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The History of Animation: Advantages and Disadvantages of the Studio System in the Production of an Art Form

(by Michael Crandol) "Animation should be an art....what you fellows have done with it is making it into a trade....not an art, but a trade....bad luck ." Thus Winsor McCay, father of the animated cartoon, pronounced the doom of the very industry he had inadvertently helped create.

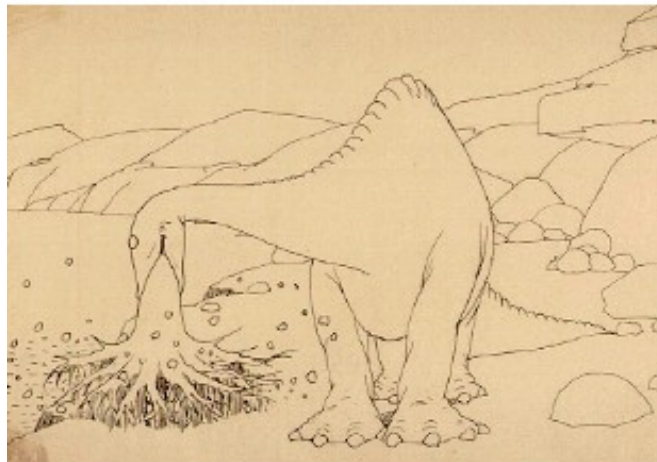


Winsor McCay
"father of the
animated cartoon"

Below:
Gertie the Dinosaur

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From 1911-21 McCay nursed animation from a simple camera trick to full blown character animation that would take 20 years to be surpassed. McCay animated his films almost single-handed; from inception to execution each cartoon was his and his alone. He took the time to make his films unique artistic visions, sometimes spending more than a year to make a single five-minute cartoon. But the burgeoning world of cinema could not wait so long for so little, and so the modern animation studio came into being. The art of animation was no longer the work of one man, it was a streamlined, assembly-line process in the best Henry Ford tradition. But was the art of the animated cartoon sacrificed for the trade's sake? That, of course, depends on the studios themselves.



Through the years several institutions have proven McCay's prophecy at least partly false; indeed, without such positive collaborations of talent the art of animation would not have advanced to the level of sophistication it enjoys today. But who exactly was it "bad luck" for: the art, or the artists themselves?

Even before McCay had shown the world the true potential of the animated cartoon in his landmark film "Gertie the Dinosaur" (1914), the first animation studios were



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already around, trying to exploit the medium for what they could. Raoul Barre' opened the first animation house in 1913, and within five years a new industry was born as more and more studios began to pop up around the New York metropolitan area.

Arguably the most successful and certainly the most influential of these early studios was the the John Bray Studio. Bray created the first successful cartoon series, Col. Heeza Liar, in 1914. Future studio heads Max Fleischer and Walter Lantz honed their skills here. But the studio's most important contribution to the medium was the introduction of cels. The process of inking the animator's drawings onto clear pieces of celluloid and then photographing them in succession on a single painted background was invented by Bray employee Earl Hurd in late 1914. In the first of what was to be many such incidents, the studio swallowed all the credit and most of the revenue for it's underling's contribution to the art form. Hurd lent his patent to boss John Bray, who charged royalties for other studios to use the process....an understandable business practice. Yet from an artistic standpoint this was as if Picasso had demanded exclusive rights to Cubism. It was a relatively moot point, however; the patent expired in 1932 and was not renewed. The only real loser, it seems, was Earl Hurd.

Like Hurd, Otto Messmer was another studio employee who never got due credit for his innovations. But whereas Hurd's contribution to animation was a technical one, Messmer's was an artistic creation that is still recognized the world over 80 years after it's inception. Otto



Messmer was employed by the Pat Sullivan Studio in 1916. Three years later he created Felix the Cat; it was a milestone in the development of animation as an artform. Not since Gertie the Dinosaur had a cartoon character exhibited such a degree of personality animation as Felix's brooding, ponderous walk. But unlike Gertie, Felix was a studio character, which meant audiences could look forward to seeing him again and again, while affording Messmer and his co-workers the opportunity to explore the possibilities of ongoing character development in animation. Meanwhile, studio head Pat Sullivan took sole credit for the creation of Felix, earning millions of dollars in royalties over the years. Messmer continued to receive his usual salary. A quiet and unassuming man, Messmer never challenged Sullivan's claim to be the father of Felix, even after Sullivan's death in 1933. Indeed, Messmer probably

would have taken the secret to his grave had not animation historian John Canemaker tracked him down in 1976 (the revelation produced quite a stir in animation circles....twenty years later the story was lampooned on an episode of "The Simpsons").

For the first time a studio produced what may be considered true art, but in doing so took the credit usually given to the artist.

Hands Down the most influential studio (from an artistic as well as a commercial standpoint) in the history of animation is the Walt Disney Studio, which exploded onto the scene in 1928 with Mickey Mouse in "Steamboat Willie" and continued to dominate the field to this very day. It is at Disney that we see the studio system's best and worst effects on the development of animation as an art form.

Without Disney's streamlined organization of talent and creative collaboration the animated cartoon could never have advanced as rapidly or as beautifully as it has....yet, as at the Bray and Sullivan studios, in the process many of the men responsible for the studio's achievements remain anonymous and forgotten. Had Disney animators Vladimir Tytla and Freddie Moore been

alive during the renaissance their names might well have been numbered among Da Vinci and Michelangelo. For all their accomplishments, however, they remain totally eclipsed by the titanic figure of Walt Disney.

Walt Disney's first important contribution to animation was to move his studio to Hollywood in 1923. Los Angeles had become the center of live-action filmmaking, but the animation industry remained rooted in New York (with a few studios scattered throughout the Midwest, like Disney's). Accompanying him on his move from Kansas City were Hugh Harman and Rudy Ising, who would eventually found the Warner Bros. and MGM animation houses. These three studios were to become the leaders of the animation industry. Disney's decision to move to California was a pivotal turning point in the development of animation as a business.

Disney Studio's artistic achievements derived from a sort of symbiotic relationship between Walt and his employees. Like other studio heads, Walt received all the public attention and praise for the studio's work, but unlike many of his fellow producers he was at least partly responsible for the studio's accomplishments. He was certainly a cinematic visionary, and can be justly credited for introducing the latest innovations in sound and color.

Walt was the one who steered cartoons away from the "rubber hose" style of the silent era (dubbed thus because of the way characters moved without regard to anatomy, as if all their limbs were rubber hoses) and encouraged his artists to develop a realistic, naturalist style of animation in the early 1930s. He was the moving force behind such groundbreaking films as "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" (1937), the first full-length animated feature, and

"Pinocchio" (1940), a film whose intricate levels of technical brilliance many animators feel has never been surpassed. But it was up to the studio artists to make Disney's ideas reality.



It was Freddie Moore who led the movement towards realistic motion in cartoons with his re-definition of Mickey Mouse in such films as "The Band Concert" (1935). Disney features like "Lady and the Tramp" (1955) and "The Jungle Book" (1967) could never have succeeded without the polished character animation of Ollie Johnston, Frank Thomas, Eric Larson, and others. Vladimir Tytla's

rendering of the demon Chernabog in the Night on Bald Mountain sequence of "Fantasia" (1940) might well be the greatest work of animation ever. These extraordinarily talented men, in alliance with the vision of their leader, accomplished what Winsor McCay had deemed impossible: high art in a studio setting.

The downside to all this was of course, once again, the studio head received all the recognition for his artist's work. In Disney's case, however, it doesn't seem to be attributable to greed on the executive's part. Walt certainly didn't mind all the attention, but he seems to have recognized his artist's importance to his success. Yet to this day the Disney staff remain unknown to the public at large (do you know that David Hand directed "Snow White"?). It seems to be an unfortunate side effect in the development of animation studios that individual contributions to the medium should go uncredited.

The men behind Warner Bros. cartoon juggernaut "Looney Tunes" and "Merrie Melodies" have managed to beat the odds and achieve a degree of prominence in the public eye. Then again, maybe that's because they have such unusual and distinct monikers like Friz Freleng, Tex Avery, and Chuck Jones. But to claim thus would be to belittle their accomplishments, and for

once in the history of animation's Golden Age the names of the artists outshine the name of the producer.

"Looney Tunes" began in 1930 when Disney vets Hugh Harman and Rudy Ising teamed with producer Leon Schlesinger to make cartoons, to be distributed by Warner Bros. Three years later Harman and Ising left to form the MGM cartoon studio, and Schlesinger and his artists continued on their own. Unlike other studio heads who craved the limelight, Schlesinger (and his successor Eddie Selzer) seems to have been concerned only with making money. He left it to his directors and animators to meet the press, and gave them complete artistic freedom at the office....so long as it was under budget.

The Warners artists used their creative freedom to take the medium in new directions. Directors Tex Avery and Bob Clampett broke from the Disney tradition that the other studios had begun to mimic and imbed their films with highly exaggerated slapstick comedy. In Avery's "Porky's Duck Hunt" (the first appearance of Daffy Duck, 1937) and Clampett's "Porky in Wackyland" (1938), the characters appear at first to be of the naturalist Disney school, but are constantly distorted beyond all rationality, defying every law of physics for comedic effect. The other Warners artists immediately picked up on the style, and eventually every other studio, even Disney, adopted the method. Slapstick ultimately proved to be the theatrical genre animation was best suited for.

Like Disney, the Warner Bros. studio turned the assembly-line-art system to their advantage and collaborated their talents to take the art to a higher level. Nowhere is this better exemplified than in the creation and development of Bugs Bunny, arguably the greatest cartoon character ever. It took over 10 years and 30 films for Bugs' personality to coalesce into the suave and wily comic hero that he is today. During that period he was continually tweaked by various directors and redesigned several times by different animators, notably Bob



McKimson. By 1950 Warners' three animation units had reached a consensus as to who Bugs was and how he looked; while each unit made its own cartoons, it was the same Bugs Bunny every time. Without the tandem talents of Jones, Freleng, et.al., it is unlikely that Bugs would have been as fully fleshed-out a character as he eventually became.

It was when animation finally made the leap to television that the art truly began to suffer for business's sake. The great Hollywood studios of the 30s, 40s, and 50s had been manned by people genuinely interested in making quality cinema. The denizens of the TV animation houses of the 60s, 70s, and 80s only cared that the product was there to market. The quality of writing was poor, and the animation itself was often so limited it barely qualified as animation at all. McCay's prophecy had finally come to pass.

Cartoons made exclusively for television had been around since Jay Ward's "Crusader Rabbit" in 1949, but production of TV animation didn't really hit its stride until about 1960, when most of the cinematic cartoon studios had shut their doors. Bill Hanna and Joe Barbera, former MGM directors and creators of Tom and Jerry, dominated the market almost from its inception and continued to do so through the 1970s.

Unfortunately, Hanna and Barbara never understood that just because something works once, that doesn't mean the same thing will work again and again. In their 20 years together at MGM they never made anything except Tom and Jerry cartoons. But at least Tom and Jerry had been well animated and cleverly written.

The duo's television hits are considerably lesser in quality (one gets the feeling they succeeded merely because there was nothing better on), and the myriad self-imitations of every successful show they had were downright abysmal. Despite its flat, one-dimensional characters and campy, formulaic stories, "Scooby-Doo" proved extremely popular in 1969, so Hanna-Barbara made "Speed Buggy", "Jabber Jaw", and "The Clue Club", which were all variations on the same characters and theme. "The Flintstones" begat "The Jetsons", and "The Smurfs" begat "The Snorks". It was a process that stunted creativity, giving the artists even less of a chance to infuse life into their work.

Other TV cartoon studios like Filmmation and DIC proved little better or even worse than Hanna-Barbara. Desperate to conquer as much air time as possible, the studios churned out series after series without any regard to aesthetic. The situation improved in the second half of the 1980s when the two big studios of old, Disney and Warner Bros., entered the market. Shows like Disney's "DuckTales" (1986) and Warner's "Tiny Toon Adventures" (1989) were considerably better than anything their competitors were producing. Yet they still fell utterly short of the great cartoons made for the movies in the first half of the century. The budget restraints and hurried deadlines of the television industry simply prohibited artists from crafting the kind of art their cinematic predecessors achieved.

Finally in the 1990s the artists in the television cartoon industry began to figure out how to work effectively with the limitations of the field. 1992 saw the debut of Warner Bros. "Batman: The Animated Series." Despite the fact that the animation was contracted to various Oriental studios (by the mid 80s the practice was almost universal in television production....it continues to be so today) the show's creators Bruce Timm, Paul Dini, Eric Radomski, and others managed to infuse the series with a distinct visual style. Combined with the deep characterizations and strong stories, "Batman" was a first-rate cartoon. While they did not attract as much publicity as Disney's theatrical department, the Warner Bros. TV artists were just as important to the art of animation, demonstrating that even a television cartoon series was capable of artistic achievement.



Back on the big screen the medium faced a different set of problems. Since the advent of television people were no longer spending all day at the movies, and short subjects were gradually dropped from the billings. While animation never completely disappeared from theaters, by the 1960s most studios had closed down; the ones that didn't suffered from severe declines in quality. Only Disney retained its level of excellence, but Disney had ceased full-time production of short subjects by the mid-50s, earlier than anyone else. While there was the occasional Non-Disney animated feature, no other studio was producing them on a regular basis. By the 1980s no studio was producing shorts full-time, and even the Disney movies had lost their appeal.

The new generation of Disney artists breathed life back into animation with films like "Who Framed Roger Rabbit?" (1988) and "The Little Mermaid" (1989). These well-crafted cartoons were celebrations of animation's glory days, and the public proved just as nostalgic as the artists themselves. The new Disney crew proved that the studio system was still capable of turning out great art. In fact, the major flaw of the studio system, lack of artist recognition, dissipated. Gone were the producer-moguls of old, and with no Walt Disney public attention finally shifted to the artists themselves. While not exactly household names, directors John Musker and Ron Clements and animators like Glen Keane and Andreas Deja certainly received more press than Disney vets like Milt Kahl or Wolfgang Reitherman did in their heyday.

It was inevitable, in spite of Winsor McCay's warnings, that animation would become a "trade" in the form of the studio system. The complexities of bringing moving drawings to life on the screen are too time-consuming and too expensive for it to have developed otherwise. Fortunately, through the years there have been many individuals working in the field who have been careful not to let business logistics overwhelm the artistic potential of the medium. The collective nature of the studio may prevent the artists from receiving the amount of praise an artist working solo garners, but the art attained is no less great. As long as there are creative men and women behind the drawing desk, the animated cartoon will continue to be the best of both worlds: a trade and an art.

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In 1999, Michael Crandol entered this essay into a contest sponsored by Joe & Vicki Tracy's Animation History Website where he won first place and a limited edition signed copy of The Illusion of Life.

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