

## SO YOU WANT TO TEACH A MICKEY MOUSE COURSE? AN UNDERGRADUATE COURSE IN THE HISTORY OF ANIMATION

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Numerous times while advising students who were looking for "gut" courses or "the soft underbelly of the curriculum" I have finally said, "so you want to take a Mickey Mouse course?" At those times, I never believed that there would one day be "Mickey Mouse" courses in a college curriculum.

At our college we are supposed to teach "innovative" courses (meaning non-catalog courses) in the January Term during which students take only one course for approximately four weeks. After teaching Illinois Prehistory one January, American Utopianism for two different January Terms, as well as courses on the American Revolution, Civil War and Reconstruction, and even Illinois History, I decided why not, indeed, teach a Mickey Mouse course. I have been a fan of Disney since the early days after Pearl Harbor; later I even thought of becoming a cartoonist, but soon learned that being a good copyist is not the prime requisite for being an animator. I purchased numerous Disney volumes over the years and have an excellent collection. Once our history department acquired a TV and a VCR, it seemed the right time to propose a course in The History of Animation to be taught during the January Term on a pass/fail basis. Perhaps, the curriculum committee would not realize that I was proposing a "Mickey Mouse" course.

But as a long-time member of the curriculum committee and its chairman, I decided that it would be best to be forthright about the matter. My proposal pointed out that the animation course was directed toward students looking for a "Mickey Mouse" course but one that would not fatten their academic averages. My strategy worked: the Curriculum Committee approved the course, no one questioned the course at the faculty meeting, and in January 1987 I taught my first course in the history of animation.

In preparation for the new course, I ordered books directly from publishers (who responded to my letter and check much more quickly than I ever expected) to build my personal library in animation history, especially works not related to Walt Disney productions. As a text I used Leonard Maltin's *Of Mice and Magic: A History of American Animated Cartoons*, published in 1980 by New American Library. The revised edition of 1987 was used when I taught the course for a second time in January, 1989. Maltin's text is chronological to 1928, but the rest of the volume, except for the last chapter that deals with recent trends, is a collection of cartoon studio studies. Thus, there is no coherent narrative of the animation field from 1928 to the early 1960s.

Fortunately, this gap is now filled by the publication in November, 1989, of Charles Solomon's *Enchanted Drawings: The History of Animation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 322 pages, which deals with the animation industry in chronological order. The Solomon volume covers the different studios thematically within chronological chapters and tends to devote separate chapters to the Disney studio. Solomon is the best work available, with only two drawbacks: the author's

evident biases that he openly promotes in the style of a movie critic and the \$75 price tag since the volume is not available in paperback. An excellent volume that has been used as a text on a number of campuses is Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston, *Disney Animation: The Illusion of Life* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1981), also available in a paperback edition. This volume was too long and too Disney-oriented to suit my tastes as a text, but it has the merit of including not only the history of animation but also a great deal on the techniques of animation.

What kind of course is the history of animation? The course is best described as belonging to the popular culture movement fostered by the National Association of Popular Culture and Bowling Green State University. Film is certainly part of the recreational side of American life and the animated film is an important part of this general category. Over half of the class time is spent in viewing animated films and discussing them as they relate to technology, history, and art. The advantages of a course in animation history are numerous since an appeal can be made to many different interests pursued by students.

The history of technology is extremely important to the study of animation. Historically, one can start with the invention of the magic lantern by the Jesuit scholar Kircher in the seventeenth century and proceed to the late nineteenth century when a number of animation devices were developed, eventually leading to the invention of motion pictures. Breathing life into drawings, however, involved numerous difficulties that live-action productions did not have. Many different methods were tried including a series of individual drawings such as those of Winsor McCay, slash and tear method, use of cels, the pegboard, the animation camera stand, and such sophisticated developments as the multiplane camera used by Disney, xerography of cels, computer animation, and special effects animation like those provided by Industrial Light and Magic. Likewise, there are many different types of animation: stop-action/object animation, clay animation, cel animation, puppet animation, pixilation, cutouts, computer animation, and live action/animation. The technological side of the industry is a vital part of any history of animation course.

As a historian, I especially focus on how animated films reflect the period in which they were produced. During the depression of the 1930s, for example, animated films such as Disney's *Silly Symphonies*, *Looney Tunes*, and *Merrie Melodies*, were musically dominated and intended to cheer up audiences. Walt Disney's "The Three Little Pigs" with its catchy song, "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?" told the moviegoer not to be "Afraid of the Big Bad Depression." In the early 1930s Betty Boop was sexy like many of the contemporary movie stars until the censors insisted that she be dressed more conservatively. Not until the early 1970s with Ralph Bakshi's X-rated "Fritz the Cat" and sexy Jessica Rabbit of 1988's "Who Framed Roger Rabbit?" would viewers again be treated to risqué material. Such shifts tend to reflect the public mores of the periods involved.

Again, with the advent of World War II in Europe in 1939 and especially with America's entry into the war in December, 1941, the animation industry changed to meet the times. The armed forces requested training films that were

animated because they were easier for recruits to follow; this type of film kept many animators busy during the war years. Also, many animated shorts were propagandistic and poked fun at Hitler, Mussolini, and Hirohito. "Der Fuhrer's Face" with Donald Duck won an Academy Award for Disney for 1942. The feature length Disney film "Victory through Air Power" in 1943 stressed this important concept based on the book by Major Alexander P. de Seversky. Similarly, Ralph Bakshi's "Fritz the Cat" reflects student discontentment in the late 1960s and early 1970s while the United States was involved in the divisive Vietnam struggle and had severe civil rights problems at home. Many animated films such as "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs," "Cinderella," and "Sleeping Beauty" seem to be timeless and attract large audiences each time they are re-released. But their subject matter and style of presentation are still rooted in the times in which they were produced. "Snow White" was, for example, such a gigantic hit in 1937 because it presented an upbeat story that was an antidote to the Depression. "Sleeping Beauty" did not achieve the same acceptance because it was released during the height of the Cold War in 1959. Its sophisticated Renaissance art style did not meet the needs of the public at that time. Thus, my animation course focuses on how the films reflect the times in which they were created.

Another major ingredient of my course is the consideration of animation as an art form. I have had art majors take the course for this reason. This concept has been recognized by a number of recent volumes on animation that have the word "art" in the title. But, even as early as 1942, Robert D. Feild argued this position in his volume *The Art of Walt Disney* (New York: Macmillan, 1942). The sale of animated cels in art galleries is now widespread throughout the country; the prices are astounding, especially when one considers that many times cels were washed clean and reused. Certainly, animation as art has come into its own in the late twentieth century.

Because so much class time is spent in showing the animators' works, it is important that there are such an amazing number of animated films on videocassettes. My initial concern about covering the early years of animation was lessened after taking extensive notes from Donald Crafton's excellent study, *Before Mickey: The Animated Film, 1898-1928* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1982) and using the companion videocassette that contains about 25 early animated shorts from 1900 through "Steamboat Willie" in 1928. With the variety of cartoons available one can showcase the talents of various animators and animation directors. Although I showed numerous examples of Disney my first time through the course, it would have been just as easy to show Fleischer Brothers' cartoons, those of Walter Lantz, Tex Avery, Bob Clampett, Chuck Jones, John Hubley, UPA, Hanna-Barbera, or a host of others.

There is also an ample supply of video material available on the history of animation. For example, Walt Disney Presents "The Story of the Animated Drawing" (1955); "The Art of Disney Animation," a 28-minute film made in 1988; or "Disney Animation: The Illusion of Life" (the same title as Thomas-Johnston volume), a 60-minute film narrative by Haley Mills, are all helpful. Most students

are interested in finding out how the animated films are created and special effects are achieved. The work of Industrial Light and Magic is well displayed in a special shown on the Disney Channel entitled "Roger Rabbit and the Secrets of Toontown." Computer animation is covered in the Disney production "Beyond Tron" (58 minutes) that also aired on the Disney Channel and "Computer Animation Magic," a 58-minute PBS special.

A number of specials on the Disney Channel have been helpful for classroom use, including some of the Disney Family album specials (biographies of some of their leading animators), "Behind the Scenes at Disney—Backstage" (58 minutes, 1983, narrated by John Culhane), and a recent 28-minute production of "The Making of the Little Mermaid." "The Fantasy Film Worlds of George Pal," a 90-minute 1985 production, is an excellent documentary about the puppets and special effects that Pal utilized in his films and cartoons. To demonstrate clay animation, segments of "Return to Oz" (the Gnome King) are excellent and parts of the California Raisins specials are interesting, both the work of Will Vinton. As examples of live action/animated films, I have used Walter Lantz's "The Lunch Hound" from the 1920s, "The Three Caballeros" and "Anchors Aweigh" from the 1940s, "Mary Poppins" from the 1960s, "Bedknobs and Broomsticks" from the 1970s, and "Who Framed Roger Rabbit?" from the 1980s. A number of avant garde films can also be shown in class so that the students can see various types of animation, especially those produced by independent animators. Several examples are given in the bibliography, which also includes some of the more important titles for a course in animation history.

I require students to complete a project as part of the course. Art students have done projects in this field; for this type of project drawing is prominent but a knowledge of photography and photographic techniques is also essential. Student projects have also involved stop action videos with a camcorder, making of flip-books, and historical research on special topics or a particular film or animator. One student graphed his own cartoon, put it on his Commodore computer, and showed it to the class. Although it lasted only four minutes, he spent many hours in preparation. For their projects other students have read more deeply in subject areas and written critical reviews or a research paper.

The number of volumes available in animation history is increasing rapidly; over 75% of the volumes on my bibliography were published after 1980. Most of the volumes about the history of technology in the animation industry cover this subject exclusive of animation history. There are a number of excellent, and sometimes only barely adequate, biographies and autobiographies of animators. Likewise, various animation studios are receiving full-fledged histories and a number of animated films have volumes devoted to their production. In addition to the recent flurry of books concerning animation, there is a publication entitled *Animation Magazine* now ready to begin its fourth year and at least one article on animation in each issue of *Comic Scene*. This array of printed material, plus the financial and entertainment successes of recent features "Who Framed Roger Rabbit?", which grossed \$150 million domestically, and "The Little Mermaid,"

which grossed \$84.4 million domestically on its initial release, herald the fact that animation history has arrived. Yet for teaching my course, all would be in vain were it not for the VCR/TV and the availability of numerous videocassettes of animated features and shorts.

When I taught the course in January Term, it was on a pass/fail basis: I gave no examinations and I did not give a letter grade for class discussion or outside projects. I wanted the course to be not only a learning experience, but also an entertaining one as well. I did not want the course to be taken by students who only wanted to fatten their academic averages. but students in their evaluations of the course argued that they would take the class more seriously if I gave examinations and assigned a letter grade. They considered the purchase of the textbook a "waste of money" if they were never examined on its contents.

Thus, in the fall of 1990, I taught "The History of Animation" as a regular catalog course. I had 33 students in each of my January Term classes, while 22 registered for the class during the regular semester. I added lecture materials prepared during my 1990 sabbatical so that videos now comprised less than half of the course. I allowed students to use their lecture notes and textbook for reference during exams that were chiefly essay with some short identifications. I asked more questions than usual and held to a strict time limit for each test.

I was certainly pleased with the results and so were my students who seemed to know the history of animation more thoroughly than the subject matter of more traditional courses. One student stated that the class "was far more worthwhile than I ever thought it would be" and "a good reflection of the culture and history of the time." A history major in the class who did his student teaching in junior high school during the following semester illustrated World War II propaganda by showing "The Ducktators" with good response from his students. Several in the class commented that cartoons took on a whole new meaning for them in terms of their artistic value and historical perspective. A student even indicated that open book exams were difficult but fair because so many names and technical terms were unfamiliar. Now I have to steel myself when the students complain "Not another Mickey Mouse examination!"

#### SELECTED GLOSSARY

**ANIMATION CAMERA:** A motion picture camera with single frame and reverse capabilities for animation work.

**CEL:** Familiar term for "celluloid," the transparent sheet on which characters are inked (on the front) and painted (on the back).

**CLAY ANIMATION OR CLAYMATION:** An animation technique using pliable clay figures whose positions are manipulated fractionally before each exposure.

**CUTOUPS:** An animated technique using cut-out and jointed figures that are manipulated slightly between each exposure.

**MAGIC LANTERN:** The first projection device consisting of a metal box with a hole in one side covered by a lens; an image painted on a glass slide placed behind the lens is projected by means of a lamp inside the box.

**MULTIPLANE CAMERA:** An elaborate animation camera developed by the Disney studio, for which each shot is separated into as many as 14 layers; when the camera shoots through these layers, an illusion of depth is created.

**OBJECT ANIMATION:** An animation technique, similar to puppet animation, in which objects are made to appear to move by manipulating them slightly before each exposure.

**PEG:** A standard knob on an animator's drawing board over which pre-punched paper is laid in order to hold it in place.

**PIXILATION:** A stop-motion technique in which objects and live actors are photographed frame by frame to achieve unusual effects of motion.

**SLASH AND TEAR:** A hole is cut in the background and laid over the moving elements, which were simply retraced drawings on paper. Also used for figures: A character was drawn and photographed; then the moving limb was torn away (slash and tear) and a new one, in its new position, was drawn on the next underlying sheet.

Definitions for the terms found in this glossary have been compiled from the following works (see bibliography or article for complete citations):

Crafton, *Before Mickey*; Maltin, *Of Mice and Magic*; Noake, *Animation Techniques*; and Solomon and Stark, *Complete Kodak Animation Book*.

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