DAVID SURMAN

Animated Caricature: Notes on , 1941-1943

Introduction

How might animation extend the visual modalities of caricature? The following essay develops a primary discussion of animated caricature, supported by a close analysis of Max and Dave Fleischer's animated series *Superman* (1941–1943).[1] The aim of the essay is threefold. First, to demonstrate the importance of caricature in the analysis of animated representation. Second, to investigate the role of caricature in the hyperrealist modalities of certain animations. The investigation focuses primarily on the perceptual phenomena: caricature as a form of a reality *effect* or *affect*. Finally, though to a lesser extent, it discusses the problem of linguistic analytical methodologies in the study of animated representation.

To take the prime example, when we eventually encounter an original Mickey Mouse cartoon of the twenties or thirties (on Disney DVD, or a TV special), it is reasonable to say that we will have seen Mickey elsewhere. In fact, for the vast majority of people I ask, the indomitable mouse figured prominently in their childhoods, in the form of stuffed toys, posters, TV shows and the like. The iconic image of the mouse extends far beyond the relative confines of the rather small number of cartoons featuring Mickey. The "meaning" of Mickey, and his iconic status

in contemporary culture, relates primarily to his merchandising, rather than his classic cartoon appearances. When we do have an

image expresses a core problem in the consideration of animated representation; the non-linguistic, non-narrative dimension in which an animated character expresses both its identity and formative contexts. If on certain levels animation is interpreted beyond linguistic and culturally specific barriers (for instance Japanese *anime* in a UK audience context), how do we discuss the representational modalities of animation, aware of the limited applicability of such traditional methodologies as Saussurean linguistics?

Such a problem has been raised in Film Studies, most notably by Stephen Prince, who writes that "film theory since the 1970s has been deeply indebted to structuralist and Saussurean-derived linguistic models…. To speak, for example, about 'reading' a film…is to index and enhance this lineage."[3] In accordance with Prince's call for the pictorial analysis of the cinematic signifier, I shall similarly account for the iconicity of animated caricature as it is perceived rather than "read." In this sense, my analysis of animated caricature promotes a cognitive/perceptual approach, and though semiotics does provide useful insights into animation culture, I would like to develop an analysis that is not centrally dependent upon linguistic principles.

Observing the broad critical ambivalence towards animation in both the popular press and film-academic circles, Paul Wells has noted that discussions of animated representation are needed if the role animation has in our broader cultural context is to be a reappraised:

> The idea that animation is an innocent medium, ostensibly for children, and largely dismissed in film histories, has done much to inhibit proper discussion of issues concerning representation…. Though some attention was paid to the ostensible content of certain films, the complex ways in which animation problematises the representation of gender and race have yet to be discussed.[4]

Although the terms ‘mimesis’ and ‘abstraction’ are not ideal, they are useful in suggesting opposing tendencies under which animation and live-action imagery can be juxtaposed. The term ‘mimesis’ represents a desire to reproduce natural reality (more like live-action work) while the term ‘abstraction’ describes the use of pure form—a suggestion of a concept rather than an attempt to explicate it in real life terms (more like animation)…. While it may seem strange to describe *Snow White* as an example of an ‘abstract’

movement no less than on static symptoms, and [still-image] art has to compensate for the loss of the time dimension by concentrating all required information into one arrested image."[11] A carrot is not a cigar, and yet Bugs' performance—in which he fingers and taps the vegetable—suggests precisely that. The non-linguistic, performative process through which animation creates a meaningful mode of expression suggests that we must develop a methodology that moves away from the traditionally applied semiotic models hindering the development of critical frameworks for understanding animation.

Animation and Realism

There are a number of other practical concerns that shape the production of an animated character, aside from those of caricature. As I shall explain later, character animation shares a common trait with the (live-action) action-adventure genre in its core concern with the excess of the body. To clarify, when producing (two-dimensional) animation, the illusion of movement is achieved through the creation of drawings with small interstitial changes from one image to the next:

> When the film-maker uses the term 'animated film' he uses it in the narrow sense of the work of a graphic artist recreating on paper or celluloid separate phases of movement which give the illusion of continuous action when they are projected in sequence on to a screen.[12]

A character, as a constant and legible creation, is only achieved if the sequence of images is of regulated continuity, recalling Töpffer's "permanent traits." In order to maintain this consistency, the animator refers to "model sheets" which show the character from all angles, ensuring a consistent and non-contradictory image. In an effort to produce as realistic an image as possible, an "illusion of life," the Disney animation studio initiated a number of production strategies to ensure the hyperrealist regulation of the movement sequence from one image to the next. These included the

aforementioned model sheets showing the character from all angles, anatomy classes and life drawing, film reference material, desk-mirrors for studying facial expression, and the development of work methodologies that promoted a process of iterative, continual "line-testing" as a core production practice. The Fleischers' *Superman* takes this realist production strategy to an extreme. Without these inhibitions, at the very least, the animated line appears to "boil" irregularly, which in some cases is desirable (for instance Bob Godfrey's *Roobarb and Custard,* 1974).

Therefore, aesthetic realism in animation can be thought of as the suppression of excess itself, since an unregulated animation is pure excess, an abstraction without sealopme(e n pra)47.1(c65.3r is)-w[.9(m3)47p n .3(5(s lrat-cha)21.1ima)]TJ15.09 0 TD-0.0009 Tc0.0009 0olog)9h of Suman exe4(pmetres)]TJ93.34 0 TD-0.0005 Tc0.0005 Twait"l eht as tbostudy.3rio str(on)]TJ-93.65 -2.3 TD-0

In the broader contemporary context, clearly there are a number of paradoxes emerging as animated representation moves toward greater and greater realism. An anti-realist "boiling" animated character self-reflexively refers to the mode of production, rupturing the reality effect generated by the diegesis, as Terrence Lindvall and Matthew Melton note: "by commenting on filmmaking and the film industry and by unveiling the raw materials and methods of the filmmaking process, cartoons reveal their own textuality."[14] True of all animation, the artifice of the image refers to the mode of production, and yet hyperrealist animation employs a range of audiovisual practices that cohere into a plausible reality effect. In these animated worlds, the administration of rules governing objectivity (both environmental and figurative) is integral to a consistently plausible diegesis, and a legitimate reality effect. I use the term "plausible" in accordance with Christian Metz's definition: "the Plausible…is an arbitrary and cultural restriction of real possibles; it is in fact, censorship: among all the possibilities of figurative fiction, only those authorised by the previous discourse will be

would warrant a larger debate. The focus here is primarily on the representational capacities (realist or otherwise) of caricature.

Regarding the Fleischers' *Superman,* such "boiling" bodily excess is not evident in the eponymous hero. Preserving the design integrity, the "permanent traits" of the hero over time were central to the hyperrealist character construction, as previously mentioned. Inversely, we see that the excessive facial contortions and serpentine movements of the villains of the series are central to their "evil" characterisation, and their design is not regulated by the strict rules of the "good" Superman character.

Degrees of caricature—varied points on Furniss's continuum between hyperrealist mimesis and cartoonal abstraction—are employed throughout the series to convey the masculinity, femininity, herois

prepared to 'take them as read.'"[23] Likewise the laborious construction of hyperrealist animation extends far beyond the production trends of the predominant practices (for instance juxtaposing Disney studio practices with the limited-animation modalities of United Productions of America [U.P.A.]).

One of the reasons why Bendazzi might note the "insignificance" of *Superman* (in the context of the mainstream forties' cartoons) is precisely through its rogue relationship to the conventional representation of the body, which (should one temporarily adhere to an essentialist conception of animation) diametrically opposes the excessive and metamorphic tendency at the heart of figurative animation. Wells has emphasised that much of the orthodox studio work of the 1940s and after (excluding Disney) creates a body that is the staple of animation: "malleable," "fragmentary," "impossible," and more generally "uncanny."[24] He writes:

> Orthodox animation and developmental animation, in largely engaging with the figurative, are perpetually concerned with construction and symbolic expression of the body yet, ironically, it is in the design or narrational use of the body that most orthodox or developmental animation moves towards the condition of the experimental. The figurative aspects of the body substantially collapse into the abstract. Bodies merely become *forms* subject to manipulation, exaggeration and reconfiguration.[25]

Superman employs a hyperrealist expressive style, which was, more or less, an animated adaptation of the comic art of the period. In this particular mode the strict correspondence to comic-art realism meant that the traditional "squash-and-stretch" animation style (of bendy malleable characters) could not be employed. As such the technique of *rotoscoping* (invented by the Fleischer brothers), where a live-action performance is traced to achieve a realistic movement, was used. Disney used this technique to a far more conspicuous level in its early features, most notably *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937). The clear ontological difference between animation per se and *rotoscoping* in Disney's animated film was due to the

juxtaposition of cartoonal characters (Dwarfs) and "real body" caricature (Snow White).[26]

Figure 2. An example of the Fleischers' new realist aesthetic style.
Still from *Superman.* 1941. © Paramount Inc. All rights reserved.

The ambiguous technique of rotoscoping has been largely unpopular with practitioners and audiences. Gombrich notes that one of the virtues of caricature is that the non-complexity of the image construction minimises the potential for the image to be contradictory: "One effect could do the work of many, provided again

must complement the stylistic principles governing the *gestalt* or overall effect of the design.

Figure 3. Cartoonal Dogs on TV

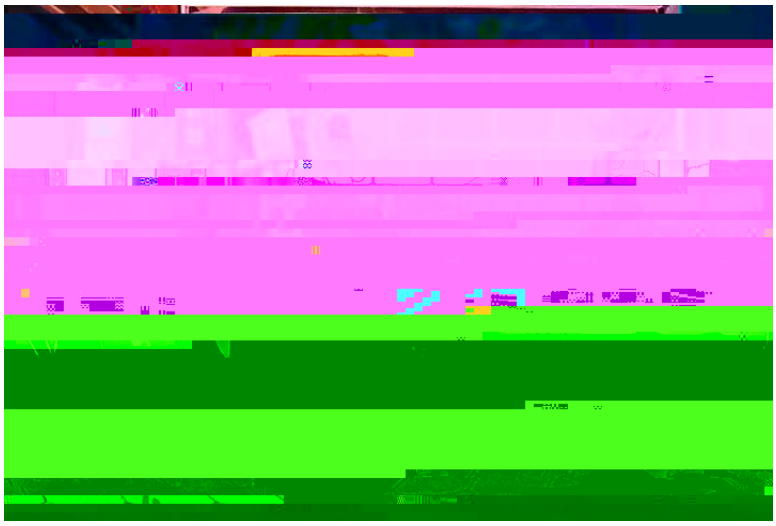

Figure 4. The “hyperreal” and the “cartoonal” are juxtaposed.

Figure 5. The attack dog attacks us.

Within the diegesis of *Akira*, degrees of caricature are used to differentiate clear ontological differences of actual and virtual. Actual attack dogs, virtual cartoon dogs. And yet *Akira* as a whole is an animation, relying on its internally constructed logic to convey a reality effect with the same system of difference we establish between live-action and animation. Of course, this particular system of difference serves the climactic ending of the film when the underdog Tetsuo is transformed from a regular (albeit psychic) boy [fig.6] into a mass of

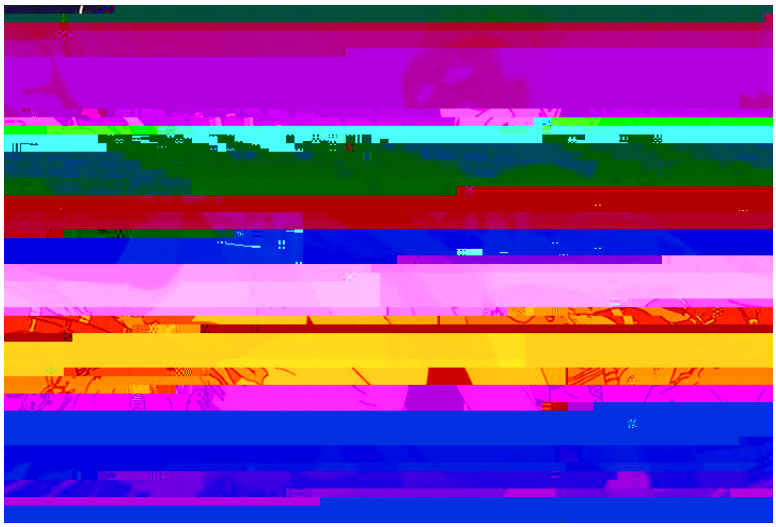

Figure 7. Testuo succumbs to the coercive effect of Akira and is transformed.

In treating the animated caricature in broad socio-historical terms the fundamentals of its mode of communication are marginalised. By examining the modes of caricature in *Superman*, we can help to explain how a critical approach to caricature can be understood alongside existing socio-historical and cultural approaches to animated representation.

Throughout the *Superman* animated series, there are five clear representational types: Superman, ordinary men, women (including Lois Lane), “ethnic” criminals, and white criminals. An understanding of representation through caricature emerges from the oppositions between these various representational types. The clearest of these is the opposition between the representation of Lois Lane, as a woman, and Superman. Irrespective of the episodic villains, Lois and Superman recursively perform the feminine/masculine opposition of almost every episode. Through their caricatured difference the binary of masculine and feminine is made apparent. The representational assemblage of the *Superman* series seems to operate with clear binary structuring, common to the Classical Hollywood model. Moreover, the codes of caricature are opposed on the abstract/real continuum when the characters are of the

same race, for instance Superman and the Mad Scientist in the first episode. However, in the representation of other ethnic types, specifically the Japanese (

Studies has yet to fully embrace the reception of formal aspects in the audience's construction of meaning:

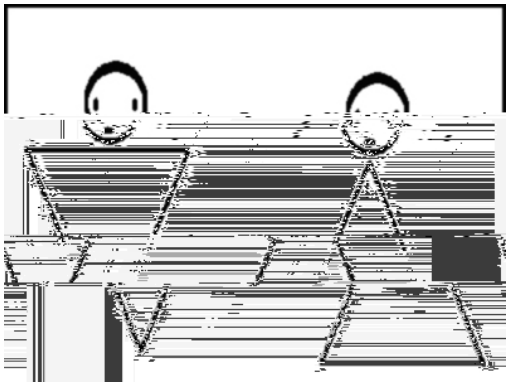

Figure 9. The body-shape *as* gender equivalence.

Diagram © David Surman.

> I mentioned the possibility that even man shows traces of such inborn responses, that, in particular, our reaction to faces and physiognomic expression may not be wholly due to learning, and that the mental set which makes us read faces into blots, rocks or wallpapers may be biologically conditioned…. The most astonishing fact about these clues of expression is

Figure 11. The Mad Scientist.

Still from *Superman.* 1941. © Paramount Inc. All rights reserved.

The villain of the pilot episode, the Mad Scientist [fig.11], is caricatured antithetically, inverting the graphic values of the white hero, to create the white criminal. The linear, compositional dimensions of his features converge inwards, and the distance between eyes, nose and mouth is considerably less than that of Superman. The thin eyebrows, hair loss, crooked hands and significantly anthropomorphic eyes coalesce into a caricature representation: the binary opposite of Superman, his "other."

Expressionistically, his criminality is "encoded" even before he has acted, since his design relates antithetically to the eponymous hero. Any performative action thereafter only legitimates and gives narrative agency to the representational predisposition of the caricature. To recall my opening discussion of Mickey Mouse, we can, in effect, take any single still moment of the Mad Scientist and his narrative trajectory is largely told to us through caricature. Such permanent traits are central to

The caricaturing of ethnicity in the *Superman* series is the most complex, because of the propagandist elements that inflect many of the representations. To understand the role of propaganda, Toby Clark makes a useful summary: "Wartime propaganda attempts to make people adjust to abnormal conditions, and adapt their priorities to accommodate the needs of war."[32] Throughout the series none of the "ethnic"

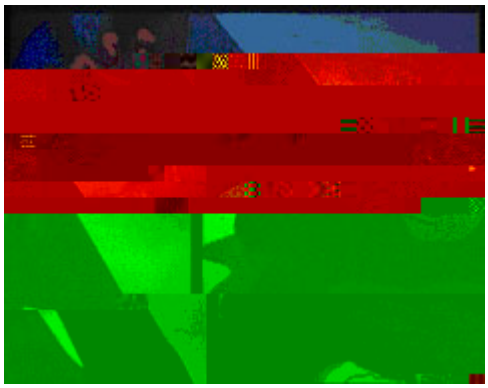

Figure 12. A Japanese soldier.

Still from *The Eleventh Hour*. 1942 © Paramount Inc. All rights reserved.

In *Terror on the Midway* (1942) (which preceded the often-noted *Japoteurs*, 1942, as well as *The Eleventh Hour*) a King Kong-like giant gorilla terrorises a circus and the surrounding area. The character motif of blending the figure into the shadows is present here, with similar emphasis on the teeth and eyes [fig.13]. This expressionist device, in the evolution of the visual strategy of the series, shows how propaganda adapts the fantastical to the political, through the transposition of the modalities of caricature.

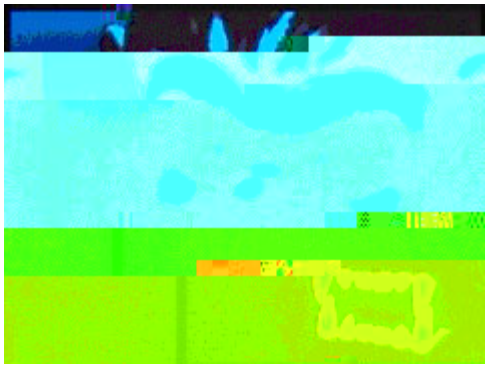

Figure 13. A gigantic, monstrous gorilla.

Still from *Terror on the Midway*. 1942. © Paramount Inc. All rights reserved.

The visual coding of the monster Gorilla, a creature common to the escapist-fantasy narratives of the Depression, is subverted and applied in the representation of the Japanese. As such the intelligibility of the propaganda relates to its previous fantastical application, rendering the Japanese as animalistic and barbarous: occupying the shadows cast by the skyscrapers of the modern city. Like the first villain of the series, the mad scientist, the latter representations function antithetically, and Superman is more defined through greater and greater feats of super-humanism than in the earlier episodes, in order to sustain and reiterate the extremity of propagandist wartime narrative. It is in the later episodes that Superman attains the national body equivalence common to the action-adventure genre, as a fantasy of never failing, insurmountable heroism and metonymic cultural focus. The relationship between nationhood and the body is an important one in the visual rhetoric of *Superman*.

Excess, Body and Nation

Before I conclude my discussion, I would like to put *Superman* briefly in a contemporary live-action context. Though I hope to have outlined a general approach to caricature, there are interesting parallels in the representational strategies of *Superman* and certain live-action films. Many of the critical suggestions I have made regarding caricature are to a greater or lesser extent applicable to certain aspects of live-action film. I would like to sketch out some of those parallels in a specific genre-context.

Contemporaneous with the boom of many "action-merchandise" animation series such as *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe* (1983) and *The Teenage Mutant Hero Turtles*

signify their nations through their fighting styles. Place confers identity. A Sumo wrestler is to Japan what a kilt-wearingr

In Conclusion: Caricature and Identification

> …nobody identifying with Superman believes they can fly after the film ends…[38]

Caricature is fundamental to the reception of character-based animation, as a mode of representation. Like all representation, a caricature is a repository for the intent of both creator and interpreter, between which creative and receptive dialectics emerge.

A caricature is an expressionistic device, and can be understood through its expressive faculties. Line, tone, colour, form and movement—the mechanics of caricature—can be apprehended in order to ascertain the intended or unintended *affective representation* of the character. To account for the material processes at work in caricature, it is useful to differentiate between the permanent and impermanent traits that distinguish character from expression. Such a division is key to the discussion of animated caricature. Through a discussion of the Fleischers' *Superman* series, I have attempted to show how the archetypes of villain and hero are embodied in caricature, specific to the North American tradition of comic book superheroes and animated shorts. I have

[28] Wells, 124.
[29] Gombrich, 288-289.
[30] Ibid., 282.
[31] Ibid., 287.
[32] Toby Clark, *Art and Propaganda in the Twentieth Century* (London: Orion Publishing, 1997), 103.
[33]