *his* property, and proceeds to sell off a parcel of the land to the Sheriff (*Rabbit Hood* 3:15-4:00). His sales pitch leads off with a question that can be taken to refer to himself and his entire way of life: “you mean to say that dis ground is better than dat ground over dere?” (*Rabbit Hood* 3:10-3:13). Any piece of ground where Bugs has dug his hole is just as good as any other piece of ground, Bugs is as good as anyone else, and his choice to live a life that combines and celebrates the best and most useful parts of living like a human and living like a rabbit is as good as any other choice. Bugs Bunny is not about to wait for Robin Hood to show up to defend his rights for him. As soon as Bugs shows up, whether it be in medieval Nottinghamshire, a clearing in the woods, or the concrete jungle, Clause 40 of Magna Carta is in force: “to no one deny or delay right or justice.” (Davis).



Bugs is about to turn real estate into surreal estate, and turn the tables on a bewildered Sheriff of Nottingham in *Rabbit Hood* (1949).

None of this should come as a surprise to anybody. Even though Bugs “never studied law” (*High-Diving Hare* 7:20-7:21), he can quote from precedent. When he says “after all, a man’s home *is* his castle” (*Homeless Hare* 6:51-6:54), he’s paraphrasing Sir Edward Coke, the seventeenth century constitutional lawyer who was responsible for refining the relationship between the individual and the sovereign state in the 1628 Petition of Right that I alluded to at the beginning of this essay. There’s more than just a legalistic bromide linking Bugs and those who were attempting to hem in the absolutist impulses of Stuart monarchs. The rebellion that Coke, Bugs Bunny, and other like-minded individuals espouse is a reaction against extensions and abuses of state power (in all forms) at the expense of the lone subject. When Chuck Jones retroactively codifies this reactive stance as a “*Golden Rule*. Bugs must always be provoked” (211), it gives shape to his personal director’s vision of “Bugs Bunny as a “counter-revolutionary” ” (Schneider 100), but it does something else as well. It expresses an attitude that was present (if unstated) right from *A Wild Hare*. “Hunting wabbits” is an activity sanctioned by the state—licensed, with a specific season—but for one little grey rabbit, both the activity and the sanction are unjust.

When Bugs Bunny rebels, it’s not just to vent frustration, it’s to change the balance of power, in ways that give equal weight to inclusion and difference. His is a democratizing project—if you’ll permit me one more play on words, a democ-*rabbit*-izing project—conceived along the same lines as the way Agamben conceives the post-industrial age’s own efforts to broaden its conception of political stakeholding: “modern democracy presents itself from the beginning as a vindication and liberation of *zoē*, and that it is constantly trying to transform its own bare life into a way of life and to find, so to speak, the *bios* of *zoē*” (*Homo Sacer* 13). Even in the instances in which Bugs’ efforts to vindicate and liberate his own *zoē* backfire, as they do

in *Rebel Rabbit* when the price on his head skyrockets from two cents to a million dollars (5:47), the impulse behind it is to curtail the arbitrary exercise of sovereign power over individual subjects. In Washington, Sherwood Forest, or anywhere else he finds himself, his prime goal is, as Edward Coke expressed it in the Parliament of the Stuart monarchs, “that we may live under a law and not other men’s discretions” (1231). Law or no law, the only discretion Bugs Bunny ever wants to live under is the discretion to live underground, wherever and however he likes.



Bugs takes a stand to defend “me native soil” in *Bunker Hill Bunny* (1950). After all he did to help George Washington in this short, I guess he can put all the paint he wants to on the man’s monument.

Chapter 2

DUCKING RESPONSIBILITY

Daffy vs. the obligations of the good citizen



ROUGHLY...
MINUS A CHEAP BOTTLE OF SCOTCH
AND AN EVEN CHEAPER PAIR OF
BRASS KNUCKLES.

SO, IS THIS HOW YOUR NEGOTIATIONS
TO GET US INTO THIS DISSERTATION
WENT?



“I kind of stand out in a crowd, don’t I?” is how Daffy Duck introduces himself to the audience as the 1944 short *Duck Soup to Nuts* opens (0:30-0:32). The crowd he’s standing out in isn’t standing in the literal sense of the word, nor is he—he’s among a flock of mallards pausing mid-migration to paddle in a lake. The other ducks around Daffy aren’t anthropomorphic in the least: they look for all the world like extras from a deleted water ballet scene from *Bambi*, or some such other Disneyesque exercise in mimetic high realism for its own sake. Anything with even a smidgen of personality would stand out in company like that, much less anything with a personality like Daffy Duck’s.

Standing out in a crowd reveals not just Daffy as a duck with a difference among other ducks, but also the paradox which governs Daffy’s existence. What makes him distinct from other ducks also makes him a distinctly easier target. This is a distinctly daffy thing for a duck to be, but the distinct form of this daffiness is precisely what makes Daffy harder to pin down, not only with gunfire, but in the conceptual sense as well.

This is something that was inherent to the character from his first appearance, in Tex Avery's 1937 Warner Brothers short *Porky's Duck Hunt*. Apparently shot down in flight, the as-yet-unnamed duck turns the situation on its head by retrieving Porky Pig's hunting dog and flinging him on to the shore. Porky's nonplussed response, "that wasn't in the script" says everything that audiences would come to know—or need to know—about Daffy Duck (*Porky's Duck Hunt* 5:15-5:17).



Tonight, we improvise: at this moment in *Porky's Duck Hunt*, Daffy Duck's film career is less than thirty seconds old, and he's already ad-libbing.

Scripts are for other ducks, and for other people. The very defining essence of Daffy Duck is that it's hard to define an essence for him: whatever role he's given to play, in whatever social, political or evolutionary script, he denies its power in one of three ways. He denies it by interpolating irrelevant details into his performance; he denies it by reinterpreting his role in such a way as to alter its significance in the script; and he denies the role in a basic and categorical sense by refusing outright to play it. A duck retrieving a retriever sent to retrieve a duck does all of these at once.

It's more than mere perversity for Daffy to act differently: it's a question of survival. Daffy stands out for the same reason that certain brightly-coloured insects do: as a warning that he may pose a threat—and to more than just your hunting dog. Daffy is a threat to what your hunting dog represents: to your plans, to your sense that there's an ordered hierarchy in nature that allows you to hunt ducks without getting such guff, to your sanity and to your sense of self.

And—because Daffy stands out by talking and by using a pair of very un-ducklike hands with opposable thumbs, it seems un-daffily logical that he should expand his expand his field of operations from the margins of the marsh, enter a world defined by the social scripts of the human race, and proceed to steal the show by gatecrashing it. The irony is that Daffy offers tantalizing flashes of abilities to indicate that he'd be more than successful enough at any role he played straight if he chose to do so. Any duck with the moxie to retrieve a retriever likely has it in him to evade retrieval by conventional means. And yet Daffy characteristically chooses to opt out of any role that seems predetermined for him. It's just as true when the determinants of the role are social as it is when they are biological. Daffy's choice has to be one chosen *by* him, not *for* him, and the main choice he wants is the choice to be different, to stand out.

In *Duck Soup to Nuts*, the role chosen for Daffy is the same one as in *Porky's Duck Hunt*: feathered target. The role chosen *by* Daffy is the starring role in a seven-minute cartoon. That's why Daffy sees no point in engaging any of his *trompe l'oeil* temporary neighbours in conversation once he's done presenting his credentials to us: he knows that he's destined for greater things than them. “You're not blasting at no ordinary everyday meat-on-the-table duck,” he explains, after slapping away a shotgun wielded by Porky Pig, “I'm gifted. I'm just slopping over with talent”; as evidence of this, he divulges that “I gotta contract with Warner Brothers” (*Duck Soup to Nuts* 1:02-1:28).



Daffy presenting the evidence of his place in the showbiz hierarchy in *Duck Soup to Nuts*. Doubtless this contract has a “Porky’s Duck Hunt” clause allowing him to ad lib at will.

Now, Porky *also* has a contract with Warner Brothers—a contract that Daffy tricked him into tearing up in 1940’s *You Ought to Be in Pictures*—and he should perhaps recognize that his status as a Warner contract player is probably the only reason he happens to be out hunting ducks in this picture. As a foil for Daffy, any schmuck with a gun will do. It can be Porky, it can be Elmer Fudd, it can even be a caricatured live-action film actor (character player Victor Moore, who also supplied his own voice track in 1945’s *Ain’t That Ducky*). As long as they’re essentially unassertive and implausibly heavily armed, it’s close enough for jazz. But that’s beside the point. The point is—and since Daffy’s modus operandi centres on getting his adversary to forget what the point was, it can be hard to stick to the point...what *was* the point I was getting at, anyway? Now he’s got *me* doing it. Move over, Victor Moore.

Ah, yes...the *point*. The point is that...well, what’s a highly articulate drake with a steady job in the movies doing flapping around with a bunch of “ordinary everyday meat-on-the-table ducks”? Is he slumming (or as Daffy would juicily lisp it, “thlumming”)? He doesn’t seem much

interested in the company of these particular members of own species. When it comes right down to it, what he seems most interested in is setting himself apart from them. What's more, he sets himself apart from them in ways that don't elevate his status, but instead problematize it and make it ambiguous, liminal and marginal. Yes, working in the movies has a tinge of glamour to it, but it's a here-today-gone-tomorrow what-have-you-done-for-me-lately existence, as precarious as working in a fast food joint, at the mercy not only of a budget's but a box office's bottom line, and moreover the whims of casting agents and directors. There has to be an easier and more respectable way to prove that you're not an ordinary everyday meat-on-the-table duck. Why not claim to be an accountant, and offer to do Porky's taxes? ("Thpeech therapy for that stutter is deductible, butterball," he might have said...although he *does* offer Porky a tax loophole in *Cracked Quack*, so balancing the books is something he's capable of in theory, if the need arises.)

ON THE OUTSIDE LOOKING FOR A WAY OUT: DAFFY'S LOVE-HATE RELATIONSHIP WITH SOCIAL STATUS



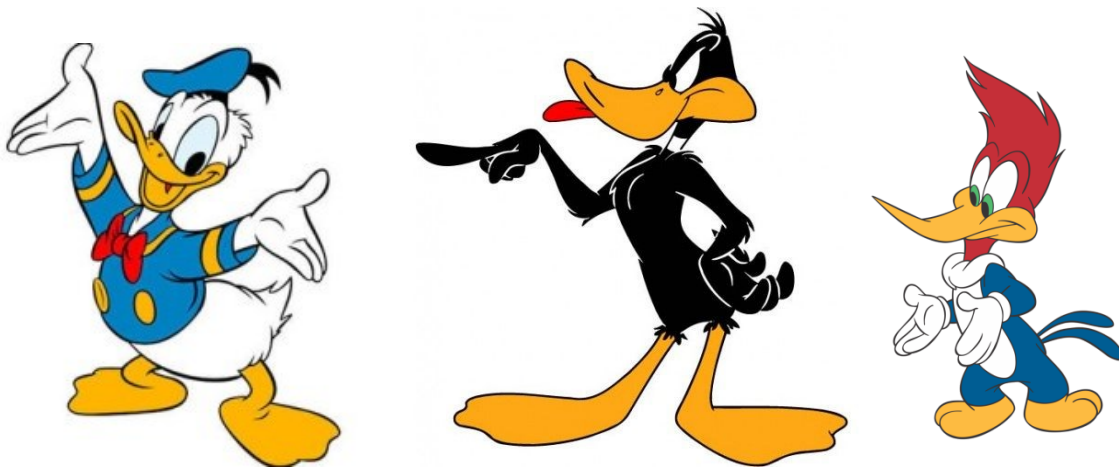
Daffy Duck seems capable of a lot of things, but finds himself marginalized so often that it invites the conclusion that this is how he *prefers* to be. Given a choice between being good at

something that comes easily to him so he can fit in, and being *nearly* good at something difficult and winding up on the outs, he'll take out over in nine times out of ten. The tenth time he'll try to find what appears to be the easy way in, find out it's harder than it looks, and wind up right outside again. To take an example from a cartoon I just mentioned, *Cracked Quack* (1952) begins with Daffy on the outside looking in, literally as well as figuratively, mistaking a stuffed duck he sees through a window in Porky's house for a live fellow traveller who's found a way to enjoy warmth and comfort without the effort of flying south (1:08-1:15). Discovering the true nature of things should deter Daffy, but instead it gives him an opportunity to use all those acting skills that landed him a contract at Warner's. There's no Oscar for Best Performance by a Live Duck Impersonating a Stuffed One, and the rewards of being stuffed full of cotton and plopped on a mantelpiece—Daffy's eventual ignominious fate at the hands of a preoccupied and unwitting Porky—are debatable at best. He may be inside for good, but in order to do so he has submitted to having the ultimate outsider status imposed on him—that of an inanimate object. Even given the flexibility of ontological boundaries in the cartoon world, this constitutes a definite comedown for him.

To further complicate matters, *Cracked Quack* ends in a way that a handful of other Daffy Duck cartoons end, going all the way back to the character's 1937 debut in *Porky's Duck Hunt*. A brace of ducks, all of them identical to Daffy, see the hastily-taxidermed Daffy through Porky's window, and get the same mistaken impression as Daffy did at the beginning of the cartoon (6:07-6:28). It's a variation on the idea underlying a gag near the end of *Porky's Duck Hunt*, where a flock of ducks follows Porky home from his failed day's hunting to taunt him by doing aerial acrobatics (8:03-8:15). The common thread is that Daffy is not alone among his kind in possessing an eccentric blend of low cunning, delusional thinking and situationally

inappropriate affective behaviour. Cases like this imply that all ducks who are not upper-case Daffy are lower-case daffy, but they imply something deeper besides that. The daffiness is an aspect of and a justification for the marginalization of ducks among cartoon anthropomorphisms in cartoons like this, rendering them unfit for the company of self-respecting animal folk, but fit to be (in spite of Daffy's protestations) meat on the table.

ANTHROPOLOGY BY WAY OF ORNITHOLOGY: DAFFY VS. A COUPLE OF OTHER STRANGE BIRDS



Birds of a daffy feather don't always flock together: there are plenty of cartoons where Daffy is the only duck around. Leaving aside the occasions where he's portrayed as a family pet, a resident of a barnyard, or a lone hunted duck, there's no apparent reason for Daffy to be marginalized or an outsider solely on the basis of his species or personality. I could go the facile route, and say "look at Donald, for example", but the Disney version of American society is conceived along vastly different lines from the one in Looney Tunes and Merrie Melodies. While Donald Duck spent the early stages of his career as an out-and-out troublemaker (a quality he never shed entirely), he was never a marginal member of society—nor could he be, given that

Disney's fictional societies tend to equate social and economic marginality with out-and-out villainy.

This isn't to say that Donald rolls up the sleeves of his sailor suit and unprotestingly buckles down to the type of Protestant Work Ethic-informed sweat-of-the brow toil that underpins the Disney vision of mid-twentieth century Middle America. He is, on screen and in the comic books analyzed by Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart, "an inveterate slacker", but the stakes of slacking for Donald's workplaces are virtually nil in any permanent sense (71). Dorfman and Mattelart's post-colonial reading of the Disney ethos in *Para Leer al Pato Donald (How to Read Donald Duck)* reveals Donald to be living in a combination of a worker's paradise and a fool's paradise: "there is never any question of need on Donald's part. He never has any problems with the rent, the electricity bill, food or clothing. On the contrary, without so much as a dollar to his name, he is always buying" (70). Granted, this is a description of a Donald Duck who talks in speech balloons rather than unintelligible quacking noises, but Donald's cinematic instantiation scarcely has to confront scarcity any more than his print counterpart. No matter which medium you encounter it in, the Disney macro-economy is "a world where jobs abound. Getting a job is no problem since the supply of them is far in excess of demand, just as, in Disney, consumption exceeds production" (Dorfman and Mattelart 71).

Donald and Daffy belong to the same broadly conceived species of cartoon avian life, but that's where the similarities end. Daffy schemes and grifts to get ahead, while Donald has blundered into a way of gaming a system that goes out of its way to game itself for him. It's more productive to draw comparisons between Daffy and an abrasive troublemaking character who was frequently portrayed as a social misfit. What's more, this feathered pest was created

from a template established with the creation of Daffy Duck at Warner's: Walter Lantz's Woody Woodpecker.

Woody was not technically created by Walter Lantz, but rather by Ben "Bugs" Hardaway, late of the Warner cartoon story department, and namesake of a certain rabbit who was the subject of the previous chapter. While at Warner's, Hardaway cooked up a rabbit character who is often cited as a prototype for Bugs Bunny, but who is more accurately described as a long-eared knockoff of Daffy Duck. Roughly a year after putting the rabbit through his paces in such recipes for comedy failure as *Porky's Hare Hunt* (1938) and *Hare-um Scare-um* (1939), Hardaway lit out for Lantz's studio, recipe book firmly tucked under his arm. As soon as he arrived, he opened the book to his favourite page, substituted a red topknot of plumage for rabbit ears in the list of ingredients, and plopped his 'new' creation into familiarly unfunny surroundings. The first Woody Woodpecker cartoon, *Knock Knock* (1940), pays off in the same way that a 1938 Hardaway-scripted cartoon entitled *Daffy Duck and Egghead* does: woodpeckers who prove to be just as unhinged as Woody come to ostensibly carry him off to the insane asylum before wreaking havoc through the final iris-out (6:21-6:49).

So now that we've established that Hardaway was either a shameless self-plagiarist or just a screamingly unoriginal thinker (or both: I'm personally happiest with *that* conclusion), back to where Daffy Duck and Daffy 2.0—sorry, Woody Woodpecker—begin to part company. In their earliest appearances, both are nuisances, but the motivation behind the nuisance is ever so slightly different. Woody, as Michael Barrier points out, is a nuisance because he doesn't know any better than to be one: "he is not flouting civilised norms as much as he is oblivious of them" (377). When Daffy gets on people's nerves, it seems to be the product of something resembling conscious thought. Even at his least inhibited, Daffy is capable of enough self-

reflection to make declarations like “I’m so crazy, I don’t know this is impossible” when pedalling along suspended in mid-air with no visible means of bicycle support beneath him and ringing an invisible (or imaginary) bicycle bell (*Porky and Daffy* 4:16-4:43). It’s hard to imagine Woody Woodpecker having enough on the ball to own up to something like that.

Before we move on, here’s one more example of the comparative level of self-awareness in the insanity of these two strange birds: they both sing about the fact they’re not playing with a full deck, but there is a considerable variance in the upshot of their respective musical musings. I’ll lead off with Woody’s number, since it comes first chronologically and appears, appropriately enough, in a film which uses his full name as its title—1941’s *Woody Woodpecker*. The song serves as Woody’s mission statement in music—his personal version of Figaro’s “Largo al Factotum” (which, by the way, he sang in Shamus Culhane’s 1944 short *The Barber of Seville*, getting to the material half a dozen years before Bugs Bunny—and possibly giving music lover Chuck Jones added incentive to do a decent take on the source material), telling everybody who he is and why the hell we should really care:

Everybody thinks I’m crazy,

Yessiree, that’s me, that’s me—

[...]

So I’m crazy—so what? What can I do?

So are you. (*Woody Woodpecker* 0:30-0:34; 0:44-0:48)

No offense, Woody, but the only reason I should doubt my sanity is because I sat through this ditty (and it’s less than twenty seconds long!). It’s not only a waste of Mel Blanc’s talent, it’s classic denial by way of projection and/or gaslighting. Telling me I’m crazy doesn’t make me crazy. On the other hand, telling me I’m crazy for thinking that you’re crazy for attempting

something that I think is crazy to attempt but that you succeed in doing might convince me that I'm the crazy one. Did you get all that? Because that's precisely what Daffy does at the beginning of 1949's *Boobs in the Woods*—and I quote:

Oh, people call me daffy,
They think that I am gooney,
Just because I'm happy is no sign of looney-tooney.
(*Boobs in the Woods* 0:34-0:41)

After sharing this bit of information with us—and while still singing—Daffy paints a tunnel on a tree and walks right through it (*Boobs in the Woods* 0:44-0:48). Crazy, this isn't. 'In tune with forces beyond the comprehension of the narrow-mindedly sane' is more like it. The important takeaway from this is that Daffy may be a bit of an oddball, but his oddball way of doing things produces empirically verifiable results. What's more—and even more importantly—he *likes* doing things this way. (And why not? Why walk around a tree like any Tom, Dick and Woody if you can just paint your way through it?)

To sum up: Woody Woodpecker is a nut and a nuisance because he can't help it; Daffy Duck is a nut and a nuisance because he *chooses* to be and *enjoys* it. One thing that earmarks Daffy as a self-selecting outsider is the living conditions he selects for himself. Out of the 96 cartoons he starred in between 1937 and the closure of the Warner cartoon studio in 1963, 22 feature him as a wild duck. Of these, 4 begin with him migrating; only the final one of the other 18—1962's *Quackodile Tears*—gives Daffy an actual wildlife home life, complete with nest and egg-laying mate. The previous 17 show him in a generalized woodland or marshland habitat, but never in anything that could be called a place of residence—no nest, no hollow tree, no nothing. (I know, I know, real ducks don't live in hollow trees, but neither do real gophers, real beavers,

or real rabbits—cartoon makers of this era weren't about to let details like that stand in their way.) When Daffy accosts plein-air hobby artist Porky⁶ in *Boobs in the Woods*, slapping canvas off easel with a slurpy snarl of “you can't go around painting other people's property!” (2:06-2:06), he's speaking true words in jest. Sure, he's doing it to get Porky's goat, but he also means it: what he means specifically is that he's granted himself the right to go anywhere and act like he owns the goddamn place. Once you've decided that, who needs a fixed address?

Daffy doesn't seem to require anywhere in particular to hang his hat when he's in a world that's more analogous to a human one. There are a couple of key instances when he's portrayed as a full-on urban vagrant: *Daffy Doodles* (1946) implies that hit-and-run graffiti artist Daffy has no permanent abode; *Riff Raffy Daffy* (1948) spells it out, opening with our title riff-raff sleeping rough on a park bench (0:35-0:46). By contrast, the one time that Bugs Bunny is shown as a vagrant, it's a brief interlude (in 1950's *What's Up, Doc?*) that shows vagrancy as a temporary fall in social status caused by the vagaries of show business—one he shares with other recognized and prominent showbiz figures of the time. Jack Benny, Al Jolson, Eddie Cantor, and Bing Crosby are co-occupants of Bugs' park bench (3:28-3:37).

OCCUPATION: UNEMPLOYABLE

Moving right along (an appropriate phrase to follow up the topic of vagrancy), Daffy's existence as a human-substitute in realms where ducks don't exist as livestock or targets for hunters seems to follow a pattern marked by transience and a lack of occupational stability. He moves from job to job, and has a tendency to hold jobs that are marginal, precarious, and ever so slightly shady. As you read on, ask yourself “Would I hire someone who gave me *this* CV?”

⁶ After doing the “invisible bicycle” gag again, complete with invisible bicycle bell, to accompany the exit line “if you don't want a shapely model, so long Rembrandt” (*Boobs in the Woods* 1:50-1:55).

DAFFY DUCK

“Have lisp, will travel”

Send correspondence to:

c/o J.L. Warner,
Warner Brothers Studios,
Hollywood CA
or

c/o Leon Schlesinger,
Leon Schlesinger Productions,
Hollywood, CA

JOB SKILLS

Fast talking, misdirection and name-dropping

WORK EXPERIENCE

1938 Professional Boxer (*Porky and Daffy*)

Defeated a rooster fighting under the inventive name of “The Champ” for a \$500 purse in a challenge match. Rumors that the state boxing commission suspended my license to fight when they found out I went berserk at the sound of a boxing bell (or reasonable facsimile, such as a dinner platter cover placed over my head and struck) are unmitigated fabrications.

1938 Interning physician, Stitch in Time Hospital (*The Daffy Doc*)

I wouldn't give any credence to the insinuation that I was unfit to practice medicine, but I will grant you that there are those who found my techniques to be somewhat at variance with orthodox procedures. So what's wrong with hitting myself over the head with a mallet so I can see multiple versions of myself if I need to get a second opinion on a case, I ask you? To each their own, I guess.

1938 Feature film director, Wonder Pictures (*Daffy Duck in Hollywood*)

My experimental film *Gold Is Where You Find It* won me a contract to take over a production from noted cineaste Josef Von Hamburger. The fact that I was already under contract to Warner Brothers has nothing whatsoever to do with the fact that I never completed the project.

1939 General, United States Army: Commandant of Post no. 13 (*Scalp Trouble*)

Solemn reflection has made me alter my sensibilities on my command of an outpost somewhere on the American frontier, and my regrettable command decision to use all means necessary to repel efforts at reclamation of ancestral lands by the natives of the vicinity. Besides, I've heard about what happened to that fella Custer.

1940 Sous-chef and dishwasher, food truck (*Porky's Last Stand*)

If I learned one thing from this job, it's that it's unwise to try to source ground beef from live cattle. Especially bulls. I can't stress this enough: ESPECIALLY BULLS.

1942 Telegram delivery boy (*The Impatient Patient*)

If you think trying to get hamburger from a live bull is tough, brother, trying to do a singing telegram at a mad scientist's laboratory is murder. And it almost was. Enough said.

1942 Film artiste (singing cowboy variety) (*The Daffy Duckaroo*)

After deciding I'd rather be Gene Autry than John Ford (see Feature film director, above), I retired briefly to the desert to recoup my creative energies. I decline comment on my activities during my sojourn at a local native reservation, as they may reflect poorly on my current greater state of enlightenment (see General, United States Army, above).

1943 Talent Agent (*Yankee Doodle Daffy*)

I'm not sure what possessed me to have only one client—the lethargic Sleepy Lagoon, but if nothing else, it convinced me I should get back into show business in a more active capacity.

1943 National defense auxiliary (*Scrap Happy Daffy*)

So it means I guarded a pile of scrap metal. So? We all had to do our bit for the war effort. Besides, it sure beat flogging that stiff Sleepy Lagoon from one studio to another.

1943 Commando, United States Army (*Daffy—The Commando*)

What if I *did* say I was a general before? I was on an undercover mission...yeah, that's it—undercover. Look—we *beat* Hitler and you've got a problem with a minor discrepancy in my rank?

1944 General, United States Army: Commandant of...oh, don't ask me which post—I forget (*Slightly Daffy*)

When I said I'd reflected about getting kind of trigger-happy with the natives in my first command posting, I didn't say I did it *immediately*. Hey, even Westmoreland took a while to realize that Vietnam thing was kind of an "oopsie". Never mind what I was doing in this scene during the middle of World War II. The Navajo Code Talkers came as just a big a surprise to me as anyone when I saw that documentary on PBS.

1944 Carrier Pigeon, United States Army Intelligence (*Plane Daffy*)

My record in this capacity has been redacted. All I can say is it's TOP SECRET. Really. TOP TOP SECRET. Classified information, hush-hush and all that sort of thing. I may even have been seduced by an enemy spy, but I don't kiss and tell. And don't ask me about my rank. It was so secret, even I didn't know it. Like I said before, we *beat* Hitler, and that's all that counts.

1946 Assistant traffic manager, Storks, Inc. (*Baby Bottleneck*)

My first civilian work after the war was helping to relieve the inevitable backlog and logistical challenges with delivery caused by the postwar Baby Boom. When all was said and done, I'd rather have been back beating Hitler. I'd definitely rather have been back being seduced by enemy spies.

1947 Remote boreal territory field representative, Classy-Cut Knish Catering Co. (*Along Came Daffy*)

I was all for the promotional lagniappe of a six-course turkey dinner my company offered to prospective customers, but did the cookbook I was selling on their behalf have to have quite so many recipes for *duck*? Sheesh.

1947 Bellhop, Gland Hotel (*A Pest in the House*)

My dedication to providing a five-star full-service experience for guests led to a temporary promotion to desk clerk. I'm still not sure why that one guest kept punching the old desk clerk Mr. Fudd in the face, though. Life is full of mysteries, isn't it?

1948 Babysitter, Acme Baby Sitting Agency (*The Up-Standing Sitter*)

Looking after kids once they've been born is no treat, either (see "Assistant traffic manager, Storks, Inc.", above). That's all I'm saying about this one.

1948 Independent novelty retail entrepreneur (*Daffy Dilly*)

Don't knock selling joy buzzers and squirting flowers on a street corner 'til you've tried it, buster.

1948 Personal assistant to millionaire tycoon J.P. Cubish (*Daffy Dilly*)

I assisted him by providing a ready target (me) for custard pies to throw at. It almost goes without saying that he found this hilarious. Any wounds to my dignity were easily plastered over by the greenbacks he shelled out to me in recompense. Besides, it beat hawking joy buzzers and squirting flowers on a sidewalk. Forget what I just told you—it did. Well, it paid better, anyway.

1948 Travelling representative, Assorted Household Products Division, Excelsior Appliance and Appurtenance Company (*The Stupor Salesman*)

In the course of my mundane door-to-door peddling duties, I chanced to assist the authorities in tracking down the notorious armed robber Slug McSlug...mostly by blowing up his hideout while trying to sell him stuff.

1950 Freelance screenwriter (*The Scarlet Pumpnickel*)

On second thought, cross J.L. Warner's off the list of addresses I want my mail forwarded to. Leon Schlesinger might be six feet under, but he was never as stingy with the greenlight as Old J.L.

1950 Radio quizmaster, Ajax Broadcasting Company (*The Ducksters*)

Quick note to any chump who takes a job like this: never offer a contestant a prize equal to the exact asking price of the network you work for. You may live to regret it.

1952 Private investigator (self-employed) (*The Super Snooper*)

My last case made things too hot for me, so I had to take it on the lam. I don't mind being shot a dozen times, having a piano dropped on me, and getting run over by a train, but when the dame responsible for all this wanted to get hitched, I knew it was adios time.

1952 Field representative, Hot-Foot Casualty Underwriters Insurance Company of Schenectady (*Fool Coverage*)

Offering insanely lucrative policies with seemingly impossible loopholes ain't the brightest thing you could do in a cartoon either, bub.

1953 Contract player, Animation Division, Warner Brothers Pictures (*Duck Amuck*)

Will all my experience as a cinematic auteur (see Feature film director, above), you'd think *I'd* be the one directing this cartoon, not a certain rabbit who shall remain nameless. If I'd kept that radio quizmaster job, I'd be in TV by now, rigging game shows and taking kickbacks from sponsors. Where did I go wrong?

1954 Home installation and demonstration representative, Acme Future-Antic Push-Button Home of Tomorrow Household Appliance Company, Inc. (*Design for Leaving*)

A potentially rewarding position, but employee turnover tended to be high, since the firm also carried a line of robotic salesman ejectors. Still, free use of a company helicopter was a definite perk.

1955 Hotel proprietor (*Dime to Retire*)

Offering accommodation at the reasonable rate of 10 cents a night seemed to bring in the customers alright, but I may have alienated them by going a little too far with the upcharges. Could it be that \$666 to remove an elephant from a room was a bit too steep? (Sheesh...I mean, most people spend way more on therapy and twelve-step programs just to *find* the elephant in the room.)

1956 Rural territory field representative, Ace Novelty Company of Walla Walla, WA (*The High and the Flighty*)

Country bumpkins aren't as bumpkiny as you'd think. One rooster and dog in particular had more experience cooking up elaborate practical joke apparatus than our entire R&D department.

1956 Detective, Interplanetary Police Force (*Rocket Squad*)

I was a cop. In space. You might know me better by my cover name, Joe Monday. It was a good job. It didn't last long. Got bounced from the force and sentenced to twenty years for false arrest. Those are the facts. Just the facts.

1956 Mild-mannered reporter on a metropolitan newspaper (name withheld by request) (*Stupor Duck*)

Actually, I didn't do very much mild-mannered reporting. This was really a cover for my secret identity as—oh, no, you don't get it out of me *that* easily...you're in league with The Forces of Evil, aren't you? This looks like a job for—uh, forget I said anything—gotta fly...I mean, gotta go.

1956 Stunt double for Bugs Bunny (*A Star Is Bored*)

The nadir of my showbiz career. At least it got me a screen test for a picture more suited to my type and talents. I still had to do my own stunts, though. Anybody know how to get buckshot out of pinfeathers?

1957 Star of two-person travelling variety act (also featuring Bugs Bunny) (*Show Biz Bugs*)

After making this no-talent look good in the movies, I figured he'd need all the help he could get on a live personal appearance tour. Forgive and forget, I say. I'm sure all that stuff I went through as the guy's stunt double was studio politics.

1961 Hotel janitor, Bristle Inn (*Daffy's Inn Trouble*)

What could possibly be a bringdown from being a stooge for that rabbit? How about...pushing a broom for Porky Pig? "What a job for a grown duck with my I.Q.," is how I felt at the time.

1961 Hotel proprietor, Duck Inn and Tavern (*Daffy's Inn Trouble*)

Healthy competition is the backbone of American enterprise, I say.

1961 Hotel janitor, New Bristle Inn (*Daffy's Inn Trouble*)

Easy come, easy go. At least I got an office with my name on the door.

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Frederick Bean Avery

Animation director

Leon Schlesinger Productions, Warner Bros. Pictures, MGM, Walter Lantz Productions

Robert Emerson Clampett

Animation director and producer

Leon Schlesinger Productions, Warner Bros. Pictures, Republic Pictures, Bob Clampett Productions

Isadore Freleng

Animation director and producer

Leon Schlesinger Productions, MGM, Warner Bros. Pictures, DePatie-Freleng Enterprises

Charles Martin Jones

Animation director and producer

Leon Schlesinger Productions, Warner Bros. Pictures, MGM

Robert Porter McKimson

Animation director

Leon Schlesinger Productions, Warner Bros. Pictures, DePatie-Freleng Enterprises

Francis Frederick von Taschlein (a.k.a. Frank Tashlin, Frank Tash, Tish Tash)

Animation and live-action feature film director, not to mention children's author

Leon Schlesinger Productions, Twentieth Century Fox, Paramount Pictures, etc., etc., etc.

Melvin Jerome Blank (stage name Mel Blanc)

Animation voice specialist and radio actor

Warner Bros. Pictures, Walter Lantz Productions, Hanna-Barbera Productions, NBC Radio Network, NBC Television Network, CBS Radio Network, CBS Television Network, Charles Mintz Studios/Columbia Pictures, MGM, UPA, Ruby-Spears Productions, DIC Entertainment, Capitol Records, etc., etc., etc., etc., etc., etc., ad infinitum



Did you hear the one about the travelling salesman with webbed feet? Twenty of Daffy Duck's cartoons show him gainfully employed in some fashion outside show business. Five of these feature him in an occupation that used to be euphemistically referred to as 'commercial traveller'... more than any other single line of work. The total becomes six if you lump in the street vendor from *Daffy Dilly* (bottom right) with the travelling salesmen from *The High and the Flighty* (upper left), *Design for Leaving* (upper right), *Along Came Daffy* (middle left), *Fool Coverage* (middle right), and *The Stupor Salesman* (bottom left).

As you've seen (after possibly reaching for the Advil to stop your temples throbbing while thinking about what employment prospects such an individual thinks he actually has), Daffy gravitates to jobs at the low end of the old occupational org chart...or off to one side of it. There are a couple of noteworthy exceptions to this predilection for low-end, tail-end dead-end jobs: his stint as a physician in *The Daffy Doc* and his two tours of duty as an army general in *Scalp Trouble* and its remake *Slightly Daffy*. The idea of Daffy Duck in any position of authority, much less one with the power of life and death inherent to medical and military authority is, as Daffy himself might put it, "a revoltin' development".

Revoltin' or not, these rare instances of Daffy in an actual profession show him occupying a marginal position within that profession. Command of the frontier outpost in *Scalp Trouble* and *Slightly Daffy* hardly constitutes a plum assignment. Insofar as it is necessary to pinpoint the historical era of cartoon fiction, the uniforms of the rank-and-file at the post place the action some little time after the end of the American Civil War. By then, experience as what was known as an "Indian fighter" was hardly the royal road it once had been to bigger and better commands—including the role of Commander-in-Chief, as evidenced by Presidents Andrew Jackson, William Henry Harrison and Zachary Taylor. There might be something not altogether G.I. about "General" Daffy's rank, either—it could be a brevetcy, a temporary promotion to give all the dogfaces a dog with the proper pedigree to bark orders at them.

As far as his medical career goes, D. Duck, MD is decidedly on the bottom rung of the profession. A sign on an operating theatre door in *The Daffy Doc* identifies him by a pejorative used for those with dodgy medical credentials and/or methods—a quack. It's part of an array of wordplay that takes a dig at Daffy in particular and the medical profession as a whole: the family name of the doctor Daffy is assisting in surgery is "Quack" (*Daffy Doc* 1:00-1:07). Dr. Quack's

demeanour in the operating theatre is (at least initially) professional enough for the audience to consider him to be *not* a quack, whereas Daffy acts, well, *daffy*, making him a quack through and through. Ejected from the operating theatre by Dr. Quack for being a...well, a quack, Daffy solidifies his reputation as an undesirable medico for patients to take themselves to by taking *himself* to the patients. If you're assaulted outside a hospital and battered over the head with an oversize mallet, you may need to see a doctor; if the doctor you see is also your assailant, that doctor is definitely, decidedly, and unequivocally a quack. This breach of medical ethics is brought to new 'patient' Porky Pig's attention the only way it can be...the hard way (*Daffy Doc* 4:38-5:21).

FAKE IT 'TIL YOU MAKE IT: DECEPTION AS DAFFY'S CHIEF STRATEGY FOR SOCIAL CLIMBING

Using the term "doctor" for Daffy, of course, assumes that his medical credentials are genuine...just as calling him "General" assumes that his military credentials are as well. Give his track record of entry-level frontline jobs, there's something fishy about him showing up as an assistant surgeon or a post commandant. It certainly wouldn't mark the only time that Daffy had engaged in brazen imposture for personal gain, social standing, and just plain bragging rights. Talking one's way into a soft life among the gentry with nothing more substantial than a dime-store engagement ring may seem easy enough for "an impoverished yet personable single duck", but Daffy lives to regret that move—just barely—in the 1950 short *His Bitter Half*.

For Daffy, it's immaterial whether wealth and prestige are earned or merely agreed upon by social convention. His overweening self-regard considers both to be his by right. If "to the victor belong the spoils" reflects a worldview that holds success to be proof of merit, then

Daffy's worldview holds merit to be proof of how successfully you cheated. Nowhere perhaps is this clearer than in 1948's *You Were Never Duckier*: having travelled a great distance (from Dubuque, Iowa to an unnamed big city) to compete in a poultry show, Daffy is affronted that the prize for the best rooster is a thousand times greater than the prize for the best duck (0:36-0:58). Daffy's ego seems to bypass two questions related to economic inequity: 1. Is such a discrepancy and its accompanying hierarchy of value inherently fair, given the contributions to the common weal of those thus valued? 2. Aren't the criteria which determine this discrepancy established by the agenda of humans rather than ducks and chickens—an agenda which ultimately assigns greater value to whatever is better equipped to supply foodstuffs for the humans? Cutting straight to what seems to be the chase for him, Daffy reacts to being valued at a maximum of five dollars rather than five thousand to be an insult to his pride, rather than a symptom of a system based on arbitrary exploitation and species bias. His solution, therefore, is not to buck this system by abandoning the pursuit of a lousy five bucks, but to go for the five thousand by means of the kind of impersonation that seems to work all too frequently in cartoons.



And so, with a rubber glove strategically positioned on one end of his body and the suction cup from a toilet plunger filled with purloined feathers on the other, Daffy demonstrates with chilling transparency his idea of his place in The Grand Scheme of Things. Simply put, it's any place he can fake his way into without the time-consuming tedium of having to establishing fitness for his position or any verifiable credentials. As his job and personal histories indicate, he's not counting on staying in any one place particularly long. Whether he's a janitor, a bellhop, a travelling salesman, a would-be trust-fund-draining husband, or a marginal figure on the dodgier fringes of show business (to name just a few), Daffy's preferred station in life is one you can just show up at and talk your way into.

Daffy's strategy for gaining maximum status with minimum responsibility by talking the talk while ducking the walk puts him in select, though not necessarily desirable, company. He's akin to a breed of quasi-genteel con artists who drift around, not looking for a predatory big financial score, but for respect and esteem based on enacting schoolboy fantasies of playing at Being Somebody Important. Passing off a rubber glove as a rooster's comb parallels the unbelievably simple home-crafted fake IDs created by Frank Abagnale as he impersonated an airline pilot, a doctor and an attorney (Levy 26-27). Claiming to be "a genuine pedigreed Red Island Rhode Buff Orpington prize rooster"—a sideways conflation of two breeds of chicken—and upping the ante by billing himself as "the only five-gaited rooster in the world"—a creative reapplication of a standard for judging horses—shows Daffy to be working from a game plan similar to that used by bunco grand master Ferdinand Waldo Demara for avoiding scrutiny (*Never Duckier* 3:43-3:47; 4:47-4:49). By creating bogus breeds and distinctions—and what's more, mooted the idea of using cigars to bribe someone he thinks can legitimize them—Daffy generates conceptual space that increases the difficulty of verifying the truth or falsehood of his

statements, in the same way that Demara (popularly known as The Great Impostor) did (*Never Duckier* 4:26-4:28). Demara was able to pass himself off as everything from a college lecturer to a ship's surgeon to a prison warden by looking for or creating new job titles to insinuate himself into, making the educated guess that such fluid circumstances engender a greater degree of latitude for interpretation of credentials: "there's no past laws or rules or precedents to hold you down or limit you. Make your own rules and interpretations" (Crichton 103).

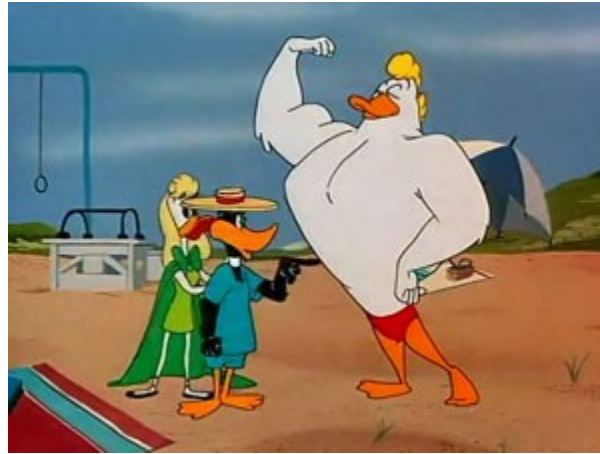
It's kind of a Wild West take on things—and wouldn't you know it, the open-to-interpretation time and place known vaguely as "The Wild West" is the scene of two of Daffy Duck's more widely familiar impostures...or rather, the same imposture twice, via a sequel. *Drip-Along Daffy* (1951) and *My Little Duckaroo* (1954) see Daffy attempting to impose law and order on the frontier, have-gun-will-travel-style, with no more constituted authority to do so than the lint under his saddle blanket might be reasonably expected to have. In the first half of this duology, he tips his hand and reveals his authority to be thoroughly bogus and self-appointed by selecting a toy sheriff's badge from an array of novelty buttons under his vest and pinning it on himself (*Drip-Along* 2:02-2:06). (Just in case you didn't get what this is supposed to mean, Carl Stalling's musical score for the cartoon hits you in the ears with the section of Rossini's *William Tell Overture* associated more popularly with The Lone Ranger than with the nineteenth century opera's eponymous Swiss archer.)

As with the pose he adopts in *You Were Never Duckier*, Daffy's pose in *Drip-Along Daffy* and *My Little Duckaroo* fails because appearance is not equivalent to competence. In both Daffy Westerns, he looks the part of a Typical Western Hero, even earning a super-caption identifying him as one (*Drip-Along* 0:36-0:38). His sidekick Porky proves to be a properly effective dispenser of vigilante justice, outduelling the villain on one occasion with a surprisingly

lethal wind-up toy soldier and being instantly acclaimed sheriff for his efforts (*Drip-Along* 6:13-6:57). It's far from the only time on record that Porky one-ups Daffy by being quietly and efficiently competent without overreaching himself. There is a difference between *Drip-Along Daffy* and *My Little Duckaroo* (where Porky wisely opts to sit on the sidelines whittling rather than risk life and limb in hand-to-hand combat) and other Daffy/Porky pairings set in a human-dominated or human-analogue social milieu—think of *The Ducksters* or *Fool Coverage*, in which Porky suddenly and accidentally comes into a fortune that gives him leverage over his web-footed erstwhile tormentor. The difference lies in what Daffy aspires to Way Out West: neither wealth nor social position as established within the confines of a stable social framework, but heroism as established by the need for repairs in a framework lacking in stability.

You don't need Joseph Campbell to tell you that the hero is by nature an outsider, someone whose largely uncharted course through life is oceans apart from the safe waters navigated by normative patterns of behaviour. Even so, it's easier to set sail on this sort of Kon-Tiki voyage if your craft is a custom-built, one-of-a-kind-model, or as Daffy once described himself, “iniminimabtule” (*Duck Amuck* 5:22). Heroism (albeit inevitabttully...er, inevitably doomed to failure in Daffy's case) is a plausible mode of life to adopt if you're the only duck in a lawless western town (*My Little Duckaroo*, *Drip-Along Daffy*)...or in Sherwood Forest (*Robin Hood Daffy*)...or in an intergalactic empire ruled by Earthling humans (*Duck Dodgers in the 24½th Century*)...or if you're a ducklike visitor with semi-reliable superpowers who hails from another planet (*Stupor Duck*)...or if you possess Sherlockian de-duck-tive genius in crime-ridden Victorian London (*Deduce, You Say*).

**AN ODD DUCK NO MATTER WHAT: DAFFY AS A MISFIT EVEN AMONG HIS
OWN KIND**



“Nine-pound weakling” Daffy about to enter a war of testosterone at a distinct disadvantage in *Muscle Tussle* (1953).

But what if you’re one duck among many—what if, in your little ring-necked world, being a duck is, in fact, the norm? Outsider status then becomes less a matter of fate and circumstance than of choice and preference. I’ve already described how this works when Daffy is hanging out with other ducks on the pond. Where it really sticks out like a sore thumb-feather, though, is when Daffy’s presence is not suffered due to his role as potential foodstuff and/or trophy material, but when his species is the dominant life form in society.

Muscle Tussle (1953) is one example of this: in a world where ducks are the sole human-substitute species, Daffy makes himself an outsider by putting his “puny” body on display at the beach. The prevailing ethos in this particular subcultural milieu privileges the superficial aesthetics of presumed good health—to use the vernacular that was once familiar to devotees of Jack LaLanne and Charles Atlas, the body beautiful. Being the brainchild of a human subculture with a health regimen based on coffee and cigarettes (a 1950s animation studio), this beach is

played up as a site of competition where points are scored by males for muscular development and prizes are awarded in the form of submissive and impressionable females. (The adjectives here are significant: when Daffy is portrayed as a married duck, his wife is anything but impressionable or submissive. Let's assume he's between wives here, and is looking for love amongst the easily impressed.)

This beach is a carnival within a carnival: a Bakhtinian Feast of Fowls where web-footed waddling clownlike figures constitute the norm rather than the exception. The scene is carnivalesque as well in the ways that Roland Barthes describes pro wrestling in *Mythologies*: it's a seductive conjunction of grotesquerie and physical prowess that adds up to "a spectacle of excess" (13). In *Understanding Popular Culture*, John Fiske underscores the societal function and appeal of the fascination over exceedingly muscular bodies, again with reference to wrestling, describing such physiques as being "opposed semiotically and politically to the forces of domination" (100). It's probably no coincidence that the musclebound duck who temporarily sweeps Daffy's date off her feet and offers her the implied promise of joining forces with a being who can overcome whatever dominates her⁷ resembles a famous wrestler of the time—Gorgeous George, the tow-headed mesomorphic Adonis who was a favourite target for caricature by Warner cartoonists in other films such as *Bunny Hugged* (1951).

If Daffy is out of place on *Muscle Tussle*'s beach, the circumstances that make him an outsider aren't entirely beyond his control. Being on that beach is a *choice*: he could have just as easily taken his date anyplace else that comes to mind (as long as it wasn't someplace where he'd already tried and failed to pass himself off as something he isn't). Daffy's choice to put himself on the margins even when surrounded by his own kind is put into sharper relief in

⁷ Or in this case, Daffy, since it's kind of a stretch to view him as a force of domination at the best of times.

another cartoon where his attitudes and decisions concerning the occupational and personal spheres of life foreground the intentionality behind his outsider status. *The Super Snooper*, a 1953 Robert McKimson directorial effort, places Daffy in a familiar social position, this time in a ducks-only version of civilization. As a private investigator out of the Sam Spade/Philip Marlowe mould, he is an upholder of the law who operates outside a traditional institutional framework of law enforcement. This isn't functionally different from the role he takes upon himself as self-appointed sheriff of a Lawless Western Town or even as Robin Hood, imposing a version of social justice in a place where no such thing exists.

What does exist in these places, though, are humans who impose whatever rules have crowded Daffy's views of justice out of the picture. Being a gumshoe in *The Super Snooper's* world of ducks, however, brings Daffy beak-to-beak with an occupational hazard familiar to Dashiell Hammett's and Raymond Chandler's private eyes: class distinctions. Daffy's duck-ness is no longer what puts him at the bottom of the pecking order (or do I mean the "ducking order"?); there's an upper crust of ducks who provide at least some of his livelihood by hiring his services.

Now, Daffy could have chosen to put his skills as an investigator to use in a more conventional manner, and chosen the more stable career path of police officer. A cop's life is a poor fit for Daffy: it's a job that, with one exception during the period I'm looking at, the Warner writers and directors never put him in. That exception is itself an exception to the exception: in 1957's *Rocket Squad*, Daffy is a plainclothes detective—a type of policeman with more latitude for interpreting the law than your standard beat cop. Moreover, he portrays a parody of Jack Webb's Sgt. Joe Friday from *Dragnet*, a character who, given his unblemished record of crime-

solving and Webb's position as star and producer of the long-running series, effectively constitutes a law unto himself.

Meanwhile, back at *The Super Snooper*, Daffy—or 'Duck Drake', as he styles himself—drops a couple of broad hints that he's less interested in what he can do to maintain law and order than what law and order can do to maintain him. Initially rejecting a case, he reconsiders when his full fee is delivered to him as a thick roll of banknotes spat at him through his telephone receiver, followed by some loose change for carfare (*Super Snooper* 1:12-1:28). As Daffy noted in another cartoon, "it isn't the principle of the thing, it's the money" (*My Little Duckaroo* 1:08-1:11): money has to be the principle of the thing when your lifestyle choices put a drain on your bank account. Near the beginning of *The Super Snooper*, Daffy demonstrates that his fluidity is being adversely affected by his fondness for one particular type of fluid: he is "disposing of my last case" —that is to say, a case of now-empty liquor bottles labelled "Old Hicup⁸" (0:43-0:46).

Before the main action of *The Super Snooper* gets underway, we have a sense that Daffy/Duck Drake prefers to live by his own set of rules. This sense is reinforced when the hardboiled private eye (or, as an old sight gag not exclusive to Warner's designates him on his office door, "Private Eye, Ear, Nose and Throat") arrives at a mansion where a murder has apparently taken place. Daffy (as is his wont) shows far more interest in making asides to the audience about the standard features of detective fiction and in constructing elaborate reenactments of the crime than he does in uncovering evidence that a crime has actually been committed. If you're going to be a character straight out of a book, you might as well do things by the book, I guess.

⁸ This is not a typo. We're dealing with the work of graphic artists here, not lexicographers.

One thing you'll find in the type of book Daffy's written himself into in *The Super Snooper*, if not written in these exact words, is that dames are trouble. The dame in *The Super Snooper's* all-duck cast of three (Number Three being a butler) is as close to an actual Dame as American society affords. It's never made crystal clear whether she's an heiress or the owner of the mansion, but she's as loaded in the monetary sense as Daffy probably was in another sense while working on that case of Old Hicup. She's also statuesque and very, VERY interested in Daffy: "just crazy about us hardboiled gumshoes" is how Daffy puts it (*Super Snooper* 2:32-2:35). "Business before pleasure, please, madam" is Daffy's response to her double entendre denial-cum-invitation "search me" (*Super Snooper* 4:23-4:28), and since his business at the moment involves assuming that she's a homicidal prime suspect, both business and pleasure are potentially between him and more cash for more Old Hicup.

It turns out, though, that the Trust Fund Duck is *not* a suspect, because no crime has been committed on her premises. True to form, Daffy's gone to the wrong address. Just because that end of the business has taken care of itself doesn't mean that it's time for pleasure, though. The kind of pleasure that the lady of the house is interested in requires a considerable investment of time. "She's got that old ball-and-chain look in her eye," Daffy notes nervously, as he realizes his former prime suspect has upgraded him from fun-time paramour to full-time matrimonial prospect (*Super Snooper* 6:43-6:48).

FAMILY: THE TIES THAT BIND...AS IN 'HAND AND FOOT'



Wedding bells are breaking up that old gag of mine: *The Super Snooper* (1952) ends with Daffy cutting out into a cutout of his future (L), while *The Stupid Cupid* (1944) presents a grim picture of matrimony from Daffy's family album (R).

The fact that Daffy rejects an offer of an easy life has to do with more than just following through on a hoary vaudevillian theme about the privations males allegedly perceive in married life. It says a lot about where Daffy sees his true place in the grand scheme of things. Even in a fictional world where his is the dominant species, and where there is no apparent impediment to gaining effortless entry into the upper echelons of society, Daffy *would rather remain* a marginal outsider who lives a hand-to-mouth existence. Circumstances, at least in this case, may have other things to say on the subject: *The Super Snooper* concludes with Daffy pursued through a closed door by his would-be inamorata. The outlines they leave as they run through the door (this *is* a cartoon, after all) create a silhouette of a bride and groom walking arm in arm (*Super Snooper* 6:52-6:58).

If Daffy seems intimidated by the commitment to a stake in society represented by a commitment to marriage, there's a good reason...or, rather several good reasons—if the plot of a

cartoon can be said to constitute a reason of its own, that is. Every time Daffy is portrayed as a husband and/or father, things don't exactly go well.

Domestic conditions at the Daffy Duck household in several cartoons appear to have been distinctly ahead of the sociological research curve: none of the recent studies that point to children hampering rather than enhancing domestic bliss would have come as a surprise to him. *The Henpecked Duck* (1941) features Daffy on the brink of divorce after misplacing an egg he was asked to sit on in his wife's stead; *Wise Quacks* (1939) shows him celebrating impending fatherhood by getting drunk on homemade corn liquor. In both cases, Mrs. Daffy considers it well within her uxorial purview to enforce domestic discipline by means of corporal punishment administered with a rolling pin. The sexism rooted in these particular deployments of a kitchen implement as a disciplinary tool tends to obscure the rationale behind them. In the knockabout world of short cartoons, Daffy's behaviour frequently invites a hit in the head from anyone of either gender. Such attempts at behaviour modification through cranial percussion generally backfire. Tormented out of the placidity of his camping holiday in *Boobs in the Woods*, Porky Pig throws a rock at Daffy, who conceptually converts it to a baseball. The fast-and furious baserunning which ensues at Daffy's instigation concludes with Porky sliding face-first into a home plate made of mud (*Boobs in the Woods* 5:07-5:29).

By 1955 and the release of *Stork Naked*, Daffy is on better terms with his wife, their happy home having been transferred from the barnyard setting of the earlier cartoons to postwar suburbia. By now, Daffy is so unconvinced of the merits and virtues of parenthood that he prepares to intercept the incoming stork with the homicidal zeal of a civilian air defense station...and a good deal of its deadly weaponry. (This, by the way, is a far cry from the

apparently bachelor Daffy who assisted an overworked stork in 1945's *Baby Bottleneck*...it's amazing how a person's attitudes can change when things get real for them.)

The *idea* of family life is much more useful to Daffy than the actual fact of it. For him, it best serves as a handy ruse to be deployed when danger threatens. Paying his duck buddies to dress up as “the wife and kiddies” gets him temporarily out of the line of fire of hunter Porky's gun in *Duck Soup to Nuts* (5:28-6:48); in *Riff Raffy Daffy*, he cuts out the middlemen and accompanying expenses by using a pair of wind-up duckling dependents to dodge a vagrancy charge from Patrolman Porky (5:59-6:32).

Speaking of family and family resemblances, I guess it's clear by now that I see a fair degree of continuity and consistency amidst all the daffiness of Daffy. Even given the variations in the ways the character was handled by different directors over the years, Warners' theatrical-release cartoons featuring Daffy Duck from 1937 to 1964⁹ form a coherent body of work. The element of personality that truly makes Daffy “stand out in a crowd” doesn't really have a lot to do with an inability to process behavioural norms. Instead, it's an attitude that can be reverse-engineered to some basis in rational thought: a refusal to conform solely for the sake of conformity. There always has to be something in it for Daffy to stay grounded in one role for any length of time—survival, money, easy living...something worth playing for, and worth cheating to win whenever possible, has to be on the table for Daffy to stay in the game.

When all is said and done, though, the ultimate stake that Daffy plays for is the freedom to walk away from the table at any time. No matter what undertaking he happens to be currently

⁹ As I mentioned in the introductory chapter, Daffy continued to appear in shorts released by Warners until 1968; however, the ones released from 1965-68 were subcontracted to Warner alum Friz Freleng's DePatie-Freleng Enterprises. Most of his personality traits appear to have been lost in the move, leaving him little more than a snappish churl who functioned as an unsatisfying adversary for Speedy Gonzales.

involved in, his sense of self is always just a bit too strong for him to become totally immersed in or subsumed by his activities. Intellectually and emotionally as well as physically, he is a migratory creature, happiest and most at home when he doesn't really have a home at all. Homes, after all, tend to tie you down, and for “a duck bent on self-preservationum...anum [sic]”, the name of the game is to keep on moving (*Duck! Rabbit, Duck!* 0:53-0:56).



Daffy Duck in his natural element, getting out of “going south the hard way” by hitching a ride to save the wear and tear of migrating by “flapping his way to Miami” in *Thumb Fun* (1952).

Chapter 3

WORKING AT CAT-AND-MOUSE

'Cat' as job description in the cartoon world



YEAH...

BEFORE GABBY GATOR STARTED
CHASING WOODY WOODPECKER IN THE
LATE FIFTIES, IT WAS BASICALLY
"HIT MAN WITH TEETH".

FRANK...

IS THERE A JOB DESCRIPTION FOR
"ALLIGATOR" IN THESE OLD CARTOONS?



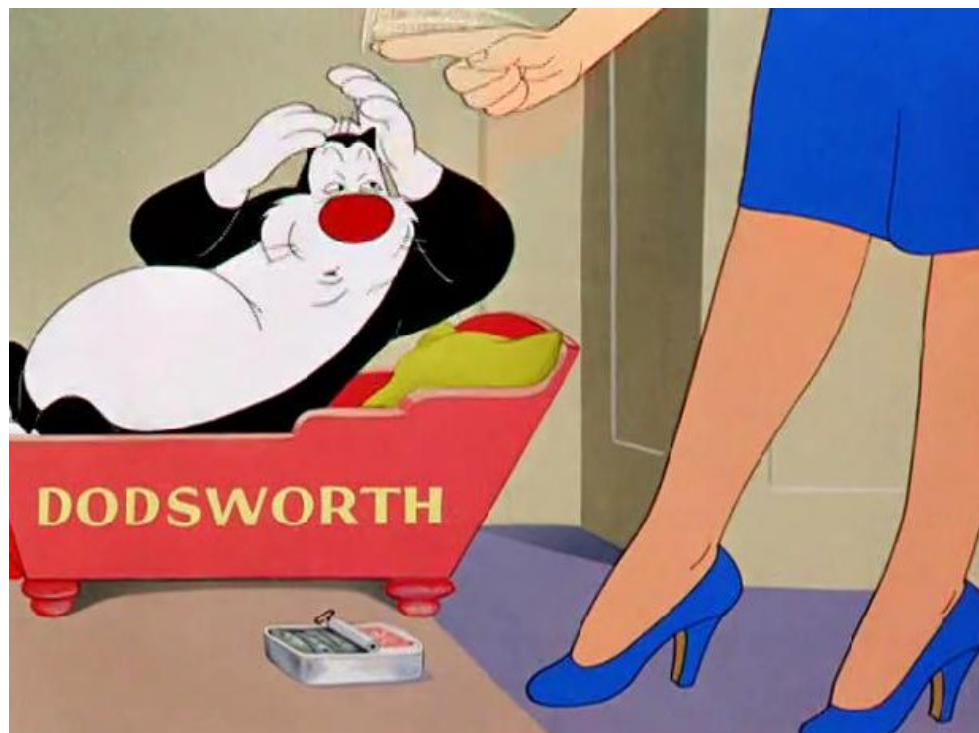
The scenario: an unpaid internship is advertised as an educational opportunity. During a probationary period, the eager, fresh-faced intern undergoes indignities and is thrown back entirely on their own resources to complete an overdue project that an entrenched supervisor can't be bothered to undertake. Once the job has been completed at well beyond a satisfactory level, the intern's position is rationalized without any kind of severance, and the supervisor takes all the credit. Welcome to the working world of the twenty-first century.

EXCEPT—

Except...this working world is in a 1950s cartoon. Its intern and supervisor aren't people, but house cats. *Kiddin' the Kitten*, a 1952 Warner Brothers release directed by Robert McKimson, is part of a minority counter-strain in American studio-release animated shorts, one which operates in contrast to a more prevalent essentialized view of the cat as an idle, indigent creature and instead assigns to it occupations based on an anthropocentric view of its presumed

ecological function. More succinctly put (as in the Chuck Jones-directed 1953 short *Kiss Me Cat*), “CATS HATE MICE” (3:09-3:15).

This is the worldview that underlies *Kiddin’ the Kitten* as well as *Kiss Me Cat*, a worldview promulgated and fostered by the humans in this world on behalf of themselves, with no thought for what the cats might have to say about it. To us, this view may seem ‘natural’, just as it does to the human in *Kiddin’ the Kitten*, a woman seen only in cat’s-eye view perspective, her head and shoulders cut off by the upper boundary of the film frame. Beset by a horde of fridge-raiding rodents, she issues an ultimatum to her companion feline, the lazy, overfed Dodsworth. Start catching mice, or (as she puts it, invoking what amounts to a Warner cartoon stock phrase for such crises) “out you go!” (*Kiddin’* 1:33).



For Dodsworth, the prospect of summary termination for non-performance from a job whose parameters appear never to have been actually spelled out is “a revoltin’ development”

(*Kiddin*’ 1:41-1:42). So might it be for any of us. Face it—if you were allowed to lounge around snacking all day for your entire life and suddenly someone told you that you were in charge of security and pest control—*or else*—how would you react? ‘Not necessarily unlike Dodsworth does’ would be a fair guess on my part. After all, his boss’s implicit invocation of the dictates of an imagined biological heritage flies in the face of his personal genealogy. “Why, no Dodsworth for generations has stooped to mouse-catchin’ fer an easy livin’ ” (*Kiddin*’ 1:43-1:48).

The implications of this objection are threefold: first, anything that others consider ‘comes naturally’ to Dodsworth is beneath his dignity; second, that the ‘natural’ activity of catching mice is easier than he wants to let on to gullible humans; third, and most importantly, that the key criterion of a “livin’ ” for him is how easy it is...that is to say, not only its potential for involving a minimum of physical effort on his part, but also its potential for offering a maximum of material comfort, recompense and other benefits. No matter what, it should resemble toil as little as possible, and preferably not at all¹⁰. As Dodsworth goes on to remark, “Oh, I don’t mind an honest day’s work...as long as somebody else does it” (*Kiddin*’ 1:49-1:54).

Somebody...or perhaps *something*. Dodsworth sees the mice as a threat not so much to the household’s food stocks and cleanliness as to his cozy sinecure. His first reaction to the brazen depredations of the mice is the insouciant comment “Y’know, one of these days, I am gonna have to buy me a mousetrap” (*Kiddin*’ 1:05-1:09)—as if somehow doing so would maintain the convenient employment-sustaining fiction that he was doing anything to catch mice

¹⁰ A recently published study from The University of California, Davis indicates that Dodsworth is far from an outlier among his species. In an article with a dead giveaway of a title—“Domestic cats (*Felis catus*) prefer freely available food over food that requires effort.”—the authors outline a research paradigm to account for anecdotal evidence provided by untold generations of cat lovers: “(c)ontrafreeloading is the willingness of animals to work for food when equivalent food is freely available. This behavior is observed in laboratory, domesticated, and captive animals. However, previous research found that six laboratory cats failed to contrafreeload” (Delgado et al.). To their credit, the researchers stopped short of concluding that the observed results were due to the fact that they were studying cats.

at all. It's worth noting in passing that this line—and another throwaway later in the cartoon about Dodsworth never having passed third grade (*Kiddin'* 2:20-2:23)—is inconsistent with the film's narrative while being wholly consistent with its central character. Does Dodsworth have a source of funds that he can dispose on mousetraps? Did he receive formal education—even long enough to become a primary-school dropout? Dodsworth says it's so, and even if his stories can't be verified, they tell us that he places himself on an equal footing with the full-time bipeds who consider themselves his masters.

Dodsworth, meanwhile, is a quadruped by vocation and a biped by avocation. Nominally a domestic mouser and house pet, he walks upright in his spare time—which is any time the lady of the house isn't looking. I'll lay odds she'd be shocked to find out that her cat can not only make a sign (sloppy penmanship notwithstanding) advertising the “Acme School of Mouse Catching” but can also hammer it up outside her front door with a speed and proficiency to rival any master finishing carpenter (*Kiddin'* 1:57-2:14). This is either a testament to skill or to the lengths the truly work-shy will go to when avoiding work...or probably both.



About to hammer his point home: Dodsworth in *Kiddin' the Kitten* has been keeping his skills with art supplies and hand tools well hidden, to prevent the lady of the house from asking him to use them anytime he doesn't feel like it.

Whatever the case, the sign has its desired effect and Dodsworth soon has a “sucker...(d’j—eh-heh)¹¹, a pupil” (*Kiddin’ 2:55-2:58*). The sucker is a case study in the deceptiveness of appearance: it’s a wide-eyed, naïve-looking kitten who quickly proves more resourceful, efficient and effective than Dodsworth when it comes to catching mice. The master would do well to learn from the pupil, but Dodsworth doesn’t trouble himself with little things like increasing his store of knowledge. His sole concern is preserving his status.



Dodsworth ‘graduating’ his protégé away from watchful human eyes in order to glom onto the kudos for a job well done by someone else (*Kiddin’ the Kitten*).

¹¹ This is the most faithful rendering I could come up with for the non-lexical vocable of embarrassment uttered by Sheldon Leonard as Dodsworth. Its function is to backtrack and misdirect the listener after the speaker has been caught out in not a lie, but a truth.

School's out and the one-kitten student body gets the bum's rush when the faculty gets wind of an upcoming performance review from upper management—Dodsworth's owner, who calls his name to see how he's coming along with the mousing (*Kiddin'* 5:35-5:50). Dodsworth's response is a reminder that, in any power structure, interpellation can be what you make of it. In the structure of the house where Dodsworth lives, the ultimate Subject—the boss lady, Jehovah-like and Junoesque, her face hidden from us—has just hailed the subject Dodsworth. Although his response to the hailing invokes “the mutual recognition between subjects and Subject” (Althusser 197), the recognition he's invoking is false on two fronts. It involves a simple one-time imposture—the substitution of Dodsworth for his pupil as a means of gaining approbation for work done by another. This imposture in turn occurs within the context of an ongoing game of bait-and-switch wherein Dodsworth gives lip service to the power structure and the expected division it implies, while doing everything in his power to undermine it.

For a being self-defined by laziness to the extent that Dodsworth is, ‘everything in his power’ ultimately means ‘as little as he can get away with’. Faced with impending disciplinary action, Dodsworth resorts to a strategy favoured by many an underperforming employee thus threatened: he changes the channel. No sly smart-talk for him, no glib remarks, no pleasantries: it's down on all fours like a good kitty, with a meowed “Yeah...?” as a combined salutation and gesture of conciliation (*Kiddin'* 6:06-6:08).

We know that Dodsdy's sudden subservience is an act, but the lady of the house isn't supposed to see through it quite so easily. The ease with which he adopts this masquerade implies that it's not a spur-of-the moment extemporization, but a tried-and-true strategy of *temporization* for keeping his “happy home”, and more importantly to him, his easy life within it (*Kiddin'* 5:33-5:34).

**WORKING HARD AT LOOKING LIKE YOU'RE WORKING HARD...OR NOT:
DECEPTION AS A JOB SKILL**

Dodsworth's facility for temporizing—playing for time while going with the flow—when dealing with household management suggests complementary approaches adopted by two types of subordinates. The sudden regress from bipedal goldbricking to quadrupedal sucking-up is reminiscent of the shifting between 'front' and 'backstage' regions of behaviour noted in workplace environments by Erving Goffman:

One of the most interesting times to observe impression management is the moment when a performer leaves the back region and enters the place where the audience is to be found, or when he returns therefrom, for at these moments one can detect a wonderful putting on and taking off of character. (121)

For Dodsworth as for many of the working stiffs discussed by Goffman, the 'audience' isn't supposed to know that they're an audience, because they're technically on the same side of the footlights as the performer. The offscreen summons of "Dodsworth!", its hortatory and scolding tones reminiscent of a stage manager paging an absent actor from the green room, is our indolent feline protagonist's cue that the curtain's up and it's time to step onstage and act more like a member of the household than a freeloading guest (*Kiddin'* 5:35-5:36).

So, the play's the thing for working domesticated cats just as much as it is for working domesticated humans. That thought immediately prompts another: are Dodsworth's duplicitous displays of indolence and industry entirely a depiction of something considered unique to the

feline equivalent of ‘human nature’? Whatever he’s playing at, his ability to knowingly play at it is something he shares with the human in high heels wagging a finger in his face for goofing off. That’s what Johan Huizinga was playing at when he opened *Homo Ludens* with this statement: “(a)nimals play, so they must be more than merely mechanical things. We play and know that we play, so we must be more than merely rational beings, for play is irrational” (4). To live with a cat is to be Michel de Montaigne, always wondering “(w)hen I play with my cat, who knows whether she is amusing herself with me, or I with her?” (qtd. in J.M. Cohen 10). Somewhere in this common ground identified by a sixteenth century French essayist, a twentieth century Dutch cultural historian, and the twenty-first century makers of Lolcat memes, the seeds for anthropomorphism have been planted. Anything that plays as much as a cat does, and uses the human play strategy of dissembling as much as a cat does seems so close to already being human that all you need to do is to hand it a placard and a hammer, and watch it get up on its hind legs and tack up its credentials for being fully human.

With that in mind, if you take it for granted that a cat never willingly shows exactly how much effort it’s putting into anything, you also have to allow that there are humans who profit from sowing confusion about whether they’re working hard or hardly working. To show you what I mean, I’m going to juxtapose a couple of case studies from two domains of artistic endeavour—one fictional, the other anecdotal but otherwise real as far as anyone can tell. First, consider T.S. Eliot’s Jennyanydots, a cat who “sits and sits and sits and sits” by day but by night is a demon of activity, organizing the household’s mice into productive hobbyists, its cockroaches into a scout troop, and its beetles into a military drill team (13-14). “The Old Gumbie Cat”, the poem in *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats* in which Jennyanydots never lets on what she’s really up to, sits on a parallel track to a real-world human example of

misdirection which ran in two directions at once. Chuck Jones devotes a small portion of the first instalment of his memoirs, *Chuck Amuck*, to a description of a game of double-bluff played by Warner animation staff on studio management. Given a signal that the studio's business manager was making the rounds to check up on them, animators who had been napping and idling started "drawing at... a breakneck pace", while writers and directors who had been hard at work on storyboards packed up their work and made a big show of doing as little as possible (67-70).

In both these cases, the play of keeping the bosses guessing about how much is actually being accomplished is all in a day's work; more than that, it's integral to the day's work. The effort put into dissimulation has become a vital part of the overall effort of the working day. Counterproductive as it may seem, the act of fooling one's superiors contributes to job satisfaction. Such exercises in ludic subterfuge give the worker a measure of control over the affective part of the working environment and with it a greater willingness to work, all of which reinforces the notion put forth by Huizinga that "all play is a voluntary activity" (7). If, as Huizinga goes on to say, "(p)lay to order is no longer play: it could at best be but a forcible imitation of it", then the game stops being worth playing when the boss cottons on to it and expects you to play it (7).

The games played by Gumbie Cats and goldbricking animators are played at an All-Pro level by Dodsworth. His Uriah Heep routine is calculated for maximum effect: like Dickens' paragon of obsequious duplicity, McKimson's cagey cat chooses to work the room in lieu of doing other actually productive work. As Goffman reminds us, the appearance of conscientiousness is often an effective substitute for the real thing, and may stem from a situational ethic rather than a true work ethic. When it comes to your boss and their expectations

for you, a “show of respect may, of course, be motivated by a desire to impress the audience favorably, or avoid sanctions” (Goffman 108).

HUMOURING HUMANS IS SERIOUS BUSINESS: DODSWORTH AS A PRACTITIONER OF AFFECTIVE LABOUR

Dodsworth on all fours meowing dutifully isn't avoiding work *entirely*, though. He's also *doing* work...well, *some* of his work at least. He's reframing a potentially uncomfortable encounter between himself and a dissatisfied supervisor in terms of a part of his job description where his performance is more likely to be deemed satisfactory. He wants the lady of the house to forget for the moment his obligations to catch mice and concentrate on his obligations to provide companionship.

In our times, when ‘companion animal’ is both a descriptor and a stated function, it doesn't seem so strange that a human should keep a member of a different animal species in the household for the express purpose of providing types of emotional support and comfort that other humans can't supply. The geisha culture of pets and their owners may still raise hackles among the unsympathetic—anecdotal stories of conflict caused on airplanes, buses and other forms of public transportation continue to be a reliable source of filler material print in all forms of news media. Even so, we seem more attuned to the house pet's service to its owners through emotional rather than strictly utilitarian labour. If he were writing today, Ogden Nash might think twice before letting these lines slip into print:

You get a wife, you get a house,

Eventually you get a mouse.

You get some words regarding mice,

You get a kitty in a trice. (Nash)

This ranks kitty alongside the mousetrap you can buy at the dollar store, rendering it a one-use only disposable consumer item in the eyes of its purchaser. Nash admits the basic flaw in that line of thinking in his following stanza, however:

By two a.m. or thereabouts,

The mouse is in, the cat is out.

It dawns upon you, in your cot,

The mouse is silent, the cat is not. (Nash)

In other words, you've bought a living thing, not a slat of wood with a spring-loaded neck-snapper; that living thing has its own distinct agency, interests and agenda, and one of the keys to all three of these concepts is the desire to get out and about and seek members of its own kind for the purpose of procreation (hence the lack of silence late at night). There's no planned obsolescence in this product: the omnipresence of feral cats is proof positive that the part of the cat-human dyad that is more likely to become obsolete and disposable is the human.

Not that Dodsworth has the least inclination of going feral, of course—that would be too much like work. That's why he's always eager to shift the discourse to his effectiveness as a household companion whenever the subject of his effectiveness as a mouse-catcher comes up. Even so, laying stress on the affective (rather than the effective) component of his work life draws attention to the instrumental component of the affect. Dodsworth's function in his home would be easily recognized by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri as the type of affective labour they describe in *Multitude*, a mode of work “that produces or manipulates affects such as a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, or passion.” (108). There's no inherent conflict in this paradigm if the affective labourer is also responsible for a tangible product, since

“immaterial labor almost always mixes with material forms of labor” (Hardt and Negri 109). In Dodsworth’s case, being a good mouser is interwoven with a matrix of other behaviours with less tangible outputs than deceased rodents: together, they add up to a desired end product that can be described as ‘good cat’.

This desire, it must be said, lies mostly on the side of Dodsworth’s owner. For his part, Dodsworth would much rather ditch all material forms of labour and concentrate on the immaterial, living the kind of easy life that Warner’s more famous black-and-white cat Sylvester enjoys at the start of the 1956 short *The Slap-Hoppy Mouse*. Being the resident cat in a mansion means that Sylvester has “nothin’ to do all day but purr and meow and eat and sleep” (*Slap-Hoppy* 1:13-1:17) Even a setup like this can be seen to have its drawbacks, however. Sylvester’s son regards the business of acting out a charade of one’s species identity as perceived by another species to be purely degrading, citing intra-species peer pressure and class envy. With more than a tinge of the Protestant Work Ethic informing his complaint, Sylvester Jr. offers a condensed opinion of other neighbourhood cats on his father’s situation: “soft living has ruined a once-great mouser” (*Slap-Hoppy* 1:24-1:27).



They also serve who only take catnaps and wait: Sylvester appears unimpressed at the prospect of remonstrations from his more industrious son in *The Slap-Hoppy Mouse*.

Stand *Slap-Hoppy Mouse* alongside *Kiddin' the Kitten* and one of the central dilemmas of modern labour emerges: is superfluous labour that is undertaken on one's own initiative (the mouse-hunting done by the cats in Sylvester's neighbourhood, presumably outside and on their own time) inherently superior to and more 'noble' than necessary labour undertaken at the behest of another (the in-house mouse-hunting ordered by Dodsworth's owner)? In either case, the labourer (in this case the cat) can be seen to be surrendering the more efficient dictate of work as a means of survival sake to the dictate of work as a means of making it known that work is being done. In lay-cat's terms, this is, to reprise an earlier quote from Dodsworth, "a revoltin' development" (*Kiddin'* 1:40-1:42).

The development is "revoltin' " in more senses of the word than one. For one very lazy cat, it is repugnant in a way that nearly prompts a gag reflex (*Kiddin'* 1:39-1:40). In a more general sense, it's the kind of development that justified open revolt long before the days of Marx, and which is formulated along Marxian lines of thought by Hardt and Negri: "(w)hen our ideas and our affects, or emotions, are put to work, for instance, and when they thus become subject in a new way to the command of the boss, we often experience new and intense forms of violation or alienation" (65-66).

Part of Dodsworth's alienation consists in his lacking a community of fellow affective-labouring felines. Any withdrawal of labour he might undertake would be hard to distinguish from the unauthorized work-to-rule program of featherbedding that is his standard operating procedure. In contrast to this is the much more secure bargaining position of filmdom's first great cartoon cat, Felix. 1923's *Felix Revolts* is plotted around the inequitable living and working conditions imposed on cats by the human residents of a cartoon 'Anytown'. Fed up with brutal and humiliating maltreatment, Felix already possesses a pre-revolutionary consciousness. An

overheard conversation at town hall about a plan to rid the municipality of cats becomes his spur to initiate collective action (*Felix Revolts* 2:39-3:29). A hastily-assembled mass meeting of cats resolves to “make life miserable” for the townsfolk as a means of securing a better deal (*Felix Revolts* 3:35-4:30). Well-orchestrated back-alley caterwauling choirs and a staged ‘walkout’ by the stock of the local fish market (enticed to leave their post by cat-trained worms) are topped by a blow calculated to hit the humans where they live...and everywhere else (*Felix Revolts* 4:30-5:17, 5:41-6:21). It’s a two-pronged attack: once the cats are on strike, Felix enlists the rats in the vicinity as *agents provocateurs*, and decamps his comrades to a safe vantage point where they can observe the anarchy that ensues (*Felix Revolts* 6:22-7:45). The upshot of this is a civic declaration “that all cats be treated with utmost courtesy and have free access to all kitchens garbage cans etc.” (*Felix Revolts* 7:57-8:13).



Discontent among the purr-letariat: *Felix Revolts* condenses its version of Ten Days that Shook the World into a four minute cat-aclysm that overturns the status quo.

If the stories of individual cartoon shorts combined to form a consistent chronology and history, it would be tempting to say that Dodsworth is the beneficiary of Felix's work, which in turn allows him to get away with doing as little work as possible. Hardt and Negri might counter that Dodsworth is hard at work whether he likes it or not, since his principal line of work consists of being a housecat. Mousing is a sideline for Dodsworth in a home-based workplace defined by immaterial labour and its concomitant "*networks* based on communication, collaboration, and affective relationships" (Hardt and Negri 66, italics theirs).

The relationship in Dodsworth's home is complex, and as with many such relationships in small-shop labour, blurs the lines between proprietor and workforce more than somewhat. The lady of the house doesn't appear to have given Dodsworth a comfy cat bed, his own food bowl and on-demand access to sardines, cream and other contents of the fridge strictly as a condition of his catching mice. If she is, she must know she's getting ripped off. It's more likely that her ire at Dodsworth's diffidence towards mousing stems in part from guilt at having indulged him for so long. Deep down she knows that he's far more pet than predator, but she has to overcompensate on occasion to keep him from abusing her love and trust *too* blatantly.

Kiddin' the Kitten is a reminder that even the most instrumental aspects of the job of house pet have a strong emotional component. Dodsworth has a live-and-let-live relationship with the mice and therefore couldn't care less about catching them, but he has to *act* pleased once they're caught. It's what the boss expects, and it's what will make her happy. Happy employees make for happy bosses...and as Arlie Russell Hochschild (among others) points out, vice versa. Taking the emotional temperature of the room is an unstated part of the job description for many of those whom Hochschild chronicles in *The Managed Heart*, just as it is for Dodsworth. This fictional cat would likely feel a very real kinship with employees whose

productivity is an outgrowth of people-pleasing; he'd also understand, just as they do, that making the boss happy isn't just a pleasant side effect of a job well done—it's a conditioned expectation, almost a precondition of undertaking any part of the job, instrumental or emotional.

Just how deeply conditioned this expectation can be is addressed by Hochschild when she quotes from a 1974 manual for executives: "More executives hire secretaries for pleasant dispositions than for good looks. As one of them put it: 'I need a secretary who can stay cheerful even when I get grouchy, work piles up, and everything else goes wrong' " (148). 'Grouchy' and 'everything going wrong' are apt descriptions of Dodsworth's domestic boss and her predicament at the outset of *Kiddin' the Kitten*: with a kitchen overrun with mice, how can she possibly ensure the smooth running of what to all appearances is a comfortable middle-class household (0:30-0:57)? It's up to Dodsworth, no matter how much he may feel like sticking his tongue out at her when he thinks she isn't looking, to maintain at least the appearance that he shares her problems, whether he cares about them or not (*Kiddin'* 1:29-1:37). Assistants to management spend as much time and effort managing their managers' hearts as they do managing their own. This is as true for a cartoon feline assisting in household management as it was and is for real-life assistants like Anne Bogan, an executive secretary quoted in Studs Terkel's *Working*: "(a)s a secretary, you learn to adjust to the boss's moods" (91).

MANAGING HOUSEHOLDS AS WELL AS HOUSECATS: THE SITUATION SEEN FROM THE HUMAN POINT OF VIEW

In parlance that began to gain acceptance at the time *Kiddin' the Kitten* was released, Dodsworth's boss is a domestic engineer: though more periphrastic, the term wasn't used as often with the same demeaning connotations as 'housewife'. McKimson would address the

cultural narrative behind these connotations in a later cartoon, *Wild Wife*. While this 1954 film would never get its director confused with Betty Friedan or any other earlier feminist, it takes a sympathetic if blinkered look at the amount of unpaid work that goes into managing the daily life of a middle-class household. If, as a contemporary saying had it, the business of America is business, *Wild Wife*, *Kiddin' the Kitten*, and indeed any other film (cartoon or not) that foregrounds domestic engineering serve as a reminder that this business begins in the American home.

In the animated American home of the period immediately after World War II, a household pet was as much a part of the business as a work animal on a farm, with working conditions that suggested a more varied occupational brief than an agricultural beast of burden. Not only is labour like mouse-catching expected of companions animals like Dodsworth, but the tone that pet owners use to address them indicates that they're expected to understand complex instructions, and treat them as direct orders rather than as the air-filling conversation of lonely humans. The pet becomes anthropomorphized in the minds of a cartoon's fictional human characters as well as in the minds of the non-fictional humans who created the cartoon. It's asked to adopt multiple and shifting roles, analogous to being both a plough horse and the hired hand behind the plough. At the drop of a hat, it may be required to transition from being a tolerably 'dumb' animal to a trusted employee to a treasured member of the family.

Raised in the postwar American culture of domestic engineers and the suburban ideal, Hochschild is attuned to the subtleties that make the household a training ground for the work that its members do outside its confines: "it is in the family that we assess our ties to the public culture and search out ways in which we may be monitored there" (161). For Dodsworth and the domestic engineer he serves, home, family and work are one and the same, which can make the

dividing lines between them more difficult to distinguish. All the same, Hochschild would recognize that this particular home is not regulated by a *personal* control system based on appeals to reason, but by a control system of the more authoritarian *positional* variety, in which “clear and formal rules determine who gets to decide what and who gets to do what.” (156-157).

This is the type of hierarchy we assume to be in force between us and our pets: like our children or our subordinates at work, their influence over policy and its implementation is rigorously circumscribed. As far as the consultative facet of policy is concerned, pets have far less latitude for action than children or workplace underlings—I’ll venture that even the intelligent, active show dogs extolled by Donna Haraway in *The Companion Species Manifesto* had about as much say in their schedule of extracurricular activities as my infant daughter did when we enrolled her in babe-in-arms swimming lessons at the age of six months.

The affective component of our relationship with children, pets and coworkers is undeniable, but our capacity to comprehend it is frequently overstated. In all three cases, a misassessment of motives based on an overvaluation of our own perspective can lead us to substitute volition for pragmatism. Throughout *The Companion Species Manifesto* Haraway admits (both on and between the lines) that an intelligent and well-trained dog who appears to share “love, commitment and yearning for skill” (61) with its owner is still the product of a positional control system which reflects the human’s interests and priorities, and makes broad assumptions about the dog’s.

Even with an anthropomorphism like Dodsworth, whose motives are humanized and easier to fathom, love for one’s fellow creatures and the desire for the warm glow of commitment don’t do much to explain why he’s one of millions of American “cats...willing to

make the leap to the biosociality of...family members” (Haraway *Companion* 14). If he’s willing to leap, the main reason is pretty obvious—he’s in it for the free sardines (*Kiddin’* 0:58-1:14).

Dodsworth is aware that he’s effectively an employee in a home-based business—a home based on the idea that the home *is* a business—a business whose proprietor would have been aware of this as well. The young(ish) American homemaker of the 1950s grew up at a time when the idea of managing a home using rational businesslike principles was aggressively promoted, the better to instill a belief that the ‘domestic economy’ of an individual residence formed part of the support structure of the economy of the nation as a whole. This was an age that did not universally dismiss as ludicrous the specious and untenable notion that a household was not conceptually dissimilar to an automobile assembly plant, as helpfully outlined in tracts like Lillian Gilbreth’s 1927 magnum opus *The Home-Maker and Her Job*: “(h)ousekeeping is an industrial process. Industry has reduced much of its procedure to standard practice, and this is equally applicable to and available to housekeeping” (qtd. in Sammond 150).

Nifty and risible tidbits from history like this help to fill in some background details, but a clear picture of Dodsworth’s situation is all there in the foreground. A ready supply of food from the kitchen means that he doesn’t have to hunt mice to survive. Instead, his natural stock-in-trade becomes a form of alienated labour, since in order to justify the free food that allows him to survive, he has to hunt mice. This vicious cycle is compounded by a classic proletarian dilemma: kitchen food for immediate survival is available if and only if he hunts far more mice than he would need for immediate survival. Management’s position boils down to “hunt all the mice now, or you don’t eat here ever again”. That much surplus labour is worth a lousy tin of sardines? This is a cat badly in need of contract mediation.

**HOW THE OTHER HALF WORKS: THE CONFUSING WORK ENVIRONMENT OF
*TOM AND JERRY***

Contrast this clear-as-a-hit-in-the-head picture with the aggravating ambiguities surrounding a far more famous cartoon cat. Intricate details of graphic design aside, clarity is not either the longest or the strongest suit of a Tom and Jerry cartoon. Nearly five decades of watching and rewatching the things cannot stop my brain from screaming these words every time I see one:

“SO, DO YOU EAT MICE OR WHAT?”

Plots and situations vary in the 114 Tom and Jerry shorts produced and directed for MGM by William Hanna and Joe Barbera between 1940 and 1958. Each one of them has one unvarying constant: at some point, for some reason, Tom the cat is going to chase Jerry the mouse. Sometimes, the chase is instigated by an incident related in some way to the central conflict in the story; even when it isn't, the series' defining rationale dictates that no particular justification is necessary. Tom and Jerry fans had to wait until 1948 for this rationale to be spelled out, but they probably knew it all along. Still, the three-word manifesto chalked in by Tom on a blackboard in *Professor Tom* sums up the situation adequately enough: “cats chase mice” (0:24-0:32).

That's probably all the kitten being instructed by Professor Tom needs to know. The kitten under Dodsworth's tutelage in *Kiddin' the Kitten* already knows it, because he's signed up for master classes on “the fine art of mouse-catching” (2:34-2:36). Dodsworth's pupil is at least aware that for the purposes of running a household according to best practices and principles of domestic economy, mice are vermin and should be removed from the premises, by all means

necessary. After baiting them with ball-bearing-impregnated Swiss cheese and gathering them up with a magnet, he deposits them in a cage for future disposal (*Kiddin'* 4:41-5:30). On the other hand, Hanna and Barbera's Tom and Jerry shorts appear to be governed by an unstated corollary to *Professor Tom's* "catch chase mice" dictum, which can be phrased as follows: "...but never catch them". This in turn makes it easier to read the two antagonists as anthropomorphic stand-ins for humans scoring points off one another in an endless round of slapstick violence than as hunter and hunted in a fenced-in, walled-in, fully furnished sector of the animal kingdom.

The problematic of Tom and Jerry's relationship—are they predator and prey or two fur-bearing frat boys on a mutual pranking spree?—is thrown into sharpest relief when Tom ostensibly *has* to chase Jerry to keep his place in a household. With the activity a vocation rather than an avocation, Tom often acts uncertain about where the payoff for his hard work lies. When tasked as an occupational mentor in *Professor Tom*, he makes "cats chase mice" literally and figuratively the bottom line. No loaded Swiss cheese, ball bearings, magnets and cages for him: the pursuit is all that matters.



"Cats eat mice" must be part of the advanced course: *Professor Tom* (1948).

To be fair, Tom's understanding of his job isn't helped any by the anomalies in his reporting relationships as a household employee. The default setting for Tom's adventures is a middle-class household, and his default setting is 'housecat'; however, surprisingly few of the Tom and Jerry shorts show the owner of the house that Tom chases Jerry in and around. Human possessions function as comedy props: Tom's intermittent familiarity with their properties and use establishes his lower status in the household, but leaves the implications of that status somewhat ambiguous. The cigar he uses to attempt to smoke out Jerry in *Professor Tom* belongs to a human homeowner (or a human guest), because a few quick puffs on the stogie make him sick (4:20-4:48). However, his facility with a mop, scrub brush and other household cleaning aids in the 1948 short *Mouse Cleaning* indicates that he's considered responsible enough to help out with the general tidiness and upkeep of the abode (1:20-2:00, 2:20-2:25, 2:41-2:46, 3:22-3:31, 5:43-5:48, 6:01-6:04).



The best way to keep your 'forever home' is to forever keep it spic and span: Tom doing a little janitorial multitasking in *Mouse Cleaning*.

The ambiguity of Tom's status in his household is compounded by the ambiguity of the status of a human who asserts household authority over Tom in nineteen shorts between 1940 and 1952. The stereotypical African-American character known popularly (but never referred to on screen) as Mammy Two Shoes unintentionally functions as a blank slate on which viewers—among them animation historians—can project their own discourses of race and class. Karl Cohen tiptoes around the question of whether Tom's home is owned by whites and has Black servants by saying that “(a)lthough Mammy appears in several of the [Tom and Jerry] cartoons wearing an apron, suggesting she is a maid, in one cartoon she goes upstairs to her bedroom before going out, suggesting she owns the house and is its only human occupant” (56-57).

Christopher P. Lehman is rather less sure of the anti-segregationist implications of Cohen's conclusion, quoting a letter from onetime MGM animator Jack Zander which makes no bones about Mammy Two Shoes' character function: “the ‘mammy’ in Tom and Jerry was an outright racist cartoon character” which perpetuated comedic discourses on race dating back to the earliest days of blackface minstrelsy (“Jack Zander”). Lehman's own statements on the subject of Mammy Two Shoes are similarly categorical: particularly in her postwar appearances “the ‘Tom and Jerry’ maid was modeled more after radio sitcom characters like the title-character of *Beulah*, and she essentially became just another fictional domestic servant” (“Lillian Randolph”). He goes further than this in *The Colored Cartoon*, referring to her unequivocally as a “mammy figure” and postulating that her occasional fate as collateral damage during Tom and Jerry's escalating bouts of violence reduces her to the status of a stray prop that essentially “does not belong in the film” (51).

And yet, there she is, in the film—in nineteen of them, in fact—giving orders to Tom about keeping the home dirt-free, noise-free, and above all, mouse-free. The giving of orders

opens the door for ambiguity to creep in, based on where a viewer lines up on the spectrum of opinion between Cohen and Lehman. If, as Cohen contends, Mammy Two Shoes is the homeowner, then orders are hers to give free and clear. Agreeing with Lehman's reading that she is what used to be called 'in service' means conceding that her orders could be overruled by a homeowner who values their cat more than their maid, regarding her as little more than "a stray prop".

The implication here is that Tom's affective services as a companion animal would trump the more practical services that a maid could provide through elbow grease. However, while removing Mammy Two Shoes from the equation and making Tom directly answerable to the owners of the house settles the matter of where Tom stands in the household hierarchy, it leaves him a notch or two below Dodsworth's station in life. To split up an idea from Donna Haraway which I used a little while ago, Tom enjoys little of the love and commitment of a pampered pet, and is subject to his owners' yearning for him to display more skill as a mouser.

Hanna and Barbera conveniently and unknowingly demonstrated the lowering of Tom's occupational status that accompanies his having to answer directly to household management by reworking a theme from one of their earlier Tom and Jerry shorts. 1954's *Pet Peeve* is 1947's *A Mouse in the House* dressed in a grey flannel suit, replacing Mammy Two-Shoes' unsettling racially-charged ambiguity with the anodyne clarity of a stereotypically white middle-class married couple. The central dilemma remains the same—which of two pets to keep? So is the defining criterion for the competition between the pets—whichever one catches Jerry the mouse gets to stay.

The later film puts a middle-class spin on the question of having one less mouth to feed, mixing in a presumed gender dynamic as well. Rather than pitting two cats against each other, as in *A Mouse in the House*, *Pet Peeve* brings in a veteran of the *Tom and Jerry* stable of characters to vie with Tom—Spike the bulldog. The affective aspect of the two pets' labour is briefly invoked as justification for keeping one of them...and here's where the hackle-raising gender stereotypes come into play. The selection of a dog rather than another cat as the husband's preferred companion can be viewed through the same lens as Hanna and Barbera's earlier use of Mammy Two-Shoes: a 'just because' invocation of an assumed universal truth based on unexamined presumptions about cultural norms.

All that aside, the economic argument for keeping only one of Tom or Spike is based on the principles of domestic economy earlier quoted from Lillian Gilbreth, if slightly misapplied in practice. While going over the household finances, the husband in *Pet Peeve* bemoans the high cost of cat food and dog food, even as Tom and Spike merrily raid the refrigerator (1:32-1:36). The true drain on the family budget is revealed in this sequence: it's the bread, milk and other 'people food' that the two pets take to supplement their pet food (*Peeve* 0:26-1:31). It's also a fringe benefit that neither pet relinquishes when both are dismissed from the household. As a form of severance, Tom and Spike grab the refrigerator and run off over the horizon, in search of fresh prospects, preferably ones with electrical outlets (*Peeve* 6:02-6:14).

Before this departure for parts unknown, Tom and Spike's replacement as house pet—Jerry—is praised for not eating much (*Peeve* 5:48-5:50). How much he *eats* at any one time is not likely to become as much of an issue as how much he *takes*: unbeknownst to his new 'owners', he's been siphoning off provisions long enough to have sufficient reserve stashed behind the walls to stock a corner grocery store (*Peeve* 5:50-5:52).

I'll translate this to the terms of the human workplace to show how bad an example of HR practices this is. Mr. and Mrs. White Middle Class of 1954 have fired two slackers for abusing break room privileges and replaced them with an out-and-out embezzler.

HR RED IN TOOTH AND CLAW: COMICALLY CUTTHROAT COMPETITION AMONG HOUSEPETS

Not all 1950s cartoon household management teams are as unclear on what constitutes proper grounds for dismissal of their pets. The couple in Chuck Jones' 1950 Warner Brothers short *Two's a Crowd* have one strict criterion based on emotional labour and workplace harmony. A new hire—that is, a new puppy (named 'Frisky' in his subsequent appearances, but not named at all in this one)—immediately becomes the cynosure of the eyes of husband and wife; the household's incumbent pet, Claude the cat, overhears that he will have to toe the line and “get along with him” or “Claude will have to go” (*Two's* 1:10-1:11, 1:13-1:14).



New employee orientation, Looney Tunes style: Claude attempts to get acquainted with Frisky in *Two's a Crowd*.

This is easier said than done: Claude isn't particularly keen on the idea of being supplanted as top dog—uh, cat...and the creature that's supplanted him appears to have been endowed by nature with a range of behaviours that barely extend beyond the ability to unnerve anyone within earshot by padding up behind them and barking (*Two's* 2:40-2:42, 2:55-2:59, 3:17-3:18, 5:29-5:31, 5:41-5:43). Driven to distraction (although it could be argued that it's a short enough trip that he didn't have to be driven—he could walk), Claude's frenzied pursuit of his mindlessly friendly harasser leads him to an ill-advised attempt to extricate 'Frisky' from the house's ductwork with a toilet plunger. A volcanic eruption of red-hot coals from the furnace just as the gentleman and lady of the house arrive home from a night at the theatre seals Claude's fate...out he goes, propelled by a Size 10 ½ Oxford (*Two's* 5:51-6:25). Given more time, Claude's owners may have seen the wisdom in sending 'Frisky' for workplace sensitivity training (a.k.a. obedience school), but it was Claude who overreacted, and it was Claude who wrecked the joint. More mature behaviour than that is expected of a veteran employee, even one who may resent being bumped down the org chart.

As long as I've mentioned that dreaded word 'chart'...here are a pair of flow charts that may help to clarify why the outcome of *Two's a Crowd* can be deemed acceptable and rational by even the most die-hard dog-hating cat lover¹², while *Pet Peeve* can leave one wondering if anyone involved in making it had even a passing familiarity with what could be described as 'logical explanations for attitudes and behaviour'.

¹² My sample size for this postulation is admittedly small: one—that is, me. And I'm really more a dog-tolerator than an outright dog-hater...depending on the dog, under favourable circumstances. I empathize with both the feline and anthropomorphic sides of Claude in this regard.

Two's a Crowd

Claude must be nice to Frisky or out he goes

Claude gives Frisky half a chance

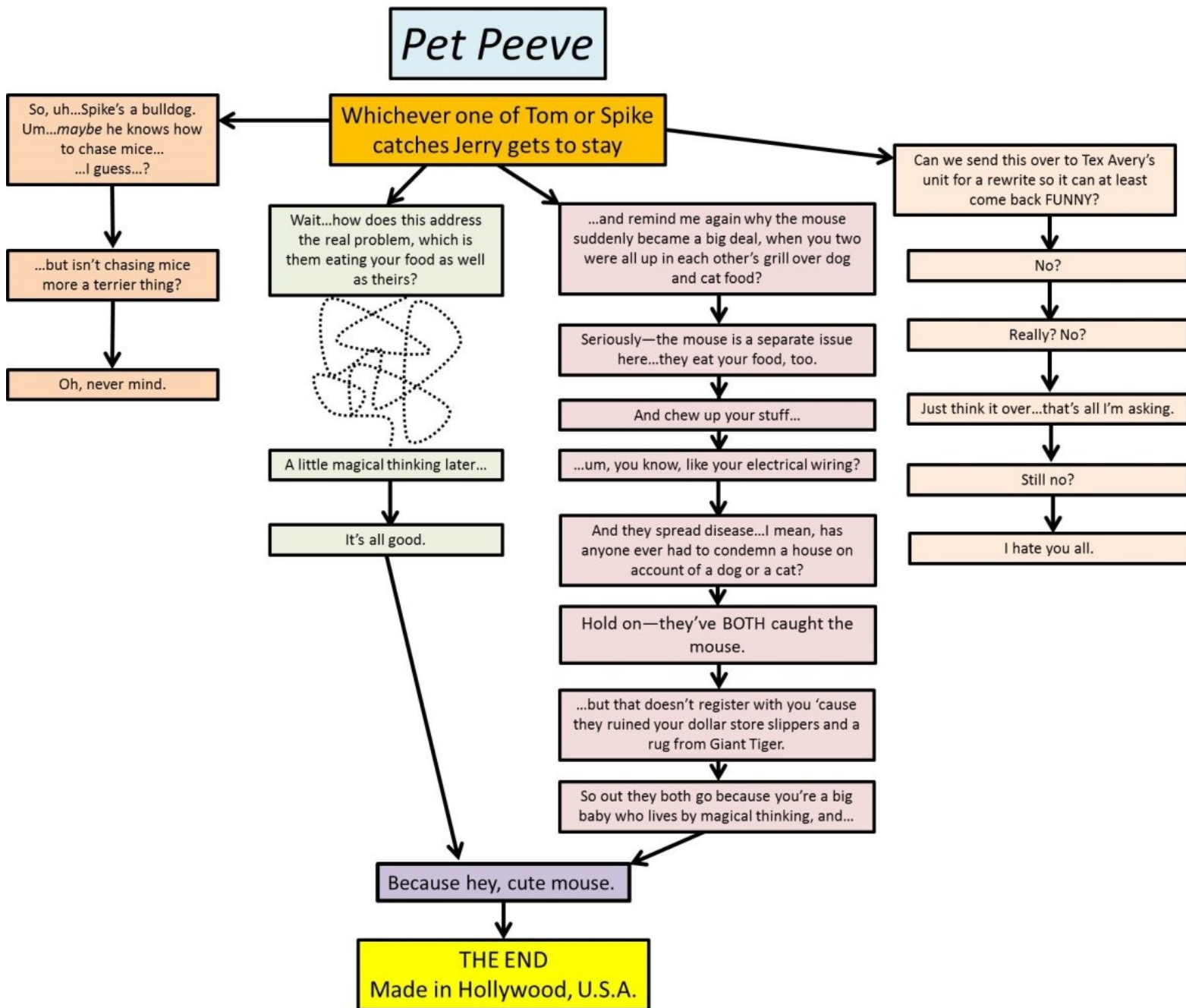
Half a chance is half a chance too many with this little sh**head

Claude loses his cool and flips the kill switch

One destroyed house later...

Claude is OUT

That's All Folks!



It's hard to imagine the plot of *Two's a Crowd* playing out in the fictional worlds of Tom and Jerry cartoons, because one of its main characters—Frisky—never displays aggression (despite displaying a considerable nuisance factor). Closer to the Tom and Jerry theme of “don't trust this cute animal's innocent look” is *Kit for Cat*, a 1948 Friz Freleng effort for Warner's. *Kit for Cat*'s Sylvester faces the same threat as Tom in his debut outing *Puss Gets the Boot*—expulsion for making noise after lights-out—but Freleng's cartoon tops Hanna and Barbera's in two significant respects:

1. THE STAKES FOR BOTH ADVERSARIES ARE HIGHER AND CLEARER:

Kit for Cat takes place in the dead of winter. Sylvester and an unnamed orange kitten are alley cats who throw themselves on the mercy (and central heating) of Elmer Fudd. For his part, Elmer is glad to take on a household companion, but his staffing decision will be based on implied budgetary considerations: “I'd wike to have a cat aaround the house alwight, but I can't keep both of you” (*Kit for Cat* 1:56-2:00). From that moment on, gaining the upper hand with the new ‘boss’ during a probationary period becomes a matter of survival for both cats. Sylvester's little orange rival borrows from Jerry the mouse's bag of dirty tricks, loosening plates from a rail on a wall and sending them tumbling to the floor, but he has a more compelling reason for framing the competition (*Kit for Cat* 5:00-5:09; *Puss Gets* 6:20-6:54). The alternative is possible death by exposure and/or starvation on the mean streets and back alleys of Warner Toontown; Jerry, on the other hand, faces...um...

...yeah, what actual *consequences* does Jerry face? Let's examine this. To avoid Tom, he can hide out unnoticed inside the walls of the house. Apparently he's chewed enough bolt-holes

that a fake one Tom paints on the baseboard doesn't register to him as being out of place (*Puss Gets* 1:12-1:24). Oh, yes, you say, *but at the beginning of the cartoon*, Tom...

...yes, go on...what *does* Tom *do* exactly?

He toys with Jerry, literally playing cat-and-mouse with him (*Puss Gets* 0:29-2:04).

While doing so, he passes up no fewer than five easy opportunities to end the game by eating his 'prey' (*Puss Gets* 0:39, 0:48, 0:57-0:59, 1:33-1:43, 1:53-1:56). At no time during any of this is it made manifest, evident, clear, or even plausible by inference that *this* cat intends to eat *this* mouse at *this* moment. After getting punched in the eye, Tom chases Jerry with a rage that suggests he's looking for revenge, not a snack (*Puss Gets* 2:08-2:19). In the absence of anything but an assumed essentialism concerning cats and mice, all we're actually witnessing is one creature tormenting the other, largely for the purpose of psychological humiliation rather than physical harm. When Jerry returns torment for torment, it's to remove an existential nuisance rather than an actual danger to life and limb. On the flip side of existential nuisances, it takes Tom a considerable amount of tension-filled time to finally get the drift that the best solution to his torment might be to eat his diminutive tormentor (*Puss Gets* 6:17).



Animation is the sincerest form of flattery, as demonstrated by *Kit for Cat* (R) reworking a routine from *Puss Gets the Boot* (L). Neither version explains exactly why plate rails were ever a thing.

And—before the question of the weather becomes obscured entirely—there’s no indication what the weather’s like in *Puss Gets the Boot*, but if this opening entry in the *Tom and Jerry* series plays to form, it’s probably nice outside. It’s always nice outside when Tom gets thrown out of the house. Leaving a cat to roam around a moderately prosperous neighbourhood with detached homes on a pleasant night...hardly a fate worse than death, much less (as in *Kit for Cat*) equivalent to it.

Mentioning the weather and the neighbourhood is a reminder of the second way that *Kit for Cat* ups the ante on *Puss Gets the Boot*...

2. THE PAYOFF SITUATES THE SETTING AND THE ACTION IN AN ACTUAL WORLD, AND NOT IN A VACUUM:

The noise in both cartoons comes from more than dishes breaking: falling light fixtures, a shotgun, a bass drum, slamming doors, a blaring radio and a school bell contribute to the din in *Kit for Cat*; *Puss Gets the Boot*’s plot proper is kicked off by a shattered flowerpot, followed by five minutes of nothing (and nothing breaking, either) before the crockery starts raining down (*Kit for Cat* 5:13-5:19, 5:42-6:47; *Puss Gets* 2:19, 7:06-7:08, 7:55-8:00). It’s enough to wake the dead, or at the very least, wake the neighbours. One neighbour is woken up in *Kit for Cat*—a very important neighbour—Elmer Fudd’s landlord, who hands him a summary notice of eviction for what we can reasonably assume is a violation of his lease due to all this after-hours hullabaloo (*Kit for Cat* 6:52-6:59).

Puss Gets the Boot takes place in another locality entirely, and not just because its surroundings seem more suburban than *Kit for Cat*’s decidedly midtown exteriors. This is an empty neighbourhood, or one inhabited by sound sleepers and/or the deaf. Those aren’t the only

possible explanations for the fact that Mammy Two Shoes is the only living soul perturbed by a ruckus that has to be audible at least as far away as next door. They do seem to be the only explanations that make *Puss Gets the Boot* seem more like an enacted narrative of events than a self-contained event staged on a closed set for the amusement of anyone who can sit through it.

As much as Hanna and Barbera's *Tom and Jerry* cartoons have been praised for their pictorial realism, they'll never be accused of realistically portraying the ways that actions can have consequences for more than one person at a time. Tom takes the fall, and that's that. *Puss Gets the Boot* is the tamest of the series in terms of household wreckage: subsequent exercises in object-shattering, ear-shattering home demolition prompt nary a call or a visit from neighbours, concerned passersby, or the police.

One of the troubles that the Hanna and Barbera *Tom and Jerrys* present is that they disappoint the expectation that something whose aesthetics have been so carefully thought out should be carefully thought out in its thematics. Instead, they betray a prevailing naïve ethos that life should be fair in spite of all the evidence life provides to the contrary, and moreover, that life should be fair in certain ways. Life is *not* fair to mice when they get caught and eaten by cats, but it's equally unfair to cats when they fail to catch and eat mice. It's also not fair when those held responsible for noise and destruction aren't its perpetrators, nor is it fair when one's survival depends on the arbitrary decisions of others.



CARTOON ART IMITATES CARTOON LIFE: THE PRECARIAT OF MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY AMERICAN ANIMATION

All these sound like possible themes of Greek tragedies; they're most definitely themes of Warner Brothers cartoons. The one about arbitrary decisions is specifically about *Kit for Cat*, but may also refer to goings-on at Warner's that the world at large wouldn't have been party to at the time. *Kit for Cat* was being made during a period when job security, characteristically at centre stage among the worries of Warner cartoon employees, seemed to have the spotlight all to itself. In 1947, while *Kit for Cat* was in its preparatory stages, "the decision to minimize costs at Warners called for three directorial units instead of four" (Baxter). The resulting staff reductions exacerbated the tension in a workplace atmosphere which had long been marked by brittle and sometime hostile competitiveness. One of *Kit for Cat*'s writers, Mike Maltese, had narrowly avoided being let go early in his tenure at the studio by producing evidence that writers with more seniority were rejecting his contributions out of hand to protect their own positions (Barrier 476).

Maltese confided this observation to Michael Barrier, who sums up the Warner workplace environment in this way: "(t)he Warner writers approached the world and their colleagues at the cartoon studio in what was, even in its most benign form, an essentially adversarial spirit" (477). This tendency was most pronounced in the production unit that was eventually axed. Its director, Arthur Davis, had inherited the unit from the more highly regarded Bob Clampett, and felt considerable pressure to perform up to his predecessor's standard (Schneider 90). Davis seems to have responded by passing the pressure on to his subordinates, leading to staff turnover that was, if not higher than the studio average, then certainly more fraught with drama. To take one example, the promising writing team of Bill Scott and Lloyd

Turner, both of whose post-Warner resumes indicate no shortage of talent¹³, was disbanded after a brief stint under Davis; each of them in turn was then dismissed for reasons that seem to have more to do with office politics than creative output. Scott's recollection was that disbanding the team was a misguided effort at enforcing productivity through internecine rivalry, and one that misfired badly:

We each had to write our own story, and whoever had the better story would be kept on and the other guy would be fired [...] we refused to play the game. We worked on each other's stories [...] We tossed a coin to see whose story would be whose. When the two stories were done, they liked Lloyd's story better than the one I had supposedly written by myself. He was kept on and I was fired. (Korkis)

Turner quit soon thereafter, rather than accept a demotion and a pay cut: "After three cartoons on his own, Turner was given an ultimatum to return to [the] in-betweening department [as an assistant animator] or leave; he chose the latter" (Baxter). Small wonder that Scott later was given to refer to the HR protocols at Warner's as "the fang and claw system" (K. Scott 37, also Korkis)¹⁴.

¹³ Turner "enjoyed a highly successful TV career" writing for a variety of sitcoms; his most enduring work was arguably done for Jay Ward's TV cartoon mini-empire (K. Scott 320). Ward's right-hand man was none other than Bill Scott, who in addition to functioning as the studio's story editor and head writer, supplied the voices of Mr. Peabody, Dudley Do-Right, Super Chicken, George of the Jungle, and (most famously) Bullwinkle.

¹⁴ Keith Scott (no relation to Bill) cites no source for this remark, but it reads like the kind of catchphrase that could have plausibly popped up in the frequent correspondence and conversations between the two namesakes, rather than uniquely in Bill Scott's 1982 interview with Jim Korkis.

Small wonder as well that Mike Maltese, a survivor of the Warner job wars, would have a hand in penning a cartoon that could be taken as an allegory for what he and his coworkers had to go through. Sylvester and the orange kitten in *Kit for Kat* may not have been meant to represent Bill Scott and Lloyd Turner, nor Elmer Fudd the Warner studio brass¹⁵, but the congruence between the ‘one more mistake and you’re out’ atmosphere of the cartoon and the ‘one more mistake and you’re out’ atmosphere of the place it was made is hard to miss.

A workplace where the old guard and the newbies are constantly in strife, where veterans downplay the work done by rookies to make their own work seem more worthy by comparison, brings us back around to *Kiddin’ the Kitten* and its central premise. After catching every mouse in the house, the white kitten is “graduated” from his apprenticeship by Dodsworth, enduring the same fate as Bill Scott and Lloyd Turner (*Kiddin’* 5:38-5:51). Like Mike Maltese, however, he fights back: after setting the mice free from the cage he captured them in, he roars in and expels them, this time in full view of the boss lady (*Kiddin’* 6:14-6:52). Order is restored, and the work of the household can continue henceforth on an even keel, with a cat in place who properly understands and executes the instrumental as well as the affective aspects of their contractually obligated labour.

...for a while, at least. *Kiddin’ the Kitten* concludes with the title character in the same recumbent posture as his erstwhile workplace mentor, on a cat bed with the name ‘Dodsworth’ crossed out, as indifferent to the comings and goings of the mice as Dodsworth ever was (*Kiddin’* 6:43-7:06). Perhaps, as at the Warner cartoon studio, it’s the workplace that sets the tone for the quality of the work: the kitten’s one and only line at iris-out echoes Dodsworth’s

¹⁵ Although the prospect of Mr. Fudd as a meddling movie mogul whets the imagination...imagine the impact of his interference to create film titles like *Bwidge on the Wiver Kwai*, *Wawence of Awabia*, or *A Cowckwork Owange*, or change Robert Duval’s line in *Apocalypse Now* from “I love the smell of napalm in the morning—it smells like victory” to “Sshh—be vewy quiet...we’re hunting Chawwie.”

opening dialogue: “Y’know, one of these days, I’m gonna have to buy me a mousetrap” (*Kiddin’* 7:07-7:12). With any luck, he’ll get around to buying one before the next kitten comes to the door, ready to be kidded, and even readier to take his job.



Chapter 4

"WHAT BIG ROVING EYES YOU HAVE"

Tex Avery's *Red Hot Riding Hood*, its 'sequels',
and their complicated take on sexuality



EVERY SINGLE THING I'M THINKING
RIGHT NOW COMES FROM AN ARCHAIC
CULTURAL CONTEXT.

OH--SO YOU'RE THINKING
"LUCILLE BALL CALLED; SHE WANTS HER
HAIRDO BACK", TOO...?

Of all the instances of potential mating between an anthropomorphic animal and a human female during the era of the cinematic-release animated short subject, this one may be, depending on how you look at it, the most famous, infamous or notorious.



Tex Avery's 1943 *Red Hot Riding Hood*, its eponymous heroine, and the other cartoons she featured in—*Swing Shift Cinderella* (1945), *The Shooting of Dan McGoo* (1945), *Wild and Woolfy* (1945), *Uncle Tom's Cabaña* (1947) and *Little Rural Riding Hood* (1949)—continue to be problematic. Although only the first and last of these films are directly adapted from the folktale they takes their titles from, all of them are tightly focussed on one of Little Red Riding Hood's core themes: the effects of young women's emerging sexuality. Avery's *Red Hot Riding Hood* corpus explores, problematizes, and celebrates the presumed unidimensionality of

heterosexual male arousal and men's love-lust-hate-fear relationship with female sexual response.

The sexual dynamic proposed by Avery in *Red Hot Riding Hood* and its sister films is by no means as simple as it appears on the surface. On the one hand, "Red" (that's the name she's now popularly known by, so that's what I'll call her from here on in) is, to put it mildly, pure eye candy. She's designed—and moves—with a sinuously sensual appeal that even Betty Boop's creators never dared to draw in her pre-Production Code incarnation. On the other hand...



...well, Red's other hand often has something in it that'll shut down even the most insistent lecher. She's well aware of the effect her looks have on men, and is perfectly capable of using any visible portion of her anatomy as either a defensive or an offensive weapon. This

includes her mouth, which can go from cooing a Mae West-intoned “Hello boys” in the general direction of all males in the vicinity to brusquely dismissing the Big Bad Wolf’s self-propelled roving eyeballs with an icy “beat it, boys—you bother me” (*Dan McGoo* 2:04-2:05, 4:42-4:45).

**PULLING THE WOLF OVER THE AUDIENCE’S EYES: CONTRASTING
ANIMATED TAKES ON *RED RIDING HOOD***

Red has another surprise tucked in that riding hood of hers. For all its contemporary references to Hollywood nightclubs and café society, the story she first features in hews more closely to the spirit of its source material than a good many of its cartoon predecessors. When a title card in *Red Hot Riding Hood* boasts—in neon lights, yet—that “something new has been added” (1:21-1:28), what it should actually be saying is “something old has been put back in”.

That “something”, of course, is sex. More specifically, it’s sexual predation. Even more specifically than that, it’s sexual predation which uses an anthropomorphism to bring the animalistic side of human sexuality into sharp relief. In their collection *Folk and Fairy Tales*, Canadian folklorists Martin Hallett and Barbara Karasek stress the symbolic function of the wolf in *Little Red Riding Hood*: “this is not a real wolf—and arguably neither child nor adult reader ever takes him as such” (21). Going on to note that an early version of the tale “identifies him as a werewolf” (21), they see Charles Perrault’s seventeenth century version of the tale as a turning point in “the evolution of the werewolf into a metaphor” (22). In the main body of his story, Perrault’s wolf is strictly the four-legged kind, but the author makes it clear in an appended moral what the creature *really* represents:

Now, there are real wolves, with hairy pelts and enormous teeth; but also wolves who seem perfectly

charming, sweet-natured and obliging, who pursue young girls in the street and pay them the most flattering attentions. (Hallett and Karasek 27)

The link drawn in this and other versions of *Little Red Riding Hood* between the threat posed by a hungry woodland predator and the threat posed by aggressive male sexuality is echoed in subtle indications of Red Riding Hood's emergence into womanhood. Hallett and Karasek assert that another addition of Perrault's—the familiar red riding hood worn by the girl who derives her name from it—is a deliberate invocation of “a color symbolic of sexuality” (22). Another garment furnishes the pretext for innuendo in the Grimm Brothers' telling of the tale. Inquiring about the purpose of her journey into the woods, the Grimms' wolf asks Red Riding Hood, “And what's that you've got under your apron?” (Hallett and Karasek 28). Red Riding Hood's response to this question—“Cake and wine”—contains sexual symbolism of its own (Hallett and Karasek 28).

One further aspect of *Little Red Riding Hood* comes to the fore through a comparison of several early animated versions of the tale. Wolf or no wolf, Red Riding Hood is only as ‘little’ as a storyteller implies and a listener or reader infers her to be. The word ‘girl’ commonly used to describe Red Riding Hood is a distinctly ambiguous term. Members of the PTA with grown children can have ‘girls’ nights out’, and residents of long-term care homes can be referred to by other residents as their ‘girlfriends’. Despite those anecdotal postulations, I'm going to hypothesize that Red Riding Hood is not widely thought of as either a member of the 35-54 age demographic, nor a Golden Ager. Still...as a ‘girl’, is she six years old or sixteen? Pre-sexual or just awakening to her sexuality? Metaphorically, it may not make as much of a difference, but if you're going to be as graphic about things as an animated cartoon has to get, it matters a lot.

An early and confused take on the relationship between Red Riding Hood and the male of any species came from the animation world's great muddler of all things sexual, Walt Disney. His 1922 Laugh-O-Gram short *Little Red Riding Hood* deals with the sexual aspects of the story and the question of Red Riding Hood's age in ways that go beyond merely coy. The girl is on the receiving end of what could be called ogling, if only it were drawn better and animated more clearly (*Little Red Riding Hood* 2:41-2:55). It's not coming from a wolf, though, but from a man in a car. The object of his attentions is in a car of her own—although the car's 'engine' is a dog in harness who pushes the vehicle while chasing a suspended string of sausages (*Little Red Riding Hood* 2:15). Whether this artistic license is meant to tell you that Walt's silent Red Riding Hood is old enough to have a driver's license is up to you. So is what happens at Grandma's house when Mr. Wolf-Substitute meets Red Driving Hood there. I get the sense that Walt wanted to keep the full implications of the incident from both the audience and the censors by having the house bounce around while clouds of dust and the occasional word "help" emanate from it (*Little Red Riding Hood* 4:26-4:33, 4:39-4:44, 5:11-5:14, 5:19-5:20, 5:24-5:27)...but my imagination (and probably that of many people watching it over the years) ran a little wilder than even I was comfortable with.



Everything's up to date in Kansas City: before moving on to Hollywood fame and theme park fortunes, Walt Disney made a Midwestern version of *Little Red Riding Hood*, substituting a thirsty man with a mid-life crisis for the standard hungry wolf.

A Disney hagiographer would say that the mishmash that is the 1922 Laugh-O-Gram *Little Red Riding Hood* reveals Walt to be an ace amateur folklorist, well-versed in the history of this particular folktale, and keen on stripping it of its symbolic layer of anthropomorphism to reveal the darkly human essence at the core of the story. Such an individual might even go on to exult about how Walt emphasized the true horror of the situation by concealing most of its details, revealing him to be not only an analyst of folklore rivalling Vladimir Propp or Claude Levi-Strauss but also an assiduous student of the dramaturgical conventions and traditions of classic Greek Tragedy. I'll toss aside this straw man I just cobbled together and stick to a more commonsense view of the 1922 Walt Disney as a guy very nearly out of his depth as both an animator and a storyteller, give a passing nod to his uncontested ability to surround himself with better talents than his own, and move on.

Where I'm moving on to is another Disney take on *Little Red Riding Hood* that reveals that Walt really wasn't at all comfortable with the adult themes inherent to its symbolism. *The Big Bad Wolf* from 1934 doesn't really spell out what its title character's after—is it sex? Food? Directions to the public library? Who knows? What we *are* supposed to know is that he represents some sort of undifferentiated evil, and therefore must be vanquished. It hardly helps matters that he doesn't even show up in a cartoon named after him until the thing's nearly three minutes old (*Big Bad Wolf* 2:42). In case you're thinking this is director Burt Gillett anticipating classic Hitchcockian suspense, what's actually been killing time up 'til now is exposition via overkill. For the sake of brevity, animated versions of *Little Red Riding Hood* often gloss over the mother's warnings in the traditional tale about avoiding big bad wolves, deep dark woods and whatever other dangers spring to the maternal mind. *The Big Bad Wolf* also discards the mother,

but retains the discussion of danger, putting it into the mouths of the Three Little Pigs (0:32-2:27).

Writing the pigs into Red Riding Hood's story isn't a sly attempt to mock the expectations that accompany an audience's familiarity with the common genre their narratives both belong to. The only thing it seems to be attempting on a conscious level is to short-circuit the audience's critical thinking. It exploits the celebrity factor of the Disney version of the Three Little Pigs, stars of a cartoon from the previous year with a breakout hit song, "Who's Afraid of The Big Bad Wolf?" Both the pigs and their song reappear in *The Big Bad Wolf* to reassure anyone who missed the film's title that whatever the wolf may be up to in this outing, it's going to be bad (and possibly big as well). There it is. No further need for thinking about the subject required.

Not only does this do the audience a big favour by saving wear and tear on their grey matter, it saves Disney's writing staff the bother of coming up with a clear reason why the Big Bad Wolf wants anything to do with Red Riding Hood. The writers of other contemporary cartoon shorts derived from the folktale seemed a little more hung up on what the Big Bad Wolf wanted, and why. For example, Friz Freleng's 1944 Merrie Melodie *Little Red Riding Rabbit* makes it crystal clear that the wolf's ruled by his stomach: he starts drooling as soon as he gets wind of the idea that a meal in the form of Bugs Bunny is in the basket destined for Grandma (2:38-2:42). The Red Riding Hood in this picture is a visibly maturing teenager, but she's an annoying buttinski whose voice is like a skate sharpening machine with a loose grinding wheel. No wonder the wolf keeps shooing her away with a perfunctory "G'bye" (*Riding Rabbit* 2:50-2:51, 3:01-3:03).



Little Red Riding Headache: The wolf's big eyes in *Little Red Riding Rabbit* (1944) are fixed squarely on the nearest door that he can he can throw this pubescent pest out of.

I'm going to gloss over Freleng's 1941 Red Riding Hood parody *The Trial of Mr. Wolf*, except to say that the Red Riding Hood in it shows her maturity through lipstick, eye makeup, and frightening skill at driving a motorcycle. Oh, yes, and through the scam she runs to entrap hapless wolves for her grandmother's fur business. Enough said...but the subject of skinning wolves forms a neat transition to the Fleischer Brothers' contribution to the sub-genre, 1931's *Dizzy Red Riding Hood*. The title character in this one is fully and visibly sexually mature, and played by Betty Boop. Before Little Red Betty Boop (or anything else, for that matter) appears onscreen, we already know that sex is going to be on the menu. A narration in rhymed couplets accompanying the film's title card informs us that

There's been 'red' rumours of Riding Hood,

Some are bad and some are good.

Why do they pick on the poor little kid?

Some say she didn't and some say she did.

You surely heard the story before,

That she tried to keep the wolf from the door.

(Dizzy Red 0:15-0:30).

The seed has now been planted: placing the wolf at the door makes it a metaphor for poverty, and Red Riding Hood (if you believe the rumours) is trading sexual favours for the wherewithal to live. What follows doesn't quite live up to this billing—*Rain* by Somerset Maugham it ain't—but you don't have to look far to see overt and covert references to sex. For 'overt', let's start with a lingering low-angle close-up of Betty's legs as she walks along and stops to adjust her garters (*Dizzy Red 4:27-4:34*). Here's something even more overt: at the end of the cartoon, the wolf pulls Betty into bed with accidentally-on-purpose maladroitness and starts to kiss her. Betty gives every indication of enjoying these ham-handed advances (*Dizzy Red 5:39-6:06*).

Mind you, by the time the kissing starts, the wolf has revealed himself to be Betty's sometime boyfriend Bimbo, an anthropomorphic dog whose appearances in Fleischer cartoons often come tantalizingly close to investing him with enough personality to justify his reappearance. Bimbo's in there pitching woo from the very first scene, although his offer to walk Betty to Grandma's house is rebuffed: "my mother wouldn't want you to" (*Dizzy Red 1:01-1:03*). So much for the subtle approach. Next Bimbo tries chivalry, warning Betty about wolves in the forest. He gets blown off again (*Dizzy Red 1:21-1:29*). Ignoring the warnings, Betty lets a forest wolf walk alongside her, not even batting an eyelash as he makes flirtatious attention-seeking gestures like walking on his hands and planting flowers (*Dizzy Red 2:08-2:50*). Just when you

think you he's going to put the moves on Betty, though, the wolf changes his tack, revealing that his true desire is to eat Betty in the literal rather than any figurative sense (*Dizzy Red* 2:50-3:22).



Bimbo looks on with jealousy from behind a tree as Betty Boop tries to play hard to get with a show-off wolf in *Dizzy Red Riding Hood* (1931).

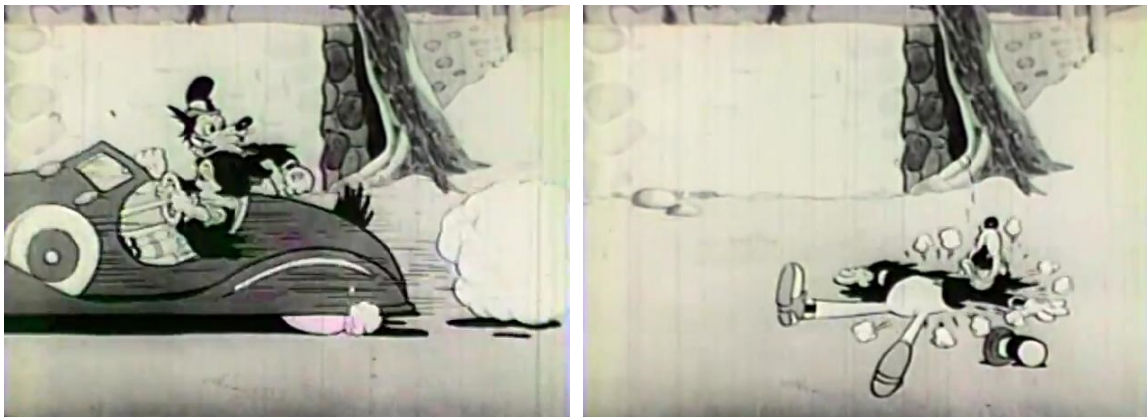
Whether or not this wolf's intentions seem consistent, Bimbo's certainly are. After fighting and skinning the wolf, he puts the wolf's skin on, flirts with and gawks at Betty while she picks flowers, then sneaks into Grandma's house and climbs into bed to impersonate the wolf impersonating Grandma (*Dizzy Red* 3:22-4:56). In the midst of this comes an epiphany of sorts: "She loves wolves" says Bimbo, as he puts the wolf's skin on (*Dizzy Red* 3:46-3:47). In other words: based on what he's seen in the forest, Betty likes the boys who come on strong. This is where we came in. Cut to the groping and the kissing; dissolve to a copulatory visual metaphor of Betty and Bimbo canoodling while swinging on a crescent moon, and iris out (*Dizzy Red* 6:05-6:12).

When it comes to food and sex, everyone's tastes are very much their own, and are subject to change. This is illustrated to the nth degree in the 1931 Van Beuren short *Red Riding Hood*. This time around, Red Riding Hood is a Minnie Mouse knockoff who doesn't have enough screen time with the wolf for us to get a sense of whether he's after her at all, much less for what reason. Instead, Grandma's the focus of the writers' and ultimately the wolf's attentions. After drinking a nostrum called "Jazz Tonic", she transforms into a youthful, shapely and decidedly statuesque lady mouse (*Red Riding Hood* 1:53-2:44). As for the wolf...well, one look at the New Improved Grandma, and little girls with baskets are right off his wish list (*Red Riding Hood* 3:03-3:33). A whirlwind courtship complete with a shimmy dance by Grandma ensues, and off they go to the altar to get married (*Red Riding Hood* 3:33-5:06). The only hitch to the hitch is that there's already a Mrs. Big Bad Wolf and a battalion of wolf cubs, all of whom come to the church armed with rolling pins to stop the ceremony (*Red Riding Hood* 6:13-6:37).



"Some grandma", opines The Big Bad Wolf in the 1931 Van Beuren version of *Red Riding Hood*. Ninety years later, the FDA still hasn't given its opinion about "Jazz Tonic".

There's one more variation on the theme that I want to take up, in the interest of making a smoother transition back to Tex Avery and *Red Hot Riding Hood*. A 1935 Terrytoon entitled *A Modern Red Riding Hood* has a title character who appears to be a little girl, but like the Red Riding Hoods in Disney's 1922 cartoon and Freleng's *The Tale of Mr. Wolf*, is very grown-up when she gets control of a vehicle (*Modern Red* 2:59-3:50). Maybe the little speed demon's just petite; whatever her age, she's most assuredly a practised coquette. The Big Bad Wolf plays by the rules, ringing the doorbell when he comes a-courting and serenading her in a passable impression of Bing Crosby, and what does she do? She grabs his gifts of flowers and candy and slams the door in his face not once, but twice (*Modern Red* 0:30-2:20). Some of the girl's callous treatment of an individual who has so far shown no ill intent can be ascribed to the sense of entitlement that comes with economic privilege. This "modern" Red Riding Hood has a butler to do her bidding (*Modern Red* 2:24-3:06); all the wolf can afford to keep up with her souped-up convertible is an antiquated penny-farthing bicycle and a pair of roller skates (*Modern Red* 3:29-3:39, 3:54-4:00).



The wolf in *A Modern Red Riding Hood* (1935) discovers that hit-and-run driving is an effective if potentially lethal method for rebuffing unwanted advances.

**RED WARMING UP AT WARNER'S: TEX AVERY'S PRECURSORS TO
*RED HOT RIDING HOOD***

A Modern Red Riding Hood contains an element which offers a key to better understanding the part Red plays in Avery's explorations of sexuality during his mature period as a director. It's an element which is also on display throughout Avery's first use of the Red Riding Hood story—the 1937 Warner cartoon *Little Red Walking Hood*. Like its 1935 Terrytoon counterpart (only with considerably more subtlety and panache), this version of the tale leans heavily on the theme of male response to emerging female sexuality. Where Avery's MGM Red is clearly an adult, sexually developed and highly sexualized, *Little Red Walking Hood's* title character is a little girl, visibly prepubescent for all her Katherine Hepburn-ish affectations. This plain fact has no effect on the wolf's libido: his pursuit of her is from the outset exclusively sexual in nature. It's hard not to cringe a little as the wolf cruises alongside Little Red in an open roadster, making the most inelegant of efforts to pick her up in two senses of the phrase (*Little Red Walking Hood* 1:24-3:24). Little Red's icy rejections of the free ride and the other sort of ride that it implies betray a streetwise worldliness that belies her tender years and innocent appearance. Addressing the audience, she offers the sobering comment that “two-thirds of you girls out there have gone through just what I'm going through now” (*Little Red Walking Hood* 1:56-2:01). The question that this question raises is, “does she really understand just exactly what she's saying here?”

My answer to that question would be “yes...up to a point”, that point being established as dangerously close to censorship territory when Little Red brushes off the wolf with a casual “scram, Romeo” (*Little Red Walking Hood* 3:19-3:20). What redeems *Little Red Walking Hood* from becoming an unintentional case study in pedophilia is Avery's addition to the story of a

character from his personal cartoon repertory company—that perplexing, bulbous-nosed clown-like figure known as Egghead. As with his appearances in other Avery cartoons such as *The Island of Pingo Pongo* (1938), *A Day at the Zoo* (1939), and *Hamateur Night* (1939), Egghead intrudes just when the action seems to be settling onto a predictable path. Exasperated by Egghead’s insistent and apparently unmotivated strolls across the downstage area of the film frame, the wolf blurts out “Now, who the heck are you, anyway?” (*Little Red Walking Hood* 7:20-7:23). Be careful what you wish for: Egghead’s response “I’m the hero in this picture” is punctuated by a roundhouse blow with a maul upside the wolf’s noggin (*Little Red Walking Hood* 7:25-7:30). A quick iris-in that interrupts the concluding iris-out shows Egghead smothering Little Red with rapid-fire kisses. The expression of glee on Little Red’s face shows that she has at least a rough notion of what a kiss can lead to...and that she enjoys at least the idea of it (*Little Red Walking Hood* 7:33-7:34). Given that this machine-gun-style osculation is coming from the man-child Egghead and not someone more apparently full of adult masculine potency such as the wolf, the audience is spared some of the trouble of thinking through what might take place once the iris is out for good.



Kids, don’t accept rides from strangers: Little Red Walking Hood snubs a wolf who’s too big and too bad for someone her age. The innocence of the activity between her and Egghead in the image on the right is open to question, but it is consensual.

Or not...because ...if you think this is a one-off...well—the wolf who gate-crashes the story of The Three Bears in Avery’s 1940 effort *The Bear’s Tale* gets this tease-cum-smackdown from Goldilocks: “Hm! What’s Red Riding Hood got that I haven’t got?” (*Bear’s Tale* 4:34-4:38). Goldie’s body language makes it all too clear that she’s not necessarily or exclusively talking about a basket of baked goods. Avery’s *Cinderella Meets Fella* (1938) has “Prince Charming” Egghead wooing and engaging in prolonged reciprocated kissing with a Cinderella who, for all her finery, appears no older than the Little Red and Goldilocks of Avery’s other fractured fairy tales. I might also add that she’s the instigator of the kissing bout at the royal ball, where the king and his retainers further complicate the question of how mature she’s meant to be by wolf-whistling and leering “Baby—!” (*Cinderella Meets Fella* 4:30-4:36). And don’t get me started on *Johnny Smith and Poker-Huntas* (1938), another Egghead venture with a mix of anachronisms and unfortunate racial stereotypes that upstage something that’s a little difficult to overlook for two reasons: 1. The heroine is once again underage, her build and movements in no way suggesting that she’s even on the cusp of adolescence; and 2. Miss Underage and her sort-of-a-grown-up-man-sort-of-a-little-boy of a boyfriend wind up having a houseful of children (wait for it...) *without seeming to age at all*. I don’t know if Tex Avery ever read any Freud, but this is polymorphous perversity at its most perverse.

**WHAT DO CARTOON WOMEN WANT? RED AND HER GRANDMOTHER
EXPRESS THEIR DESIRES**

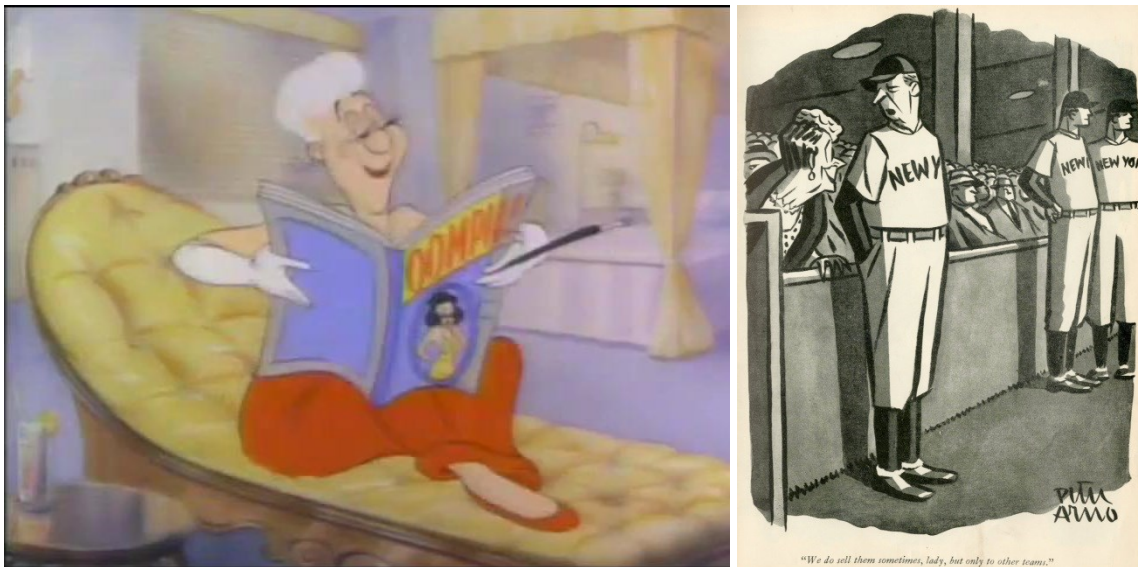
The operative word in that last sentence is ‘polymorphous’. What I’m trying to get across is the idea that Avery’s explorations of heteronormative sexuality involve a complex interrogation of the subject that is sometimes obscured by its more titillating features. Although she was portrayed less as a character than a piece of mobile scenery in her later appearances, the

first two animated shorts featuring the all-grown-up Red show her as a woman in control of her own destiny. She may reluctantly accept a seat at the wolf's nightclub table in *Red Hot Riding Hood*, but persistent suggestions of further diversions by her hopeful suitor are steamrolled by a resounding "NO!" (courtesy of Tex Avery's own underrated voicebox) with an exclamation point provided by a lamp slam-dunked over the wolf's head (*Red Hot Riding Hood* 4:43-4:45). This is a woman who knows what she wants, and a wolf on the make is definitely not it. Red is not about to let herself be used as merely a means to the end of male sexual gratification. She has other ends in mind—very material ends enumerated in her cabaret song that precedes and triggers the wolf's invitation. According to the lyrics she sings, Red believes that the best things in life are far from free, coming at the hefty price of "a diamond ring...some bracelets [...] sables, clothes with Paris labels" provided by anyone willing to be her "Daddy" (*Red Hot Riding Hood* 2:46-2:49; 2:59-3:01). In case anyone tried to avoid thinking about what "Daddy" would get in return for his purchases, she spells it out (to the fullest extent allowed by the censorship of the time) at the end of her number: "With a bit of stimulation/I could be a great sensation/I'd even be your little consolation" (*Red Hot Riding Hood* 3:26-3:33). With this film coming out at the height of World War II, maybe it's not surprising that sex becomes weaponized and turned against the traditional aggressor. After all, Red *does* ask "Daddy" for the B-19 bomber at one point during her song (*Red Hot Riding Hood* 3:17-3:18).

The wolf takes singer and song at face value: part of his pitch at the table involves not only jewelry and furs, but consumer goods that were difficult come by due to wartime restrictions: "I will give you diamonds...pearls...ermine...I will even give you a new set of white sidewall tires" (*Red Hot Riding Hood* 4:25-4:34). If we assume, as the wolf does, that Red's song was tailor-made to reflect her offstage attitudes and interests, it would seem that her

motives are mercenary, not predatory like the wolf's. Her tactics are a very civil defense against a potential love-‘em-and-leave-‘em blitzkrieg.

Her grandmother, on the other hand, is a highly militarized erogenous zone. Grandma's pursuit of the wolf takes up a frenzied and uninterrupted minute of screen time—about one-sixth of the main action in Avery's updated version of the fairy tale—supplying *Red Hot Riding Hood's* (ahem) climax as it turns the tables on Fairy Tale Land's most notorious skirt-chaser (5:25-6:30). Where Red uses the promise of sex to turn a profit, Grandma appears to use sex itself for sport. The arrival of “At last! A wolf!” (*Red Hot Riding Hood* 5:28-5:30) means that the game is on. Sex as a recreation is a natural outgrowth of Grandma's life of leisure: if she spends her time in bed, it's because she's lounging in a penthouse like one of the sybaritic society matrons in the Peter Arno *New Yorker* magazine cartoons she has been said to have been modelled on (Barrier 413).



Just because there's snow on the roof, it don't mean the fire's gone out below: Red Hot Riding Hood's grandma and a Peter Arno 'grandmother' type with more than a casual interest in the Great American Pastime...and in baseball, too. For those of you without scanning electron microscopes, the caption of the Arno cartoon reads: “we do sell them sometimes, lady, but only to other teams”. (For all any of us know, Grandma could be looking at this very cartoon in her magazine.)

Grandma's response to the wolf at her penthouse door shows her to be ready for active duty on a moment's notice. Zeroing in on her target for the night, she streaks across the room like a surface-to-air missile; but for quick evasive action by the target, the puckered lipstick stain Grandma leaves on the wall could have easily enveloped the wolf's entire face (*Red Hot Riding Hood* 5:51-5:58).

There's something beyond a straightforward turning of the tables going on here, something which confounds the monadic Freudian interpretation of the heterosexual dynamic. For Grandma, the pursuit has a highly desirable element of play for play's own sake; it's a grown-up version of a schoolyard game of tag. For the wolf, it seems much closer to a question of life and death. At stake is not so much whether the wolf finds Grandma attractive, but whether she's *allowed* to express her attraction for him by *taking* action instead of *inviting* action and reacting to it. Viewed both from the vantage points of the overall narrative and the characters within it, Grandma can be seen to have unseated the wolf from his comfortable place behind the steering wheel, claiming for herself "the man's role of forwarding the story, of making things happen" (Mulvey 838). To borrow a metaphor from another game, the wolf is as nonplussed by Grandma's opening gambit as a chess master would be if the player with the black pieces made the first move.

Grandma's sexuality is a threat to the wolf's concept of How Things Ought To Be on two fronts: her hot pursuit deprives the wolf of the privilege of taking the initiative and puts it in the hands of someone whose drives operate along different dimensions from his. The notion of multidimensionality in human sexual imaginary and response goes a good way towards explaining why Tex Avery's "Red" cartoons have been compellingly uncomfortable to watch since they were first released. Part of what makes Tex Avery's wolf work so well as a vehicle for

comedy in these cartoons is the manner in which he embodies an incomplete view of heterosexuality. It almost goes without saying that this view is incomplete to the extent that it represents only the male side of the heterosexual equation. What *does* need to be said is how Avery's depiction of this dynamic unconsciously but subtly presents the female side of the equation with a complexity that is overshadowed by the wolf's graphically emotive reactions to the 'cheesecake' elements in female character design.

A WOLF IN CREEP'S CLOTHING: MACHISMO, BRAGGADOCIO, AND OTHER MASCULINE SEXUAL FALSE FRONTS



The moment you've all been waiting for: no discussion of *Red Hot Riding Hood* is truly complete unless it includes a picture of the wolf's phallic reaction to Red's nightclub act.

A caveat before I continue with this thought: the men-only composition of the Avery cartoon unit implies that 'the female side' actually means 'the female side as hypothesized from a male perspective'. Even if you essay a further hypothetical and assume that Red's chief animator Preston Blair submitted his rough work to his sister-in-law, Disney background painter

and designer Mary Blair, for her input on aesthetics and sexual politics, this input would reach the screen at more than one remove from its source. Even so, there's more than just visualized carnal desire being put on display in these cartoons. To attempt to demonstrate what's going on beneath the surface, I'll make another brief mention of Freud and skew his famous quote about women by asking "*What does the wolf want?*"

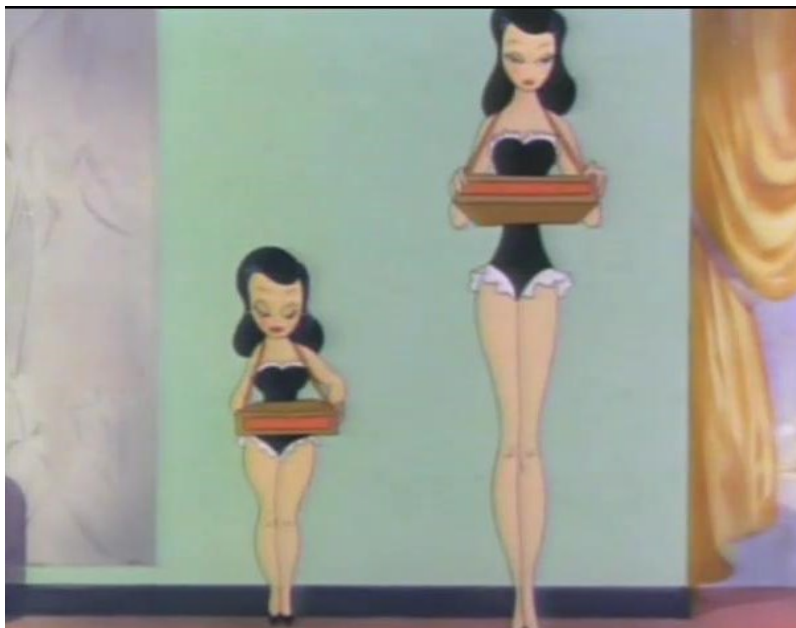
You probably hate it just as much as I do when someone answers a question with a question, but I'm going to begin my answer to the question I just posed with a question posed to an earlier Tex Avery wolf, and what's more, one I've already quoted. In *The Bear's Tale*, Goldilocks accelerates the collision between her own story and one you expect to see a wolf in by asking point-blank "what's Red Riding Hood got that *I* haven't got?" (4:34-4:38). For the wolf in that cartoon, the answer is 'nothing', with the result that The Three Bears encounter a housebreaker very different from the one that previously published versions of the story have led all of us to expect. The wolf in *Red Hot Riding Hood* and its follow-ups is never asked this question, but his answer to it can be deduced from what he does...and what he *doesn't* do.

A closer look reveals that the wolf looks at other human females, but once he's caught sight of Red, he expresses neither interest in nor desire for anyone else. Although his first appearance in the plot reboot in *Red Hot Riding Hood* shows him wolf-whistling and howling at a silhouetted woman's legs to establish his status as a rakish cad with a roving eye (1:31-1:39), his eye has already stopped roving once he reaches the club where Red is performing. He walks right past two cigarette girls (*Red Hot Riding Hood* 2:10-2:20) without a backward glance—no howl, no wolf whistle, no flirty remark, no wink, no nothin'. In *Swing Shift Cinderella*, the coat-check girl gets a similar brush-off in favour of Red, whose coat she is taking (4:24-4:28).

Just like Red, all three women conform to a standard ‘sexy girl’ pattern of 1940s cartooning; like Red, the cigarette girls are clad in a manner that accentuates and reveals their curvaceous contours. Looks alone aren’t enough to get the wolf’s interest. Something else must be at work in his mind to supplement a conceptualization of Woman “as, first and foremost, a sight” (Berger, *Seeing* 51). To be sure, the wolf surveys Red with the “controlling and curious gaze” redolent with Freudian scopophilia and narcissism that Laura Mulvey explored in her landmark essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (835). Superficially, though, the coat-check girl and the cigarette girls have all got what Red’s got...so what else is there that a woman might have that the wolf wants?



The coat check from *Swing Shift Cinderella*. Taken out of context, it’s unclear which of these two women the wolf is more interested in. He’s about to sneak around the corner to try to ambush Red without so much as a “Hi, Toots” to the woman working the coat check.



The cigarette girls from *Red Hot Riding Hood*. The comedy premise behind this feminine Mutt-and-Jeff act is signalled by their dialogue. In a tight one-shot, the one on the left calls out “Cigarettes...cigarettes”; the camera then pans to the one on the right, who calls out “King size...King size” (*Red Hot Riding Hood* 2:12-2:19).

By inviting voyeurism without explicitly suggesting that looking need ever lead to overtly sexual behaviour with its full implications and responsibilities, Red and the employees of the nightclubs in *Red Hot Riding Hood* and *Swing Shift Cinderella* certainly embody an image of “the sexually mature woman as non-mother” (Mulvey 834). In a different way, so do *Red Hot Riding Hood*’s Grandma and another character from Avery’s ‘Red’ corpus—the Fairy Godmother from *Swing Shift Cinderella*. Assuming them from their appearance to be post-menopausal, they and their highly willing libidos represent an opportunity for consensual and consequence-free libertinism. Over and above that, they also possess desirable powers: the Fairy Godmother’s are supernatural and (occasional missteps in spellcasting aside) presumably limitless; Grandma’s are more in the material and socioeconomic realms (as evidenced by her ownership of a penthouse apartment) but are no less formidable for their lack of thaumaturgical backup.



Visions of Red have the wolf floating up to the ceiling in *Swing Shift Cinderella*, but his date—Red/Cinderella’s fairy godmother—is about to bring him back down to earth.

The idea of great power without great responsibility making the sexual and non-sexual aspects of the wolf’s life easier is constrained by the idea that this arrangement brings with it a loss of perceived freedom. In order to keep Wolfie by her side, the Fairy Godmother in *Swing Shift Cinderella* resorts to concretized metaphors of a masculine view of the confinements associated with committed relationships—a cage and his-and-hers leg irons (2:50-2:55, 6:42-6:47). *Red Hot Riding Hood*’s Grandma has the force of gravity on her side: the only sure escape the wolf has from her unsolicited appreciation of his masculinity is a multiple-storey fall (5:40-5:42, 6:28-6:33). This already slightly complicated situation is further complicated by the way *Red Hot Riding Hood* played out before the heavy hand of studio censorship descended on it. The film’s original version, animated and ready for viewing, showed the wolf giving in, not to gravity but to Grandma, marrying her, and siring a family of wolf sons who howl lasciviously at their ‘stepdaughter’ Red (K. Cohen 38).

That unsettling mental image makes it as good a time as any to return to the question “what does the wolf want?” The answer that’s beginning to emerge is that the wolf’s desire combines simple biological drives with complex psychosocial goals. Sex? He could get that from Grandma or the Fairy Godmother, both of whom are willing donors. The *plaisirs esthétiques* of scopophilia? A coat-check girl or a cigarette girl is comparable to Red in that department. Materially transformative power, whether the agent of transformation be a magic wand or a magically large bank account? No sale, sister. What *does* Red have that all these other women don’t?

Red’s hold on the wolf’s imagination has sexual, voyeuristic, materialistic and magical dimensions, working in concert. That’s ‘concert’ in two senses of the word, because Red’s cabaret song is a vital part of her appeal. Putting Red on stage establishes a link between the wolf and the cinema audience, allowing the spectator to view her through his eyes, and participate in his part of the story while it unfolds. As Mulvey notes concerning live-action cinema which pauses the plot for a musical number or a dance routine, “the device of the showgirl allows the two looks to be unified technically without any apparent break in the diegesis” (Mulvey 838). But there’s more to it than that. In this case, the venue is as vital as the performer in generating sex appeal. Red’s theatre of operations is a nightclub—a locale where you don’t just get a show, you get food and drink, a cigarette if that’s your pleasure, and you get it all served to you with a smile. You get catered to, pampered to such an extent that someone is paid to watch your coat for you, and make pleasant conversation with you if you choose to initiate it. It’s all the comforts of home and then some: a little mother love, some harmless interaction with attractive women who don’t reject you, something to nibble on, and something to wash it down with—in short, everything to cater to “the neurotic needs of the male ego” (Mulvey 843).

And there's something else to Red on top of that: star power. It's an amorphous bit of affect to pin down, but I'll try anyway. Being the star, the main attraction on the bill, implies that you're allied with the deep pockets bankrolling the show. In the spotlight, Red becomes a simulacrum for a proprietor or hostess. Her welcoming presence transforms the paying customers into guests in her home. Returning a patron's male gaze with a 'come hither' look is the act of something other than a free agent: it is a gesture of invitation by an embedded portion of a power structure. For the price of a cover charge, anyone, even a wolf, can be part of this structure and share its benefits...as long as the show goes on. The promise of the show, empty for most, goes a little further still for some. If they're pursuing Red for sex in their imaginations, the male patrons are perforce also imagining courting her as the adopted daughter of a mythically wealthy and well-connected family. Anecdotal evidence provides hope that this fantasy could become reality: real female stars form real pair-bonding partnerships which pay dividends of social and monetary capital for their partners. You can't get that from the girl who takes your coat or sells you cigarettes.

And that's why, when Red is in the house, you know about it in no uncertain terms. Her first appearance, remember, was heralded by a sizzling neon sign (*Red Hot Riding Hood* 1:21-1:28). She gets a full-picture sandwich board advertising her as 'Little Eva' in *Uncle Tom's Cabaña* (3:13-3:17). Whatever her stage name is at any moment, the mere mention of it hath powers to conjure. It can even alter a cartoon's plot: a 'conventionally' hobo-costumed wolf breaks off his chase of a 'conventionally' school-age Red Riding Hood to give the title card for *Swing Shift Cinderella* the once-over and decide that *this* is a story whose title character has more appeal for him (0:19-0:50).

Meanwhile, back at the penthouse... Grandma's assertiveness with sex runs the wolf, his libido, and the theoretical constructs associated with it smack into a brick wall with "IMAGINE THAT—NO DOOR!" written on it (*Red Hot Riding Hood* 6:03). Grandma's lack of inhibition goes beyond the idea of assertiveness and alludes to an experience of sexual release which is fundamentally different from the wolf's. Without aiming to get a door prize for being the one-millionth person to draw attention to the phallic and ejaculatory elements in the wolf's reactions to Red's floorshow, I'll put a gloss on the merely obvious and mention that it constitutes a performance in its own right. When the wolf sounds a factory whistle to show his appreciation for Red, he's not merely blowing off steam in the sense of sublimating sexual tension, he's blowing his own horn in the sense of boasting about his sexual prowess (*Red Hot Riding Hood* 3:21-3:25). He's having a symbolic orgasm of his own and at the same time demonstrating the intensity of the orgasm Red can expect to have with him. Seen in the same light, the familiar take in which the wolf's body snaps into a stiff horizontal airborne posture is a visual metaphor for an erection but also a statement by the body's owner about how fast he can get big and hard (*Red Hot Riding Hood* 2:46-2:49)¹⁶.



¹⁶ It's interesting to note in passing that Avery shows the discretion of self-censoring a potential penis reference earlier in this cartoon. The wolf pulls up to Red's nightclub (suggestively signed thusly: "The Sunset Strip: 30 Gorgeous Girls—No Cover") in a convertible stretched well beyond stretch-limo length (*Red Hot Riding Hood* 2:00-2:09). A similar vehicle driven by the wolf in *The Shooting of Dan McGoo* is labelled in a fashion Avery tended to truck out for any object of ridiculous linearity: "LONG WASN'T IT?" (3:09-3:10). The key difference that may account for the omission of a joke Avery liked to work into a script whenever possible is that the identity of the car's driver in *The Shooting of Dan McGoo* hasn't been established yet, nor have his priapic tendencies.

Another performing wolf—one who sang blues under the name Howlin' Wolf—was wont to express himself in a not entirely dissimilar fashion:

The mighty wolf

Makin' a midnight creep

The hunters

They can't find him

Stealin' chicks

Everywhere he go

Then draggin' his tail

Behind him

[...]

A cooter¹⁷ drags

His tail in the sand

A fish wiggle

His tail in the water

When the mighty wolf come along

Waggin' his tail

He done stole

Somebody's daughter (“Tail Dragger”)

¹⁷ A freshwater turtle of the eastern United States, any of several species in the genus *Pseudemys*. Also slang for a redneck, cracker, good ol' boy, trailer park trash, or any other southeastern United States species of the genus *Crudemys*.

No matter how much Tex Avery's wolf may howl (and howl he does), he's no Howlin' Wolf. The trouble with his act that it's basically a bluff, one which loses most of its power when called. John Berger put it this way during his exploration of the male gaze in *Ways of Seeing*: "A man's presence [...] may be fabricated, in the sense that he pretends to be capable of what he is not" (45-46). For all its array of visual images for erections and orgasmic loss of bodily control, sex for the wolf (and for all the hetero males the wolf stands in for) is about the *idea*, the *image* of Woman, enjoyed from a safe distance whenever possible. The actual fact of an actual woman, a woman who says "NO!" when asked, or a woman who says "yes" before even being asked, reduces the wolf to stammering, gibbering impotence (in whatever way you choose to define it) (*Red Hot Riding Hood* 5:54-5:56).

And yet—this wolfish type of sex *needs* a woman, real or imagistic, for its full consummation. After his encounters with Red and her Grandma, the wolf has ample reason to believe that for the woman, the fact of being a woman is more than enough. As Luce Irigaray put it in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, "woman's autoeroticism is very different from man's [...] she touches herself in and of herself without any need for mediation, and before there is any way to distinguish activity from passivity" (24). Grandma's zero-to-sixty acceleration into mating mode can be read as an indicator of the sexual self-sufficiency inherent to Irigaray's paradigm for female sensuality. So, mind you, can Red's. For all she offers herself up to be male-gazed as "a more or less obliging prop for the enactment of man's fantasies" (Irigaray 25), she moves in ways that make it clear that she (to paraphrase Oscar Hammerstein III by conjugating a verb) enjoys being a girl. The self-hugging by the bosom and the pelvic twist while squeezing her legs tightly together during her song-and-dance routine—and the rapture on her face while doing

both—are straight out of Irigaray (*Red Hot Riding Hood* 3:11-3:12). Red, woman that she is, “has sex organs more or less everywhere. She finds pleasure almost anywhere” (Irigaray 28).

Just as Red’s performance alludes to an idealized version of the feminine capacity for sexual self-sufficiency, the Fairy Godmother’s magic can be seen as a parallel to other aspects of the female experience traditionally found by the patriarchy to be mysterious, powerful and threatening. Irigaray refers to a ‘magic wand’ that she sees as a standard part of Woman’s arsenal: “*the intimacy of that silent, multiple, diverse touch*” which defies and transcends the power of a rational and non-magical masculine vocabulary to describe and contain it (29). Rather than deal with this as fact, the chosen way has been to marginalize and suppress it with sophistry: “woman’s desire has doubtless been submerged by the logic that has dominated the West since the time of the Greeks” (Irigaray 25). Mind you, the Fairy Godmother doesn’t seem to need a wand to keep the wolf in his place (that place being, per her preference, right beside her). A wooden mallet to the cranium serves the purpose just fine, thank you (*Swing Shift* 4:47, 5:09, 5:31, 7:06).

Just in case you thought Avery gave more experienced women a monopoly on this kind of tactical advantage, Cinderella/Red also clobbers the wolf with the mallet, following through with the full force cartoon physics will allow (*Swing Shift* 7:07). Her advance on the head at the other end of the wolf’s body is no less of a threat: his look of apprehension as this version of Red sits in his lap and gives him a quick prick-tease rivals any that cross his face when the Fairy Godmother whips out the magic wand (*Swing Shift* 5:58-6:01). He soon warms up to the prospects, but his initial reaction says a lot about the apprehension that hetero males have been conditioned to feel when a hetero female instigates contact while showing interest and enjoyment in sex for its own sake and on her own terms. Even when the interest is mutual, the agendas are

to some extent separate: “the vagina [serves] *also*, but *not only*, to take over for the little boy's hand in order to assure an articulation between autoeroticism and heteroeroticism in intercourse” (Irigaray 24). In the cruder terms of the burlesque hall or the strip club, when a jerk pays his nickel to get jerked off, he’s getting jerked off by a dame who’s jerking herself off on her own nickel.

AND HERE’S WHERE IT GETS...COMPLICATED

For Red, the wolf is just another jerk in the audience, but he’s a jerk that she’s only interested in jerking *around*, and never jerking *off*. However, that doesn’t make her either a man-hater or a wolf-hater: the way she refers to males of both the human and wolf persuasion indicates that she welcomes masculine attention as a concept, if not always as a fact. She refers to wolves in the abstract and by name in two of her onstage numbers. “Oh, Wolfie” in *Swing Shift Cinderella* (4:59-7:02) repurposes “Oh Johnny, Oh Johnny, Oh”, a song about a woman expressing an achingly serious longing for the male in the orgasm-implying title. *The Shooting of Dan McGoo* flips species and gender in the lyrics of “Put Your Arms Around Me, Honey”, changing the implied singer of the song from male to female, and changing “any girl like you” to “any wolf like you” (4:55-6:30).

Red, then, is neither a tease nor a prude *per se*, nor is she averse to a little lupine loving. It’s really more that she finds the specific attentions of one specific wolf a trifle off-putting. Regardless of her personal feelings about the wolf, though, Red has to be careful to maintain the illusion of approachability in her professional capacity. Song about “Daddy” or not, there is no sugar daddy in her life, or else she wouldn’t have to perform for a living. It’s not a command performance, either: her place of work depends on the patronage of a whole lot of gents who

might want to see themselves as her “Daddy”, if only while the music's playing and the spotlight's on. Even if her actual price for it is only her nightly salary, what she's selling is a dual hope, or if you like, a dual illusion. Red's act holds out the promise that sex is handed over to any man who masters the language and routines of paternalistic mastery, and that she (or someone like her) is a likely candidate to hand it over to any masterful man.

The act extends beyond the stage, and that's why Red doesn't immediately make a break for it when the wolf goes into his stage-door Johnny act during *Red Hot Riding Hood*. Letting the customers get a little chummy is an implied part of the job description of a nightclub entertainer. Just as a comedian has to feign laughter at the warmed-over wit of a patron who stands a round of post-performance drinks, a showgirl has to play along with a lot of awkwardness that passes for flirting. Red's initial reactions to the wolf's gaucheries after he pulls her to his table have the same studied air of pleasant-visaged patience as a sales associate dealing with a cloddish customer (*Red Hot* 3:48-4:42). Like the sales help, the conditions of her employment require her to be the public face of her employer, and a friendly, welcoming face at that.

All this is a reminder that, even in a cartoon, a woman's work is never done because it's always gendered. Red's forbearance of the overbearing wolf bears out Arlie Russell Hochschild's assertion that “women make a resource out of feeling and offer it to men as a gift in return for the more material resources they lack” (163). In this view of women and work, making use of gender and its implications is a strategy, part survival mechanism, part good business sense:

Women more often react to subordination by making defensive use of sexual beauty, charm, and relational

skills. For them, it is these capacities that become most vulnerable to commercial exploitation, and so it is these capacities that they are most likely to become estranged from. (Hochschild 164)

As an entertainer, Red is certainly in a subordinate position; the ephemeral essence of her skillset renders the position precarious and constantly subject to termination. She has to watch her step, onstage and off. Indications that she's on to the game she has to play have to be slipped in under the radar. That song about "Daddy" buying this, that and the other thing for her? It's a veiled reference to Red's understanding that in order to make their way in the world of her day, "women seek *primary* ties with a supplier" (Hochschild 169; italics hers).

Although Red's public behaviour—body movement, lips, eyes and all—is an exercise in professional courtesy, that doesn't mean that Red's life lacks an affective side beyond workplace. There is a hint in two of the cartoons featuring Red that she may have a supplier lined up for her emotional and other needs. In *The Shooting of Dan McGoo* and *Wild and Woolfy*, both from 1945, it's revealed she actually has a love interest, and one whose identity clearly indicates that she's not averse to crossing the species divide when dating. Similar to Egghead in Avery's Warner Brothers shorts, he's a character who keeps his resources under wraps until it's time to hit the audience (and at least one other character) over the head with them.



...you were expecting maybe Screwy Squirrel...? Red demonstrates her affection for Droopy in *The Shooting of Dan McGoo*.

Droopy, the pint-sized milquetoast dog with what Jeff Lenburg has described as “hidden brute strength” (134), may seem an easy romantic rival for the wolf to dismiss—in *Wild and Woolfy*, he has a waiter dispose of him, as one would an underdone appetizer (2:24-2:35; 3:01; 5:28-5:31). Still, it’s with Droopy “the hero” (*Wild and Woolfy* 6:53) that Red’s affections lie, and he’s the one who gets her kisses (*Dan McGoo* 7:25-7:26; *Wild and Woolfy* 7:02-7:04). Both times, the kisses send Droopy into paroxysms which recapitulate the ones experienced by the wolf earlier in the cartoon when he first laid his socket-escaping eyes on Red (*Dan McGoo* 4:49-6:16, 7:25-7:39; *Wild and Woolfy* 3:25-3:30, 7:05-7:11). In *Wild and Woolfy*, Droopy’s mimicry of the wolf goes one step further, taking the “survival of the fittest” theme identified by Lenburg in Droopy cartoons to a level of Stone Age brutality implied by a naïve reading of the pseudo-Darwinian phrase (134). Red’s kiss brings out the caveman in Droopy, causing him to forget the chivalry of the B-movie Old West and bear Red off on horseback like a trophy (*Wild and Woolfy* 7:05-7:11). Simplistic and one-dimensional as it is, the view of heterosexual male response presented by this ending serves as a reminder that superficial readings about what big bad wolves

and little droopy dogs are supposed to be like miss a lot of complexities as they skim along their merry way.

One of the reasons that Avery kept grappling with the complexities of heteronormative gender roles was that he knew it was something his audiences recognized and related to. In a short essay outlining some of the defining aspects of popular culture, John Fiske characterizes a similar reaction (noted among contestants on TV's *The New Newlywed Game*) in the following terms:

One of the requirements of...masculinity is public performance...even those men who, in private, might relate to their wives or girlfriends very differently would, in public...be under strong pressure to conform to the norms of mastery: they were placed at a point of acute and anxious contradiction between the social relations of gender and their own personal relationships. ("Popular Culture" 327-8)

So it is as well with the social relations in the world of Tex Avery: the wolf anxiously and showily tries to conform to the norms of mastery, while the unassuming but actually masterful Droopy knows (to quote his catchphrase) that "I'm happy" with his sexuality and the relationships that stem from it. What absolutely and positively complicates the whole situation is that Avery's entire "Red and Wolfie" oeuvre features not one single non-human female (and no married ones, either). Fully human males are nearly as scarce, making the briefest of appearances as peripheral figures—two identical taxi drivers in *Red Hot Riding Hood*, a bus driver and a taxi

driver¹⁸ in *Swing Shift Cinderella*, and an ice cream salesman in *Wild and Woolfy*. That's it; that's all. All other males in the three cartoons I've just mentioned, as well as in *the Shooting of Dan McGoo* and *Little Rural Riding Hood*, are anthropomorphized animals—to be more specific, one species or other of anthropomorphized canine.

There is one outlier that features Red without a wolf in sight, and it deserves a brief mention. *Uncle Tom's Cabaña*, a film whose Amos-and-Andy-ish portrayal of Harriet Beecher Stowe's title character makes for troublesome viewing nowadays, takes place in an all-human world. Cast in the role of Little Eva, Red provides not much more than a passing visual diversion from a sequence of spot gags dominated by visualized puns. One moment, however, harkens back to her origins in the Avery universe, while solidifying the rationale for her appearance in this particular corner of it. A sign at the door of the nightclub that Uncle Tom has built around his cabin reads "No Dogs Allowed. Wolves Welcome", the last part in flashing neon letters (*Uncle Tom's Cabaña* 3:13-3:17). "Wolves" can be taken in its metaphorical sense, it can be taken literally, or it can, as is invited throughout the history of Red Riding Hood tales, be taken both ways at once to create a third sense that may transcend any symbolic reckoning of it. Any way you choose to take it normalizes and justifies the pursuit of a human female by a cartoon wolf...at least from the wolf's point of view.

A coda to all this: as I was putting the finishing touches on these musings, my then six-year-old daughter brought home a book from her school's library. *Very Little Red Riding Hood*

¹⁸ This is one of those "blink and you'll miss it" moments that happen when a Tex Avery cartoon steps on the gas. For a fraction of a second, the driver of the taxi which whisks the wolf from a 'straightforward' version of Red Riding Hood to the updated-for-a-World-War-II-audience Cinderella plot is visible, if only as a blur. Stop the film at the right place (and you've got to be quick!), and you'll see what appears to be a caricature of Avery himself at the wheel (*Swing Shift* 0:57).

makes an almost herculean effort to be parent-friendly, child-friendly and inoffensive¹⁹: Red Riding Hood is a preschooler, and the wolf eventually takes on the role of tired father trying to get a fussy toddler to fall asleep (Heapy and Heap). And yet...all its Cartoon Postmodern-illustrated stevia can't disguise the flavour of all the things that the mothers of Red Riding Hoods keep warning their daughters about. When Very Little Red gives the wolf a spontaneous hug in the forest, and when the wolf later "tickles her arms, her ribs, and her toes" (Heapy and Heap), I can barely suppress a shudder.

This may be a case of a little knowledge being a dangerous thing. Perhaps repeated exposure to the idea that *Little Red Riding Hood* has a very adult underlying message has conditioned me to direct my attention to the gutter; perhaps certain content simply leaves itself more open to from-the-gutter takes. It may be that doing close readings of Tex Avery's work makes me suspicious that any given Red Riding Hood, whether she's Little, Very Little, or Red Hot, fits Gary Morris' description of the one in *A Bear's Tale*: "a willful, sexually aware gamin who may be as attracted to the wolf as he is to her" ("Goosing Mother Goose"). However, it doesn't ease my corrupted mind one whit that the wolf in *Very Little Red Riding Hood* wears a coat which makes him look altogether too much like a flasher. In any case, stuff like this doesn't help me figure out whether my daughter will be ready for Tex Avery's Red Riding Hoods before she reaches the age of consent...if any of us ever are.

¹⁹ Although it isn't entirely friendly to one particular parent who finds its lack of page numbers offensive as he quotes from it.

Chapter 5

MOUSE IN THE MACHINE

A look under the hood at anthropomorphism of inanimate objects in studio-era animated shorts



**NOBODY STEALS NOTHIN' FROM
BETTY BOOP NOHOW, MY FRIEND--
NOT THEN, NOT NOW, NOT EVER.**

**IS THIS ONE OF THOSE PATENTS
EDISON STOLE FROM WHOEVER IT WAS
HE STOLE PATENTS FROM?**

A tinkerer with a highly inventive mind converts a car into a manually-controlled fighting robot. With much at stake, the battlebot takes on a feared opponent and emerges victorious. Have I just described:

1. The latest instalment in the *Transformers* movie franchise?
2. A forgotten Anime television series, in the tradition of *Voltron*?
3. An early sound cartoon starring a prototype for Betty Boop's first boyfriend?

The answer is #3. The cartoon, enigmatically entitled *The Robot* (1932), not only features a version of the anthropomorphic dog Bimbo that resembles the one that appeared alongside a prototypical Betty Boop in *Dizzy Dishes* (1930), but an unintentional metaphor for the 'life' of a character in an animated film, whether that character is anthropomorphic or not.



Machine versus...um, anthropomorphized dog. The fighter inside the converted car in *The Robot* is also an anthropomorphized dog, which either makes matters simpler or complicates them further, depending on your point of view.

You'll notice that I put the word 'life' in inverted commas. This is to emphasize that what characters in animation display is not life as we know it—it doesn't even qualify as a simulacrum

of life, if we apply Baudrillard's standard for the term to it. Because the technical processes involved in creating animation can be considered as distinct and separate from the cognitive processes involved in viewing and interpreting it, the relationship between animation and life isn't quite "a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real" (Baudrillard 4). What we're dealing with here is in a grey area between 'life' and 'non-life', a liminal zone in which something can be conceptually 'alive' and 'not alive' at the same time. Although any appearance of life in animation is ultimately the product of a union between various forms of high and low technology and one or more human beings, the life thus engendered is not in that grey area I just alluded to in the same way as a cyborg is...at least, not in the sense that Donna Haraway is inclined to define a cyborg: "a hybrid of machine and organism" (*Cyborgs* 149). *In fine*, what you have is a creature made with the aid of some form of machine, and whose appearance of vitality through movement is the product of other manifestations of machine culture, but which is still not a machine creature. This may not be precisely what Agamben was driving at in "Anthropological Machine" when he said that "the machine actually produces a kind of state of exception, a zone of indeterminacy", but it raises questions about whether we should privilege the 'machine' or the 'creature' when we try to define what such an amalgam of the biological and the mechanical might actually be (*Open* 37).

And yet, a machine creature is exactly what Bimbo's fighting robot *is*. At the same time, it isn't essentially mechanical because its movements are controlled by something whose outward appearance and previously displayed behaviour are calculated to make us look upon it as organic. It's a metallic exoskeleton-cum-compensatory device, a McLuhanesque extension of human potential which in turn "produces a generalized numbness or shock that declines recognition" (McLuhan 52). The act of creating the car-bot is the beginning of a process in

which Bimbo rejects his original beta-tested form in favour of a technologically-augmented Bimbo 2.0.

And perhaps it's also something above and beyond that as well. When Bimbo's 'car-bot' first enters the boxing ring to do combat with its opponent One-Round Mike, it appears to be more creature than machine, the head of its operator visible, the machine-body concealed beneath a boxer's robe (*The Robot* 4:08-4:20). Machine soon takes over from creature as Bimbo disappears inside his creation, which supplies him with surrogate strength and a surrogate identity. The strength is to be expected: the identity somewhat less so. There's no function or purpose behind the fighting robot developing a humanoid face once Bimbo's own face is out of sight; for all that, a face is what it develops, and one which is more than a match for its owner's in the personality department (*The Robot* 4:33-4:38). One other thing that develops as the boxing match wears on is the idea that Bimbo inside the fighting car-bot is a more fully developed character than Bimbo outside the car-bot. The less that can be seen of Bimbo's face amid the traded blows, the more this idea morphs into the idea that the car-bot is a more fully developed character than Bimbo, period. Even Bimbo's girlfriend buys into this idea: after One-Round Mike knocks Bimbo and the car-bot temporarily out of the ring, it's the car-bot she deems worthy of a restorative drink of water, not its driver/operator (*The Robot* 4:50-5:08).



Bimbo's girlfriend hydrating a car instead of Bimbo has implications beyond the scope of a single animated film. In *Animating the Science Fiction Imagination*, J.P. Telotte makes a strong case for the animated film as a site of combat with the same stakes and ground rules as the site of combat in *The Robot*. Telotte doesn't quite have the same perspective on *The Robot* as I do—although he does emphasize the expressivity of the car-bot's face—but his views form an interesting parallel and counterpoint to the ones I've laid down here (50-51). From Telotte's vantage point, the notion that an anthropomorphic cartoon dog can convert an automobile into an automaton which then subsumes his identity is a key to understanding not just this one animated short, but animation, film in general, and contemporary concerns about technology's potential for superseding human endeavour even while enhancing it. Just as Bimbo's car-bot is pitted against an adversary of flesh and blood in a contest for supremacy in the squared circle, cinema went toe-to-toe with the actuality of here-and-now human existence—its liveness and other indices of its materiality. The purse in the no-holds barred bare-knuckle scrap between Kid Cinema and Hugh Manity was nothing less than the right to claim pride of place where authenticity was concerned. It wasn't exactly a fixed fight, but it wasn't a fair one, either: its footwork slowed by being perpetually anchored in the present, the human competitor was outmanoeuvred by a sparring partner that could jump-cut between totally unrelated moments in time, quick-shuffling them together with unnerving ease and speed, and editing out the moments when it dropped its guard.

If this sounds a little like a scenario straight out of a pulp sci-fi dystopia—the whirring, flickering machine creature conquering and supplanting feeble figures of flesh and blood—there's a degree to which it is just that. Telotte reminds us that films, whether animated or not, are “machine products, part of a machine culture, and as such partly science fictional in

nature” (4). The relegation of the purely human to behind-the-scenes functions and the consequent foregrounding of technological processes and products in animation made it an ideal standard bearer for the Brave New World of modernity, even of ultra-modernity: “the fact that the animation industry, through the popular vehicle of the seven-minute cartoon, took up this challenge of the new should be neither surprising nor dismissed” (19).

Even so, if the fight to establish primacy for claims of authenticity were being staged on the grounds of pure materiality, it would be no contest: the actual and the human would win hands down. However, questions of authenticity are rarely decided on material grounds alone. The fake Vermeers painted to swindle Nazi treasure hunters by the forger Jan van Meegeren gain their own brand of authenticity by virtue of the story behind them; the material fact of their inauthenticity becomes the authenticity of their provenance. As a contender for the crown of authenticity, the sole thing cinema had to prove was that it could construct a plausible facsimile of lived experience; any time it could demonstrate an augmentation of or an improvement on lived experience, it gained the upper hand.

Whatever could be done in this respect by a cinema which required living beings as its subjects could be done just as well, if not in some ways even better, by a cinema constructed entirely from scratch using inanimate materials. Live-action cinema is at its heart a recapitulation or a reporting of lived experience. Its subject matter, so long as it involves living beings, must refer to something which its audiences will recognize as ‘life’; its physical subjects possess lives which incontestably extend beyond the bounds of sets, locations, shooting schedules or film frames. No matter how much it might relieve the fan who fears the spectre of disillusionment that trails behind many an actor’s feet of clay, movie stars can’t get packed away in boxes at the end of a day in front of the cameras. The drawing materials, models, or arrangements of pixels

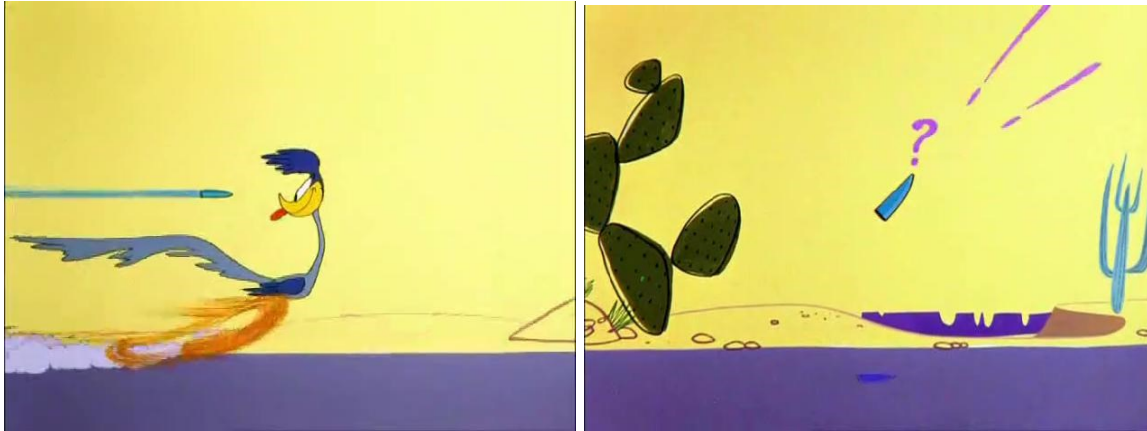
that are involved in the making of animated lives go into storage until a new day that brings with it the promise of a fresh chance to redeem or abandon unsatisfactory work²⁰. If being able to modify the ‘life’ of an acquaintance whose behaviour has proven disappointing isn’t in some way an improvement on lived experience, then what is?

The trouble, of course, with describing the movements of animation drawings or other inert material as ‘life’ is that ‘life’ is almost too flexible a word. One of its strengths as a piece of vocabulary is that it’s all-encompassing; at the same time, its lack of specificity attenuates its usefulness. Without further qualification, ‘life’ becomes a flaccidly homespun catchall that applies equally to complex organisms like you and me and the colonies of single-celled organisms that we might find in the uncleaned sections of our fridges. At the beginning of an extended discussion of the ontological status of the animated image in *Shadow of a Mouse*, Donald Crafton introduces a term that is a more potent and precise descriptor of the operative principle of the sort of ‘life’ that animation trades in. “(A)gency—the ability to cause events to occur...is involved in every animation performance” (Crafton *Shadow* 58). Moreover, Crafton says, this is an agency that is far more persuasive of its existence than the apparent agency of a single, still rendered image, whether that image appears on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel or on the back page of a newspaper’s Sunday funnies. “(T)oons act and have agency because we grant it to them as part of the performance *of* animation and then we deem it to be authentic” (Crafton *Shadow* 62).

²⁰ The scope for make-believe offered by animation sometimes blinds even respected animation scholars to the art form’s mundane, utilitarian underpinnings. With all due respect to the extraordinary lengths that Paul Wells goes to reify and codify individual pieces of detritus, bric-a-brac and memorabilia in “Chairy Tales: Object and Materiality in Animation”, “the meanings and affect of objects and materials actually used in animated films” are actually far less significant than those of the finished products they went into (1).

The operative word here is one not italicized by Crafton, but one that I'll italicize to drive his point home: *performance*. A 'toon'—a moniker whose Roger Rabbit origins Crafton freely acknowledges—*moves*, in a way that Michelangelo's counterreformation-era Jehovah or Bill Watterson's neoliberal-era Calvin and Hobbes simply cannot. Toons move in real time, right in front of our sometimes disbelieving eyes: "the actors of animation...intersect with our living world" (Crafton *Shadow* 72). Put in brutally graphic terms, the vehemence, the vitriol and the vigour which impel the bricks tossed by Ignatz Mouse in George Herriman's comic strip *Krazy Kat* fade into a hazy blur of pen scratches compared with the potential held by the kinetic force of that selfsame brick once animated. The fact that the brick's energy hasn't been depicted even once on film as effectively as Herriman depicted it time without count on illustration board is a question of the capabilities of individual humans rather than the capabilities of artistic media.

Other simple animated objects have been made to appear decidedly more vital, to the point of being capable of agency surpassing that of Ignatz's impassive brick. No stranger to the capriciousness of the seemingly inanimate, Wile E. Coyote once discovered this by firing a bullet at the Road Runner. Much to the surprise of—well, should it actually be *anyone?*—the Road Runner easily outpaced the projectile, leaving it to pause mid-flight, emitting a shower of question marks and exclamation points, its body language (insofar as a bullet *can* have body language) emphasizing how perplexed it was that such a thing should come to pass. Dropping to the ground, dejected, the bullet exacted lethal revenge on the first mover unmoved in its existential crisis, exploding in Wile E.'s face as he picked up the apparent dud to assess the situation (*Gee Whiz-z-z-z-z-z-z* 1:27-1:47).



Prisoner of the excesses of his own ratiocination though he may be, Wile E. Coyote wouldn't hesitate to impute either sentience or sentiment to his misspent ammunition. Nor, as we watch the bullet backfire retroactively and with apparent malice, would we. It's yet another unsubtle, impolite rejoinder from an inanimate object to Cartoon History's Least Successful Tinkerer—a being whose world is composed of inanimate objects with the two-word working vocabulary of “fuck you”. The obscenity becomes all the more obscene to us, in both the current sense of the word and one of its putative original meanings. It is obscene by virtue of being *obskene*—something too close to the sordid realities of our offstage lives to be comfortably portrayed in any sort of performance space. Bullets may not (let's hope) blow up in our faces, but day in, day out, we're forced to cope with the uneasy feeling that all the inert things around us may simply be playing possum, sizing us up, looking for a moment of weakness, a crack in our defenses at which to strike.

That's how it felt to Wile E. Coyote's creator, at any rate. Chuck Jones was given to describing Wile E. as an avatar for his mechanical ineptitude with anything other than a pencil and a piece of paper:

The Coyote is a history of my own frustration and war with tools, multiplied only slightly. I can remember that my wife and daughter would start to weep bitterly and seek hiding places whenever they saw me head toward the tool drawer, if only to hang a picture. (Jones 219-220)

He may have been exaggerating for comic effect, but we all have some facet of existence where we find ourselves at the mercy of inanimate objects that seem merciless in their glee at our animate powerlessness. Each time I encounter a venetian blind makes me less likely to doubt that the walls of friend Jones' house resounded to a silent yet perceptible chorus of "fuck you, Chuck".

Nonetheless, as Crafton warns his readers, "there's a difference—sometimes miniscule, to be sure—between proximal liveness and being alive" (*Shadow* 72). While acknowledging the vast number of films which have combined live action and animation, and making an exception for the compelling quirks of the 'let's use humans as puppets' animation technique known as pixilation, a piece of animation doesn't present anything that was alive at the time it was used in the recording of images for future viewing...at least, not 'alive' in the sense that its audience is likely to understand the word. And yet, part of the residue of viewing a piece of animation is that the viewer has been in the presence of a *presence*—something possessed of sufficient actuality and dynamism in a 'here and now' defined by the viewer's own presence that it qualifies as having at least a hypothetical materiality. What's more, it's a materiality based on *motion*: from a purely technical standpoint, all film is nothing more than a very fast slide show, but even limited animation's more notorious exercises in televised stasis—*Clutch Cargo*, for example, or the first

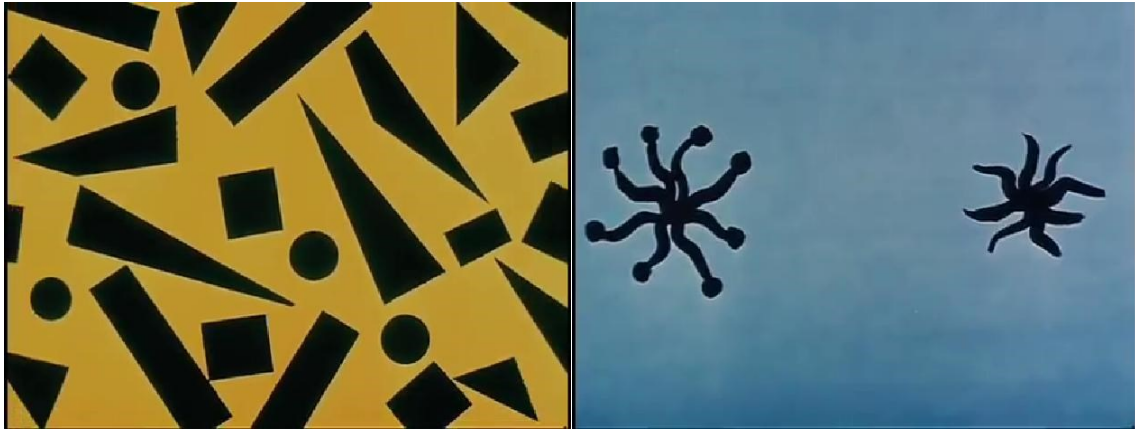
iteration of *Crusader Rabbit*—move just enough during playback to distinguish them from a sequence of filmed illustrations.

WHO'S MY LINE? AGENCY, AUTONOMY AND PERSONALITY DISPLAYED BY PURE GRAPHIC FORMS IN ANIMATION

The visual content of animated film need not be illustrative, figurative or representational to evoke the sentiment—'gut feeling' is less academic, but perhaps more accurate—that its movements are in some ways analogous to our own. Experiments in direct animation—Len Lye's painted-on-film *A Colour Box* (1935), his scratched-on-film *Free Radicals* (1958), works like *Begone Dull Care* (1950) or *Blinkity Blank* (1955) by Lye's onetime GPO Film Unit colleague Norman McLaren—emit a dynamism and vitality that invites this type of visceral response. It invites other responses, equally visceral, but not so charitable. The human protagonist of Ernest Pintoff's *The Critic* (1963), heard only in voice-over, is a disgruntled filmgoer who elects to meet McLaren-esque abstract animation decidedly less than halfway:

What the hell is this? Must be a cartoon. [...] This is cute...this is cute...this is nice...*what the hell IS it?* Oh, I know what it is. It's garbage. That's what it is. [...] It must be some symbolism...I think it's symbolic of...JUNK. [...] The fella that did this, he must be...must be over thirty if they let him do this kind of thing, right? Why does he waste his time with this? Fella like that, he could probably drive a truck, do

something constructive...make a shoe. (*Critic* 0:32-0:39, 1:06-1:19, 2:13-2:17, 2:47-3:00)



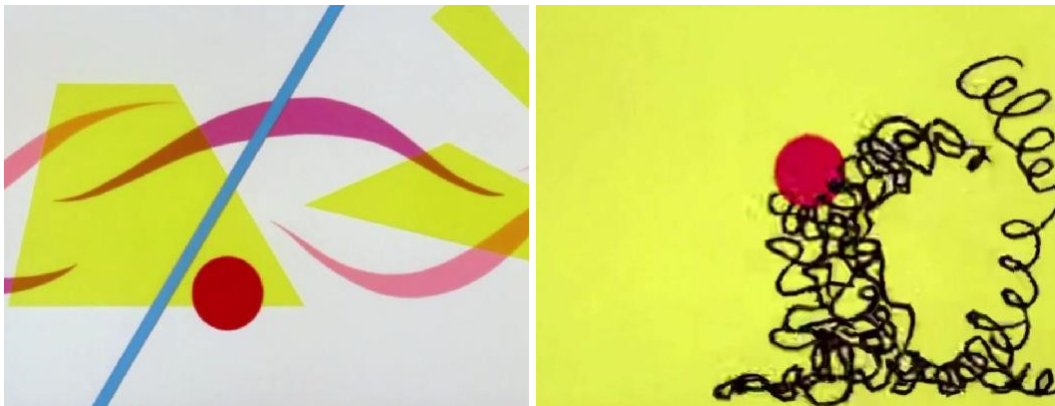
Two of the abstractions that slowly drive an unseen (but very vocal) audience member to distraction in *The Critic*.

As *The Critic*'s unseen narrator/self-appointed conscience, Mel Brooks was being deliberately *meshuggeneh* and voicing opinions that he likely didn't share with the character's real-life inspiration, a heckler that he overheard during a screening of "a surrealistic abstract cartoon by Norman McLaren" (Parish 156-157). Nearly sixty years after *The Critic* was made (and won an Oscar for its trouble), the "symbolic of junk" school of abstract film criticism still has a fair share of adherents. Some of them were students in an interdisciplinary course on animation that I taught at Trent University in the autumn of 2020. In a unit featuring films by Lye, McLaren, Oskar Fischinger (and, in the interest of fairness, *The Critic*), reactions to the material on the syllabus were polarized, to say the least. One scalding hot take begs to be read aloud by Mel Brooks: it called abstract animation "boring, lacking in substance and very random [...] when I watch an animated film I expect a little more substance or story".

Other students in the class did experience the "sensual experience of pleasure generated through color whose abstract and direct appeal avoided narrative forms" that Andrew R.

Johnston identifies as a defining feature of Lye's work (167). Most often, however, this pleasure was generated by a film with abstract appeal but with a definite narrative form—Chuck Jones and Maurice Noble's 1965 adaptation of Norton Juster's children's book *The Dot and the Line*. Though largely composed of non-representational graphics, *The Dot and the Line* has two clear protagonists (its title characters) and an antagonist (a squiggle) which move in manners that denote embodiment. Juster's text, read as narration by actor Robert Morley, is rife with language that suggests that this embodiment is meant to be understood as specifically human:

The Dot was overwhelmed. She giggled like a schoolgirl and didn't know what to do with her hands. [...] The Dot wondered how she'd never noticed how hairy and coarse [the Squiggle] was, how untidy and graceless, and how he mispronounced his L's and picked his ear. [...] she turned to the Line and shyly took his arm. (*Dot and Line* 8:12-8:17, 8:54-9:04, 9:29-9:31)



Line meets dot; dot meets squiggle; line loses dot: the central problem of *The Dot and the Line*'s (ahem) linear plot.

The Dot and the Line abounds with references like these—to hands, ears, and arms...not to mention the “head” (that is to say, the hangover) that the Line suffers after an all-night bender (a literal as well as a figurative one—he turns himself into angles) (*Dot and Line* 5:58).

Individually and collectively, they do more than just suggest human embodiment: they point to it as the preferred method for conceptualizing the essence of Juster’s *dramatis personae*. To clinch the matter, all three of the principals in the story are clearly and unwaveringly cis-and-heteronormatively gendered: the Dot is female, the Line and Squiggle both male. (Juster shied away from using the geometrical pun ‘love triangle’ to describe them, but I don’t see any reason why I should.) Even on the pictorial plane of existence, it would seem that love is not necessarily a purely platonic affair.

That’s the opinion of Mel Brooks’ voice in the dark as well, although he expresses it in rather earthier terms. Faced with a pair of what could be asterisks (if they’re meant to be anything at all), he comes to the following conclusion:

...it’s two things, that...they like each other—sure,
look at the sparks—two things in love [...] Could this
be the sex life of two things? (*Critic* 1:32-1:49)

To hear this fellow talk, *The Critic*’s abstractions are redolent with implications that range from the erotic to the pornographic: “See? Even if they don’t want to, they get dirty [...] Dirt—dirt and filth” (2:36-2:46). It’s all reminiscent of the old joke where a man taking a Rorschach test tells off his psychiatrist by saying “*Me?* You’re the one with the dirty pictures!” In being so, it also serves as a reminder of the all-too-human tendency to read all-too-human tendencies into everything we humans see.

I'll stop short of giving this tendency the McLuhanesque name "anthropo-seen", mostly to save the time of looking up whether anybody came up with it before me. Name or no name, the concept is demonstrated by *The Dot and the Line*, *The Critic*, and other pieces of abstract animation that don't have voice-overs to suggest modes of interpretation. Anything a human gazes into, no matter how apparently formless, is a potential mirror. Through this gaze, "a power is ascribed...comparable to human power but never coinciding with it" (Berger *Looking* 5). I left out the words "to the animal" just now when quoting John Berger's essay "Why Look at Animals?", but the purpose of the gaze remains the same: to render ourselves more comprehensible by searching for what we have in common with everything around us. So does its net result, even though inanimate objects never return the gaze, much less return it with the semblance of human cognition that Berger refers to when he looks at people looking at animals. If, as poet William Carlos Williams put it, there are "no ideas but in things", this idea becomes a thing in and of itself. One of the implications of the idea of "things as the necessary condition for ideas" is that these ideas are *human* ideas, made by humans for humans, with humans, human interests, and human modes of expression and perception ultimately in mind (Brown 3). What this in turn means is that if you look long and hard enough at them, a dot can have hands, a squiggle ears to pick, and a line a head to nurse a hangover in.

This power that Berger says that we ascribe to animals seems very much like the one that we ascribe to a line that bends itself every which way into a dreadful 'morning after'. It also seems very much like Crafton's notion of *agency*, of motion that is not propelled by outside forces or sustained by inertia, but initiated from within by volition and intention. Whether it is or is not present in dots, lines, squiggles, or stray bullets is not for me to say. Looking at animated objects involves looking for signs of potential agency in them, and that implies that the viewer of

an animated film is at least as open to dualistic speculation as the peasant imagined by Berger who “becomes fond of his pig and is glad to salt away its pork” (7).

Note the “its” there—in the mind of the peasant, the pig is already an object—not a ‘he’ or ‘she’ (or even a non-binary ‘they’)—by virtue of its future use-value as foodstuffs. Would you call Porky Pig an ‘it’? Even those of my students who irritatingly referred to him in written assignments as ‘Porky *the* Pig’, misapprehending the last word in the phrase as an indicator of generic status rather than the proper name it truly is, would have a hard time swallowing that one. (Just in case you think the generic name of your own species *can’t* be a proper name, go ask Thomas Mann or former NBA rookie of the year Chuck Person about it.) In the world of animation, Porky Pig is not an ‘it’, but there are plenty of other ‘it’s that we grant the same dual status of mutual exclusives that Berger’s peasant grants his pig. On the one hand, they are utilitarian ‘it’s, of interest only through their use and function. On the other, they are ‘she’s like the Dot, ‘he’s like the Line and the Squiggle, and (since a general state of confusion may betoken a questioning of personal identity) ‘they’s like Wile E. Coyote’s bullet may well be. They don’t have to be exactly *like* us to be analogous to us through the thoughts, hopes, desires, and agency their movements put on full display.

But imagining that dots, lines, squiggles, bullets and so forth have inner lives that influence their outer lives—and other lives—is all a child’s game, you say—’let’s pretend’, or to give it the fancier name that grown-ups apply to it, suspension of disbelief. After all, such things aren’t really...*real*...are they? To that, performance theorist Keir Elam very eloquently says a combination of “who cares?” and “so what?” Here’s the crux of his argument against giving two hoots about the so-called ‘reality’ of anything put in front of an audience:

Dramatic worlds are hypothetical ('as if') constructs, that is, they are recognized by the audience as counterfactual (i.e. non-real) states of affairs but are embodied *as if* in progress in the actual here and now. The spectator will conventionally interpret all stage doings in the light of this general 'as if' rule. (Elam 62)

By accepting the hypothetical, propositional nature of a performance—whether it be the live performances Elam concentrates on, or ones whose status as performance hinges on an acceptance of the “proximal liveness” that Crafton and others posit as a central feature of animation and all its mediatized kin²¹—an audience dispenses with the need to suspend their disbelief to the extent necessary to believe in such a thing as ‘the suspension of disbelief’:

On the contrary, disbelief—i.e., the spectator’s awareness of the *counterfactual* standing of the drama—is a necessary constant, since it permits him to judge and enjoy what is represented according to less literal standards than he might apply to his own social experiences. (Elam 66)

Perhaps what Elam calls ‘suspension of disbelief’ is also unnecessary because something else is being suspended, and it’s being suspended in a slightly different sense from the one meant

²¹ The watershed text for this school of thought is Philip Auslander’s *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (Routledge, 1999). Part of what makes Auslander’s study relevant to the study of animation is his caveat that “liveness must be examined not as a global, undifferentiated phenomenon but within specific cultural and social contexts” (3). The provisionality of this stance allows for the dual interpretation that an animation director like Chuck Jones can be simultaneously someone who “draws Bugs Bunny”—a fabricated image dependent on its creator for its existence—and someone who merely “draws pictures *of* Bugs Bunny”—a viably and independently living cultural and social fact with a potentially live presence (Jones 215).

in the turn of phrase that he rejects. What's at play here is belief rather than disbelief—a belief formulated as a recognition that alternative modes of being *might be possible*, and it's being suspended like a rope bridge strung across the gap between the 'here and now' of the spectator and the 'as if' of the performance. The ties that bind 'here and now' to 'as if' aren't flimsy filaments either, as Elam demonstrates by carefully and deliberately unbraiding them:

Our perception of our own world is inevitably conditioned by the beliefs, fantasies, fears and wishes that we project onto it—that is, all the possible states of affairs that we imagine and propose. The 'actual' world of the drama is similarly subject to the speculations and projections not only of the characters within it but also of the spectators who observe it. (Elam 69)

So, if a dot can wish for a lover worthy of her attentions, a line can fantasize about dazzling the dot with his geometrical prowess, and a bullet can fear that they've been made redundant by a fleet-footed bird, surely we can believe that these things are actually occurring, at least during the time we spend observing them.

Elam has a trick to top this feat of wire-walking, and it's one worthy of inclusion in the cartoon portion of any entertainment program: "(t)he spectator assumes that the represented world, unless otherwise indicated, will obey the logical and physical laws of his own world" (63)

Read that again slowly out loud, putting emphasis on the phrase "**unless otherwise indicated**". What it's saying is (and much more economically than I'm about to): "in the absence of evidence to the contrary, you must accept the evidence of your own two eyes as truth".

Without knowing he'd done so, Elam has encapsulated the spirit of what have come to be known in the vernacular as The Laws of Cartoon Physics. Film and animation scholar Scott Bukatman's formulation of this general idea stresses the time element inherent to performance and playback as a foundational element of this informal corpus juris: "the diegesis of the Hollywood cartoon is governed by its own set of physical laws, a new set of restrictions that operate in the service of humor" (303). Real or not, what you're witnessing is happening in real time, so you're going to have to accept at least its existence until you have some more time to think about it.

Elam *has* had time to think about it, and proposes a term for the feeling that what you're watching goes by once and only once as you perpetually run to catch up with it. Using the conceptual stopwatch that Elam uses to clock its progress, we could call it "*discourse time*. Though 'perpetual', it is dynamic, since the moment referred to deictically as the present is, clearly, unrepeatable" (71, italics his). Getting adjusted to this way of perceiving things in motion is a little like constantly having to shift from Standard Time to Daylight Saving...or, since Elam is describing the world of performance, maybe 'Play-light Saving Time' is a better way of putting it. Once you've gotten over your time lag, one of the things you might find yourself thinking about is that when you watch an animated film, you're watching a double impossibility: a world with its own special laws of motion which is never actually in motion unless it's being run through a machine. The stillness and inertness of the raw materials of animation are what led Sergei Eisenstein to identify the paradox that lies at its heart: "the conflict between an event and its temporal nature" (145).

Because another law—one of film and media studies—is that mentioning Eisenstein tends to bring things to a dead stop, I'll invoke the second clause of Newton's First Law, and

keep this thing in motion. In language far more accessible than Eisenstein (in translation, at any rate), Bukatman offers up a bullet-point list of cartoon physics maxims, beginning with this one:

- Any body suspended in space will remain in space until made aware of its situation. (302)

Another iteration of this basic concept may contain greater performative force, due to its having been uttered on numerous occasions by someone with closer ties to the animation business than the cartoon fans among us academics:

...10,000 years ago...some guy with a white beard and two cracked stone tablets came down off a cartoon mountain: “These are the Laws of the Cartoon Universe, to be adhered to and obeyed by all...” [...] “If you punch an alligator very hard, it will come back to earth as three suitcases—*These are the Laws of the Cartoon Universe.*” (“Cartoon Laws” 2:02-2:17, 2:27-2:33)

The source of this eternal wisdom is Tom Kenny, a mere mortal at the time these words were recorded at Montreal’s Just For Laughs comedy festival as part of his stand-up act in 1993. Since then, Kenny has achieved animation apotheosis as the voice of SpongeBob. The law I quoted is more properly a subsection of a law—alligators also willingly turn themselves into luggage to escape the jaws of the Tasmanian Devil—but it illustrates the mutability of matter in the realm into which Kenny’s Mosaic figure did descend, tablets akimbo, in days of yore (*Bedevilled Rabbit* 1:36-1:39).

**THIS IS A LIFE? THE VITALISM SHARED BY DOTS, LINES, SHAPES, OBJECTS
AND ANIMATED CHARACTERS**

Matter that can be changed can be put to different uses. What manifests itself one moment as an alligator and the next as a heap of valises can conceivably also become a dot, a line, a squiggle, or a bullet with an identity crisis. I'm going to get (even more) contentious (than usual) for a moment and ask the question (I've decided) you all have on your lips: what makes it easier for us to read agency into one of these animated drawings rather than another? A cartoon alligator's animated agency is almost self-evident; agency becomes part of an animated alligator handbag's repertoire if it creeps away in wormlike fashion, after its alligator/human hand emerges temporarily from its clothing-packed depths to give Bugs Bunny a Tasmanian tourist brochure (*Bedevilled Rabbit* 1:59-2:01). Agency in a bullet? Emitting question marks helps denote sentience—so why then did Richard Williams decide to give human faces, human arms, human hands and identifying pieces of apparel to the 'dum-dum' bullets fired by Eddie Valiant in *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*? As for dots and lines, their agency and sentience (as far as Chuck Jones was concerned, anyway) is best denoted by changing their dimensions as they pulse under lines of dialogue, and in the case of squiggles, altering their composition to mimic human body language.

Even though Kandinsky describes dots rather dramatically as “the ultimate and most singular union of silence and speech” and lines as their “greatest antithesis”, the trouble with them as points of audience identification is that they're too abstract, too generalized (25,57). The *punctum* that Roland Barthes refers to in *Camera Lucida*—“that accident which pricks” one's consciousness, inoculating it with meaning—is not likely to be a single dot in a thumbnail

sketch, a lone pixel in a digital photo, or one speck of halftone in a picture in a newspaper (27). A dot, a line, and even a more energetic-looking squiggle need to be set in motion to get us to think of them as being potentially alive. Kandinsky's descriptions of the life that he sees brimming within the picture plane are thus perhaps not descriptions of something inherent, but are more like the active reading-in of the picture's observer that Barthes refers to as "an internal agitation [...] the pressure of the unspeakable which wants to be spoken" (*Camera* 19). When Kandinsky expounds on the ways in which the areas to the top and left of the picture plane engender "freedom" and areas to the bottom and the right engender "restraint", what he may actually be expounding on is the culturally-conditioned tendency of eyes trained at reading written European languages to create closure as they read from left to right and up to down (116-121).

All of that is happening in the static world of the still picture, of course. Set a bunch of pictures in motion at the rate of dozens a second, and the eye starts to ask for the movements that betoken life to come ready-made. This isn't just a question of seeing things move and going along with the idea that they possess *élan vital*. The students in my class who said things like "boring, lacking in substance and very random" saw things move, and clearly couldn't care less. So maybe it's less a matter of what we think about something when we see it move and more about what we think about it when it's standing still. In a(n) (in)famously (over)quoted section of *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud goes to (his usual) more effort than is necessary to (literally) illustrate the point that a circle containing two strategically placed dots above a half-ellipse is effectively (and affectively) a human face (26-31). Awkward encounters on first dates, family get-togethers and faculty-student meetings notwithstanding, we don't expect a face to just

sit there forever doing nothing. Taken on their own, two dots a circle and a half-ellipse have nothing else to offer us than inert presence.

But...take the circle, lose the half-ellipse and add another dot above or below the other two so that they form an equilateral triangle, and what you've got is a bowling ball. Now *there's* something that moves—admittedly not under its own power, but what else does a bowling ball exist to do except to move? And as for potential agency, I'm fairly certain there are enough permanent novice bowlers like me out there who suspect that bowling balls would go exactly where you were aiming them if they didn't prefer to see you suffer. I haven't even entered the world of animation, and I've got the basis for a viable character. (Here it is, below. To keep the academic tone of my prose more or less intact, I've named him Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Kegel. He speaks in a guttural voice.)



My imaginary future star of Adult Swim or Nick at Nite may never become a world-historical figure along Hegelian lines, but he has something in common with all other animated characters based on inanimate objects. It's an advantage they possess over dots, lines and squiggles. Their purpose is immediately apparent based on our experience with them. And here we are back at the concept of use value: when a piece of animation shows an object moving not just in the ways it would if its real-world equivalent were filmed, but in ways that imply or demonstrate cognition and volition, it makes an implicit statement about that object's perceived significance and utility. To animate an object failing to carry out its intended function, whether on account of a *prise de conscience* (as with Wile E. Coyote's bullet) or out of sheer spite (as I suspect would be the case with my new creation G.W.F. Kegel), is to make a smallish political statement about one's own preferences concerning the order of things. We are surrounded by purpose-built objects, and like Chuck Jones, Wile E. Coyote, and myself, we would like at least the most immediately necessary of them to operate according to that purpose on a consistent basis. Wanting the stuff we've got around us to work the way it's supposed to may seem to be a petty place on which to build the kind of culture-governing 'structure of feeling' described by Raymond Williams, but ours is a culture of stuff, stuff and more stuff. Our reactions to the way our stuff works—and doesn't work—constitutes exactly what Williams is talking about: it is in no uncertain terms "a specific structure of particular linkages, particular emphases [...] and conclusions" (134).

Animation often reminds us that one of the conclusions that we come to concerning objects is that they're perverse, even though we wish they wouldn't be. This may seem perverse in itself, but it's a vital part of our structure of feelings concerning vitalism. As Bill Brown expresses the idea in *A Sense of Things*, it's an attempt "to ask why and how we use objects to

make meaning, to make or re-make ourselves, to organize our anxieties and affections, to sublimate our fears and shape our fantasies” (4). Brown asks a series of rhetorical questions about how and why the fantasy of animating objects takes its shape:

Do you grant agency to inanimate objects because you want to unburden yourself of responsibility? Or because you need to mark how overwhelmed you are by your material environment? Or is it simply because you’re lonely? Because, unlike a child, you don’t have a toy to talk with? (12)

An alternative and equally plausible answer is that the things around us may be one step ahead of us, and take perverse joy whenever our efforts to prove otherwise redound on us. Here then, we have a reason to harken back to the definition of cyborg that Donna Haraway uses in “The Cyborg Manifesto”, and introduce the second half of it. In addition to being a “hybrid of machine and organism” a cyborg is also “a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (*Cyborgs* 149). Images of objects brought to a semblance of sentient life through animation have been part of our social reality for about a century; they are clearly creatures of fiction, but also creatures of mythic import. Every thing that’s just a ‘thing’ until animation grants this power to it contains a touch of the golem: when it refuses to perform, or refuses to wait to be *made* to perform, it forces us to confront the complexities of our relationship to the material and spiritual realms of existence.

**MATERIAL JOY: INANIMATE OBJECTS TAKING PLEASURE IN BEING
ANIMATED**

Recalcitrance is not a default setting for the inanimate made animate through animation. Many objects in cartoons are quite happy with their lot, at times deliriously so. Two Betty Boop shorts, *Ha! Ha! Ha!* (1934) and *Betty Boop and Little Jimmy* (1935), conclude with pieces of the set decoration falling about laughing (*Ha! Ha! Ha!* 4:59-6:16, *Little Jimmy* 4:51-5:36). The former of these two recapitulates the ending of *The Cure*, a silent short made by Betty's employers the Fleischer Brothers in 1924 (8:10-8:33). Jollity among the inanimate need not be so fervently expressed to be a potent force in a film's narrative. In *A Picnic Panic*, a 1935 Van Beuren Rainbow Parade short, the pre-panic picnickers are a family of kitchenware—a teapot mother, a coffeepot father, a brood of assorted cups, saucers, dishes and cutlery—who cut out the middleman by using themselves to prepare their open-air feast. Two aspects of the behaviour of this kitchen clan are particularly noteworthy: their total acceptance of the anthropocentric uses they were constructed for and, more strikingly, the cavalierly anthropocentric way in which they put each other and themselves to use. Papa Coffeepot leads one of his teacup progeny down to a stream and uses the cup to scoop up water which he pours into his head; after sending the teacup over to Mama Teapot so she can drink from it, he then proceeds to build a fire, sit down on it and wait to percolate (*Picnic Panic* 3:30-4:15).

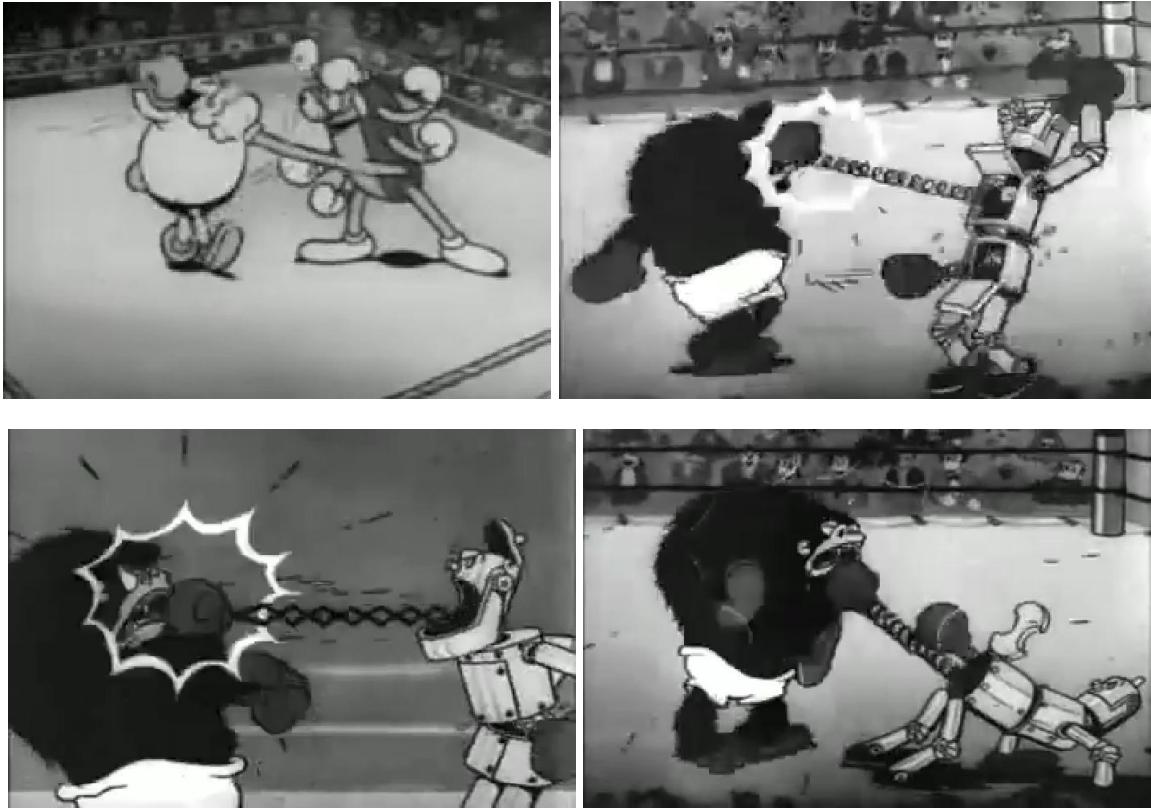


A Picnic Panic probably wasn't created to make its audiences question the ethics and motives behind the way we humans expect everything around us to bend to our will and act on our behalf. If it had been, I highly doubt that its principal characters would have spent quite so much of their time smiling as they got keelhauled to draw water and tested their nether regions' pain thresholds over open flames. These housewares don't break, but they're definitely housebroken. The evidence for this is at the beginning of the film, where we find Mama and Papa in their natural habitat—the kitchen of a live-action house, where they tell the story of their outdoor adventure to a bemused trio of live-action children (*Picnic Panic* 0:10-2:43). The combination of live action and animation in a film which opens with not a trace of animation to be seen establishes a clear hierarchy in which objects that carry on with life like fully functioning human adults are outranked by a three kids too bored by the rain to entertain themselves. It's a state of affairs which the teapot, the coffeepot, and their friend, a kettle who never appears in the

purely animated section of the film, are more than just resigned to. They seem to enjoy their subservience enough to sing and dance while on a hot stove (*Picnic Panic* 0:56-2:03).

ANIMATION BREAKDOWNS: WHEN CARTOON CYBERNETICS GOES AWRY

A stovetop floor show while a hot cuppa is brewing still can't make *A Picnic Panic* my cup of tea. At the risk of sounding contrary, I find that there's more entertainment to be had when mechanical contrivances in animation act in ways that are themselves contrary. I led off this chapter with an account of Bimbo's boxing robot car, and how its behaviour disrupts the boundaries between the mechanical, the organic and the human. The car-bot of *The Robot* was just one of an entire product line put out by various animation houses during the first half-decade of sound on film. The one with the most obvious superficial resemblance to Bimbo's car-bot is the title character of *Mickey's Mechanical Man* (1933). Like the car-bot, the mechanical man boxes—but that's all it does. It has no secondary function as transportation, it never fuses its identity with its creator Mickey Mouse, and it never exhibits traits that call for it to be viewed as a life form rather than a machine...unless you count a design flaw that makes it go haywire every time it hears a car horn (*Mickey's Mechanical Man* 1:20-2:35, 5:12-6:38). Like much that has been seen from Disney before and since, it is wholly mechanical, appearing very much like the result of a chance viewing of a competitor's film and some notes hastily scribbled in the darkness of a movie theatre. One can be forgiven for taking the point of the entire exercise to be an effort to make more boxing gloves on springs come out of more places than came out of Bimbo's car-bot (*Mickey's Mechanical Man* 5:22-5:39, *The Robot* 5:25-5:30).



Bimbo's boxing car in *The Robot* (top L) and the title character of *Mickey's Mechanical Man* (top R; bottom L and R) offer competing designs for concealing weaponry: one opts for mounting extra boxing gloves in a spider-like array, while the other chooses to deploy its sucker punches from body cavities. (Note the scatological imagery in the attack on the lower right, and the phallic imagery in the one on the upper right.)

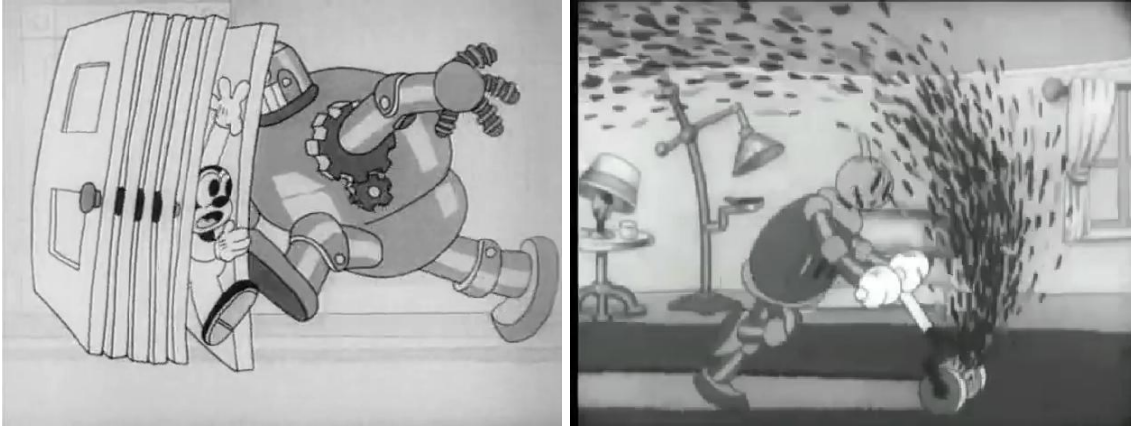
Other cartoon automata from this era combined the 'cyb' and 'org' of 'cyborg' more successfully. Two 1933 films that look like they spent a considerable amount of time looking over each other's shoulders—*Bosko's Mechanical Man* and *Techno-Cracked*—deal in slightly different ways with the proposition that assembling an assortment of materials into a form that resembles the human is sufficient to render that assemblage *entirely* human, inside and out.

The similarities between the robots in these films released within a month of one another are fodder for the kind of professional jealousy that articulates itself through legal writs. Their feet are flatirons, their legs stovepipes, and their torsos the bodies of the stoves that the pipes apparently came from. They're handcrafted using similar methods under similar conditions—by

clapping together whatever comes handy in a shed or garage. These lash-ups of detritus and bric-a-brac even serve the same basic purpose as labour-saving devices for their creators.

Here's where the two films diverge, in ways that allow their robots to explore very different facets of the human experience. Bosko's robot shows a propensity for blind rage, but also a capacity for being tamed. Perfume sprayed in its faces transforms it into a camp gay stereotype; when its temporary dose of sexuality and orientation wears off, a "kiddie" record on a phonograph inserted in its rear end turns it into a simpering, nursery rhyme-singing schoolchild (*Bosko's Mechanical Man* 4:10-4:34, 5:00-5:21). The robot in *Techno-Cracked* is ruled by different appetites: uttering its first and only line of dialogue—"when do we eat?"—it devours a tray full of metallic junk (3:16-3:43).

The *Techno-Cracked* robot's need to seek sustenance may stem from the materials used in its construction. Its creator Flip the Frog chose to equip it with a pumpkin for a head (*Techno-Cracked* 2:16-2:20). (This is the point at which the viewer is likely to ask "why?"...and just as likely to already know that no answer is likely to come.) In this respect, it satisfies the 'org' for 'organism' half of 'cyborg' more compellingly than Bosko's creation, but both creatures exhibit traits that are simultaneously mechanical and human. Their mutual flair for wanton destruction is a feature common to unsupervised machines and humans; the reasons each one has for laying waste to everything in sight are far more human than mechanical, and have been displayed by cartoon anthropomorphisms drawn from the animal kingdom. Bosko's robot is fuelled by the same high-octane rancor that propels Donald Duck into his trademark rages; Flip's pumpkin-headed pal has a genius for dim-witted devastation that rivals Goofy's most property-damaging flights of idiotic fancy.



The robots in *Bosko's Mechanical Man* (L) and *Techno-Cracked* (R) turn out to be comedic devices rather than labour-saving devices. Bosko makes the mistake of switching his robot to 'free-wheeling' mode; Flip the Frog's carpet-mowing robot has 'free-wheeling' as a default setting.

But for all that, how well does a cartoon of a thing designed to function as a simulacrum of the human function as a piece of animation? A century into the development of the art form, robots in animation are still a 'specialty act'. With apologies to *Futurama's* Bender, Jenny from *My Life As a Teenage Robot*, and others, it's something live-action film can do just as easily—and easily more convincingly, all things being equal, since its robots can be seen to be made of (or clad in) different material from their human co-stars, rather than the same ink and paint as the rest of their surroundings.

**MACHINE PLUS CREATURE EQUALS MACHINE CREATURE:
HYBRID DEVICES IN ANIMATION**

What animation *does* do more convincingly and compellingly is furnish visions of machine creatures whose machine and creature components remain separate entities, but work together as a team. “(T)he spirit of Rube Goldberg clearly rules” films like *Betty Boop’s Crazy Inventions*, with its pig-powered calliope and gramophone with a mouse’s tail for a stylus (Telotte 91). This latter device, though, has more to its workings than the passive transfer of sound waves. Betty sings into the mouse’s ear to record her voice, but the voice that issues forth on playback belongs to the mouse, not Betty (*Crazy Inventions* 4:37-5:15). After the mouse in the machine has finished its cover version, the horn of the gramophone grows a mouth and thanks the audience for its applause (*Crazy Inventions* 5:19-5:20).



Are mouse-powered machines better than purely mechanical ones? Although *The Flintstones* and its parade of gadgets with birds, dinosaurs and mastodons at their hearts began right at the tail end of the time period this work is concentrating on, its episodes run longer than theatrical-release cartoon shorts and have a distinctly different genealogy. Because of this, the ontology of the appliances in the home of the Modern Stone Age Family is a matter that will have to be investigated elsewhere. The body of evidence which does fall within the scope of this study suggests, however, that an animated mouse is more than capable of fending for itself outside the confines of a machine.

MACHINE PLUS CREATURE ALSO EQUALS CONFLICT

Animated mice also seem capable of fending for themselves when pitted *against* machines. This seems to hold anecdotally for animated mice small enough to hide in holes in skirting boards, at any rate. In the 1952 Hanna and Barbera Tom and Jerry short *Push-Button Kitty*, automation threatens Tom with redundancy, as a robotic mouse catcher named “Mechano, The Cat of Tomorrow” initially proves more effective than him at removing Jerry from the house (1:15-4:17). Jerry eventually hits upon a solution involving mechanization of a lower order than Mechano: he releases a box full of clockwork mice into the house (*Push-Button* 4:17-4:24). The sudden proliferation of quarry overloads Mechano’s circuits, prompting it to a frenzy of household devastation which culminates in the cyber-cat falling apart piece by piece during its destructive pursuit (*Push-Button* 4:25-5:42). The last of the pieces left intact is the deadliest—a combination electric motor and robotic brain which serves as the powerhouse for Mechano’s workings. It flies across the living room into Tom’s open mouth, instantly transforming him into

(if you'll pardon the expression) an automa-Tom—a Mechano 2.0 every bit as destructive as the original (*Push-Button* 5:42-6:30).



Tom upgraded to a robotic killer of toy mice in *Push-Button Kitty*. Any audience members who were concerned that the chase sequences in Tom and Jerry cartoons had become mechanical now had evidence to back up their concerns.

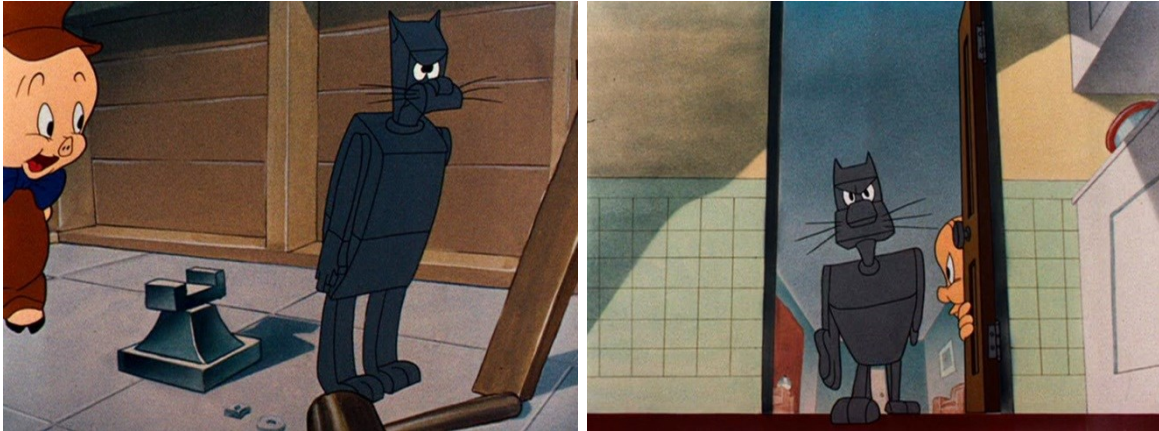
Telotte identifies a common theme in *Push-Button Kitty* and other shorts of the 1950s where a robot replaces a living thing. As people became more aware of—and more anxious about—technological encroachments on their way of life, “the robotic mind—not just the mechanical body—is increasingly the source of problems” (Telotte 114). A film that Telotte sees as being at the crossroads between the postwar boom-era fear of intelligent technology’s threats and earlier fears of the unintelligent threats posed by technology also has a mouse at the centre of its plot. The titular character of *Mouse Menace*, a 1946 Warner Brothers short directed by Arthur Davis, is well ahead of the curve as far as conventional technology is concerned. Spring-loaded mousetraps pose little challenge to him (*Mouse Menace* 0:24-0:49), and his home inside the walls of Porky Pig’s house appears to contain an ample storehouse of gadgetry and other apparatus. A ramp specially rigged up for dropping bowling balls on the heads of interlopers dispatches an anthropomorphic cat exterminator; the mouse also appears to have enough taxidermy supplies stowed away to stuff and mount a mountain lion that Porky sends in after him

(*Mouse Menace* 2:33-2:40, 1:54-1:57). The method that the mouse uses to get rid of Porky's first attempt to catch him—a good old-fashioned cat—reveals a familiarity with the state of the art in military hardware: he straps the cat to a rocket and blasts it off to parts unknown (*Mouse Menace* 1:38-1:44).

When Porky jumps on the technology bandwagon, the menacing mouse appears to have met its match. In the tradition of backyard tinkerers from 1930s animation, Porky goes into his garage and constructs a fully functioning automated cat—a true push-button kitty that can be programmed to purr, spit and claw as well as kill mice, and is hard-wired to clean itself by licking (*Mouse Menace* 2:57-3:34). The creature, which lumbers on its hind legs in Frankensteinish fashion, proves impervious to everything the mouse throws at it: a chute-launched bowling ball, a flamethrower, a revolver, an open electrical socket and an acetylene torch have little if any effect on its functioning (*Mouse Menace* 3:51-3:57, 4:07, 4:09-4:11, 4:12-4:19, 4:34-4:55, 5:10-5:21). Even decapitation only slows it down for a moment, once the toaster it's mistakenly put on its headless shoulders stops spitting out bread (*Mouse Menace* 5:21-5:43).

Like Mechano in *Push-Button Kitty*, this techno-beast's Achilles heel is clockwork mice...to be fair, however, a clockwork mouse crammed to the gills with dynamite is likely to put an end to anything that sets it off by pouncing on it (*Mouse Menace* 5:49-6:21). From his perspective as a student of technology in popular culture, Telotte views the conflict in *Mouse Menace* as “a proxy confrontation” which prefigures Cold War anxieties about the role of self-determining machines in the destruction of civilization (86). From my perspective as a student of anthropomorphisms, I'd like to offer a complementary take on this and other push-button household wars in mid-twentieth century animated America. Such battles may be fought by technological proxy, but they are won with organic survival instinct and cleverness. By turning

technology against itself, the victorious one-off mouse in *Mouse Menace* and habitual victor Jerry in *Push-Button Kitty* both demonstrate that no form of artificial intelligence is a match for their own native-born variety. The moral of this and similar cautionary tales: the anthropomorphized animal has no need of technological apparatus to sustain it: as long as its animal cunning isn't overwhelmed by the human factor, the critter will get along just fine.



“It’s al-e-al-e-al-e-alive!” Porky Pig’s robot cat in *Mouse Menace* blurs the lines between organisms and mechanoids by bearing more than a passing resemblance to Boris Karloff playing Frankenstein’s monster.

RABBIT APPLICATION DEVELOPMENT: A FEW LAST WORDS FEATURING OUR OLD FRIEND FROM CHAPTER 1

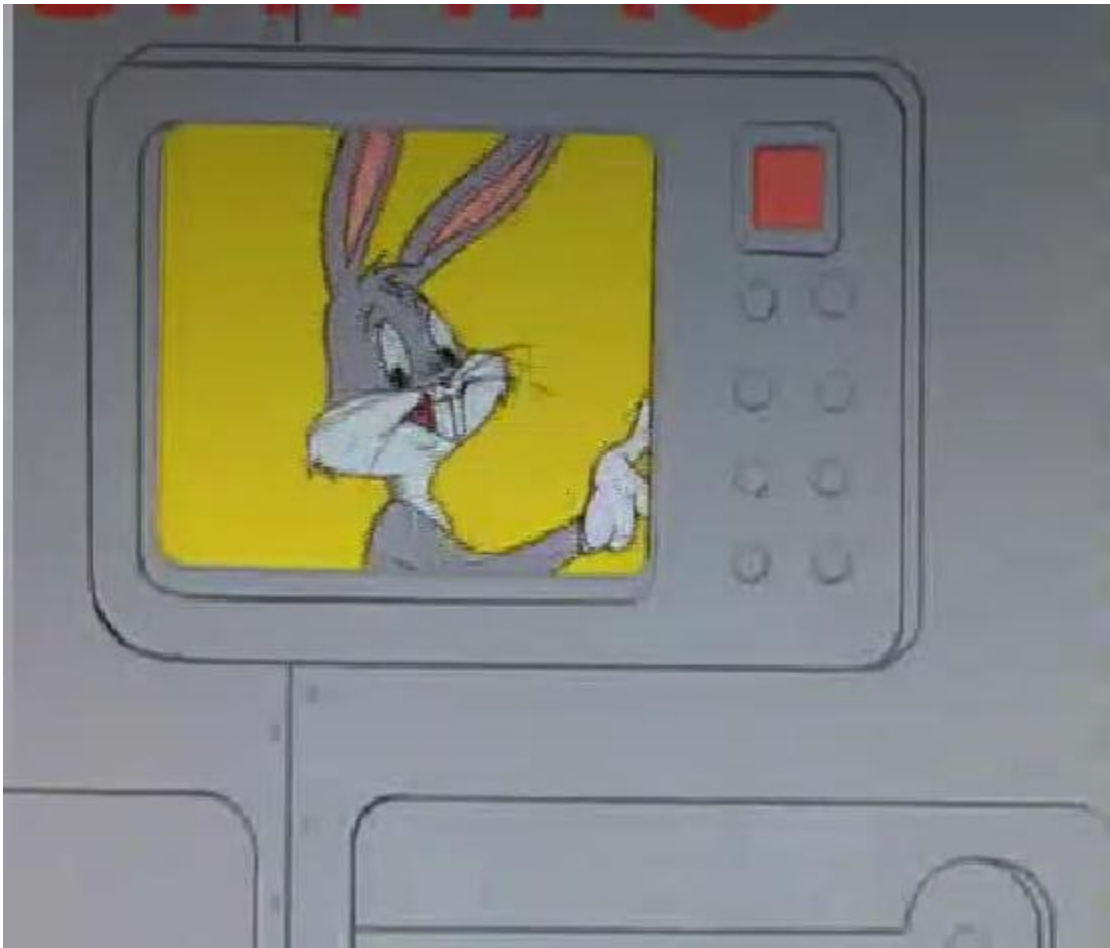
To conclude, then, a case in point—or more properly, a case with three points, each one hopefully as sharp as the wits of their subject, Bugs Bunny. Point One: Bugs’ encounter with an automated exterminator in *Robot Rabbit* (1953). Like most of Bugs’ opponents, “Old Tin Pants” is sadly overmatched, revealing a most un-robot-like libido at the sight of Bugs dolled up in a lipstick-covered bucket and an hourglass-shaped stove (*Robot Rabbit* 5:16-5:47). Its tracking mechanism is also due for an overhaul...why else would it have continued to pursue Bugs after he ran under a steam-powered pile driver at a construction site? (*Robot Rabbit* 6:04-6:16) Delivering the remains of his erstwhile pursuer to its owner Elmer Fudd, Bugs exits, remarking

that “someday these scientists are gonna invent something that will outsmart a rabbit” (*Robot Rabbit* 6:21-6:35).

Point Two pits Bugs against someone who ought to know better than to trust anything mechanical: Wile E. Coyote. During their first pairing, in 1952’s *Operation: Rabbit*, Wile E. rigged up a flying saucer-shaped guided missile, taking care to set its search-and-destroy dial to “Rabbit” (5:24-5:40). What he *also* should’ve taken care to do was to put the dial where it couldn’t be tampered with—say, by a clever rabbit who fooled the saucer’s sensors by putting on a chicken mask while he scribbled in the word “Coyote” on the dial and reset it (*Operation: Rabbit* 5:44-5:55).

Finally, Point Three, from Round Two of Bugs vs. Wile E., 1956’s *To Hare Is Human*. This time, Wile E. has gone full-on AI in his quest to bag Bugs, constructing a cave-size supercomputer to aid and abet his scheme. Miscalculations, or programming glitches, or whatever name you give to what goes wrong in something operated by toggle switches like an overachieving Heathkit DIY toy, lead Wile E. into one mishap after another. After the inevitable final rock-falling, coyote crushing catastrophe, a panel opens in the computer, revealing its problem: it’s full of Bugs. And that’s *definitely* ‘Bugs’ with a capital B: Bugs Bunny’s been inside the thing all along, feeding Wile E. misinformation, disinformation, and information preceded by any other prefix that lends the general idea that it’s calculated to be the harm-causing opposite of useful. Turning to the camera, Bugs makes a statement that can be taken to sum up not only *To Hare Is Human*’s director Chuck Jones’ views on technology, but also the appeal of animated objects that privilege the organic over the purely material and mechanical: “the real beauty of this machine is that it has only one moving part” (*To Hare* 6:45-6:53).

No matter how much things in animation appear to move, only one thing is ever really moving—the individual frame of film or video. That movement is more than enough to make us constantly wonder whether it's moving for the same reasons that we do.



As Bugs might have said, invoking the name of the cartoon from which this still is taken and the name of the late 1950s' most advanced programming language, "to hare is human, to Fortran divine".

Chapter 6

AIN'T NATURE GRAND

Anthropomorphizing plant life and ecosystems
in animation



I'VE GOT ABOUT A DOZEN JOKES
ROLLING AROUND IN MY HEAD THAT USE
THE WORDS "PALM" AND "WOOD", AND I
CAN'T REPEAT A SINGLE ONE OF THEM.

ARE WE BACK AT CHAPTER 4 AGAIN?
IS THIS A STAG REEL FOR THE
SIERRA CLUB, OR WHOEVER ELSE GETS
TURNED ON BY TREES?

Early on in the previous chapter, I mentioned the oft-repeated Zen koan about a tree falling in the forest. When trees fall in animation, of course, there is someone to both see and hear them, onscreen as well as in the audience. Not only that, but multiple sounds are indexed to the falling of animated trees: in American shorts of the mid-twentieth century it was something of a stock gag to herald a tree's fall, seen or unseen, with a lusty call of "TIMBER!" In animated films, trees falling don't give rise to mind-bending conundrums. Trees walking, or even dancing, are another story altogether. In this chapter, we're going to walk along behind some of these trees, pick up the trail of perambulating plants as well, and address a few puzzling questions that arise when trees, plants and sometimes local ecosystems receive the anthropomorphizing touch.

The first question is an old one that's implicit in every myth and folktale that involves a human being or a being with a human consciousness temporarily or permanently adopting botanical form. How much of what we understand as human perception is grafted onto this new form of life? After it was done speaking its piece to Moses, did the burning bush say "now, throw a little water on me before I turn into charcoal?" If Stan Laurel got turned into a real laurel, would the sound it made when it fell be Stanley's trademark simpering whine?



"Why is he trying to sell me off, Ollie? We're practically family," is what I imagine the Christmas tree from *Big Business* (1929) might be saying about the nice mess that's about to take place.

Long before Arthur Stanley Jefferson began his rise to mythic status by adopting a stage name that turned him into a Laurel, two other figures from myth got turned into actual trees...at least, insofar as the word ‘actual’ can be said to pertain to the goings-on in myth. Each of these trees, like Stan, was part of a double act. The best-known recounting of the myth of Philemon and Baucis comes from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*: poor but honest, this aged Phrygian peasant couple are changed into trees as part of Zeus and Hermes’ gratitude for their hospitality. Ovid’s appointed narrator for the tale, the Greek hero Lelex, emphasizes the couple’s continuing local fame in ancient times: “(s)till to this day the peasants of Phrygia point to the oak and the linden nearby which were once the forms of Philemon and Baucis” (328).

Philemon and Baucis’ fame doesn’t seem to have spread far enough for anyone to be quite certain which one of them became the oak tree, and which one became the linden. Ovid’s version of the tale keeps it an open question, because he has a more important question uppermost in his mind. Although transformation into trees would seem to be sufficient reason for the story of Philemon and Baucis to be retold in the *Metamorphoses*, it functions as a coda to the moral of the tale. For Ovid, this is a story of virtue rewarded in both worldly and otherworldly terms: changing into trees so that neither may see the other die is an extended retirement benefit enjoyed for faithful service as guardians of the temple that Zeus and Hermes transformed Philemon and Baucis’ cottage into. This drops a hint for human subjects who live outside a mythical frame of reference: the return on investment for right thinking and right actions is an elevation in esteem and status: “(l)et those who are loved by the gods be gods, and those who have worshipped be worshipped” (328). Mighty oaks from tiny acorns grow, but the way up is considerably easier if you have friends in high places to help you as you go.

I'll shinny down off this limb concerning social capital that I've climbed out onto, and get over to what for the purposes of this discussion is the root of the problem. If either of the trees that once were Philemon and Baucis happened to fall, the other one could conceivably hear it. Both are very much alive as far as Ovid is concerned; at the very least, they are alive at the time his narrator Lydias tells his audience about them. They've been granted not just a reprieve from witnessing each other's death, but a reprieve from death itself, in the form of the lengthy lifespan that a healthy tree enjoys. It's a step short of immortality, but it's as close to an apotheosis as you can get while remaining a carbon-based life form. That leads us to another question Ovid leaves open, which in turn will lead us back to trees in animation: *what form do the extended lives of Philemon and Baucis take?* They're self-evidently trees, but the implication that they remain in place as guardians of their temple once their bark hardens and their leaves begin to bud means that there may be a fibre or two of human consciousness embedded somewhere in their xylem.

Even given that Ovid draws his source material from a body of folklore that breathes deeply from a general atmosphere of "divine unaccountability" (Raeburn xxv), it seems fair to ask why Zeus and Hermes chose not to bestow the same favour on other trees in the vicinity while they were going all Luther Burbank on Philemon and Baucis. A forest full of sentient sentinels to warn against potential temple-robbers would help immensely on the security end of things. Trying to understand why humans turned into trees could still fulfil a priestly function while trees imbued with human qualities are apparently unfit to be hierophants brings us face-to-face with a double-headed doctrine. One head directs a look at you that says in no uncertain terms that to be human is to be special in a way that requires no further explanation. Then, the other catches your eye to remind you that all that is necessary to qualify for this special

treatment, and never have to ask embarrassing questions about it again, is to become human. If that sounds a little like someone telling the poor that the solution to their problem is to just get rich, it's meant to. This sort of doctrine establishes a meritocracy without ever making it clear whether merit can be earned, or is arbitrarily predetermined.

**TREEDOM OF MOVEMENT FOR ALL? THE PROBLEM WITH DISNEY'S
*FLOWERS AND TREES***

Arbitrary meritocracies established through unassailably unfathomable doctrines by unaccountable forces with great creative powers brings us back around to the world of animation, and to animation's great justifier of arbitrary meritocracies, Walt Disney. In his introduction to *Reading the Rabbit: Explorations in Warner Bros. Animation*, Kevin Sandler justifies editing an anthology about Warner's rather than Disney by noting that "(a)s an ideological construct of specific values, knowledge and desires, Disney signifies unproblematic innocence to the general public" (4). It's the same brand of unproblematic innocence that got Philemon and Baucis their tree-ternal reward, and it's a brand of innocence that underpins unproblematic readings of Disney films and their behind-the-scenes histories. One of these films is in the spirit of a grade-schooler's "what happened next?" imaginative extension of the myth of Philemon and Baucis, without being directly inspired by it: the 1932 Silly Symphony *Flowers and Trees*.

A close look at a naïve hagiography such as Bob Thomas' *Walt Disney: An American Original* reveals the insidiousness of arbitrary meritocratic doctrines based on unproblematic innocence. Take Thomas at face value, and you might almost swallow the idea that Walt's faith that "colour would raise animation to new levels of creativity" brought Technicolor to his door,

polychromatic hat in hand, begging him to unleash the muse by making *Flowers and Trees* (114). To be fair, Thomas hints at a more mundane explanation for the Technicolor transfiguration of what was originally planned as a black-and-white film: Technicolor's concession to "grant Disney two years' exclusive use of the [state-of-the-art] three-color process" (115). Even so, the business topography which allowed *Flowers and Trees* to blossom was quite different from the garden of innocence depicted in Thomas' watercolour words. As outlined in Neal Gabler's *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*, it involved a byzantine concatenation of wheeling, dealing, bluff and dumb luck which landed Disney not just a competition-free showcase for Technicolor but financial underwriting for its future projects from the Bank of America (178-81).

The film that was used as Disney's Technicolor calling card is planted in similarly ambiguous soil. Strip away the leafy trimmings and you have what a cynic would call The Standard Disney Plot:

1. Young Lovers, innocent, and therefore suffused with virtue and deserving of favour from Providence, court in as inoffensive a manner as possible for noticeably longer than is truly entertaining.

2. The courtship is mercifully interrupted by the offensive (and more interesting) intrusion of a Rival whose villainy is made obvious by the simple fact that he wasn't in the film at the beginning.

3. The Rival demonstrates a largely muddled emotive response toward the female of the pair of Young Lovers, which the audience should interpret as lustful, covetous, or untoward for

reasons which are occasionally almost as adequately explained as the motivations of characters in a play by Eugene Ionesco.

4. The Rival is rebuffed. Now the fun begins...or is supposed to, at any rate.

5. A number of events occur which the charitable are still inclined to label as ‘advancement of the storyline’, but which have no purpose other than to fill up contractually obligated screen time until...

6. THE BIG FINISH, where innocence triumphs, usually by default and often by accident as well, over whatever exactly the Rival is supposed to represent. The Rival either dies or clears off, taking any allies he may still have with him, leaving the innocent to sing, dance and otherwise celebrate the confirmation of their way of life being better than whatever it’s supposed to be an alternative to. The End.

I may not be Vladimir Propp when it comes to breaking down story patterns, but I know schlock and schmaltz when I see them. If you want a more succinct and less cynical view of what happens in *Flowers and Trees*, you could do worse than Gabler’s summing-up of it as “a story about two trees who fall in love, only to find their romance threatened by a jealous gnarly tree” (*Disney* 178). Even this apparently neutral one-line precis carries within it the seeds of the Disney doctrine of unproblematic innocence: the first two trees and their love are presumed innocent, for lack of adjectives to describe them; the rival tree is described with a loaded term meant to evoke disgust—“gnarly”. An opposition by way of omission is set up here, in a way that’s reminiscent of definition of the abject that begins Julia Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror*: “(t)he abject has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to I” (1). In this schema, “I” is never defined except through process of elimination: “I” is a permanently innocent blank slate to

which “I” can oppose anything that appears repugnant to me—or, to use words Kristeva drops into her descriptions of the repugnance thus felt, “shameful” or “loathsome” (1, 2).

This is the function of the evil “gnarly” tree in *Flowers and Trees*: to point out the presence of innocence and virtue by signalling their opposites. The first signal is a form of visual shorthand: before he appears, the anthropomorphic trees and flowers who have yawned, stretched and begun the day anew are all the picture of robust good health. Not so for our Mr. Gnarly: beyond being merely gnarled, he is withered, dried up and hollowed out. A lizard darts out of the hollow that serves as his mouth, becoming a reptilian tongue which calls up associations of the actions of scavengers on a decaying corpse (*Flowers* 1:13-1:23). The sight of him prompts in us, and we are meant to presume in the other living things in the forest as well, the same reaction that Julia Kristeva experiences when encountering a cadaver—a recognition of “what I permanently thrust aside in order to live” (3). If this tree is the result of a human being’s encounter with a god, it represents a punishment, not a reward.



Evil is as evil does, and the evil tree in *Flowers and Trees* does more than stand around looking ugly and abject to earn this designation. Not content with simply breaking up a happy couple, he threatens them—and the entire forest—with death by setting a fire (*Flowers* 4:20-4:30). As a teaser for the next chapter, the fire has its anthropomorphic moments, but more on that at the appropriate time. For my current purposes, I'll regard it as a mindless expression of the laws of physics in action, because it's the reactions of the flowers and trees in *Flowers and Trees* that are at issue here. Outrunning a fire isn't out of the question for them, as one tree proves by jumping into a pond and pulling up a hollowed-out stump like a pair of pants to replace his burned-away bark (*Flowers* 5:16-5:24). In the meantime, the hero and heroine of the piece are proving that unproblematic innocence is no defense against fire; all that occurs to them to do as the threat encroaches on them is stand stock still and make vague flapping and stamping gestures with their branches and roots in a vain attempt to swat away the flames (*Flowers* 4:30-4:37, 5:26-5:31, 6:10-6:11).

The villainous tree is not so nimble, and not so lucky: it barely has a chance to stop gloating before it is surrounded by fire and immolated (*Flowers* 5:32-5:37). Our last view of the temeritous timber is as part of the animation's background painting, lying charred and expired as vultures circle it (*Flowers* 6:24-6:30). Upstage of the remains of the villain in this background painting are other anthropomorphic trees, still alive, their faces etched in sorrow. This same arboreal Greek chorus formed a tableau to echo and/or elicit audience response as the villain-tree began to meet its fiery end; at that moment, their expressions were masks of mute wooden horror (*Flowers* 5:24-5:26, 5:31-5:37).

To look at *Flowers and Trees* through isolated moments such as these is both literally and figuratively to lose sight of the forest for the trees, because such moments leave the

impression that all the trees—and flowers—in this film display the same high degree of sentience and agency. That absolutely isn't true at all. Most of the flora depicted in *Flowers and Trees* doesn't emote, or move, or do anything that indicates volition or any of the dynamic qualities of *acting*; they just stand rooted to the spot, passively waiting to be *acted upon*, or reacting defensively, like the lilies who spit water at the flames, or the black-eyed Susans who spin themselves like electric fans to spray them (*Flowers* 4:53-4:58, 5:04-5:09). One small conifer drops all pretence of its human side in its panic, adopting the shape of a terror-stricken mother hen that gathers a brood of seedlings around it like chicks for protection (*Flowers* 4:58-5:04). It's the fauna who become the forest's saviours when the fire spreads, as birds puncture the clouds to soak the conflagration (*Flowers* 6:03-6:10).

All this points to an aspect of *Flowers and Trees* that's rather troubling, now that the novelty of Technicolor has long since worn off. The film articulates its own special Chain of Being, a hierarchy of sympathy to instruct the audience where to invest its emotional energy, if not necessarily why. At the top: a pair of leafy juvenile leads, their antagonist the “gnarly”, withered evil tree, and anything else with leaves that picks up its roots and walks. In the middle: the immobile but emotive Greek tree chorus of the climactic forest fire. At the bottom: anything stationary with branches and bark, but without a face. This bottom category of trees gets the same casually instrumental treatment as the farm animals in an early Mickey Mouse cartoon: their primary purpose is to be close at hand when the protagonist feels like converting them into a temporarily useful object.

The treatment in *Flowers and Trees*, as in *Steamboat Willie* or *Jungle Rhythm*—films in which Mickey manhandles other animals to make music with them—is instrumental in more than one sense of the word (*Steamboat* 5:10-6:28; *Jungle Rhythm* 4:21-4:37, 5:14-6:40). When

the young male lead wishes to serenade his lady love, he pulls some vines from a conveniently-curved neighbouring tree and stretches them taut to construct a ready-made harp (*Flowers* 1:56-2:50). No word or gesture of protest comes from the faceless vines and tree at having such liberties taken with them by what is presumably one of their own. This shouldn't really come as a surprise at this point, because the young lady tree who's caught the eye of the sap-filled swain has just finished her morning beauty routine by uprooting a handful of flowers, using them as a powder puff, and chucking them aside (*Flowers* 1:48-1:56).

If differing levels of anthropomorphism help to delineate a class system in *Flowers and Trees*, distinctions between the system's classes may also be based on implied discourses of race.

Among the first of the forest's residents to awaken as the film begins are a group of black-eyed Susans whose faces appear to be made up and ready for a minstrel show (*Flowers* 0:38-0:43).

After supplying support in an impromptu dance troupe headed by the young lady tree, they form themselves into a heart-shaped garland for her boyfriend to place atop her (*Flowers* 2:43-3:02).

It's difficult not to read a hegemonic statement about the 'presumed' place of Blacks in American society into this, a statement about Blackness as a willingly subservient form of light entertainment.



Take a bough...er, bow: the first of two dance routines in *Flowers and Trees*.

There are gendered discourses as well as racialized ones in *Flowers and Trees*. The lush foliage at the ends of the young lady tree's branchlike arms is revealed to be a woman's fashion accessory, held daintily in one hand as she pummels flowers to death to powder her nose with the other (*Flowers* 1:48-1:56). The purpose of this accessory becomes apparent as the newly garlanded lady tree performs a tame, if game, fan dance. Unfortunately, it has more than the desired effect, arousing the interest not only of the young gentleman tree who serenades her, but the withered, villainous "gnarly" tree who is drawn into the plot by her mildly titillating tease (*Flowers* 3:05-3:37).

THE SECRET LIFE (AND LOWLIFE) OF PLANTS: IMPLICATIONS AND MECHANISMS OF ANTHROPOMORPHIZING PLANT LIFE IN ANIMATION

The Hays Office probably wouldn't have batted an eyelash at the adult content in *Flowers and Trees*, though...other cartoon trees were offering up more scandalous fare. In *Congo Jazz*, an early Looney Tune starring Bosko, a palm tree joins the spontaneous concert party that forms the final third of the film, pulling its top fronds midway down its trunk to simulate a grass skirt and bump-and-grinding through a butt-slapping combination of a hula and a shimmy, two strategically-placed coconuts standing in for swaying breasts (5:34-5:47, 5:53-5:57). This type of sexually suggestive visual reference was common in American animated shorts until stricter studio self-censorship was put in place with the industry-wide adoption of the Motion Picture Production Code in 1934. While the hoochie-coochie dancer in *Congo Jazz* makes for a memorable (and not quite NSFW) image, pre-Code depictions of anthropomorphized trees did not always resort to femininity in the service of scopophilia to

introduce the theme of sexuality. The lustful antagonist in *Flowers and Trees* is not the only aggressively hetero male amongst arboreal anthropomorphisms during this period: in *Is My Palm Read*, Betty Boop has an encounter with pair of palm trees on either side of a grass hut that rub together lasciviously before reaching out and dragging Betty through the hut's mouth-like door, enacting a double metaphor of rape and consumption (*My Palm* 4:30-4:36).

Is My Palm Read offers an explanation for these actions that is a little subtler and goes a little further than what *Flowers and Trees* has to offer. In Disney's first foray into a Wonderful World of Color, the evil tree's potential for depravity is signalled on the surface by his repulsive, abject appearance. The hut in *Is My Palm Read*, on the other hand, doesn't tip its hand until Betty is locked safely inside: the dwelling turns out to be inhabited by phantoms who infuse it and the trees beside it with a variety of life force that is perhaps best designated as a 'low-life force'. Palm trees abducting Betty Boop because they're haunted by human revenants with decidedly active libidos creates narrative closure in its fictional world by proposing that such an occurrence could not take place without the intervention of the supernatural.

As intellectually satisfying as it is, this 'because ghosts' explanation raises another philosophical spectre: what if this is implicitly true for any other animated film in which trees simulate human behaviour? If not as if the grabby palms in *Is My Palm Read* are the only trees on the island where Betty finds herself. The film's backgrounds are full of trees that don't give Betty a passing thought, much less make a pass at her. Is there a similar hierarchy in force here as there appears to be in *Flowers and Trees*? If so, does this mean that the main actors in a film like *Flowers and Trees* have been set apart from all the other flowers and trees that function as props and scenery by an unacknowledged supernatural intervention?

Introducing this theory of metamorphosis reintroduces us to Ovid: individual life forms become invested with the spark of the human through the wills and whims of the gods, as a result of momentary impulses which are best not questioned, much less analyzed. Ovid's sixteenth-century English translator Arthur Golding needed a more elaborate explanation, and in his preface to the *Metamorphoses* supplied one which attempted to reconcile the Classical era's case-by-case approach to animism with a few Tudor Renaissance generalizations about botany, zoology and theology:

Three sortes of lyfe or soule (for so they termèd bee)
Are found in things. The first gives powre too thryve,
encrease and grow.

And this in senselesse herbes and trees and shrubs itself
dooth show.

The second giveth powre too move and use of senses
fyve,

And this remaynes in brutish beasts, and keepeth them
alyve.

Both theis are mortall, as the which receyvèd of the aire
By force of Phebus, after death, doo thither eft repayre.

The third gives understanding, wit, and reason: and the
same

Is it alonly which with us of soule dooth beare the
name. (1-2)

Identifying the qualities which differentiate “senselesse herbes and trees and shrubs” from “brutish beasts” and human beings doesn’t delineate the mechanism by which the gods distribute the privilege of soulfulness, but at least it gives us something to look for to determine which beings have received this divine favour. There have to be signs of “understanding, wit and reason”—at least, insofar as a human might be expected to define these terms by witnessing the effects of their presence in other humans. It’s a question of the activity that produces an effect looking *reflective* rather than *reflexive*, of its being something that implies forethought and afterthought rather than unconsidered obedience to physical processes or instinct.

On the purely apolitical, asocial plane of metaphysics, it’s almost immaterial where you draw the dividing line in categories of being thus determined, which in turn leaves you free to be surprised by the proposition that other humans you despise as typically “senseless” and “brutish” may under certain conditions be granted an Ovidian metamorphosis in reverse. Like Neil Young during the politically fraught Watergate years, you can imagine a place “(w)here even Richard Nixon has got soul” (“Campaigner”).

Back when ‘Plantagenet’ was the last name of the historical Richard whose soul was a matter of conjecture, Golding made a further stipulation, one which makes it clear that possession of the spiritual qualities he describes is not an either/or proposition. Instead, it is part of a process of accretion through which a being obtains greater access to soulfulness: “as the second dooth conteine the first: even so the third/ Conteyneth both the other twaine.” (Golding 2). Golding’s lay understanding of a caste system for biodiversity doesn’t provide a model for understanding true metamorphosis—a transformation between incommensurate forms. However, it does serve as a rough scaffolding for a naïve theory of evolution—and what’s more, one with a built-in teleology. All of a sudden, any magical way of changing things has a goal and

guidelines, and begins to resemble a thumbnail sketch of magically transformative spiritual powers that Marcel Mauss would draw three-and-a-third centuries later: “magic...is a game, involving ‘value judgments’, expressive aphorisms which attribute different qualities to different objects entering the system” (149).

Or, if you like, there is nothing so magical but saying makes it so. This applies equally to the godly power of Ovid’s tourists from Mount Olympus and the demigod-like power to invest drawings with “sentient and desirable personalities” which Crafton ascribes to the often nameless (or at least frequently uncredited) animator (*Shadow 3*). When investing drawings of non-humans with personality traits—desirable and otherwise, as evidenced by the villain of *Flowers and Trees* and the palm trees in *Is My Palm Read*—animators make value judgements of a magic-making kind, not sowing dynamism hither and yon so that everything that moves appears to be equally ‘human’, but selectively seeding it so that its germination reveals a consistent if generally unarticulated rhetoric. The magic and the value judgements at its heart are both notable for their focus and their discretion: if a figure in an animated film moves in a way that conveys purpose and premeditation, it is no accident that it does so.

In animation, it goes without saying that members of the animal kingdom—be they the “brutish beasts” Golding speaks of or the “stoopy hyoomins” that the makers of Lolcat memes refers to themselves as—do this every time they move. Anything else that moves with volition during an animated film is doing so to make a point. Often the point is self-contained, in the form of a throwaway gag—animation history has made the shorts produced by Fleischer Studios up to the mid-1930s a sort of collective poster child for this: “it was by bringing the inanimate to life that such gags could most easily be introduced” (Barrier 179). Such footage fillers were a common enough practice at other studios at the time—and sometimes they filled up a fair

amount of footage. *April Maze* (1930) gives its star, Felix the Cat, about a minute for the animation world's versions of makeup and wardrobe departments to finish with him while a visual overture establishes the springtime theme hinted at by the film's title. The second half of this Felix-free zone of screen time involves a pair of flowers leaping out of the earth and doing a stride-jumping dance which concludes with them turning into a pair of hands to applaud themselves (*April Maze* 0:55-1:27). Although it has a lot of competition from other diverted trickles of narrative flow which never coalesce into a true stream of consciousness, it still stands out as the film's most needlessly digressive moment. *Jungle Rhythm* has a digression with a built-in rationale: two palm trees that are part of the audience for an al fresco cabaret thrown together by Mickey Mouse clap their fronds together like hands, as part of an attempt to goad the film's viewers into accepting that what they're watching is meant to be entertaining (3:22-3:27, 6:41-6:44).

In *Flowers and Trees*, the rationale for having flowers (and trees) trip the light fantastic is clear to the point of self-evidence. It's all there in the film's title—they're the stars of the show. Moreover, the rationale for which trees (and flowers) get to take the spotlight and which ones are merely set decoration obeys a doctrine which is central to the Disney ethos to this day. It's easier to see in Disney films which feature zoological rather than botanical casts, but no matter where you find it, it's a reflection of the studio founder's "social imagination" which Richard Schickel characterizes in *The Disney Version* as "profoundly stunted" (7). In the Disney cosmology, to be truly alive is to be a Hero, a Villain, or an ally of one or the other. Anyone—or anything—that declines to take sides, expresses moral ambiguity, or possesses its own independent agenda, is immaterial. It can stand there in the background and hope to get noticed by the casting director of some other cartoon, thank you very much.



Flowers and Trees is one of two films released in 1932 that feature a serenade on a harp. The other one is *Horse Feathers* starring the Marx Brothers. What you're looking at here is the cartoon equivalent of Harpo stretching Zeppo's hair down around his ankles, tying it off, and plucking away.

POTATOES WITH REAL EYES, CORN WITH REAL EARS, AND THEIR BEST BUDS

THE FLOWERS: SOME THOUGHTS ON PROSOPOPEIA, PLANTS AND FOOD

Since I've mentioned them over and over again in this section, the distinguishing features that act as class markers to separate flowers and trees that act in the plot from flowers and trees that act as scenery should be as plain as the nose on your face. Or, as plain as the nose on the face of a tree that uses a noseless neighbouring tree as a harp. To put a face on a tree or a flower is to put a *human* face on it, both literally and figuratively. To take Gertrude Stein one step further, a rose is a rose is a rose until it looks you in the eye and tells you it's something else.

Now, the faces of all members of the animal kingdom had a tendency to be humanized during American studio animation's first half-century (and more), so what a cartoon animal looks like from the neck up can be an equivocal statement. If you'll recall, a cat like Dodswoth

can be nailing a sign he made up on a door one minute and on all fours sucking up in identifiably feline fashion to his human ‘owner’ the next. However, when something that doesn’t have the same freedom of movement in the live action world as a cat or anything else that has legs suddenly takes up legs and walks, dances or strums on a DIY harp, you sit up and take notice. And if it’s doing all these things, *of course* it has to have a face—otherwise, how could it see where it was going? In analyzing the use of personification in the works of Thomas Hardy, Satoshi Nishimura has recently mused that “a face, among other body parts, is synecdochic: once there is a face, very often there follows a tropological process of totalization whereby a full picture of a human being is established” (28).

But, of course, it *doesn't* have to have a face for us to read its actions and its essence as somehow human. That’s why Nishimura added the caveat “among other body parts”. A rose—not Gertrude Stein’s, but one in *Mendelssohn’s Spring Song* (1931) by then-independent animator Cy Young—sprouting hands on its sepals²² and pulling its petals out so that it can be painted red is all it takes for us to know it’s really a person (3:27-3:39). Sprouting a mouth in the middle of its newly painted petals so it can give itself a quick breath spray with (presumably rose-scented) perfume makes it clear that this is also a person with a sense of decorum and personal hygiene (*Spring Song* 3:40-3:42).

²² The botanical term for the little green bits that stick out below the petals of roses and other flowers. The part of the rose that the sepals stick out from is called a hip, a fact which Young declined to use to create an anatomically-based visual pun in *Mendelssohn’s Spring Song*.



A rose sprucing up in *Mendelssohn's Spring Song*. This would suggest to linguistic hair-splitters like me that in this particular fictional animated world the spruces also rose up early.

Animation historian and archivist Steve Stanchfield, who restored what's currently the best available copy of *Mendelssohn's Spring Song*, points to an irony which resulted from this film full of anthropomorphism and other symbolic transformations: “[Walt] Disney saw this short and hired Young to head the newly formed special effects department at Disney” (“Mendelssohn’s Spring Song”). In his new position, Young worked in an environment where synecdochal references to humanity were gradually effaced from the animation of features of the natural world, which was carried out by “specialists” with “a narrowly focused responsibility” for making objects, rather than characters, move (Barrier 123).

For a while, though, the synecdoche hung around the Disney studio, accompanied by harp glissandos by anthropomorphized trees using trees that had no human qualities to speak of. The ways these synecdochal hybrids of character and effects animation behaved recalls another word used by Nishimura, one which highlights their function in the overarching discourse of Disney’s narratives. To call a process of personification “tropological”—with all the word’s connotations of Scriptural analysis—is to set it in a seat of judgement and grant it the implied

moral authority to rule on conflicts between Good and Evil, Heroes and Villains, and other dialectics. For Disney, the dialectic is the true magic at the heart of the Magic Kingdom. It doesn't really matter which side of a Disneyfied dialectic we cheer or boo, as long as we unquestioningly sanction the necessity of interpersonal conflict by taking sides, rather than standing off to one side and decrying the inherent wastefulness of the conflict. This is what relegates the most truly active and heroic characters in *Flowers and Trees*—the birds whose cloud-puncturing brings on forest-fire-extinguishing rain—to secondary, almost incidental status. They're not directly involved in the tug of war between The Hero and The Villain for The Girl, so their interests can be discounted, in the interest of playing up their instrumental value to characters who have been set at centre stage. It's almost as if they didn't live in the forest as well, depended on it for their lives, and would rather not see it burned to a cinder if at all possible.

If that makes us sound as though we're back in Grade Three, and we've been called over by Our Pal Walt to witness a schoolyard fight that we suspect he instigated between two other kids, it all goes back to that stunted social imagination that Schickel speaks of. A large part of Disney's success comes from tapping into older forms of cultural imagination which can be subjected to deep analysis, but aren't necessarily the products of any great depth of thought. It doesn't exactly take Jacques Derrida or Roland Barthes to do a close reading of the trees in *Flowers and Trees* that pulls away the human masks that have been grafted on them and reveals the film's true and homiletic face. In this eight-minute fictional world, trees with human faces are All Good or All Evil; trees which cannot act out of their essential Goodness to combat or avoid the fire set by the Evil Tree must express Goodness by enacting shock and awe at this flaming heap of *hamartia* in a dumbshow that could be captioned 'goodness me'. Trees which

get adulterated to form musical instruments because one Good Tree is pining for another Good Tree do not have a face, and therefore do not have an opinion on this or any other subject involving ethics.

It's unfair, it's highly selective, and it's something that's been going on since long before Disney came along and honed it to diamond-drill precision. Here's a fairly recent description of the process and its heritage by literary scholar Nayef Ali Al-Joulan:

Perhaps the earliest view of personification comes from ancient rhetoric in which an abstract entity is turned into an agent embodying a moral value, so that the value is understood through its personification into personae whom we receive as figures standing for the ideals they characterize. (21)

The word for this ancient rhetoric is itself so ancient that the modern tongue practically trips over it: *prosopepeia*—"a figure of speech that designates the linguistic act of giving human qualities to abstract ideas, animals, and inanimate objects" (Al-Joulan 21). As much of a fan as I am of anything that helps me add to my store of Attic lingo, I'd like to have more of a say in literary nomenclature than the tree that got turned into a harp had in the music that the other tree was playing on it. What I propose in place of the cumbersome and tongue-twisting word 'prosopepeia' is the more up-to-date-sounding term 'facemarking'. That's what's going on here: by having a human face or some other attribute we deem uniquely human slapped on it, something becomes a trademark for an essentialized quality. It becomes the brand name and the face of the brand, all at once.

Putting a face on something to turn it into a brand-worthy body double for a characteristic or attribute is perhaps most easily seen in advertising. When it comes to plant life, the most widely-advertised category of products is food: fruits, vegetables and grains form a significant enough proportion of the North American diet that you'd expect to see them all over animated advertisements, with faces slapped on them and extolling their health-giving properties. In truth, it takes a bit of detective work and luck to stumble across anthropomorphic edible plant life in animated ads made in the mid-twentieth century, whether for cinematic release or for broadcast on television's early years. By contrast, animals used for food are more than glad to put their heads on the butcher's chopping block via animation. Charlie Tuna's decades-long quest to get canned by Star-Kist derives a certain gauche charm from Charlie confusing cultural capital with palatability. Had Charlie been profiled in *Distinction*, Pierre Bourdieu could have told him that the bourgeoisie doesn't want tunas with good taste, they want tunas that taste good.

Although he is hooked on invidious distinctions, Charlie never actually gets landed by a tuna boat, which spares the viewer the trouble of dwelling on the implications of his monomania. The attitude of other animated anthropomorphisms towards winding up as groceries, however, can be truly unsettling. Two 1950s television ad campaigns for meat packers are striking and not altogether unusual examples of this. Valleydale Meats apparently inspired such pride in pigs destined to become bacon, ham and sausage that they paraded, brass band and all, to the slaughterhouse²³ ("Hooray for Valleydale"). Frosty Morn Ham inspired even greater fealty, if the words sung by its glee club of animated swine are anything to go by:

²³ The commercial doubles down on this unsettling subtext with a disturbing 'can't unsee it' moment: the trombonist in the marching band sucks not one, but two other pigs into the bell of his instrument. Restitution and expiation are made in the ad's closing moments, as both pigs are spat back out of the trombone to resume their places in the parade ("Hooray for Valleydale" 0:16-0:19, 0:55-0:57).

The height of a piggy's ambition
 From the day he is born
 Is hope that he will be good enough
 To be a Frosty Morn ("Frosty" 0:15-0:28)

To speak for the general viewer, part of me is reviled, while another part dismisses that revulsion with a snort: "of *course* the ad has singing pigs—who else would know more about being made into ham?" After all, there's no substitute for experience.

Although many forms of plant life are no less experienced at being turned into provender, they seem to show up far less frequently than edible animals as product spokes-characters. This comes as something of a surprise when considering one sector of the processed food industry which truly came into its own in the years following the end of World War II: breakfast cereals marketed specifically at children. On the face of it, you'd think that you could put a face on anything and children would take its word: the under-ten demographic is the prime audience for verse about dishes running away with spoons, anthropomorphic eggs that take up wall-sitting, and suchlike. Even so, Madison Avenue appears to have made a general practice of shying away from investing the constituent ingredients of the flakes, puffs and clusters that inhabit milky morning bowls with the same masochistic earnestness given by Frosty Morn's ad agency to their pigs.

The cereal aisle of the ad game still operates through a process of prosopopeia by association. The faces that dominate cereal brands belong to humanoids and anthropomorphic animals who give the human touch to the abstract ideas that are the selling points for the product: taste and nutritional value. Tony the Tiger bellows that Frosted Flakes are "gr-r-reat" (originally,

just great tasting, and latterly, great for your health); Toucan Sam exhorts you to “follow your nose” to a sweet-tasting cereal that putatively has some of the health-giving qualities of ‘froot’; Lucky the leprechaun leaves the FDA-approved copy about vitamins and minerals to a voice-over, basing his claim for the desirability of Lucky Charms on their “magically delicious” properties.

Lucky and his ilk are the reason I used the word ‘humanoids’ instead of ‘humans’: leprechauns, elves, pixies and other wee folk seem to have carved out a nice little sideline hawking breakfast cereal when they’re not making shoes, hiding pots of gold, and whatever else it is they do. This part of the relationship between the Little People and us Big People predates the use of animation to sell breakfast cereals, and has produced (pardon the pun) cereal-ized animation’s most famous trio, who combine prosopopeia and onomatopoeia to give a lasting impression that what they’re selling is not only appealing to your eye, ear and palate, but will contribute to your overall good health.

By now, you may have guessed that I’m referring to Snap, Crackle and Pop, the diminutive folkloric ambiguities who shill for Kellogg’s Rice Krispies. As avatars for the seemingly simple individual sounds made by a freshly milked-up bowl of the product they represent, these three merry elfin whatnots haul around some fairly heavy signifying baggage. Individually and collectively, Snap, Crackle, and Pop carry three separate semiotic functions: they act as sonic indexes of a quality which represents the product’s freshness, taste and healthiness, as visual icons of the pleasantly magical nature of those sounds and as complex symbols of the trustworthiness behind the industrially-based magic which could cause such a wonder as Rice Krispies to come to be. This magic has a dark side, and it’s given visual form in Snap, Crackle and Pop’s first filmed appearance. *Breakfast Pals* (1939), a ninety-second

advertising short released to theatres, features a skirmish between the onomatopoeic Kellogg's advertising creations and three thuggish sprites named Mushy, Soggy and Toughy²⁴, who represent qualities that make cereal unappetizing—and by extension, less healthy (0:35-1:01).

What with Snap, Crackle, Pop, Tony, Toucan Sam, Lucky, and a throng of others crowding out the space, you have to look long and hard to find the breakfast cereal world's equivalents of Charlie Tuna or Frosty Morn's singing pigs. As I've said, there's no objective reason for this: if we know what we're eating and we know what's selling it to us is an animated fantasy, then some animated grain or other touting its own whole-grain goodness shouldn't create the kind of stop in the mind that causes sales figures to plummet. Snap, Crackle and Pop are firmly rooted in our cultural imagination, but there's no reason that they couldn't be joined from time to time by an anthropomorphized grain of rice who talked up something other than Rice Krispies' sonic idiosyncrasies. 'Anthropomorphized Grain of Rice' is a bit of a cumbersome name, though. We need something punchier—and if it had some lingering pop culture associations, that would help, too. What about shortening it to 'Anne Rice'...?



“Alright, you clowns—take a hike. I’ve got an interview with Count Chocula.”

²⁴ Or so the Internet Animation Database names the leader of the gang, at any rate (“Pals”). He calls the two other members of his gang (Mushy and Soggy) by name, but is never addressed by any of the other principals in the film.

While I'm on the subject, I've never been crazy about Kellogg's choice of animated mascot for Corn Flakes. I mean, good on old Cornelius Rooster for being an inoffensive catchall symbol for 'morning', but there's a reason his animated appearances have been sparing. Knocking on Huck's dressing room door to start *The Huckleberry Hound Show* isn't exactly the royal road to animated stardom ("Huckleberry"). Neither was an ill-conceived 1960s television ad campaign where 'Corny' hopped off the cereal box to become a magical adventure time playmate that only children with pure hearts and bowls full of Corn Flakes could see ("Cornelius"). Leave the rooster on the box, I say, and let the corn do its own talking. Let the corn be authoritative, forthright and forceful, and give it a name and voice that call up memories of an authoritative, forthright and forceful performer from classic twentieth-century cinema and theatre by calling it 'Lee J. Cob':



“If you don't agree that these goddamn things are the best goddamn way to start your day, you'd goddamn well better get ready to find out what I made happen to Rod Steiger in *On the Waterfront*.”

If there's a market for this approach to selling breakfast cereal, it remains largely untapped, due in no small part to the half-heartedness with which it has been applied. Take, for example, the case of Post cereals trying to flog its Raisin Bran during the early 1950s using the song-but-not-quite-dance team of Maisie the Raisin and Jake the Flake. They look pleasant, they sound pleasant, but we get to hear how they sound far longer than we get to see how they look. The chief trouble with the series of commercials featuring Maisie and Jake lies in its formula: the two appear in identical animation at the beginning and end of each spot, singing merrily away (and dropping broad visual hints that they might start to dance at any moment), but disappear from view as they continue singing (and possibly dancing, though unseen) to recount a story that "happened not too long ago" ("Bank Robbery" 0:03-0:18, 1:16-1:22; "Big Circus" 0:03-0:18, 1:18-1:24; "Sunken Treasure" 0:03-0:18, 1:18-1:24; "Track Star" 0:03-0:18, 1:21-1:27). The central theme of these stories is a familiar one from other cereal commercials, and from Popeye cartoons: eating Post Raisin Bran gives the protagonist the necessary strength and vigour to heroically overcome a challenge. While this may give the viewer a reason to try Post Raisin Bran, it doesn't really give them a reason to associate Maisie and Jake with it: for one thing, they're never in the product shots that show the fateful bowl of the strength-and-vigour-giving stuff. (Maybe they were too busy rehearsing the dance steps that we never got to see.)



Perhaps everyone involved—Post, its ad agency, the animation studio it hired—recoiled in horror at the thought of Maisie and Jake being too literal or graphic about their *raison d'être* (or is that 'raisin d' être'?). The prospect of seeing the happy couple broken up as they disappeared one after the other into some raisin bran lover's gaping maw is a bit too much for me to stomach, too. I know this because I've only recently rediscovered something that I must have seen sandwiched in between eons' worth of cartoons during the Saturday mornings of my 1970s childhood. In one of its animated ads, the other major maker of Raisin Bran, Kellogg's, lined up raisins to—get this—*audition* for the privilege of being chowed down on ("Raisin Audition"). The sights of raisins slinking away dejectedly when informed they didn't make the cut and congratulating each other as they're poured into a cereal box are things fit more for *The Twilight Zone* or Shirley Jackson's short story "The Lottery" than the commercial breaks in an episode of *Hong Kong Phooey* ("Raisin Audition" 0:21-0:24, 0:27-0:31).



Be careful what you wish for: like many others who go to an audition with stars in their eyes, two raisins from a 1974 Kellogg's Raisin Bran commercial are about to discover that their big chance is nothing more than the chance to be chewed up by the general public.

Packaging and preparing the animated edibles may process out some of the cringe factor. The raisins auditioning for Kellogg's are going off to the same fate as the snacks who sing the cinema intermission earworm "Let's All Go to the Lobby" while sashaying up a movie house aisle; some of them may even have relatives in the lobby, if the snack bar there sells Raisinets (*Lobby* 0:00-0:13). Subjectively (to my subjective eye at least) it doesn't seem as big a deal if corn that's already been popped or a chocolate bar that's wrapped and ready for sale goes down someone's gullet, though.

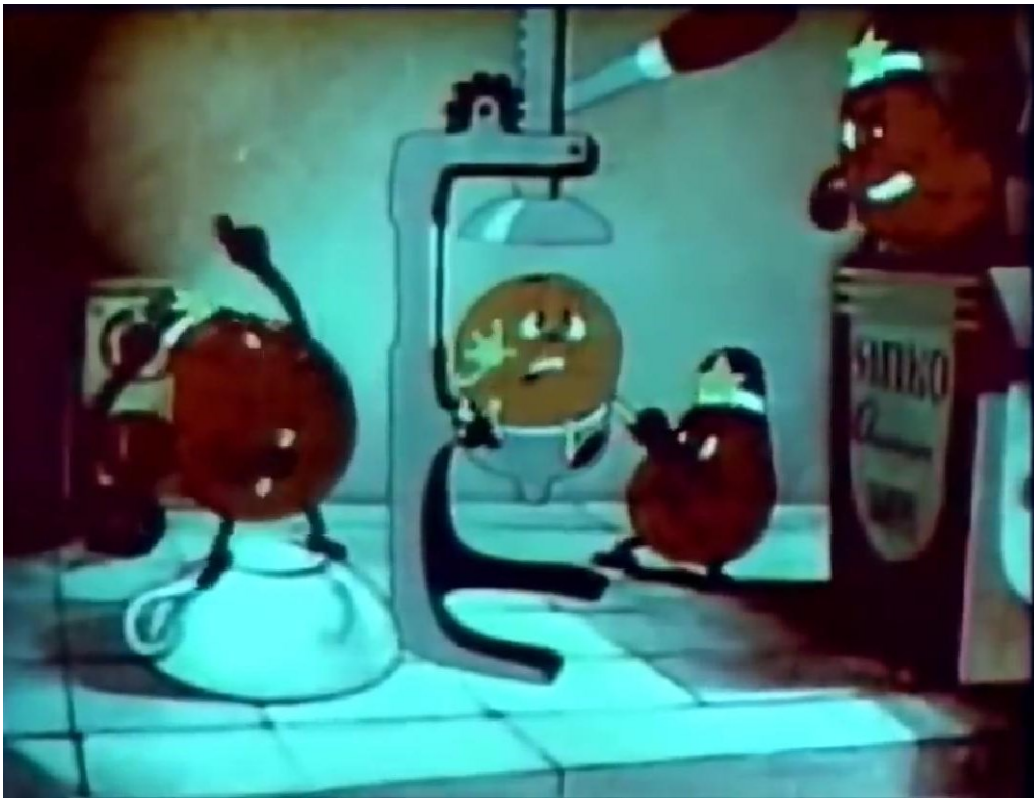
Dave Fleischer, the uncredited director of *Let's All Go to the Lobby*, made something of a sideline from importing the agricultural products of the Uncanny Valley. *The Fresh Vegetable Mystery*, a 1939 Fleischer Studios Color Classic set in a well-stocked if cluttered pantry, plays off two stereotypes about the Irish in America by setting a squad of potatoes dressed as beat cops²⁵ after the abductors of a brood of baby carrots and their mother. When the abductors are revealed to be a gang of mice, the audience is left with the plot of every cartoon with a cat and a mouse set in a kitchen, and a question that just won't go away (*Fresh* 6:17-6:21). Why should we care *who's* going to eat the carrots, since the carrots are already picked and ready for eating?

A quick detour so you can see what I'm talking about: Chuck Jones' 1938 Merrie Melodie *The Night Watchman* centres on the same basic problem, but at least gives us a cat in the title role to deal with the mice. Jones' more tightly-constructed 1953 short *Kiss Me Cat* also puts a kitten in charge of kitchen security, but gives it some backup and tutelage in the form of Jones' gruff-looking but marshmallow-hearted bulldog Marc Anthony. It's hard to imagine the

²⁵ It says something for the creative doldrums that defined the Fleischer Color Classics series that the potato patrolmen are not accompanied by a detachment of *beet* cops—that is to say, beets in full police regalia. The spiritual legacy to this glossy go-through-the-motions approach to animated shorts was passed on from Fleischer's to its corporate heir, Famous Studios, where it dominated the 'new' studio's Screen Songs series. One entry in the series, *Vegetable Vaudeville* (1951), is the cinematic equivalent of a green bin: among the sight gags it recycles from *The Fresh Vegetable Mystery* is a parade of "Irish potato cops" (2:15-2:23).

produce in either of these films taking an active part in its own salvation: no matter the outcome of the struggle between house mouse and householder, it's going to wind up on someone's menu.

I don't want to give anyone the impression that wondering what I'd do if I were a talking fruit or vegetable in an animated short keeps me up nights, but the lot of animated vegetables and fruits does seem to involve divided loyalties. In search of leads on the missing carrots, the potato police in *The Fresh Vegetable Mystery* (1941) use the same brutal methods on the other residents of the pantry that you'd expect from human diners. They "squeeze" an orange for information in a juice press, force an ear of corn into a toaster and turn the heat on until its kernels pop, and use a frying pan to try to sweat answers out of a "hardboiled" talking egg (*Fresh* 4:25-4:35, 3:54-4:11, 4:35-5:12).



Law & Order: Kitchen Patrol...the elite Potato Squad squeezes the truth out of an orange in *The Fresh Vegetable Mystery*.

There should be a glib, easy verbal metaphor of embodiment to encapsulate this situation, but in animation, life-form-swapping embodied metaphors that involve conflict tend to be based on animals rather than plants. You could describe the state of affairs in *The Fresh Vegetable Mystery* as ‘a dog-eat-dog world’, except that in the world of anthropomorphized animation, that seems to apply better to situations like the one at Oswald the Lucky Rabbit’s hot dog stand in the silent short *All Wet*. Oswald’s customer, a real (as in, anthropomorphized) dog lets his guilt pangs overcome his hunger pangs and releases a hot dog after hearing his prospective snack bark like one of his own kind (*All Wet* 1:07-1:45).

Especially since the kinship between these ‘dogs’ is in name only, I don’t wish to class the animals of the animation world as more loyal to their own than anthropomorphic fruits and vegetables may well be. Still, the knowledge that a fruit or vegetable that’s found a place in a human home has been harvested and is waiting to be eaten does seem to give animation’s plant/human hybrids a cavalier attitude towards whatever lease on life anthropomorphism affords. In the animated ad game, that can turn *selling* into *selling out*, in ways that sometimes have implications beyond the purely culinary sphere of human endeavour.

BANANAS FOSTER ACQUIESCENCE: CHIQUITA BANANA AND AMERICAN HEGEMONY

One such case concerns an animated goodwill ambassador with a roving brief to spread the good word for the United Fruit Company during the advertising portion of American movie

house programs in the late 1940s²⁶. The moment Chiquita Banana stepped off the boat in her self-titled first appearance, you could tell she had a certain something²⁷. A few somethings, in fact: let's start with the fact she steps off the boat—cartoon or no cartoon, walking bananas tend to be in short supply. Walking bananas that sing are even rarer—and walking, singing bananas that are closing in on six feet in height? Fuggedaboutit. Let's not forget either that Chiquita is disembarking via the gangplank, strutting into port as if she were on a catwalk or a thrust stage in a nightclub (“Chiquita” 0:05-0:14). No crate in a cargo net hauled out of the hold by a crane for her. Imported talent travels strictly first class.

Chiquita knows she's a star, and plays to the audience—two audiences, in fact—the one on the dock in the film's fictional world and the one in the movie theatre watching the film itself. This is a banana with a different kind of a peel...*sex a-peel*. After making a general note that the commercials “used Chiquita's femininity to market bananas”, Maria Iqbal gets down to specifics: “Chiquita's femininity is overly sexualized through her flirtatious winking and eye-rolling and through her frilly dresses and red lipstick” (4). As openly sexual as Chiquita's performance is, it doesn't inspire over-the-top Tex Avery Wolf takes from the men she happens across; there also isn't a chorus line of bananas in frilly dresses and red lipstick following her, winking and rolling their eyes to a Latin beat. She's a solo act, a top banana in every sense of the word, and she's ready to exploit it for all it's worth.

²⁶ Iqbal puts the date of Chiquita Banana's first appearance on American movie screens at 1947; other sources have it as early as 1944 (2). The earlier date appears to confuse the character's first appearance in radio commercials with her cinematic debut.

²⁷ To harken back to an earlier footnote, so could the fine folks at Famous Studios. *Vegetable Vaudeville*'s headliner is named ‘Carmen Banana’ (4:07-4:35). Sadly, she doesn't turn out to be a sly tribute to the music of Carl Orff, but a riff on the possibilities revealed by the success of Chiquita who, like her pun-named counterpart at Famous, was “inspired by Hollywood's [movie musical star] Carmen Miranda” (Iqbal 2).

That’s something which becomes apparent when her compatriots come into view. There are other anthropomorphized bananas in the first Chiquita commercial, and the differences between them and the film’s skirt-wearing star have to do with a lot more than gender. Not only are they all apparently male, but they’re the size of ordinary bananas—no strapping six-foot *hombres* here, swaggering full of machismo and potassium. Although they have arms, legs and faces, their shape has undergone no further transformations to approximate the human: where Chiquita is depicted with an erect and stately posture, her kin are bent like...well, like bananas, their underslung carriage giving the impression that they suffer from scoliosis. They cavort around, blissfully unaware or accepting of the fate that befalls them in this film and subsequent entries in the series—a fate foretold by Chiquita’s segues to live-action cutaways. Without batting an eyelash (except to wink flirtatiously), she croons about bananas—her *compadres*—being put in salads, baked as a side dish, sliced up to garnish pies and unspeakable gelatinous concoctions, and—the unkindest cut of all—rolled in bread crumbs and deep-fried as a substitute for scallops (“Chiquita” 0:43-0:47; “Fan” 0:03-1:01; “Vintage” 3:14-3:57, 5:55-6:46; “Pieman” 0:17-1:10; “Cannibals” 0:26-1:04).



“Say hello to my little friend...then eat him.” Chiquita Banana instructing a smaller but still anthropomorphized banana on the best way to serve him based on his coloration (from “Chiquita”, L), and about to dazzle and unnerve us by slicing another banana with blade speed that would put a Cuisinart to shame (from “Pieman”, R).

There is a definite hierarchy in Chiquita's world, and she is unquestionably at the apex of her bunch. This is a banana republic where Chiquita is either the president or on friendly terms with the ruling junta, who in turn are on friendly terms with your friend and mine, the United Fruit Company. It would be a conspiracy theorist's fever dream to imagine that United Fruit went to John Sutherland Productions, the makers of the first batch of Chiquita Banana animated commercials, and expressly requested an allegory for resource-based imperialist rapine. And yet...when a Chiquita Banana commercial cuts from its star's sinuous shoulder-shimmy to a live-action shot of bananas being served up on a plate, it's hard not to be put in mind of the influence that the United Fruit Company and other resource exploiters had (and have) over Latin America:

By the 1930s, [the United Fruit Company] owned 3.5 million acres of land in Central America and the Caribbean and was the single largest land owner in Guatemala. Such holdings gave it great power over the governments of small countries. That was one of the factors that led to the coining of the phrase '*Banana Republic*'. (Lauterwasser)

United Fruit was not above exercising that power, albeit by proxy, to its most brutal extent. In response to a strike by banana plantation workers in Colombia in the autumn of 1928,

The Colombian government, in compliance with the banana companies, suspended the right to both free speech and free assembly in a desperate attempt to

please the banana barons, suppress more uprisings and avoid a disaster. On December 5, martial law was declared. (Lauterwasser)

Writing in *The Columbia Political Review* in 2007, Diego Laserna looks back in regret and notes that “(s)adly, the massacre did not strike any sense into the [United Fruit Company], which continued to meddle in Latin American politics”. In light of all this, it’s clear that Chiquita Banana is anthropomorphized in a way that makes her more than just “racialized and sexualized” (Iqbal 1). It also makes her politicized, a standard bearer for “colonial ideas about U.S. cultural superiority” (Iqbal 6). A banana who acts like a human—and a seductive human, at that—while speaking precisely intoned American-accented English is making a very definite statement about who matters and why. First in importance is anybody (human or anthropomorphized banana) who facilitates the transport and sale of bananas to the American market; on the next rung down are the bananas themselves, by virtue of being a negotiable commodity; last (if anywhere at all) are the individual people who pick the bananas. In this view of the grand scheme of things, they are as disposable as a banana peel and are not to be left lying around for the whole system to slip up on.

So, when Chiquita sings something like this in her schoolmarmish voice:

Bananas are a solid food that doctors now include in baby’s diet—

And since they are so good for baby, I think we all should try it.

(“Chiquita” 1:08-1:18)

What she’s also saying (and just as didactically) is:

If you get your children thinking that bananas are a necessary foodstuff,
They'll buy into plantation culture, and other not-so-good-stuff.

Like a banana, Chiquita's identity is slippery: having a voice that belies her ethnicity makes her appearance more like a disposable costume than an index of a fixed ontological reality. Part of the costume—and what seemed its defining part—was dispensed with as Chiquita entered middle age. “In 1987, the feminized banana logo of the 1940s was transformed into an actual woman, which Chiquita Brands International²⁸ claims “reflected the image the public had of Miss Chiquita as a real person.”” (Iqbal 5). Public image or no public image, this makeover reveals Chiquita for what she truly is: she is neither intrinsically a banana nor a woman, but an operative for the United Fruit Company, under deep cover to better spread her corporate masters' propaganda. As banana and human, Chiquita's dual cover identities are avatars of the same force—not a force of nature in this case, but a force of commerce and geopolitics.

The whole situation is a reminder that prosopopeia and anthropomorphism are rarely set in motion without an agenda. If a humanized banana is used as a stalking horse for cultural and economic imperialism, 'twas ever thus as well. Andrew Escobedo recently put it all into perspective in his introduction to *Volition's Face: Personification and the Will in Renaissance Literature*, using the following words: “(n)early all the ancient and early modern commentators claim that prosopopoeia creates force, energy, and emotional intensification” (3).

²⁸ A.k.a. the United Fruit Company, operating under a more user-friendly name since 1990.

**WEED HAVE DONE BETTER TO LEAVE IT ALONE: THE OVERGROWN
ANTHROPOMORPHISM OF *DANCE OF THE WEED***

So if it's understandable that anthropomorphizing non-animal entities in animation prompts an intense emotional reaction, it's also understandable that this emotional reaction can be intensely negative. All such reactions are admittedly personal, and one I have from time to time when watching animation featuring this type of anthropomorphism can be summed up by the question "why did they even bother?" The rationales behind something like *Chiquita Banana* are clear enough that I can meet their makers half way, and give them credit for forethought, if not virtue. *Flowers and Trees* isn't my cup of tea either, but at least I know where it's coming from. Throw something like *Dance of the Weed* (1941) at me, though, and I get righteously indignant, because I know it cost a fair amount of money to make. Like a lot of the Happy Harmonies shorts produced by Hugh Harman and Rudolf Ising for MGM during the late 1930s and early 1940s, it comes across as a response to something made earlier by Harman and Ising's old boss Walt Disney. These reactions were something of an *idée fixe* with at least one of the pair: Harman's unrealized ambitions to make animated features frequently led to him "openly challenging Disney on the rival's home turf", choosing subject matter, characters and an overall aesthetic which approached Disney's highbrow gloss, but lacked Disney's rapport with middlebrow audiences (Salda 22).

Dance of the Weed spares no expense to look as pretty as the film it appears to be responding to. The nine years that had elapsed since *Flowers and Trees* was released meant that the Happy Harmonies crew had had plenty of time to think about where to spend their money. They were so busy thinking they forgot one little thing: the most important part of an artistic response shouldn't be thought, but inspiration, and it costs nothing whatsoever. The lack of a

central inspiration to guide the production team’s work typically made Happy Harmonies shorts unfocussed, wasteful efforts: this lack of focus meant that “(m)oney that at Disney’s paid for more painstaking animation and more thoughtful writing did not pay for the same things at Harman-Ising” (Barrier 192).

Meanwhile, in the lower rent district of the animation business, specifically Warner Brothers’ famed Termite Terrace, free inspiration was where you found it. As an answer to the question “how would I remake *Flowers and Trees*?” Bob Clampett’s response in *A Corny Concerto* (1943) is sophomoric, juvenile and dismissive—all of which are sterling qualities, because it’s also brief and to the point. Whip a slipstream from an enraged duckling pursuing a buzzard past knockoffs of the boy and girl trees so it twists them into a knotty lover’s knot, leave ‘em looking ridiculous, then cut to the next gag. That’s it. That’s all. Over in less than four seconds (*Corny* 7:02-7:06).



In *A Corny Concerto*, Bob Clampett displays a typical lack of respect for his elders. Now, which one of you is Philemon, and which one is Baucis...?

Meanwhile, back at *Dance of the Weed*...Rudolf Ising's animation unit started answering the question "how would I remake *Flowers and Trees*?" by saying "well, first, we'll have to get rid of those trees". There *are* trees in *Dance of the Weed*, but they're strictly for show: they hang out in the background paintings, not dancing and not even singing "I won't dance/Don't ask me" in a way I'd like to imagine a tree might in an animated response to *Dance of the Weed* made by Bob Clampett. Leaves on one tree in *Dance of the Weed* briefly sport jagged bug-eaten mouths so that they can share a laugh at the gawkiness of the film's title character (1:18-1:24). However, this moment of sight-gag synecdoche seems out of place amidst the highly representational portrayal of the world around it: parts of a living whole taking on separate lives feel far more comfortable to watch in the 'anything goes' cosmology of an early 1930s Fleischer short, such as when Betty Boop's big toe grows a face and a hand to point out a piece of ragged nail that Betty's missed during a self-pedicure in *Bimbo's Express* (1:22-1:40).

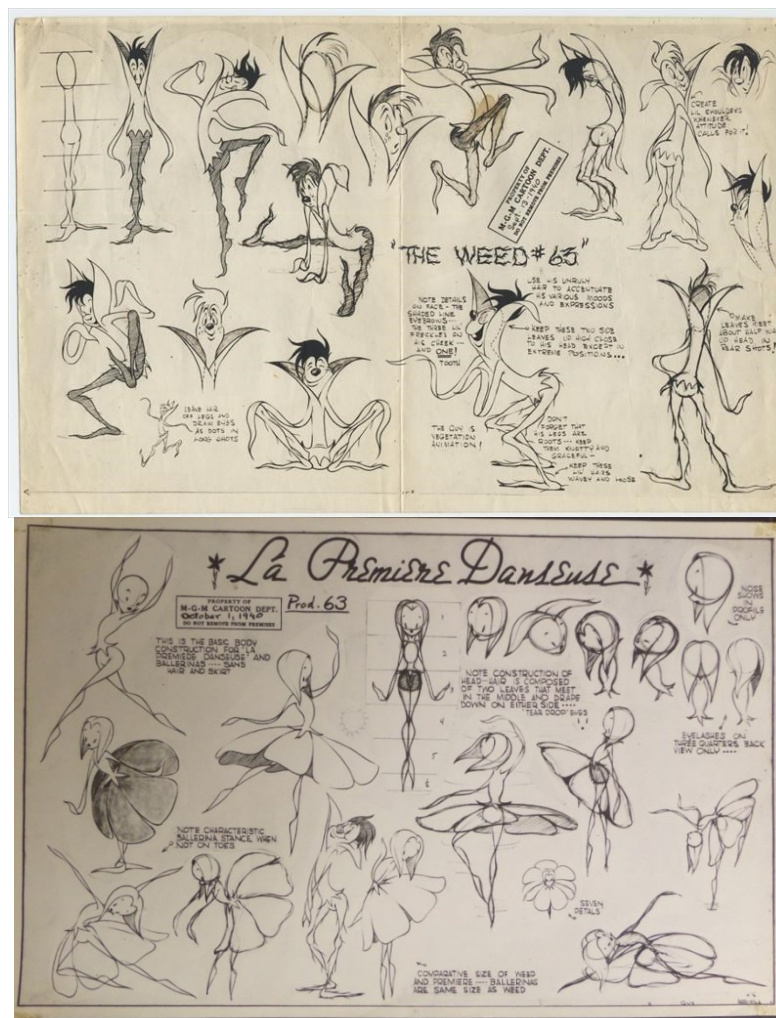
Dance of the Weed is derivative of Disney in another way that wouldn't become apparent to general audiences until three months after its June 1941 release, when another longer and more famous animated film that features dancing plant life hit the screens. The director assigned by Rudolf Ising to the film, Jerry Brewer, "had just spent a year (1938-39) working as a writer on *The Nutcracker Suite* for Disney's *Fantasia*" (Barrier 300). Brewer apparently brought his reject file with him when he changed employers: *Dance of the Weed* goes out of its way to showcase forms of plant life that didn't make the cut for *Fantasia*, and takes pains not to draw attention to ones that did. Mushrooms, which were the stars of *Fantasia*'s version of *The Nutcracker*'s "Chinese Dance", remain stationary as Brewer's weed and his dance partner skip overtop them (*Weed* 5:25-6:02). Brewer's work also leans heavily on the kind of visual punnery that would be more at home in a "Little Audrey" cartoon: pussy willows hiss, violets shrink, and milkweeds

have udders; the ‘plot’s’ late-arriving and obligatory threat to life and limb is a hydra-headed snapdragon that belches smoke (*Weed* 1:36-1:39, 1:49-1:53, 6:32-7:53).

Apart from the snapdragon, the subjects of these cameos remain rooted to the forest floor, which problematizes the film via its title. If this is *Dance of the Weed*, does anything else dance? Or rather, ‘anyone’, since the weed establishes early on that he is meant to be taken as an ‘anyone’, in the human sense of ‘anyone’. Once he uproots himself to greet the day, he’s a not only free to give the film a reason for having both its title and its dance, but he’s free to dance in exactly the same way that a human dancer can. The weed’s basic construction turns the plant part of his being into a superstructure, a façade grafted on to what to all intents and purposes is a body that could belong to Ray Bolger or any other eccentric dancer from contemporaneous live-action movie musicals. His loose-limbed choreographed awkwardness is more than a little reminiscent of Bolger’s turn as the Scarecrow in *The Wizard of Oz*; his ragged, unkempt leafiness is likewise a close parallel to Scarecrow Bolger’s dishevelled appearance. It’s hard not to look him in action and not see a dancer who’s 100% human pretending to be a weed for the sake of a piece of animation, instead of an animated weed possessing a limited and clearly defined set of human characteristics.

The same is true of the dancer with whom the weed shares an extended *pas de deux*. There’s a chorus full of upturned flowers, bodies generically designed as ballerinas, petals standing in for ballerina’s skirts; the prima ballerina who shares the bulk of her screen time with the weed is designed the same way, distinctive primarily through the shape and colour of the petals of her ‘skirt’. Skirts play a vital role in *Dance of the Weed*, not just as parts of the performance, but as a means of determining what their wearers truly are. Before you can ask “why would a weed who’s besotted with a flower play ‘she loves me, she loves me not’?”, I

don't know either, but that's what he does. When it turns out the petals he's been plucking in his fortune-telling game are part of a chorine flower's skirt, he's more abashed than aghast. For her part, the chorine is miffed rather than physically injured (*Weed* 4:17-4:23). The clincher that petals are costume elements rather than living appendages comes as a prelude to the film's climax, when a stiff, cold breeze blows off the prima ballerina flower's petals (*Weed* 5:42-5:48). None the worse for wear except for feeling slightly chilly, she's free to tippy-toe away from her awkward weedy suitor until an updraft deposits her into the lair of the dreaded snapdragon (*Weed* 5:51-6:31).



Model sheets of the two principals in *Dance of the Weed*'s corps de ballet.

None of this is to say that *Dance of the Weed* lacks charm: it fairly oozes charm from every surface. Beyond the surface charm, however, is it doing all that much that live human dancers couldn't do with the proper costuming and makeup? This is where things get a little tricky, and where anthropomorphism and prosopopoeia start playing tricks on you. Thomas Lamarre has identified a troublesome reductionism at the core of 'commonsense' poetics of animation which see animation as the indiscriminate bestower of an otherwise undefined 'life force'. According to this line of thinking, "(i)n animation, movement specifies life, implying a world or worldview in which all nature, all things, all matter, are animate" (Lamarre 118). The trouble with such a worldview, as Lamarre hints, is that it fails to account for any variability in this life force's power. If the ballet chorus in *Dance of the Weed* comes across less like dancing anthropomorphized flowers than dancing animated humans imitating flowers, and for what it's worth, comes across less convincingly as dancing flowers than a chorus of human dancers in a Busby Berkeley production number, then not all life forces are created equal. Sometimes the spark misses the mark: when it does, it's proof that animation doesn't make things 'come to life' simply because it makes them appear to move.

**AUDIENCE PLANTS: WEEDING THROUGH FLOWERS, TREES,
ANTHROPOMORPHISM AND ONTOLOGY USING PERFORMANCE RECEPTION
THEORY**

I'm going to pull my train of thought over on to a siding for a moment to give you a better view of an illustration on a parallel track. *Dance of the Weed* doesn't make me think about *what* its stars are: they're people dressed to resemble plant life, in the same way as campy

sitcom/game show/talk show fixture Charles Nelson Reilly dressed up as a banana for a series of Bic Banana ink crayon commercials during the 1970s (“Charles Nelson Reilly”; “Bic Banana”). Chiquita Banana, on the other hand, is not Charles Nelson Reilly, or anybody else for that matter, in a banana suit. She seems *sui generis*: a hybrid she may be, but she’s just enough of both parts of her dual heritage to give her authority with bananas and humans alike. When she uses quick-and-easy recipes to make an argument for the exploitation of bananas, and by extension the humans who pick them, she’s also making an argument that by combining elements of both life forms, she is better than either one. Transform her into an ordinary human (costumed any way you choose), and you deprive her of this power, the power through which the original Chiquita “removed the banana from its ‘primitive’ context so it instead embodied civilization” (Iqbal 5).

For all the good and ill the word ‘civilization’ represents, those of us who enjoy its fruits—like bananas, old animated shorts and silly 30-second spots with B-list celebrities dressed like fruit—are well equipped to sort out a human playing at being something else from something else playing at being human. All it takes is a little experience with the variety of forms of make-believe used in live and mediatized modes of performance. Keir Elam sums up the far end of this learning curve in *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*: “(a) reasonably experienced spectator will be able to understand the performance at least approximately in terms of the dramatic and theatrical codes employed by the performers” (21).

To boil Elam’s words down to their simplest form, we know the rules of the game from having played it many times before. If the ‘we’ I’m talking about is a community familiar with some significant part of a broadly-defined set of rules and conventions, then ‘we’ can arrive at a rough consensus of the boundaries of the playing field, subject to interpretation and revision by individual members of the community. Each of us within the ‘we’ can sense when things have

been taken too far. When it comes to anthropomorphism, the boundaries that govern what's in play seem to get narrower when what's being anthropomorphized doesn't have a face you can look into. Take away the human's "ability to recognize himself by returning the look" of another that Berger speaks of, and the sidelines start coming up pretty fast when you engage in open-field running (*Looking* 5).

What this means for flowers, trees and anything you take off a flowering plant or tree in order to eat is that they're on a surprisingly short leash in the world of animation. A banana has to call attention to (for lack of a better term) its banana-ness, or it may get a reverse Ovid job and metamorphose into a generic Latinx señorita. A flower needs to use the part of it that faces us—its petals—as its face and not a garment, or we may start to question whether it's a flower displaying unusually human behaviour, or a human in a scarcely unusual disguise.

And a tree needs to convey some sense that it's permanently connected to the ground, no matter how much an animated film makes it move around. Face or no face, if it breaks the connection with terra firma, it becomes like Antaeus held aloft, and loses its power to convince. The test of plausibility is similar to the one intuited by the designers of *The Wizard of Oz's* crabby apple trees, by Sid and Marty Krofft when riffing on the trees from Oz for *H.R. Pufnstuf*, or by Charlie Chaplin when envisioning the camouflage sequence for *Shoulder Arms* (19:49-21:50, 22:40-24:35). Chaplin successfully played both ends off against the middle by wearing a costume that read just as effectively as an actual tree as it did as a disguise. The key to the double reading involved taking the audience into his confidence by showing brief moments where the wearer of the disguise could be seen by the audience but not those whom the disguise was intended to fool. This technique also works in animation: two examples familiar to those raised on TV reruns of Warner Brothers fare are a tree-disguised Sylvester unsuccessfully fending off a

curious dog while trying to lure Tweety into a nest and Sam Sheepdog²⁹ turning the tables on bush-disguised sheep-stealer Ralph Wolf, lifting up the roots of the tree he's concealed in like skirts as he follows Ralph before whacking him with a branch (*Home Tweet Home* 6:11-6:46; *Sheep* 2:41-3:09).

Even if the character in question is an anthropomorphic cat or dog, an animated character disguised as a tree doing the same stage business as an anthropomorphic tree creates a lacuna in judgement. The viewer is forced to pause for a moment before tackling questions concerning ontology or authenticity. Given that *April Maze* begins with flowers that applaud their own dancing, a tree prancing and hopping merrily along seems to all intents and purposes what it appears to be...until it reveals itself to be the hiding place of a rabbit who has stolen Felix the Cat's picnic basket (6:17-6:48). When Sam Sheepdog stands arms akimbo, tapping his root-toes impatiently while waiting for the bush-whacked Ralph Wolf to return stolen sheep, is he still a dog disguised as a tree, or has the disguise taken hold and fused dog, tree, and human, however temporarily (*Sheep* 3:04-3:09)? How much wood could a dog-wood be, if a dog would be dogwood?

LIVING ISLANDS, LIVING WORLDS: ANTHROPOMORPHIZING ALL OF NATURE

ALL AT ONCE

There are intuitive limits to this sort of speculation, and to the animation that gives rise to it. Sam Sheepdog could in theory have chosen to live out the rest of *Don't Give Up the Sheep* as

²⁹ Referred to in this film by a co-worker (and the wolf in sheepdog's clothing) as "Ralph" (*Sheep* 0:51-0:52, 6:32-6:52). The names would be permanently changed to the ones familiar to animation fans in the 1955 short *Double or Mutton* (0:40-0:42).

a dog with an identity crisis about being a tree, or a tree with an identity crisis about being a dog. It would have made for a much different story, but given director Chuck Jones' fascination with the themes of self-definition and identity³⁰, that story would have been in a good home.

A hypothetical virtuosic effort by an animation director in the prime of his career isn't the sort of thing that really tests the limits of what an audience will buy into, though. Limits are better defined by efforts that fall visibly short of the mark. So it is with the 1930 Krazy Kat short *Honolulu Wiles*. In this seven-minute musicale with a Hawaiian theme, it's almost inevitable that we'll be treated to a palm tree hula, à la *Congo Jazz*. This one starts with two palm trees transforming their fronds into hands and snapping their fingers to the beat (*Wiles* 2:17-2:21). Without warning (and I realize I'm saying 'without warning' about a cartoon where things constantly and consistently happen at random), the trees hop out of the ground and transform into...well, into whatever you would call it if palm trees transformed into what look like pipe-cleaner stick figures with grass skirts. They then do a fourteen-second spot dance to give the audience a chance to guess what exactly they've become (*Wiles* 2:22-2:36). *Honolulu Wiles* has one more moment of perplexing 'planthropomorphism' up its sleeve: in a sequence which prefigures the problematic of *Dance of the Weed*, bulrushes (or are they crazy kattails?) hop out of a pond to do a stick-figure hula of their own (5:10-5:18).

It would be easy enough to dismiss the awkwardness of the transformations in *Honolulu Wiles* as the dual product of a lack of technical polish and the hit-and-miss heuristics typical of early sound era animation. A later effort by one of *Honolulu Wiles*' directing team provides an

³⁰ Arguments about the entire filmic lives of a number of Jones' signature characters as extended identity crises are better handled in a separate work. It is worth noting that the plots of films featuring self-styled 'super-genius' Wile E. Coyote, malodorous lothario Pepé Le Pew and psychological house of cards Claude Cat all hinge on their central characters receiving unanswerable challenges to their self-concept. For all that, Jones' most clearly-distilled statement on the fragility and mutability of identity is probably *Bugs' Bonnets* (1956), an extended riff on the comedic premise that personality is dependent on one's choice of headwear.

opportunity to put this hypothesis to the test. Ben Harrison's *Swing, Monkey, Swing*, a 1937 Color Rhapsody from Charles Mintz Productions (also the makers of the 1930s Krazy Kat shorts) copies the earlier black-and-white film's undifferentiated tropical setting as the backdrop for a Harlem-style big band revue. It also dusts off a few of the black-and-white spot gags from 1930 and applies a fresh coat of paint to them: this time, the hula-dancing palm trees stay in place after finger-snapping, letting their crowns slide down to form skirts and leaving two fronds midway up their trunks to act as swaying arms (*Swing* 3:10-3:18).

Two other visual moments in *Swing, Monkey, Swing* are direct lifts from *Honolulu Wiles*, with minor alterations. In one, waves slap a beachy cliff to the rhythm of the soundtrack's music (*Swing* 1:05-1:09; *Wiles* 0:40-0:53). Unlike the waves in *Is My Palm Read*, they never develop hands, but there's just enough in their movement and their shape to suggest that they are nonetheless hand-like appendages with the potential to do more than slap. *Swing, Monkey, Swing* ditches the follow-up moment in *Honolulu Wiles* which undercuts the power of this image, as waves at sea leap free of the water's surface and turn into a blobby, frothy, grinning hula chorus line in mid-air (*Wiles* 0:53-1:06). In the other recycled moment, the island hosting the concert party is set in motion by the infectious beat. *Honolulu Wiles* renders this as a gentle rocking, in extension of the swaying of palm trees which accompanies the film's iris-in (0:26-1:17, 5:18-5:24). *Swing, Monkey, Swing* takes this a step further by making the island flop up and down like a pancake having a small convulsive fit (*Swing* 1:00-1:04, 2:57-3:01). By not overselling the point, as in the case of *Honolulu Wiles*' hula-dancing waves, an island affected in this way by music leaves broader scope for speculation about the implications of classifying the entire island as a single living organism.



If this island's rockin', don't bother knockin': the stately back-and-forth sway of *Honolulu Wiles* (L) and the frenzied flip, flop and fly of *Swing, Monkey, Swing* (R).

These implications say as much about us as they do about what we call 'the natural world'. To make an island dance is to view it as a very specific type of organism, one that tends towards the human in the sense that what's making it dance is the kind of music that humans make and respond to. It's much the same as saying that a certain place has a 'vibe', a distinctive metaphysical quality which registers an effect drawn from the human gamut of emotions. If that statement makes you wonder how long it's going to take me to circle this idea back around to the example from Ovid that I used at the beginning of the chapter, wonder no longer. Enrobing two human souls in trunks, branches and leaves so they can stand as guardians of a sacred place gives the myth of Philemon and Baucis more than just a Hallmark Hall of Fame happy ending to a charming story about a pious Darby and Joan. It turns the entire story into an explanation for the sacredness of the place itself, and for the unexplained qualities that a conceptually-demarcated patch of wilderness possesses to prompt an intuitive understanding of what makes it sacred.

For all the sacred vibes it may give off, that bit of rocky Greek scrubland isn't all that different from the rocky scrubland that surrounds it. The sacredness and the boundaries that separate one piece of sacred scrub from the rest of its profane scrubby neighbourhood are

distinctly not of its own making. As Bruno Latour suggests, belief in the existence of “objective properties intrinsic to the nature of things” is a construct, not a fact (51). We can’t wriggle off the hook by suggesting that, like Zeus and Hermes transforming Philemon and Baucis, something extra-human and divine is in operation, either: among other things, “(g)ods...offer only a surface for the projection of our social needs and interests” (Latour 52). Olympus and Highest Heaven have as many or as few tenants as a culture deems necessary to explain its beliefs about how the universe is divvied up and what kinds of life forces are doled out to various bits of it. The island that dances in *Swing, Monkey, Swing* is the work of Poseidon to some eyes, and to another set of eyes the work of an animator’s hand. To yet another set of eyes, that animator’s hand is nothing more than an instrument for some greater force...even if that force turns out to be nothing more than the sum total of deadline pressure, cigarettes and coffee.

All these ways of looking at that dancing island involve a naïve folkways understanding of the Principle of Sufficient Reason: things are the way they are because things are the way they are. If we follow Gertrude Stein’s formulation of the principle, a rose is a rose is a rose, and a cartoon rose with a mouth is a cartoon rose with a mouth is a cartoon rose with a mouth. None of that goes very far towards explaining *why* the rose has a mouth or *why* the island is dancing. To do that, we have to turn our view back on ourselves. The simple, superficial way of doing this is to say “they’re that way because they’re drawn that way”. All this Jessica Rabbit-esque cop-out does, though, is shift the blame without identifying the prime suspect.

If we want a sketch we can refer to while thumbing through the mug book to find the true culprit, we could do a lot worse than Iain Hamilton Grant’s breakdown of the causes and limitations of ideas concerning sufficient reason. As you might suspect, it turns out we should be looking in the mirror. What things are to us is a combination of what they may actually be and

what we make them out to be. A mountain, whether it's one that just sits there in our physical world in 2021 or the one that joins Bosko in a call-and-answer song in 1931's *Yodeling Yokels*, constitutes a separate entity on account of how we choose to differentiate it based on prior experience and cultural conditioning (0:43-0:45). When Grant stipulates that thinking about a mountain presupposes "that there is already a mountain to be thought", implicit in that presupposition is the existence of "mountain" as a category of object to be thought about (82).



The hills are alive with the sound of music... or, the Lord Alps those that alp themselves: the singing rock formation in *Yodeling Yokels* (1931) would probably look more at home in Arizona than in Switzerland, but this is a black-and-white Looney Tune, not a geological survey.

Such categories are only natural phenomena in the sense that making categories seems to come naturally to humans. We can break all of creation into mind-sized pieces, categorizing individual flowers out of entire flowering plants, separating trees from forests, and endowing flowers, trees and whatever else comes to hand with human qualities if we so wish. That doesn't alter the fact that organizing nature in this way is for our convenience, not nature's. No matter what parts of it we choose to put faces on, to make sing, dance or give hands to so it can destroy

other parts of itself with fire, nature is simply too big and too amorphous to care about any of our efforts to put it in little boxes. As Grant reminds us, “nature is never all it can be, nor simply and reducibly what it is” because the totality of what we call nature involves “a dynamics that precisely cannot be regionalized with respect to being” (83).

But that’s a story I’ll take up in more detail in the next and final chapter of this collection of speculative essays. A dynamics that is no respecter of being is perforce no respecter of persons: it inhabits everything equally, with effects that often seem not so much democratic as anarchic. We’ve seen how animation can utilize this dynamics and its latent anarchism to instill personhood in living things—flowers, trees, other plant life, non-human animals—and in inanimate objects that are the products of human ingenuity. However, it can just as easily level this disrespectful, levelling dynamics at natural phenomena that aren’t, strictly speaking in a biological sense, alive at all. When it does so, it upends all manner of assumptions concerning the sorts of beings that animation traditionally chooses to turn into characters and why it chooses to do so. Stay tooned...

Chapter 7

CASTING SHADOWS

Light and other natural elements as anthropomorphized characters in animation



GROVER GROUNDHOG...
BUT BONUS POINTS FOR KNOWING THAT
CODY JARRETT AND JED CLAMPETT
BOTH STARTED OUT AS HOOFERS.

FRED ASTAIRE...?
GENE KELLY...?
JIMMY CAGNEY...?
...BUDDY EBSEN...?

If the previous chapter seemed like a walk in the woods, this one may have you running for cover. Some of the things it discusses—wind, rain, high waters, and fire—are just the sorts of things that spoil a nice day out in nature. When you get right down to it, they’re just as much a part of nature as all the pleasant, benign, fun stuff—trees with smiling faces, dancing flowers, islands that bounce to a boogie beat, and so forth. Labelling them as spoilsports puts them on one side of a dividing line that’s as arbitrary as they come. You could just as easily take everything as far as the eye can see and then some, toss it in a “a more or less objectified container” as Timothy Morton does, slap the label “*World*” on this one-size-fits all container, define “*World*” as “the objectification of a hyperobject”, and have done once and for all with dividing lines, categories and anything else that allows us to distinguish one thing from another (99, 100).

And if it rains on you while you’re doing that, you’ll still get wet. The dividing line between objects in nature such as flowers and trees and natural phenomena such as day, night, and the weather may be arbitrary, but it *feels* real, no matter what is said by the Timothy Mortons of this objectification of a hyperobject...excuse me, of this *world*. Since anthropomorphism is far more about phenomenology and affect than it is about epistemology and ratiocination, we’ll have to go with our premodern guts rather than our postmodern heads to get a sense of how and why it gets applied to entities that are neither alive themselves nor the products of living creatures’ ingenuity. In this concluding chapter, I’ll direct your gaze sometimes at heaven, sometimes at earth, so we can examine some of the age-old themes that link that link anthropomorphism in mid-twentieth century American animation to a deeper Western cultural memory...and perhaps the memories of other cultures as well.

As an overture to what we’ll be looking at, a brief musical interlude:



A groundhog and his shadow are a very famous pair—

They forecast the weather together, a trick that is rare;

The one little thing that bothers me when out of doors I go:

Now, does my shadow mean springtime or sixteen feet of snow?

Never know which; I just can't remember—

Will it be warm, or make like December?

The whole thing just confuses me, and that is why I sing—

A groundhog's shadow just doesn't mean a thing. (*One Meat Brawl* 0:54-1:41)

These words are sung at the beginning of *One Meat Brawl*, a 1947 Merrie Melodie directed by Robert McKimson. The singer is one Grover Groundhog; the subject matter is Grover's perplexity at the vagaries of the meteorological folklore associated with his species. Immediately after Grover sings these words, it becomes apparent that yes, the groundhog's shadow *does* mean something after all. It means that Grover can take a seat and watch his shadow finish the dance part of the song-and-dance number that features this deathless ditty. He's wise to clear the stage that he's improvised in his den, because the shadow has ambitions of finishing the routine in a manner more akin to Busby Berkeley than Fred Astaire. After a series of dizzying rapid-fire gymnastics, it splits into a chorus line of replicas of itself, it then reassembles as the music swells to a big finish (*One Meat Brawl* 1:41-1:47).

The shadow actually establishes its autonomy a moment or two before this display of terpsichorean pyrotechnics. Grover's exit leaves his shadow to finish belting out the lyrics at the top of this page, and leaves the viewer to ponder two equally valid interpretations of this state of affairs (*One Meat Brawl* 1:31-1:41). The voice could simply be Grover's, coming from out of frame as the shadow mimes over it. Just as plausible is the prospect that Grover is resting his vocal chords while the shadow carries on with the do-re-mi. Neither possibility is more likely than the other, but the degree of agency manifested by the shadow as it somersaults around makes the second scenario a more tempting avenue of thought to pursue. Once you've made the creative decision to let a shadow come up with its own dance steps, what's holding you back from giving it a voice as well?

The fact is, shadows *do* talk in animation. They've always talked, and still talk, thanks to a precept of the art form which holds just as much for stop motion and CGI as it does for traditional cel animation, and is a constant from Looney Tunes to Terrytoons to Puppetoons to

Pixar. Shamus Culhane's instructional book *Animation: From Script To Screen* explains this principle as follows: "(o)ne way to find out if your [animation] is really working is to make a silhouette of it. The action should be understood in spite of the fact that there is no detail" (170). The idea that characters need to 'read'—that is, to be perceived clearly for what they are by the viewer—in silhouette is central to all aesthetics of animation as performance. At the risk of making a contentious statement, the 'silhouette criterion' for character animation can be seen as crucial to cementing an audience's understanding that they are looking at something which has the potential of possessing life, and not merely a series of images. In that sense, it falls in line with one of the original uses of the silhouette—to create a faithful and recognizable likeness using a minimum of detail.

The idea of the silhouette as primarily a human likeness has taken a strong enough hold in the popular imagination to inform the life's work of one pioneer of animation. Taking her inspiration from Balinese shadow puppet theatre³¹, Lotte Reiniger spent six decades creating films using silhouette figures intricately crafted from construction paper and similar materials. The 1970 documentary *The Art of Lotte Reiniger* outlines her painstaking design and construction process: with the aid of nail scissors, paper fasteners and small lead weights, she built up these miniature bricolages so that when filmed, they seemed to be imbued with "almost human characteristics of movement" (5:07-5:11). Although primarily depicted in profile, these figures were conceived so that deft manipulation from frame to frame under the rostrum camera allowed for "the possibility of the figure turning" smoothly to face in the opposite direction (*Art of Lotte* 6:38-7:51). Reiniger also surmounted a problem she had in common with animators who worked in pencil, ink and paint: in order to maintain an appropriate and readable level of detail in

³¹ Likely taking its cue from the reminiscences of its subject, the voice-over narration of *The Art of Lotte Reiniger* refers to it more generically as "traditional Eastern shadow theatres" (3:23-3:25).

figures as they appeared to approach the viewer, she found it “necessary to construct an entirely new version of the original figure. In this way the expression of the figure may be altered in close-up” (*Art of Lotte* 7:54-8:13).

Making silhouettes and shadows read from various angles is more than just a parlour trick: the interplay of light, form and shadow in performance complement the interplay of narrative, movement, and gesture. Over the past two centuries, the increasing sophistication and power of lighting equipment, first in theatre and later in cinema, has produced a constellation of discourses around light and shadow as determinants of character and as characters in and of themselves. Reiniger’s own discourse was largely articulated through her work, and though its Balinese inspiration shines through as clear as day, it was also informed by a body of formal theory and praxis from the European theatrical tradition. Adolphe Appia (1862-1928) continues to cast a shadow on the art and craft of lighting design for theatre: if lighting designers can be said to possess a collective memory, then Appia’s influence on focussing the principles and practices lighting from mere illumination to creative expression is still very much a part of it.

Appia left more than vague, shadowy remembrances of his work maintained through oral tradition. In a body of writings which set out his philosophy of design, he conceived light and shadow in ways that make them more than just passive tools of the designer, but active to the point of being practically alive. The language Appia used to describe light and shadow’s role is full of terms charged with vitalism and animism. He refers to a “more or less distinct shadow cast on an already lighted area”—say a silhouette cutout used by Lotte Reiniger, or Grover Gorundhog’s shadow—as “living light” (Appia 74).

Appia's thoughts on light and shadow drift even further into the animistic by imagining a relationship between the two which extends beyond a simple binary opposition into a form of symbiosis: "what mode of existence could we imagine for light except the opposing intensities occasioned by shadows—and how is it possible to imagine shadows but in terms of the objects causing them?" (77). The operative phrase in this quote is "mode of existence": it indicates a way of looking at light and shadow that makes them *appositives* rather than *opposites*, dependent on one another rather than cancelling each other out. This distinction between the modes of existence possessed by light and shadow has an affinity with the distinction that Agamben makes between modes of existence in living things: viewed separately, light and shadow each have a sort of *zoē*, a bare life; viewed together, they combine to inhabit a mutually sustaining *bios*.

There is a third—and often only implied—participant in the dance between light and shadow: the object being lit which casts the shadow. Appia acknowledges the presence of objects in light and shadow's symbiotic relationship, and in doing so extends his biological metaphor to incorporate the idea of a life force:

Form, independent of light, expresses [light and shadow's] "inner essence" only in so far as it participates in the expression of the organic whole, either by becoming a part of the whole, or by furnishing the means of casting shadows, thus enabling the living light to function. (78)

Characters in animation occasionally turn shadows into characters in their own right, without having to resort to using spotlights like Adolphe Appia or nail scissors like Lotte Reiniger. Take, for example, the patriarch of a family of scarecrows in *I'd Love to Take Orders from You*, a “cheerful but unsubstantial” 1936 exercise in cuteness from Tex Avery’s Warner days (Young). Pop Scarecrow takes his boasting son down a peg by unnerving him with an altogether too realistic hand-jived shadow of a crow on the family’s living room wall (*I'd Love* 7:34-7:45).



And so back to *One Meat Brawl*: after Grover and his shadow are finished their little bit of cabaret, shadows don’t mean a thing in *One Meat Brawl*—until the time comes for them to mean *everything*. The film’s plot concerns Porky Pig’s attempts to secure Grover as a trophy suitable for taxidermy; as the principals in this particular iteration of the archetypal Warner cartoon battle of wits between mismatched opponents —Grover, Porky, and Porky’s hunting dog—vie against one another, nary a shadow is cast by any of them. This is rather surprising, considering the tenebrous nature of some of the woodland locales in which they find themselves. On the face of it, this would seem to be a violation both of everyday logic and the dramatic logic implied by Appia’s statement that “there is no...object of any kind, animate or otherwise, which can dispense with shadow.” (75). As Donald Crafton reminds us, however, such was often the

fate of shadows in animated films with more modest ambitions and budgets than Disney's: by and large, "animators regarded shadows as surplus value, something to turn off or on according to the requirements of the plot" (*Shadow* 183).

One Meat Brawl is one such film—after opening with shadows in general, and one shadow in particular, at centre stage, it throws the master switch on the spotlight, and locks it in the 'off' position. A fitting resolution to both dilemmas—Porky's pursuit of Grover, and the disappearance of their shadows—comes at the climax of *One Meat Brawl*, in a way that explains at least one-third of its reach-of-a-pun-on-an-old-blues-song³² title. The titular brawl takes place in Grover's underground den, played out as shadows of Grover, Porky and the dog engage in a knock-down, drag-out Pier Sixer...or whatever number of pier is small enough to fit into the den, at any rate. A pan across the den reveals the combat to be a sham battle, the product of preternaturally skilful shadow hand-puppetry. Head puppeteer Porky explains before the final iris-out that the free-for-all is only "eh-be-eh-eh-shadow boxing. [chuckles] Eh-the-e-uh-the-uh-this way no-one gets hurt." (*One Meat Brawl* 6:43-6:55)

Grover was by no means the first member of his species in Cartoonland to have his shadow declare free agency. *Winter* (1930), one of a cycle-of-the-seasons quartet of Disney Silly Symphonies, features one "Mr. Groundhog, Weather Prophet", who gives a no-shadow 'all clear' which is given the lie as the sun emerges from behind a bank of clouds (5:19-5:56). Spooked into a dead run by the prospect of six more weeks of winter³³, the prophet easily outpaces its shadow

³² According to a 2009 article in *Harvard Magazine*, the origins of the song in question, "One Meat Ball"—"a ballad about an underfunded diner and an intimidating waiter"—can be traced not to the Mississippi Delta but to a Boston eatery visited by a temporarily impecunious Harvard professor of Latin (Primus V).

³³ Something which makes absolutely no sense to anyone living north of the Mason-Dixon line, since that brings winter weather to an end on March 16 (six weeks after Groundhog Day; March 15 in leap years), half a week before the vernal equinox and well before wintry weather generally concludes any place in North America where snow is an annual fact of life.

while sprinting to home and hearth (*Winter* 5:56-6:06). “The left-behind shadow bangs on the door to gain entry” is how Donald Crafton describes the fallout from this parting of the ways (*Shadow* 184).



The groundhog in the 1930 Disney Silly Symphony *Winter* definitely thinks his shadow means something, and votes with his feet to prove it.

SOLAR FLAIR: THE SUN AS AN ANIMATED CHARACTER

Eventually, the true instigator of the groundhog’s torment slinks back into its hiding place behind a cloudbank, leaving the shadow to dissolve (*Winter* 6:09-6:11). The sun in *Winter* doesn’t really have any agency, much less the amount I just ascribed to it, but other animated suns display tendencies that are distinctly agentic. Perhaps the sun that heralds the beginning of the 1933 Betty Boop short *Morning, Noon and Night* would be better off displaying a little *less* agency. Depicted as a stylized head with arms attached, it rises, muttering “I don’t feel so hot today”, a block of ice bandaged around itself to alleviate a Solar System-size hangover (*Morning* 1:30-1:38). For this sun, the day ends just as painfully as it began: an alley cat dispatched heavenward by a boxing rooster strikes it right between the eyes, transforming it into a crescent moon (*Morning* 6:24-6:28). The new moon at least has the good grace to smile at this state of affairs. And why not? Nothing else that’s happened in the five minutes of screen time between

sunrise and sunset has obeyed any kind of logic that would indicate that this *isn't* just the sort of thing that happens every day in this particular fictional world.



Something tells me it's going to be another one of those days: a hungover sun hangs over the horizon as *Morning, Noon and Night* begins.

A different animated world from 1933 has a sun that doesn't do mornings either. *Technorocket*, one of Charles Mintz Productions' "Scrappy" series for Columbia, opens with a sun which dawdles along the horizon as the rooster crows, then tries to sneak back down again before being coaxed up to its proper place by fair means or fowl (0:23-0:50). Interestingly, in this film rife with anthropomorphized inanimate objects—a dancing alarm clock, mechanized farm hands, assorted cybernetic livestock, a model airplane bird pursuing a caterpillar made of a miniature halftrack—the sun goes about its business without the benefit of a face to register its reactions. The fact that the sun rises immediately for the robotic rooster that replaces the old organic model on Scrappy's farm of tomorrow indicates the previously work-shy celestial orb's faith in technology...or its fear of technology, or, just as likely, both (*Technorocket* 3:03-3:13).

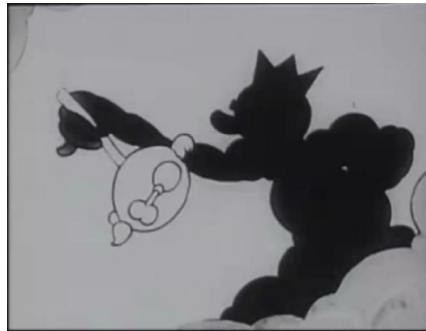
Sometimes the sun gets to enjoy its day job— that is to say, the job of lighting up the day. Of course, any day is easier to take if it's a day at the beach, so it's no surprise when the sun in the 1931 Mintz-animated Krazy Kat film *Weenie Roast* joins in on a spirited low-tide rendition of “By the Sea”, supplying some finger snapping and a mouth pop for good measure (0:55-1:01). Leisure seems to bring out the best in Old Sol: *April Maze*, a 1930 instalment in Felix the Cat's disastrous transition from silence to sound, has an anthropomorphized sun that beams in both senses of the word while chasing the clouds away so Felix can resume an abortive family outing (3:14-3:19). Technically, the sun doesn't ‘do’ anything—it's a held drawing under layers of cut-out paper clouds—but the expression on its face is enough to let us know that it likes what it's ‘doing’ very much.



The sun in *Weenie Roast*. This image alone would be enough to explain why 1930s animated shorts became popular again when college students started doing psychedelics during the 1960s.

**METEOR-ILLOGICAL: ANTRHOPOMORPHIC RAIN, WIND AND WAVES IN 1930S
ANIMATED SHORTS**

Clouds are the most active natural phenomena in *April Maze*: they roar to life in the form of a lion sounding the peals of thunder on the film's soundtrack before morphing into Jupiter Pluvius squeezing a cloudburst out of a pillow-shaped cumulus (2:05-2:46). Jupiter's interest in earthly doings extends beyond his rainmaking duties, however. Seizing on an opportunity for a quick free lunch, he uses a lightning bolt to spear a roast chicken out from under a picnicking Felix's nose (*April Maze* 2:27-2:34).

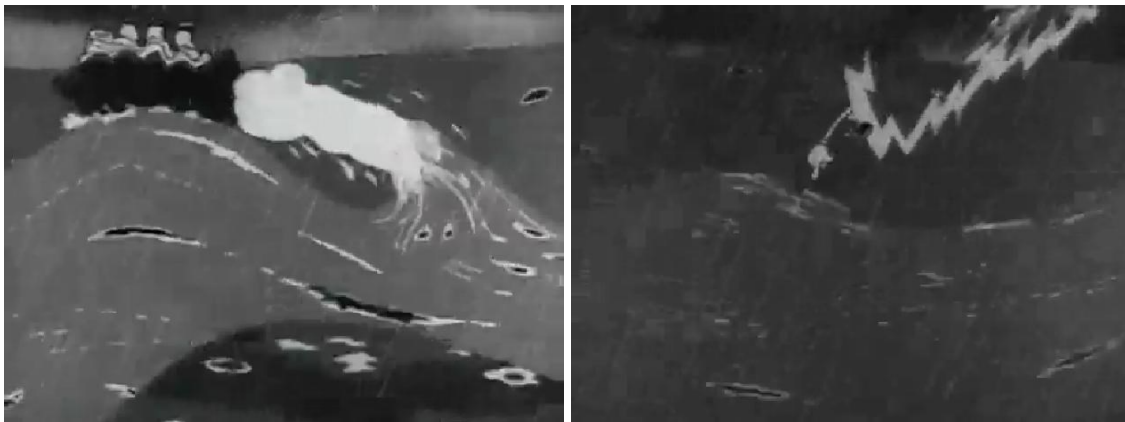


Whom the gods would destroy, first they invite on a picnic: in *April Maze*, 'Olympian detachment' refers to the way this Olympian detaches food from Felix the Cat.

It's a particularly nasty bit of weather that decides to grab your grub. Moments like this in animation are reminders that when we refer to the weather as 'nasty' we're personifying it without necessarily taking that fact into account. To take an example from around the time of *April Maze*, weather in early sound Oswald the Lucky Rabbit cartoons has a decidedly malevolent streak: a rough sea in *Shipwreck* (1931) torments Oswald's storm-tossed raft for the sheer pleasure of doing so. After a cloud with a mouth and cheeks tries to blow Oswald off the raft, a lightning bolt grows a hand to slap Oswald's parrot shipmate in the seat of the pants (*Shipwreck* 0:36-0:42, 0:46-0:47). This is a lighter spanking than the one administered in the

earlier Oswald short *Permanent Wave* (1929), where the surging swells develop hands to pull the pants off a suddenly anthropomorphized boat and give it a sharp paddling astern (5:57-6:05). Adding insult to injury, the ‘hand waves’ then grab the boat and wring it like a dishcloth, squeezing out its occupants before casually slap-serving the boat like a handball toward parts unknown (*Permanent* 6:09-6:17). The waves seem to be acting out of pique, but may be less annoyed with the boat interloping on a perfectly good perfect storm than with the actions of some of their competition for maritime meteorological supremacy. A lightning bolt gets its licks in first by transforming into a handheld brace and bit and giving the boat what for straight in the poop deck (*Permanent* 5:43-5:43).

Sometimes cartoon weather goes beyond nasty and becomes downright pugnacious. That’s the case in *S.O.S.* (1932), another romp starring Betty Boop. ‘Romp’ is perhaps not quite the right word for a film which features waves pummeling an ocean liner in the same way as you’d see a heavyweight contender pummel an outclassed opponent. After the fist-shaped breakers have deep-sixed the hapless vessel, a bolt of lightning helpfully zigzags onto the scene, sprouts an arm and plays referee by counting the ocean liner out (*S.O.S.* 2:09-2:29).



Drown for the count: a storm at sea punches a one-way ticket to Davy Jones’ Locker for Betty Boop and the rest of the passengers on an ocean liner in *S.O.S.*

1932 and 1933 appear to have been bad years for ocean travel in the Betty Boop universe. The 1933 film *Is My Palm Read* casts Betty adrift from a more seaworthy craft than the tub in *S.O.S.*: unable to capsizes this one with fisticuffs, the hands of the ocean grab the liner and upturn it, spilling its passengers out into the briny (*My Palm* 3:01-3:07). As Betty washes up on a tropical island, the waves signal the wildness of the locale, clawing at the beach with beast-like paws as they recede from shore (*My Palm* 3:20-3:30). The waves try to make things a little bit wilder than that once Betty is ashore by persistently patting her hindquarters (*My Palm* 3:30-3:37). Although this behaviour is in line with the established propensity of anthropomorphized waves towards using an exposed backside as a convenient target, it has a clearly more sexual intent than the dismissive butt-smack that the tide in the early Mickey Mouse short *The Beach Party* (1931) gives to novice swimmer Clarabelle Cow³⁴ (2:15-2:17). Disney's tides had a habit of turning on unsuspecting characters during the 1930s: the surf that Goofy thinks he has finally conquered in *Hawaiian Holiday* (1937) puts paid to his claims of mastery by grabbing his surfboard and propelling him shoreward with a derisive "Oh, yes?" and a table-tennis smash (7:54-7:56).

The tide in Betty Boop's world—at least the pre-Production Code one—is a little more accommodating, to the point of overt harassment: the surf in *Is My Palm Read* engages in its unsolicited overtures to determine whether its latest piece of flotsam is a consenting adult. Consent is not forthcoming from the flotsam, and rejection of tidal advances is unequivocally clarified by a sharp (but not altogether surprised-sounding) "Hey! Keep your hands to you!" (*My Palm* 3:37-3:40). If Betty seems largely unfazed by this unwanted attention, it may have

³⁴ Clarabelle's chief function in this film seems to be to serve as the butt (in both senses of the word) of physical comedy: Her boyfriend Horace Horsecollar resorts to a swift kink in the pants to save her from choking at a picnic; later Horace again applies hoof to derrière (or, since she *is* a cow, is that 'dairy-ère'?) to launch olive jars artillery-style from Clarabelle's mouth at a rogue octopus (*Beach* 4:33-4:35, 6:25-6:40).

something to do with the way her Pre-Code films placed her at the centre of a universe whose elements were active participants in her objectification. *Is My Palm Read* uses light as a co-conspirator in voyeurism, contriving to cast moonlight through a skylight so that Betty can be seen in silhouette from the waist down, gyrating beneath a petticoat and floor-length skirt (1:44-1:50).



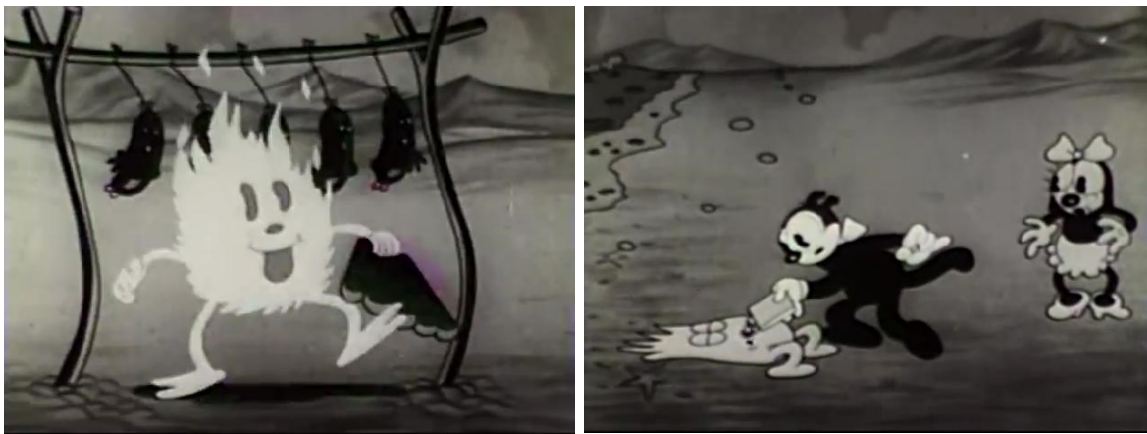
Between the devil and the deep blue sea: Betty Boop finds herself being turned into a peep show by the fires of Hell in *Red Hot Mamma* and being invited to a lap dance by lapping waves in *Is My Palm Read*.

OLD FLAMES THAT DON'T ACT THEIR AGE: ANTHROPOMORPHIZED FIRE

Betty's problems with lumen-enhanced gawking extend past phenomenological realms into realms of a more numinous quality. The centrepiece of *Red Hot Mamma* (1934) is a dream sequence which transports Betty into the fiery pits of Hell; the fire from these pits has a prurient habit of backlighting her so that her entire form can be seen through her nightgown (2:46-2:54). Before and after this blazing peep show, Betty shoos away a series of small knee-high fires that have grown legs for no reason other than to follow her, like children trying to come to grips with the implications of Freud's latency period. The first is sent on its way with a spanking; a pair who pop up later to join her musical set piece "Hell's Bells" are ditched with a bit of artful two-stepping (*Mamma* 2:26-2:42, 4:14-4:21). The appearance of all three is presaged while Betty is awake, by a flame that obediently (and without ogling) walks into Betty's living room fireplace when released from a kerosene lamp (*Mamma* 1:28-1:31).

The seaside fire in *Weenie Roast* shows no sexual interest in the animated Krazy Kat's girlfriend...or in Krazy Kat for that matter—and probably not because it's confused by the idea of the ineffably gender-fluid and mouse-loving Krazy from George Herriman's comic strip becoming an unambiguous Mickey Mouse knockoff. It has other matters to consume its mind. To say it more exactly: its mind is on consuming matter. On the verge of guttering out, it greedily gobbles down every bit of stray driftwood Krazy can toss its way (*Weenie* 2:39-2:59). The fire has come by its hunger naturally... in fact, perhaps a bit too naturally for its own good. A loose curl of surf has extinguished it, forcing Krazy to resort to one of early animation's tried-and-true methods of artificial respiration. My evidence against this method may be anecdotal, but my wife, who was in Girl Guides, assures me that there are better, more effective and safer practices for reviving a dying fire than by wringing the water out of it (*Weenie* 1:14-1:34).

Further resuscitating it by giving it alcohol, as Krazy does immediately thereafter, is similarly discouraged by fire safety experts (*Weenie* 1:35-1:41). It's hard to fault Krazy for going to such lengths, though. The fire has proven to be a most amiable companion, joining in the chorus of "By The Sea" with a sprightly jig and a hot solo on pan pipes improvised from the sticks at its base, then playing jump rope with the extremely pliant wooden spit from which the hot dogs it's roasting are suspended (*Weenie* 0:34-0:41, 1:01-1:08).

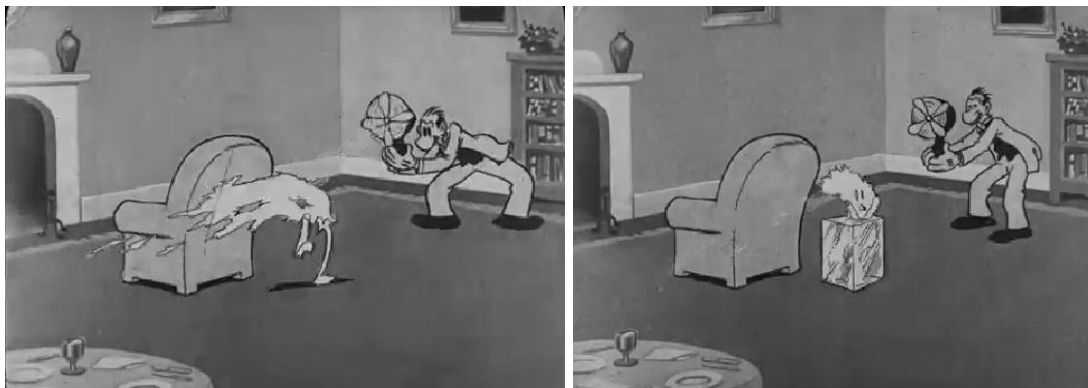


Not exactly a day at the beach: things start out happily enough for Krazy Kat's seaside campfire in *Weenie Roast*, but after taking on water it needs a stiff bracer to revive it.

The fire in *Weenie Roast* that dances, plays, and almost dies is ostending and enacting the metaphorical language used to impute a life force to combustion. Generally speaking, the playfulness of an anthropomorphized cartoon fire is not nearly so benign. Krazy Kat discovers this in *Whacks Museum*, a 1933 short that delivers every bit of the amusement that its attempted pun of a title promises. As it spreads, a fire in a wax museum swings on the trapeze in a circus tableau, swallows and spits back water that museum caretaker Krazy uses to douse it, and grabs Krazy by the tail, stretching it until it snaps back and propels Krazy across the room (*Whacks* 3:59-4:03, 4:15-4:17, 4:48-4:53).

The fire's anthropomorphic moments are part and parcel with the rest of the goings-on in *Whacks Museum*, which are predicated on the indistinctness of the boundary between the living and the non-living in an animated film. The exhibits in the museum of the title appear to have drifted into a liminal area between animate and inanimate matter, staked out their territory, and declared their own form of squatter's rights over it. When one of them moves, it's hard to tell whether what we're looking at is supposed to be a wax-covered dummy or a performer in a human statue act who has temporarily broken character. This dichotomy provides the film with its crisis, and its fire: the 'sexpot' performance by a wax figure of Mae West arouses such passion in a neighbouring wax figure of a bridegroom that he defies the laws of matter by melting and spontaneously combusting all at once (*Whacks* 3:22-3:53).

Playing with Fire, a 1926 silent film featuring two of Krazy Kat's comic strip rivals, Mutt and Jeff, adds its unwanted guest star in a far more plausible fashion: the carpet of Mutt's living room ignites after Jeff has been careless with Mutt's pipe (0:51-0:54). The fire seems to be less interested in spreading and burning the house down than in tormenting Mutt: adopting a variety of human-like guises, it frolics around, giving the taller member of the Mutt-and-Jeff act a hard time, but causing no noticeable damage to his person or property (*Playing* 1:36; 4:08-5:02). More insulted than injured by all this tomfoolery, Mutt rids himself of the nuisance with a tactic that is definitely *not* recommended for dealing with fire in the live-action world. Turning an electric fan on his tormentor, he extinguishes the fire by freezing it to death, leaving a harp-playing flame-headed angel to ascend to House Fire Heaven in the place of its last wisps of smoke (*Playing* 5:03-5:36).



Fanning the flames: Mutt demonstrates that there's nothing like an ice fire.

The frequently capricious movements of fire invite us to view them as something other than the product of passive obeisance to outside forces and natural laws: as illustrated in *Weenie Roast*, *Red Hot Mamma* and *Playing with Fire*, these imputed qualities of cognition and independence led to fire being frequently invited to join the cast of studio-era animated shorts as an unbilled supporting character. Occasionally, fire bucks for a starring role in a film—or at least the position of second lead or co-protagonist. *Good Night Elmer* (1940) is an exercise in pantomime in which Elmer Fudd imitates the andante rhythms of silent film comedian Harry Langdon as he tries to extinguish a candle flame which becomes progressively more agentic, if not wholly anthropomorphic, in its activities. Director Chuck Jones builds the action to keep the audience's sympathies with Elmer rather than the flame: all poor Mr. Fudd is trying to do is start a good night's sleep which never happens because the simple act of putting out a candle keeps him up until dawn.

This state of affairs is as we should expect; if we're going to take sides, we're far more likely to pull for one of us humans to prevail over an obstinate wick-jockey. However, in the world of animation, there are few givens, and occasionally an animated film comes along with a human character that's such an all-out and irredeemable piece of work that it invites a rooting

interest in any adversary that character might encounter, even before an adversary presents itself. *Fire Cheese*, produced by the Fleischer Studios in 1941, is just such a film. Its lead human character, Gabby, was promoted from a supporting role in the studio's feature version of *Gulliver's Travels* to above-the-title billing in a series of shorts whose underlying rationale seems to be that if audiences laugh at seeing a naïf blunder into trouble, they'll laugh even harder when the naïf is the root cause of the trouble he blunders into. With the amount of truly side-splitting destruction in the name of comedy that has been committed in animation over the years, I'm hesitant to suggest that animators should periodically consult Aristotle to remind themselves that "the laughable is a sort of error and ugliness that is not painful and destructive" (*Poetics* 6). However, there's always one exception that proves the rule, and Gabby is that and then some. As an exercise in painful, destructive error and ugliness, watching an entire Gabby short is akin to making an asphalt soufflé, serving it in a sauce made of Windex and lighter fluid, then eating it all just to see if it really turned out as bad as you thought it would.

That isn't to say Gabby doesn't have redeeming qualities. For one thing, he's never on screen for more than six or seven minutes at a time. When he is onscreen, however, he's a brash, opinionated, ignorant know-it-all who comes on strong, never goes away³⁵, and has a lingering aftereffect like the heartburn you'd get from eating the soufflé I described in a previous paragraph as the dessert to a meal with a main course of ghost peppers marinated in turpentine and paprika and flambéed in napalm. It comes as a relief (but never of the comic variety) to see him get his comeuppance, which it must be said happens to him every time he blights the screen with his presence. *Fire Cheese* is no different from any other Gabby cartoon in this respect, but the ante for the comeuppance is upped somewhat, because this time it's not just Gabby's fellow

³⁵ And doesn't even give you a chance to throw in some gratuitous piling-on of Donald Trump by adding "but at least he's never held high public office", because he *did* in his first starring effort *King for a Day* (1940).

humans who get even with him, but the Universe, as represented by the primordial element of fire. A house fire is blazing away merrily, with no signs of getting any worse, and every sign of being tameable by the fire brigade that's come to the rescue. However, Gabby's tagged along with them to prove his much-bruited prowess as a firefighter, and that's when the blaze starts to take things personally. It instantly anthropomorphizes, targets self-appointed fire chief/town bigmouth Gabby, and systematically razes the dwelling just to prove a point (*Fire Cheese* 4:05-5:51). By the end of the reel, Gabby's still there to deal with the wrath of the real firemen, but the fire is long gone. Like anyone unfortunate enough to watch this film, it couldn't bear to stick around until it was all over.



Keep the home fires burning: an anthropomorphized blaze in *Fire Cheese* borrows a trick from its opponents and makes a ladder out of fire to escape from the fire department's hose (top). Meanwhile, volunteer firefighter Gabby shows why there are professional firefighters by watering a plant and putting a fresh log on the crackling hearth (bottom L and R).

The films I've been describing have the anthropomorphized fire doing what was known in vaudeville as 'working in two' with the nominal star of an animated short, often reducing this top-billed comic character to a straight man in the process. To further fuel my argument, I'll throw on two more pieces of flammable nitrate stock: *Fire-Fire* (1932) with Ub Iwerks' Flip the Frog and *Hook and Ladder Hokum* (1933) starring the human team of Tom and Jerry from the short-lived Van Beuren Studio. *Fire-Fire* takes nearly five minutes to put Flip into direct conflict with the apartment fire that his steam pumper crew have come to put out, transforming him from life saver to melodramatic hero. Snatching Flip's girlfriend from previous outings (a female cat in case you're interested) in from an open window, the fire adopts the guise and gestus of a stereotypical melodrama villain as it taunts Our Hero (*Fire-Fire* 4:44-4:48). The villain has henchmen as well: an anthropomorphic man-beast made of smoke pursues Flip until the fearless frog turns the tables and shoots it dead (*Fire-Fire* 4:58-5:14). This goonery may have been only a diversionary tactic to keep Flip away from his damsel in distress, who is guarded by a flaming band of Hollywood-issue Indigenous warriors. The masterstroke Flip uses to defeat this horde is, like Mutt's, not recommended for daily household use: he sucks them up in a vacuum cleaner. It's up to viewers to decide whether the vacuum's bag is fireproof or whether the flames inside it don't know that it isn't (*Fire-Fire* 5:18-5:44).



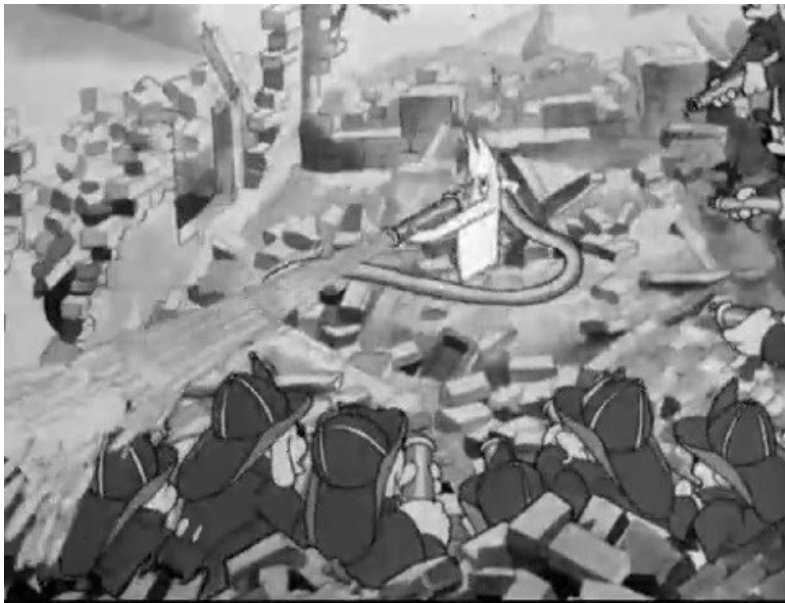
Smoking gun: Flip the Frog makes an anthropomorphic puff of smoke eat hot lead in *Fire-Fire*.

Turning to the Tom and Jerry who aren't a cat and mouse, *Hook and Ladder Hokum* gives its dual protagonists trouble with fire even before they leave the firehouse they work at. Tom (the Mutt-equivalent of this Mutt-and-Jeff-like pair) has a *Good Night Elmer*-style problem with a recalcitrant candle flame, but solves it with that old cartoon standby, a sharp blow with a mallet (*Hokum* 1:57-2:08). Later on, a house fire that Tom and Jerry have been called to shows divided loyalties, spelling out the words "HELP" and "HURRY" in flames that lick through the roof (*Hokum* 3:22-3:28).

Other than these two moments, *Hook and Ladder Hokum* goes out of its way not to give its fire human characteristics, thereby avoiding the question of why it couldn't give human characteristics to its actually human characters. To be fair, one of its co-directors was a novice, and would get considerably better at characterization in his later efforts. Frank Tashlin (billed in *Hook and Ladder Hokum* under one of his *noms de guerre*, Tish Tash) could be seen as having used the Van Beuren short as a trial run for ideas he'd work out further at Warners in 1938's *Porky the Fireman*. The latter film opens *en pleine crise*, getting to the scene of the fire before a minute of screen time has elapsed; as in *Hook and Ladder Hokum*, the fire department encounters an appeal for help spelled out in flames (*Porky the Fireman* 0:54-0:58). Tashlin adds a topper to the message in his second go-around with a firefighting plot: as hoses blast the burning building from all sides, the fire spells out "THANKS BOYS", following up the thanks with a hands-clasped swinging-above-the-head victory salute (*Porky the Fireman* 1:22-1:27).

From then on in, *Porky the Fireman*'s fire goes back to looking out for Number One, beginning its campaign of self-interest by grabbing a bucket of water out of Porky's hands and dousing him with it (2:32-2:36). Later, it pops from window to window, jeering at the marksmanship of the unseen firefighter at the hose below (*Porky the Fireman* 3:42-3:53).

Eventually, nothing is left of the building except a charred, smouldering foundation. A lone flame emerges from this, surveys the situation and discovers it to be an ambush. Surrounded by firefighters armed with hoses, the flame is wetly fusilladed into oblivion. Or not...emerging from the wreckage, the flame pulls out a hose of its own and machine-guns its attackers down, signalling its triumph with a chest-thumping Tarzan yell (*Porky the Fireman* 5:47-6:04).



A taste of their own medicine: the climax of *Porky the Fireman* proves why you should never let the characters in the cartoon watch the gangster picture that follows it.

By putting its anthropomorphized fire into contact (and combat) with multiple characters, *Porky the Fireman* modifies the fire's role from half of a comedy duo to part of a larger comedy ensemble. The ensemble comedy format in animation had been cemented in the consciousness of the 1930s filmgoing public through the success of the early Mickey Mouse shorts, two of which feature a central theme of firefighting. It may come as a surprise from an early twenty-first century perspective that the earlier of these two films, the black-and-white 1930 short *The Fire Fighters*, doesn't anthropomorphise its high-rise fire at all. A folkloric view of animation history which I'll propose as a talking point expects to see anything and everything coming to life more

often in older films, particularly ones in black-and-white. As Donald Crafton puts it in his seminal study of silent animation, *Before Mickey*:

the early animated film was the location of a process found elsewhere in cinema but nowhere else in such intense concentration: self-figuration, the tendency of the filmmaker to interject himself into his film [...] At first it was obvious and literal, at the end it was subtle and cloaked in metaphors and symbolic imagery.

(11)

Mickey's second stint as a firefighter and the titular lead of *Mickey's Fire Brigade* (1935) gives its audience these metaphors, this symbolic imagery, and a living fire...all in living colour no less. Like Tashlin's *Porky the Fireman*, *Mickey's Fire Brigade* takes place at a rooming house, and opens the action mid-conflagration, with Mickey, Donald Duck and Goofy rushing to the rescue. Each of Disney's in-house Golden Trio has his own encounter with fire at its most human and least humane. Donald has his tail feathers swatted by a fiery hand, chases flames that scamper on tiny little feet and scoops them up in a bucket, and hunts down another footed flame with a fire axe (*Brigade* 1:49-1:51; 2:00-2:10; 3:07-3:08). Goofy contends with a cloud of smoke that lands a combination of punches on his nose, then kicks him out of the house like a nightclub bouncer (*Brigade* 1:53-1:59). The part of the fire that Mickey battles has boundary issues: it slams a window shut rather than be hosed down, and soon thereafter grabs the hose from Mickey and turns it on him (*Brigade* 2:22-2:26; 2:41-2:45).

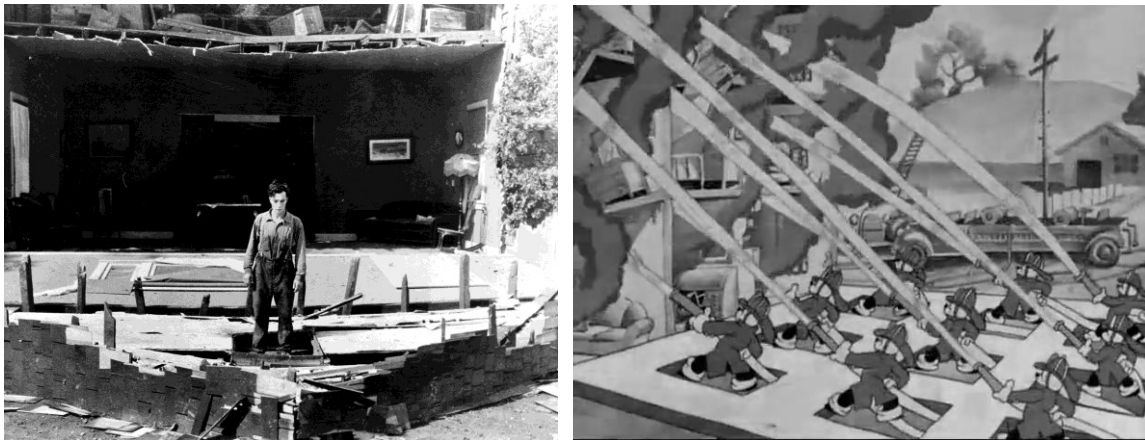
Back to Donald and the axe for a moment. With *Fantasia* some six years in the future, Mickey hasn't been able to warn him about the possible consequences of taking an axe to something that's spontaneously come to life. So, Donald hacks away at the running flame, creating two flames for the price of one with every blow. Five of the flames thus created run up onto a piano and dance out a rendition of "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?" For once, Donald's reaction may have been tame compared to what any given audience member might have been contemplating while hearing that already over-exposed tune. Even so, the duck's axe-bladed broadsides at the piano accomplish nothing, and don't stop the shameless musical product placement/self-promotion (*Brigade* 3:08-3:32).



Don't play it again, Sam: Donald Duck tries to stop a hot piano number in *Mickey's Fire Brigade*.

It seems as though this action may have gotten Donald in trouble with the front office, because the next time we see him, the flames have the axe, and are chasing him. In another of those cartoon brainwaves that defy best practices for health and safety, Donald traps the flames on pieces of conveniently-located flypaper. The fire is contained, but not powerless, as it proves by snatching the bucket Donald was going to extinguish it with and giving him a thorough soaking (*Brigade* 4:05-4:34). Another moment of twenty-first century hindsight leaves me

wondering if Frank Tashlin was in the audience at his local Bijou for the whole thing, taking notes. If Tashlin's 'bucket' gag was a lift, it wouldn't be the only one in *Porky the Fireman*: a scene in which a building's façade falls over nine firemen, framing each one conveniently in an open window, bears an oft-noted resemblance to the scene in *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* which leaves Buster Keaton safe and unsquashed in the doorway of a collapsing house (*Porky the Fireman* 5:21-5:26).



THE ORIGINAL MAGIC KINGDOM: ANIMISM, ANTHROPOLOGY AND ANIMATION

Let's get out of the world of Mickey Mouse for a moment and into the world of Marcel Mauss, to get a more precise bearing on where all this business about animation bestowing life on natural phenomena may be coming from. According to some ideas set down by Mauss in *A General Theory of Magic*, the "self-figuration" that Crafton describes goes back a lot further than the dawn of cinema: "a concept, encompassing the idea of magical power, was once found everywhere. [...] It works at a distance and also through a direct connexion [...] It is impersonal and at the same time clothed in personal forms" (144).

This concept, or power, or what-have-you, which Mauss claims “exists, *a priori*, before all other experience” may be more than symbolic: it is nearly tangible, and has transformative potential (145). Mauss equates and conflates several instantiations of the concept which he identifies in a number of non-European cultures; for the sake of simplicity and clarity, I’ll use the catchall designation ‘It’ in square brackets where specific names appear. As well as being the immanent and apparently passive source from which “(a)ll magic...derives”, ‘It’ has a component which inscribes a form of life: “[‘It’] is first of all an action of a certain kind, that is, a spiritual action that works at a distance and between sympathetic beings” (Mauss 140, 138).

A life force of this type is most easily comprehended when associated with movement and motion: Mauss describes one manifestation of ‘It’ as

power, mystical power. There is nothing in nature, particularly anything endowed with life, which is without [‘It’]. Gods, spirits, men, animals are all endowed with [‘It’]. Natural phenomena, such as storms, are produced by the [‘It’] of the spirits of these phenomena. (139)

Essentializing as this view of diverse cultural constructs may be, it is important to understand where Mauss situates the nexus of these constructs, and in doing so to understand what prompts an outsider to cram them into the same essentialized pigeonhole. What all the concepts I’m lumping under the term ‘It’ have in common is not an assumed uniformity of nature—whether you use the term ‘nature’ to refer to human nature or to the natural physical environment in which any particular human finds itself. The feature held in common is the

tendency for humans to live and work in groups which set themselves in apposition and in opposition to everything around them. Whatever ‘It’ a given culture subscribes to “is present in the individual’s consciousness purely as a result of the existence of society, in the same way as ideas of moral value and justice” (Mauss 146). As such, this ‘It’ has a doubling effect: even while subsuming individual humans and human societies, ‘It’ places human beings on a pedestal, as the possessors of a form of comprehension uniquely suited to conceptualizing an all-encompassing, all-vitalizing force.

The implications of this doubling effect for the special subculture of animation begin to become apparent when one considers the following observation made by Crafton about the art form’s earliest days:

Part of the animation game consisted of developing mythologies that gave the animator some sort of special status. Usually these were very flattering, for he was pictured as (or implied to be) a demigod, a purveyor of life itself. (*Before* 11)

To be a demigod means to possess life as well as to purvey it, to be mortal and vulnerable as well as to be empowered. Part of the animator’s promethean role involves employing one’s own agency as the means through which agency is granted to other entities. It’s this quasi-Olympian facility for using the tools of the graphic artist’s trade not only for depiction, but for putting depictions into motion, that led Erwin Panofsky to make this observation in his essay “Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures”: “(t)he very virtue of the animated cartoon is to

animate, that is to say endow lifeless things with life, or living things with a different kind of life. It effects a metamorphosis” (23n).

To say that animation ‘animates’ is, admittedly, a commonplace—but Panofsky takes his idea one step further, away from common places and towards the mystic, animistic borderlands skirted and charted by Mauss:

No object in creation, whether it be a house, a piano, a tree or an alarm clock, lacks the faculties of organic, in fact anthropomorphic, movement, facial expression and phonetic articulation. Incidentally, even in normal, "realistic" films the inanimate object, provided that it is dynamizable, can play the role of a leading character as do the ancient railroad engines in Buster Keaton's [*The General*]. (24)

The dynamic capability of the animator’s craft extends the prospects of above-the title stardom beyond locomotives and other objects apparently capable of moving under their own power. Through a manner of “spiritual action” of the sort which Mauss finds in the many-named ‘It’, animation dynamizes everything it touches, endowing previously inert matter with the quality of moving as though *acting* rather than as though *acted upon*. To invoke the concept of dynamism, and with it to suggest a metamorphic property of dynamism which converts dynamism imposed from without to auto-dynamism generated from within, is also to recall Mauss’ own invocation of the concept in reference to pre-Socratic metaphysics. “*δύναμις* is the action of *φύσις* and *φύσις* is the action of *δύναμις*. *φύσις* can be defined as a kind of material soul, non-individual, transmissible, a kind of unconscious understanding of things” (Mauss 144).

The dynamic becomes the physical, and vice versa; each is a precondition of the other; each is its necessary effect. It's a dancer and a dance of the kind that W.B. Yeats wouldn't bother trying to tell apart. Since this is still a study of animated cartoons and hasn't suddenly turned into a treatise on hermeneutics, let's put this fandango in terms someone in the animation business could understand well enough to put into their own words. Interviewed in 1969, Warner Brothers director Bob Clampett offered a pragmatic and salient synopsis of the spiritual dynamism that can sometimes make it difficult to sort out the First Mover Unmoved when things move on the animated screen:

When I do Bugs Bunny I get inside of him, and I not only think like, feel like, walk and talk like Bugs but, confidentially, Doc, I *AM* THE WABBIT! (Barrier and Gray)

To invoke Yeats one more time, how can we know the Cwampett³⁶ from the wabbit? Or for that matter, given what Crafton has to say about the art form's propensity for amplifying self-figuration, any animator from anything they depict? If Bob Clampett can be the rabbit, he can just as easily be the fire, the wind, the rain, the waves on the ocean, or even the sun in the sky. That last example would go as far as anything could towards explaining a moment in Clampett's surreal 1938 short *Porky in Wackyland* where the sun is only able to rise in the morning with the aid of a human pyramid (2:02-2:18).

³⁶ This Elmer Fudd phonetic spelling of the director's surname was used jokingly in the opening credits of Bob Clampett's 1941 Bugs Bunny short *Wabbit Twouble*.



The moment it all dawns on you: Porky Pig realizing that something's not quite right about the sunrise in *Porky in Wackyland*.

KEEPING THE FLAME WHILE TRYING NOT TO GET BURNED: ANIMATION, ANTHROPOMORPHISM, AND THE ANCIENTS

Animated suns that need a boost-up to begin the day are not entirely unlike the people who create them. What we're talking about here is the type of First Mover Unmoved that needs a little help getting started. If that idea seems to contradict Crafton's descriptions of the godlike powers possessed by animators, the whole deontic mess can be cleared up by one of Western Philosophy's great reconcilers of opposites. I gave a passing shout-out to Aristotle earlier in this chapter when I used his *Poetics* to note the tragic lack of comedy in Gabby; now I'm turning to the *Metaphysics* to describe the children of lesser gods known as anthropomorphisms in animation. I don't want to give you the impression that I think Aristotle is a henotheist—his cosmology hinges on the presence of a single overarching force, “an eternal unmovable substance” (*Metaphysics* 143). Independent of time and space, this substance is not a perpetual motion machine, but rather a perpetual source of potential energy “capable of moving things or

acting on them, but...not actually doing so” (*Metaphysics* 143). However, not all overarching forces are created equal: beneath the all-encompassing level of the main force that runs the Universe’s drive train, Aristotle envisions any number of smaller systems, each with its own powerhouse. While none of these subordinate motive forces can function without the overall First Mover Unmoved guiding them, every one of them functions as an effective *primum mobile* within its own frame of reference: “the moving principles...will be one in form but in *number* many” (*Metaphysics* 151).

Aristotle doesn’t leave it there, because that idea has implications not only for philosophy and science, but for religion and folklore ...

Our forefathers in the most remote ages have handed down to their posterity a tradition, in the form of a myth, that these bodies are gods and that the divine encloses the whole of nature. (*Metaphysics* 151)

...all of which brings us back around to Mauss’ ‘It’ with all its many aliases in all the celestial spheres, the ‘It’ factor as a driving force in the small terrestrial sphere known as animation, and Crafton’s apotheosis of the animator within it.

Mind you, the trouble with cosmologies than mix elements of the mortal and the divine is that they have a knack for finding ways of confounding themselves. I’ll return to Ovid for another case study to illustrate this. Ceyx and Alcyone are transformed into kingfishers through divine intervention, saving them both from fates simultaneously worse than and equivalent to death (*Metamorphoses* 442-458). However, the identity of the intervening divine in this case does tend to muddy the mythological waters that these two kingfishers dive into. Ceyx and

Alcyone are transformed by “Aéolus, god of the winds”, who in addition to being a fully-paid up deity is the son of the mortal Hippotas and the father of the mortal Alcyone (*Metamorphoses* 443, 674). This appears to be one of those instances in Classical mythology where godlike powers are like a life peerage, and can’t be transferred to one’s offspring. Whether being a kingfisher is suitable consolation prize for not taking over a share of Daddy’s wind business is a question I’ll leave up to those who know more about winds, kingfishers, and Greek gods than I do.

The transfer of the stuff of life, the “eternal unmoveable substance”, can be just as hit-and-miss in animation as it seems to be for Greek gods, which brings us back to an anthropomorphized fire I haven’t yet mentioned in this chapter, but which I alluded to in the previous one. The fire in *Flowers and Trees* is set by the evil tree, itself the recipient of a Promethean spark of life from Disney’s animation staff. The evil tree’s M.O. for arson owes as much to the Boy Scouts as it does to Prometheus: rubbing a stick back and forth between his hands into a log, it sets the stick alight before tossing it at the lady tree who had rejected him (*Flowers* 4:21-4:30). Once ignited, the fire displays differing levels of liveliness: even as it blindly and mindlessly spreads like—well, like wildfire—individual flames detach themselves from the main body of the fire and develop bodies of their own. Sprouting legs, they run around like hellish imps bent on wanton destruction (*Flowers* 4:51-5:24). In the best tradition of mythological and B-movie monsters, they turn on their creator, hopping onto the evil tree and immolating him for his hubris (*Flowers* 5:31-5:37). The last flame left standing is the author of its own destruction, burning through a spade-shaped leaf it’s taken shelter under and releasing the water that extinguishes it (*Flowers* 6:18-6:25). There’s a metaphor for animation and anthropomorphism to be read in all of this. Like the evil tree, an animator is only dimly aware of

the full extent and powers of the life force that resides within them; the forces let loose by both of them sometimes take on life in unexpected ways.



To you from failing hands we throw... the stick? The villain of *Flowers and Trees* prepares to unleash red-hot mayhem which will soon cost him his own animated life.

THE FORCE OF THE MOTIVE BEHIND THE MOTIVE FORCE:

A FEW CONCLUDING REMARKS

No matter how we choose to classify what's presented to us in animation, life is real enough, and we know it when we see it. We may never fully know the 'life force' for what it is, except to know that it is always to some extent a product of the collective wisdom known as social convention. For all its seeming to surpass understanding, the inexplicable, ineffable quality that we see in animation and that we call 'life' is not a gift from a god on high or an evanescent immanence. It is to some extent the creation of ordinary mortals, operating as individuals or in groups, functioning as artistic creators or as audiences. As such, this force's caprices are our caprices, its quirks, mechanisms and dynamics all too familiar, and

demonstrably separate from the presumed neutrality of a universal life-giving essence. If a universal force creates in its own image, it is because that image has the exact size, shape and contours of the universe as a whole. We're nowhere near that big, so we take smaller bits of the everything that surrounds us and try to find some congruity between them and the small bit of the universe that constitutes all of us.

If it sounds like I'm about to go off on a Scholasticist tangent and quote St. Anselm at length, perhaps I should. Instead though, I'll spare you the potted medieval theology and simply remind you that anthropomorphism and all personifying devices are very much in the eyes and minds—and where animation is concerned, the screens and drawing boards—of the beholders. I'll also remind you that, in spite of our pride in our current technological sophistication—the sort of sophistication that makes even the most primitive types of animated film possible—older ways of thinking have shaken just enough of their dust into our systems that it's become a part of their circuitry. To quote Andrew Escobedo again: “prosopopoeia thus captures a distinctly premodern intuition about the human will, namely, that the will is both mover and moved, the origin of our actions and the effect of prior determinisms” (4)

Escobedo tacks a kicker onto that, for the purpose of stressing that prior determinisms should not be confused with predestination: “(p)rosopopoeia give life to the capacities and faculties within us, transforming passions into action, but as a consequence, they also assert their independence, sometimes even doing things to us without our consent” (4). To take another backward glance at Scholasticism, it's an Anselmic argument for a modified form of free will. Phrased in premodern form, God maketh us in His image, and to show us the kind of mischief we get up to whilst He be about Other Business, giveth us the power to make things in our own image to see how much we like what they get up to when we're not looking. We have met the

enemy, and he is us...and we put words like “we have met the enemy, and he is us” into the mouths of talking animals like the denizens of the Okefenokee Swamp in Walt Kelly’s comic strip *Pogo* to make sure we don’t miss the point.

Kelly laid the groundwork for *Pogo*’s menagerie microcosm of humanity during his years as a Disney storyboard artist and animator. Comics scholar and cartoonist R.C. Harvey identifies in *Pogo* a Disneyesque “spirit of innocent horseplay” rife with “vaudeville routines and slapstick gags...drawn from the same well of theatrical experience that animated the gag sketches Kelly and the others [at Disney] passed around among themselves and pinned to each other’s drawing boards” (“Pranks” iii). Ironically, *Pogo*’s popularity and influence rose just as the tide of things-not-human-made-human in American animation was beginning to wane. One of the grand narratives in animation history is that UPA burst onto the scene around 1950, threw Mr. Magoo and Gerald McBoing Boing at a waiting public and had roughly the effect on the anthropomorphic ecosystem of American animation as an ice age or an asteroid strike. The truth is a little more complex: anthropomorphisms still abound, their evolutionary niches in various corners of the animated world apparently secure. The doctrine of anthropomorphic figures as a broadly-constituted dominant class of life form during the era of the theatrical-release short subject also requires examination before being swallowed whole. Barrier (admittedly no fan of UPA) is takes pains to point out that “the gulf between the Magoo cartoons and those of UPA’s rivals was not really all that wide; there was ample precedent in the Popeye series for the use of human characters in cartoons of the most conventional kind” (522).

Barrier could have added Popeye’s then-retired onetime co-star Betty Boop; I’ll add Elmer Fudd as an immediately recognizable name attached to an immediately recognizable human face from an era of animation which at first glance can be mistaken for a non-stop

filibuster by talking animals. Without leaving the Warner lot, you can add Yosemite Sam, Granny, and a host of often unnamed human characters who played character parts in films which set the activities and attitudes of Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck and other anthropomorphisms in relief against various forms of human endeavour. I've discussed Bugs' and Daffy's struggles to be granted equal footing with their human peers, regardless of whether their feet are furry or webbed. Dodsworth and others of his species with a jobsworth's view of what it means to be a domesticated cat are working to rule against human policies and procedures, not against the mice they may or may not care about catching. When a cartoon robot malfunctions or a cartoon bullet forgets its purpose in life, it makes a mute statement about the goals and purposes of human design.

And then there's what's going on with Red Hot Riding Hood, the Wolf, and Droopy. Conceivably, there are female anthropomorphized wolves who could provide more than adequate companionship with benefits for Wolfie; Red's whole onstage persona hinges on giving every male-gazing human member of her audience the idea that someone other than a phlegmatic knee-high mongrel like Droopy has a shot at her affections. As such, Red's act is the sort of a self-defining performative of gender that Judith Butler describes as the product of "a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms" (95). And perhaps it's a performative of species as well, a part Red plays according to the same regularized, constrained, repeated norms that govern how Wolfie and Droopy play their own parts. Red's temptress routine can be read as an ironic statement on the superficiality of aesthetic codes of femininity, the type of drag performance that Butler sees as "subversive to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality's claim on naturalness and originality" (125). Swap a couple of words into that thought, and

you've also got the gist of what Wolfie, Droopy and every anthropomorphized animal is up to. They're reflecting on the imitative structure by which hegemonic *species hierarchy* is itself produced and disputing *humanity's* claim on naturalness and originality.

Without claiming it to be an essential truth, I'm going to put it out there that part of the imitative structure through which humans reassure themselves of their hegemony over their surroundings is the belief that the ability to question this hegemony is a uniquely human capacity. The human obsession with wondering whether we're actually Number One leads us to use our imaginations to draft other parts of our world on to our team, and give them tryouts during a sort of exhibition season where the only result that matters is who makes the cut for the final roster. There's a potential secondary benefit to examining human nature by letting non-human entities sub in for us in a low-pressure setting: we may feel freer to let substitute humans fail to make the grade, to give us something we can teach Team Human as it practices for the games that count in the standings. Anthropomorphisms trying and failing at the same things that humans try and fail at reassures us about our fallibility and gives us something to improve upon, without putting a number on the scoreboard against us. At the same time, it gives us a reason to wonder just how well we have it all together, if someone—or *something*—else can do at least part of our job. Harvey's thoughts on the subject of what the critters in *Pogo* were really doing while Walt Kelly was drawing them apply equally well to the animated screen as to a newspaper's comics section:

They were perfectly content being animals, you understand, but sometimes on an otherwise idle summer's afternoon, they would (for their own amusement) try out for roles as human beings. They'd

wander backstage at the human drama, picking up a script here, a bit of costume there, and then assemble after hours before the footlights for a little play-acting. But somehow it never quite came off as intended.

(“Introducing” i)

Statements like this show that we know, as Huizinga knew, that “(s)ince the reality of play extends beyond the sphere of human life it cannot have its foundations in any rational nexus” (3). Animals play at being humans who play at being animals by creating animals who play at being humans; humans also play at being inanimate objects and natural phenomena that play at being humans in their own right. If there *is* a rational nexus hidden somewhere in the middle of this Gordian tangle, it’s probably also playing at being a human...who in turn is playing at being a rational nexus.

Nexus or no nexus, the meta-human irrationality Huizinga refers to has a serious, rational purpose, a purpose that can be discerned whether the playing field is a demarcated sacred space or the profane open field of the drawing board. Just as for Huizinga, “(i)n his magic dance the savage is a kangaroo”, in his magic-lantern world of flickering shadows Bob Clampett *is* the wabbit (25). If studio-era short-form animation tended towards the ludic impulse to emphasize the more ludicrous aspects of the human condition, the act of going to movie theatres to laugh at talking animals making all-too-human fools of themselves had something of the dual nature of Huizinga’s conception of ritual: “(t)he ritual act, or an important part of it, will always remain within the play category, but in this seeming subordination the recognition of its holiness is not lost” (27).

How far you wish to take the sacralisation of the old-time movie house or the animated shorts that played as a regular part of its program is up to you. More important than anyone's ideas about the specifics of religion is the idea of repeated communal practice as a bulwark of belief. By rendering non-human entities in ways that approach the human, then putting those renderings in motion, animation has provided an accessible proving ground for concepts about what we share with the rest of the world, what sets us apart from it, and whether being set apart from the world gives us license to impose order on it. What we see may seem divinely inspired or it may seem just plain silly, but our takeaway from anthropomorphism in animation and elsewhere is still the same, and has a lot in common from Mauss' takeaway on the effects of sacralising an anthropocentric worldview:

“The idea of man, like the idea of the sacred, becomes in any final analysis nothing more than a kind of category of collective thinking which is the foundation for our judgments and which imposes a classification on things, separating some, bringing together others, establishing lines of influence or boundaries of isolation.” (*Magic* 149)

Those “boundaries of isolation” are easier to spot in the anthropomorphisms of this concluding chapter. The occasional person may be described as ‘a force of nature’, but it takes an individual with an absolutist, imperial egocentrism—a Louis XIV or a Heliogabalus—to identify personally with nature's forces. Most of us non-Sun Kings or God-Emperors look to the link on the Great Chain of Being often rendered in the speech balloons of *Pogo* as “nature's screechers”

for our conceptual stand-ins. Still, who among us *hasn't* started one day or another as reluctantly and tentatively as the sun in *Morning, Noon and Night* or *Techno-Racket*? That particular morning could easily elide into a happy, singing finger-snapping noontime of the kind enjoyed by the sun at Krazy Kat's *Weenie Roast*. By evening, it could turn into one of those days again, with circumstances figuratively knocking the daylights out of us the way they do literally to *Morning, Noon and Night's* sun.

The lines of influence between animated anthropomorphisms and ourselves are there, even when the entity being anthropomorphized is on a cosmic scale. It's just that the lines are easier to trace when anthropomorphism picks on something closer to our own size. If you talk about finding a special someone to put down roots with, you're speaking in the metaphorical language that was given visual form in *Flowers and Trees*. When events outstrip our head-down straight-ahead efforts to keep up with them, we feel the bewilderment of a bullet outpaced by a roadrunner. Behind the wheel of a car, we can feel as fused with a ton or so of metal, polymers and glass as Bimbo does with his boxing robot car, and feel the same combative rush as the car-bot does when the bell rings and it steps out of its corner to take on all comers.

The faux-folkloric corpus starring Red Hot Riding Hood gives us places to direct our outward gaze as well as the inward gaze of our imagination. Do we look at Red with the bulging disconnected eyes of a wolf on the make? Do we put ourselves in Red's shoes and look for the moment when Wolfie drops his gaze, so we can smash him over the head and high-tail it away? Or do we look at Wolfie the way Red's grandmother and fairy godmother do—as a not-so-obscure object of desire?

The conflicting desires we encounter in our working lives put us on equal footing with four-footed working stiffs like Dodsworth, Sylvester and Tom. Do we follow our 'natural'

inclinations (and the laws of physics) by attempting to achieve maximum results through minimum effort? Do we practice a workplace doctrine of ‘success through goal modification’ by insisting that what and how much we do aren’t as important as how we do it? If how we do it is by making the boss feel comforted and valued, then it shouldn’t look like we’re doing very much at all.

And, speaking about our relationship to those with power over us, what about our relationship to Daffy and Bugs? I’ll venture that not many of us identify with Elmer and think that the best way of dealing with either of them is to fire away with both barrels, but for all of us it’s always either Duck Season or Wabbit Season. Between the two of them, their behaviour sketches in the essential choice faced by members of civil society. Opting to fulfil as few obligations as possible, like Daffy, means choosing a way of life that is transitory, migratory, and effectively rightless. Grounding yourself like Bugs in his hole lets you back-sass authority with the confidence of a rightsholder, but means that authority knows exactly where to find you when they’ve had enough of your guff.

‘Back-sass’ and ‘guff’ aren’t words you’ll find in any reputable translation of Aristotle, but the *Politics* covers the ground that Daffy waddles over and Bugs keeps house under. The door that leads to the state of full-fledged Aristotelian citizenship hangs on two hinges: unassailable position in civil society and the willingness to participate in it. Like Bugs, an individual must hold sufficient legal rights, and be able to exercise those rights without a by-your-leave from anyone, to be considered a full citizen “against whom no exception may be taken” without fear of justifiable reprisal (*Politics* 297). Picking on someone in such a state of grace simply because they happen to look like (or even be) a rabbit is an invitation to Bugs’ oft-quoted motto “of course you know, this means war”. The rights of the citizen-subject do not,

however, extend to the right to be a law unto oneself. Unlike Daffy, the individual in society must be both citizen and subject, claiming privileges and perks only when it is apt and just to do so, and submitting to rules and structures when it is not. Drifting from one place to another, from one job to another, and living from moment to moment as Daffy does is not calculated to teach anyone the two main tasks of citizenship: “how to rule and how to obey” (*Politics* 302).

Leaving aside the possibility that the director who squared Bugs, Daffy and Elmer off in a trio of three-way cage matches³⁷, Chuck Jones, might have toyed with the idea of a Bugs-and-Daffy version of Aristotle’s *Politics* whilst in the recesses of his personal ivory tower of animation³⁸, anthropomorphisms give us mere humans extra leeway to address our ethical and ontological concerns. They grant us greater license to take matters to extremes than the humans commonly used by philosophers in their hypotheticals; in addition, they function as a survey crew for the boundaries that delimit human experience. Something visibly not human acting as though impelled by human drives makes us look more closely at the ways in which the state of ‘being human’ is distinct from other modes of existence, and the ways it is congruent with them.

Animated short films from the studio-dominated period of cinematic releases were the products of a disparate variety of creative forces, some of them working in concert, others in competition. It is difficult, therefore to view them in totality as the outgrowth a single cohesive worldview, or as a single cohesive mythologizing folkloric corpus. The inconsistencies in the output of even a single studio dealing with the same character argue against such reductionism—

³⁷ *Rabbit Fire* (1951), *Rabbit Seasoning* (1952), and *Duck! Rabbit, Duck!* (1953), known collectively in animation history circles as “the hunting trilogy”.

³⁸ It’s perhaps more appropriate to think of Jones as a “superego”, as Barry Putterman does in his essay “A Short Critical History of Warner Bros. Cartoons” (34). Jones’ career was an extended exercise in bridging the id-dominated realms of slapstick and other forms of down-and-dirty ‘low’ humour with the ego-based aspirations of ivory-tower ‘high’ culture. If you have more than seven minutes to devote to the subject, the present author’s thoughts on it are as good a place as any to start (Cousins). If you haven’t, Jones’ own films *Long-Haired Hare* (1949) and *Rabbit of Seville* (1950) are even better.

as demonstrated by the example of Bugs Bunny's halting first steps towards establishing a persona independent of the biases and tendencies of any given director.

For all that, a narrative corpus need not be cohesive or consistent to be coherent. Just as Bugs Bunny lurched from pillar to post before setting up his monogrammed mailbox and settling down into a stable identity, the exploits of the mythological figures distilled into verse by Ovid sometimes come across like the last whispers in a game of 'broken telephone'. Something remains at the centre of the confusion, something firm and easily grasped: you may shy away from describing this thing you've caught hold of as an 'essence', but you at least have to grant that it ties things together well enough to qualify as an organizing principle of some sort. When Claude Lévi-Strauss published "The Structural Study of Myth" in 1955, the idea of Bugs Bunny as the sort of folkloric icon who could stand shoulder-to-shoulder with any and every other folkloric icon of cinematic and popular culture seemed far-fetched...perhaps not as far-fetched as the way *Space Jam 2* portrayed it, but that's another story. Even so, the inconsistencies in the way his pet folkloric icon Oedipus was presented by anonymous oral tradition and three opinionated Athenian dramatists prompted Lévi-Strauss to ask questions like "if the content of a myth is contingent, how are we going to explain that throughout the world myths do resemble one another so much?" (Lévi-Strauss 429).

Lévi-Strauss' method of dispelling that particular aporia is uncannily familiar to anyone who's watched enough cartoons to wonder why Bugs Bunny acts the way he does in any given film: "we define the myth as consisting of all its versions; to put it otherwise: a myth remains the same as long as it is felt as such" (Lévi-Strauss 435). The foundation of this structure of feeling that houses a myth is a sense of common, if generally unstated, purpose. Bugs Bunny and other anthropomorphisms in animation, old and new, ask questions that their makers don't always feel

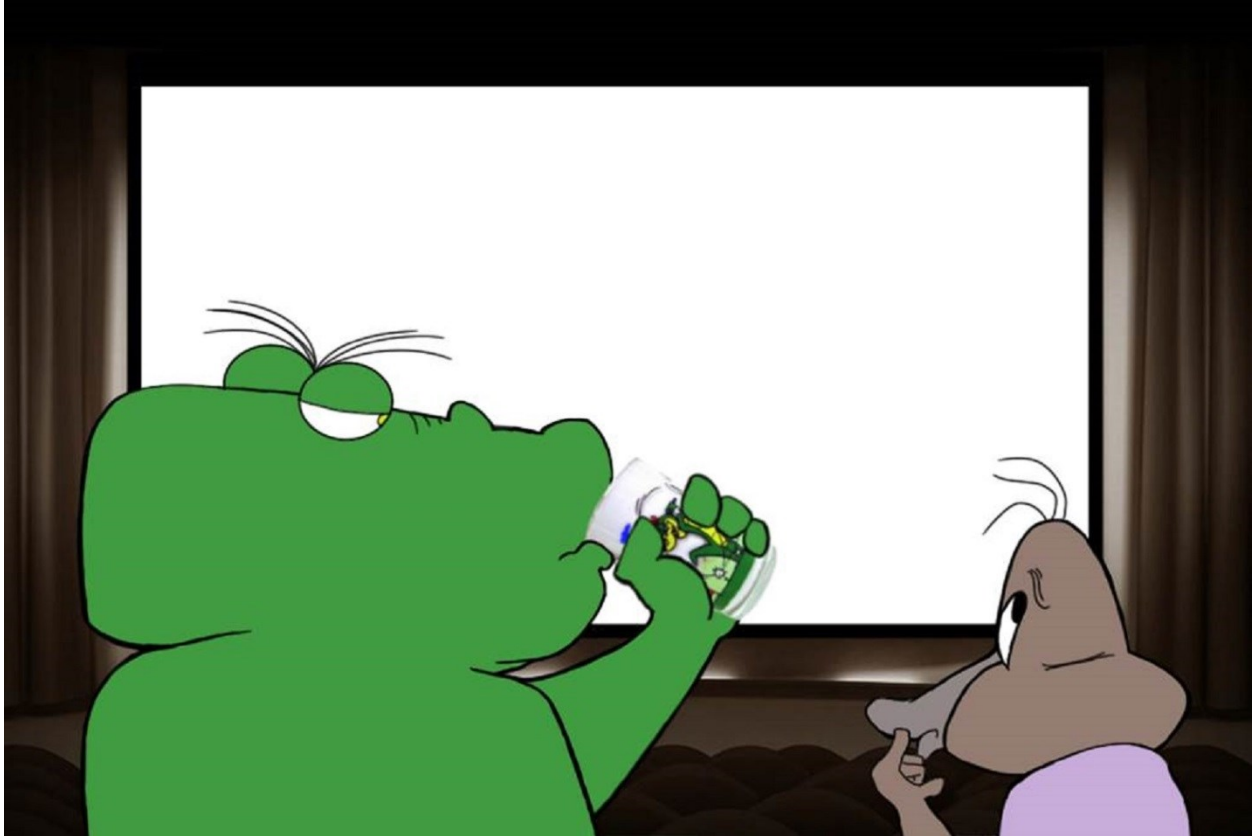
comfortable asking when they look in the mirror and see a face that's fully human. A form of Ovidian metamorphosis happens whenever some animator or other invokes their powers and declares "I AM THE WABBIT!" In the process, the 'wabbit' also becomes them, and begins work out problems maybe they didn't even know they had. The whys and wherefores behind these transformations may be different, but a unity emerges from the collective effort in the same way as it does in Ovid. To change the form of anything in a way that retains a human element, whether through the intervention of a god's hand or an animator's pencil, is to give the human race a pop quiz it still hasn't got the A-plus answer for: "what is it about a person that makes them that person, and what is it about humans that makes them human?" (Feeney xxix).

To see it is, to some extent, to be it: the people who "drew pictures of Bugs Bunny" may not have had the lofty goals that Ovid did, but viewing lifeless matter transformed into strange but strangely familiar forms of life on cartoon celluloid has a similar effect to reading stanza after stanza of people being abracadabraed into trees and kingfishers and so forth. It's calculated "to animate the question of who we think we are, and how we think about who we think we are" (Feeney xxx). We have met the wabbit, and he is us, and each of us is all the more human for having been the wabbit, even if only as spectators many decades after the fact.















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No anthropomorphisms were harmed in the making
of this dissertation