GEORGE GRIFFIN

Willful Ignorance: Making Flying Fur

"God is in the details," according to Mies van der Rohe, and this maxim is a large part of what could be called animators' core belief system, or at least aspects of our temperament which attract us to the craft.

And, because we are symbiotically entwined with the infernal machinery of illusion we are also to a large degree technicians. Even the lowly flipbook is not merely a book, but a manually-controlled viewing apparatus, prototype for the Mutoscope, precursor of the

methods of time drawing, I hoped to enrich (by undermining) the essentially comic experience with paradox and irony. At heart, I am a gloomy guy with a veneer of cheer: after I laugh at Daffy Duck's manic strutting I actually worry about what it might mean about race, gender and aggression.

Flying Fur was conceived as a cartoon redux, pure and simple, using the most basic conventions of drawing sequenced with a stolen moment of animation sound history to create a screwball stream-of-consciousness sketch.

What follows is both how I made *Flying Fur* in January of 1981 and how I came to make it: not really probing the deep, existential sources and motivations; rather, glancing at thoughts on animation process and history, and my role as a contrarian formalist within it. But, with nearly a quarter century of transformation to digital animation to sharpen and confuse my mind, it is also a rumination on drawing.
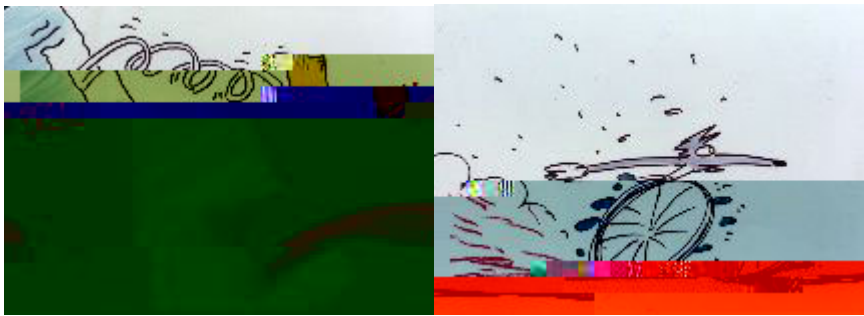

SOUND

Which comes first: the picture or the sound? There is a rich history of animated synchronisation including "Mickey Mouse" as a verb, Fischinger and McLaren, and the codified phases of character mouth actions. Bu

It was a mélange of typical cartoon effects (boings, whistles, squealing tires), stitched seamlessly together with orchestrated music that swooped from jazzy routines to dissonance: Basie meets Bartok, with a bit of Varèse on the side; no language, aside from doggie woofs.

RULES
I decided to approach this material with a fairly arbitrary set of rules to be true to the experience of the sound as such, not compete with or comment on the original cartoon characters or narrative.

1. Do not research the sound source until after completion of the animation, if then.

2. Do not add or subtract sound elements, nor alter the original track in any way; quote verbatim, including the announcer who says, "...now back to our show..." This rule has since led me to shun friendly advice that I commission a soundtrack for *Flying Fur* even
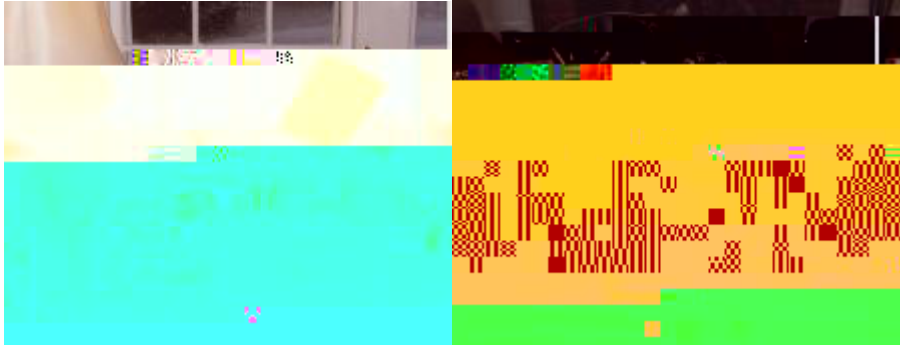
PRODUCTION

OK. Now the hard part. How does one make grass growing seem dramatic, even when compressed into a four-week period?

Sequence drawing on paper worked for Emile

a diagrammatic overview.

Even without the storyboard, dividing the action into scenes, each with its own folder, sequence drawings and exposure sheets, was a default method of organisation and visual editing practised by studios at the time.

Extreme/In-between. This system of drawing, as opposed to "straight ahead," simply describes the process of discontinuous choreography comprised of key poses which are held or emphasised and the intermediate poses which link them in time. Even a cycle (e.g. of a running figure, a repeated loop with no emphatic extreme) will need a key drawing to suggest an attitude.

Two fundamental aspects of sequence drawing are the union of time and space, often just called "timing," and the symmetry of time: an action can be constructed from the beginning or from the end. Timing includes not

who the victim was and could draw some satisfaction that it was not their sort. Explosions which blacken characters' faces are but one of many gags that serve the same purpose.

At the same time there was and is a real desire for animators to act through their character, to assume a rowdy or disreputable identity, and what could be better than interracial or inter-species mimesis. Norman Mailer's "White Negro" could easily apply to the anarchic animators of MGM and Warner's in the 1940s as it did to the Beats in the 1950s. Of course, these wild assertions were part of a speculative matrix, not the elements of a theoretical argument.

A related theme focuses on ambivalence. Characters undergo startling reversals: hunters become hunted, chasers become chased, a "bad" cat becomes a pussy cat, black masked faces are passed off to white masked figures, even the Caucasian square-man has a kind of wish-fulfillment fantasy doing a jazz dance in brown face. These transformations are abrupt, discontinuous, angular and illogical, somewhat like the music.

Classic cartoons often contain signs, labels or captions as throwaway gag lines (including Jones' long-running Acme Co.), often held on view for what seems now an eternity. Throughout *Flying Fur* I insert text as running commentary, often just below the threshold of comprehension. The most obviously legible example is a newspaper (*Daily Snare*) read by a villainous cat, accompanied by typewriter effects. Its headlines parody *Variety* while suggesting racial overtones to conflicts in cartoon studios
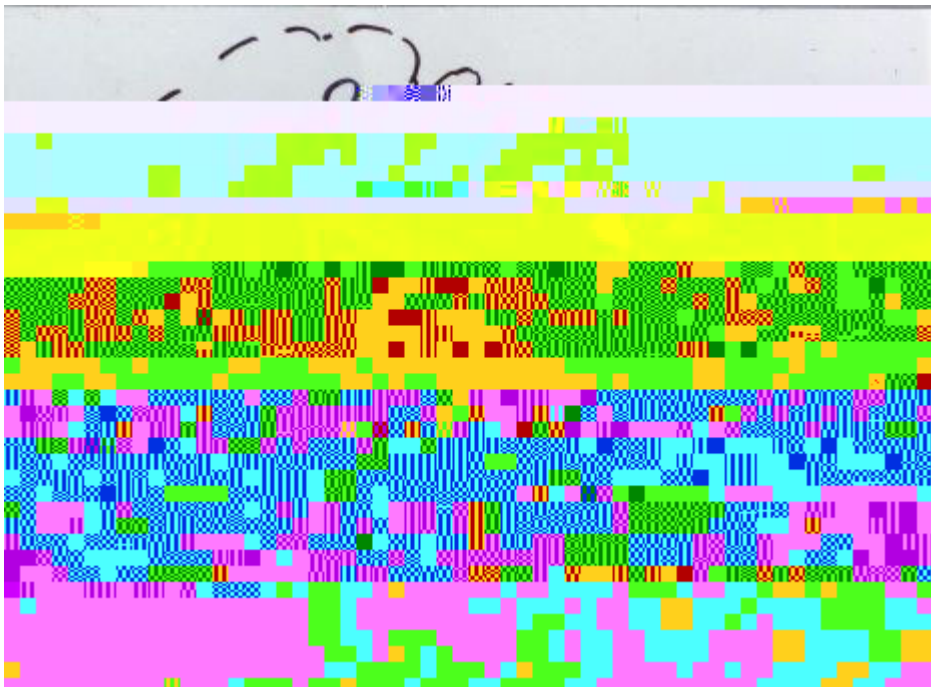
BARRELHOUSE BOP
During the 1970s I often produced related flipbooks or pamphlets with my films. Just
after *Flying Fur*

install the film in a gallery with two projectors. A two-sided screen would be positioned in the middle of the space. On one side would be projected the original Tom and Jerry, on the other side, *Flying Fur*. The viewer would hear the soundtrack and choose between viewing the original or the parody.