

Fantasyland or Wackyland? Animation and Surrealism in 1930s America

Jorgelina Orfila and Francisco Ortega Grimaldo
Texas Tech University

In early September 1938, Warner Brothers (WB) premiered *Porkey in Wackyland*, a black and white animated cartoon directed by Robert (Bob) Clampett, better known as the creator of Tweety and co-creator of Daffy Duck for the Leon Schlesinger productions. The short was part of the *Loony Tunes* series, WB's sarcastic rejoinder to Disney Studios' whimsical *Silly Symphonies*. The cartoon depicts Porky Pig's trip to "Darkest Africa" in search of the last, priceless Do-Do bird. Clampett's madcap imagination ran free in the conception of Wackyland's landscape and its absurd and bizarre shape-shifting inhabitants. As it escapes Porky's relentless pursuit, the Do-Do draws viable doors out of thin air and uses all the tricks of the animator's toolbox to contravene the basic conventions of verisimilitude the cartoon's graphics depend upon to convey meaning. In the last scene, the cartoon dismantles trust in yet another basic convention: language. When Porky finally catches the bird and boasts "Oh boy, I've really caught the last of the Do-Dos," the bird retorts "Yes, I'm really the last of the Do-Dos—aren't I boys?" Dozens of Do-Dos answer affirmatively, surrounding a frightened Porky. We are made to question the Do-Dos' understanding of human language and their comprehension of the meaning of names.

Most of *Porkey in Wackyland's* reviews include the epithet "surreal," as a synonym for bizarre and weird. Produced in the late 1930s, the cartoon has been analyzed in the sparse scholarship that considers the intersection of American cartoon animation and Surrealism, when the movement was becoming the most popular and most debated artistic trend in America.¹ Nevertheless, in the 1930s, Surrealism was more commonly associated with Disney's cartoons and characters. On November 25, 1936, the Museum of Modern Art New York (MoMA), in a press release announcing the opening of its "Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism"

Jorgelina Orfila and Francisco Ortega Grimaldo: Jorgelina.Orfila@ttu.edu and Francisco.Ortega@ttu.edu

Copyright © 2020 (Jorgelina Orfila and Francisco Ortega Grimaldo). Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 Unported License. Available at <http://jsa.asu.edu/>

show, maintained that one of Surrealism's most popular expressions was in "the animated fantasies of the world's best loved Surrealist, Mickey Mouse."² In addition, after quoting André Breton's 1924 definition of Surrealism in the Movement's First Manifesto as "pure psychic automation by which it is intended to express [...] the real process of thought," the museum's notice argued that "[i]f Mickey Mouse in his peregrinations does not cavort 'in the omnipotence of the dream' and 'in the absence of all control exercised by the reason' then no one does or can."³ The outrageousness of correlating Breton's lofty and grandiloquent characterization of the movement's goals with the figure of Mickey—emanating from the institution's eagerness to exploit the character's popularity—is highlighted by Mickey's notable absence from the show. Yet its producer, Walt Disney, was included among the "Artists Independent of the Dada-Surrealist movements." The first edition of the catalogue lists under his name four "frames from the animated cartoon *Three Little Wolves*, 1936."⁴ Disney, however, had long before stopped drawing or even actively participating in the making of the animations he produced, something acknowledged in the catalogue's second edition, which instead attributes the drawings to "Walt Disney Productions, Ltd."⁵ The final way in which the museum associated Disney's name with the show was by including his first *Silly Symphony*, *Skeleton Dance*, 1929, among the "Fantastic or Surrealist films in the Museum of Modern Art Film Library." The cartoon is listed between Duchamp's *Anemic Cinema*, 1926, and Buñuel and Dalí's *Un Chien Andalou*, 1929.

By concentrating on the intersection of animation and Surrealism in the "Fantastic Art" exhibition, and by exploring the conditions that would allow for the labeling of Clampett's cartoon as surrealist, this essay aims at filling a gap in the scholarship on the spread of Surrealism in America. Beginning with an examination of Disney in MoMA's "Fantastic Art" show, one that offers new viewpoints for the exploration of the intersection between Surrealism and film, this essay will then focus on a consideration of *Porkey in Wackyland* as a surrealist cartoon, and suggest ways by which animations could be considered manifestations of the surrealist approach to art.

Sandra Zalman's influential scholarship on the American encounter with Surrealism established the centrality of MoMA's "Fantastic Art" show in shaping the movement's critical fortune and reception. Organized by Alfred H. Barr Jr.—the museum's founding director—the exhibition suggested that the movement "resonated beyond the scope of traditional aesthetics alone," which corresponded with Barr's encompassing approach to modern art.⁶ The art historian noted that Clement Greenberg's influential 1939 essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch"—where the art critic listed Hollywood movies among the popular and commercial artistic manifestations he characterized as kitsch—refuted Barr's comprehensive stance.⁷ Zalman also convincingly argued that Dada and Surrealism by nature "challenged reigning understandings of modern art, pushing on the category of art itself, and

thereby rejecting the very premise of canonization.”⁸ Surrealism acted as a catalyst for the development of the art of the 20th century; the analysis of its critical fortune exposes some of the gaps and trappings on which the modernist canon was built. However, Zalman’s insightful analysis does not address the place film had in the incorporation of Surrealism into American culture. MoMA’s determination to include Disney in the history-making show demonstrates that the topic deserves attention.

Since its institutionalization at the end of the nineteenth century and until recently, the discipline of art history concentrated almost exclusively on the study of two- and three-dimensional objects. Modernism, as formulated by Greenberg after World War II, reflected and reinforced this limited focus, making it even more difficult to understand Barr’s interpretation of modern art. In order to make the museum’s organization and exhibition schedule reflect his approach, he had to counter the more conservative taste of the museum’s trustees and the elites. Despite his openness to all artistic manifestations and his acceptance of new developments in the arts, Barr was himself a professional art historian, one of the first to dedicate his career exclusively to modern art. Film, the only technological, time-based media to enter the museum under his leadership, challenged the institution’s and his organizational flexibility.⁹

In the 1930s, the film industry itself was in flux and rapidly changing as it tried to find its place in society and culture: by 1936, the talkies were less than ten years old and color movies were still exceptional. Cartoon animation—and in particular Disney’s—was at the forefront in the application of film’s new technologies. *Steamboat Willie*, 1928, the first hugely successful Disney animation that introduced Mickey Mouse to the world, was released only one year after *The Jazz Singer*, the first feature-length film to have a synchronized instrumental score and sound effects as well as sequences with lip-synchronous singing and speech. Because cartoons utilize drawings in the pre-production stage, Disney was able to produce a better synchronization of sound and image than was possible in live cinema until the 1940s. Animation offered a unique opportunity to art museums as the drawings and celluloids (cels) could be construed and exhibited as works of art. Disney took this opportunity to be presented as an American artist, despite the fact that the cartoons were initially fillers for nickelodeon programs structured around a main feature film. This lesser role would change at the end of 1937 when Disney released its first animated long feature, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, which was critically acclaimed and became a spectacular box office success. Clampett’s 1938 cartoon and WB’s animation style in general offered an alternative and sarcastic response to Disney’s growing ability to define the parameters of what was animation.

The existence of surrealist cinema is still a matter of debate. Breton himself seemed more interested in the experience the cinema could offer rather than in films per se, and, like the other members of the group, was unconcerned by

whether moving pictures were classified popular or high art. Further, the Surrealists manifested their taste for filmmakers such as Méliès, Chaplin, Feuillade, Keaton, and the Marx Brothers, whose films they interpreted as expressions of popular resistance to bourgeois society.

Michael Richardson, author of *Surrealism and Cinema*, proposes that Surrealism should be defined as a network of relationships. Observing that there are few instances where the Surrealists referred to film before WWII, the scholar argues it would then be a mistake to lucubrate about particular characteristics, styles or themes:

[S]urrealism was never in any sense a ‘film movement,’ and to try to see it as though it was is to distort what is most vital about it. In the analysis of film in the context of surrealism we should not be asking whether a particular film or film maker is surrealist. The principal question to be considered ought rather to be: how does consideration of this particular film or film maker in relation to surrealism help us to illuminate either surrealism or the film?¹⁰

In his analysis, Richardson overlooked Breton’s praise for *It’s a Bird* (1930), a hybrid between live film and stop-motion animation, directed and played by American slapstick comedian Charley Bowers. In his brief comment, published in the Winter 1937 issue of the surrealist magazine *Minotaure*, the poet averred that cinema had the power to call on the deeper recesses of the mind, as demonstrated by the films of Picabia, Buñuel and Dalí. In *It’s a Bird*, he added, “we are for the first time projected into the center of the black star where we sensorially experience the difference between the real and the fabulous.”¹¹ Besides Breton’s recognition of animations’ ability to materialize the unreal, it is noticeable how similar the plot of Bower’s film is to Clampett’s, as it includes the trip of a scrap metal worker (Charley) to Africa (Belgium Congo) in search of an exotic metal-eating bird. After the strange looking, kooky and cantankerous talking bird efficiently devours all the undesired car junk, Charley, eyeing bigger profits, asks it to lay an egg. When, to his surprise, the laid egg produces a new car, the ambitious Charley demands that the bird lay millions of eggs, only to discover that it can produce one egg every one-hundred years.

Film and Animation at MoMA in the 1930s

Like other art historians who in the 1930s spearheaded the study of contemporary art, Barr also had to adapt the paradigms and methodologies in which he had been trained for the study of the artistic manifestations of his time.¹² Having studied under the prestigious medievalist Charles Rufus Morey at Princeton University, Barr then gained first-hand knowledge of the accomplishments of the Bauhaus and the Russian avant-gardes.¹³ These experiences prepared him to have a broad, all-encompassing approach to what could be considered art, one that he tried

to translate into the museum's organization. Barr's conception of MoMA resulted in a multi-departmental structure that extended the museum's activities and collections beyond painting and sculpture to include architecture, design, photography, and film.

MoMA did for modern art what museums in the nineteenth century did for the art of the past: decontextualize, categorize, and produce written narratives and value assessments that established the normative interpretation of selected works of art and artistic movements. The institution fostered the application of analytical tools and methodologies developed for the fine arts to the study, selection, and exhibition of modern creations. In this way the museum assimilated these objects into the sphere of modern art, a necessary strategy that made it possible to explore the cross-pollination among different fields of art practice. MoMA was administered according to efficient business models and was among the first museums to have an in-house publicity department and a department of education, both of which it used to further its impact on American culture.

Two minor writings by Erwin Panofsky, one of the founding fathers of modern art history, expose the intertwining of the history of modern art and film/animation in the 1930s, and the prominent role MoMA played in this intersection at the time when Surrealism was being introduced in America. In 1934, Panofsky, a German Jewish scholar whom Barr had helped to find a place in American academia, contributed a book review to the MoMA's *Bulletin*. There he claimed that by substituting geographical remoteness for historical distance, American scholars had proven that "it is, after all, possible to apply the methods of art-history to contemporary art," and had constructed the history of an art that in itself was not yet an "historical phenomenon."¹⁴ The German academic argued this had been possible because America itself had not "actively participated in the artistic movements in question," an assertion he mollified three years later, when he pronounced film to be the utmost modern art form.¹⁵

In 1936, Panofsky, then a member of the MoMA's Film Library's Advisory Committee, gave the lecture "On Movies" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.¹⁶ By focusing on media history, the scholar was able to argue for film's artistic value in spite (or because of) its popularity.¹⁷ An avid moviegoer, Panofsky was persuaded that movies touched modern human beings in a way that "the higher forms of artistic production had mostly failed to hit during the last 150 years," and that they were "not only art [...] but perhaps the only art actually alive."¹⁸ Although movies had originally been a genuine folk-art product created and acted by common people, around 1912 filmmakers had begun to realize film's artistic potential, which centered on exploiting the medium's possibilities: the dynamization of space and the spatialization of time. In this context, Panofsky conceived of Disney's cartoons as the "*ideal* manifestations of film possibilities in that they retain the folkloristic element [...] while, at the same time, they realize the 'integration of time and space' to the point of absolute fulfillment."¹⁹ Although the art historian's arguments were

not original, they demonstrate that cartoon animation could be construed as modern art.

The MoMA's Film Library was officially established in May 1935, even though its curator, British film critic Iris Barry, had been writing in the museum's *Bulletin* and organizing film programs for the institution since 1933. In order to have a film collection, the museum had to establish relations with the film industry, especially with the Hollywood studios. Barry and her staff tended to associate film with the fine arts in order to convince the trustees of its value. Hence, they downplayed the collaborative nature of film production and highlighted the role of the artist-director.²⁰

Despite his comprehensive appreciation for modern manifestations, Barr, who admired and defended German and Russian films, disparaged Hollywood and American productions as crass. In this, he shared the Eurocentric bias of most American elites. In contrast, European intellectuals such as Barry and Panofsky, and artists such as the Surrealists, were likely to appreciate—if not admire—American popular culture, and in particular, its movies. Barry viewed film as a serious art form. She celebrated popular American films as often as European films, and based the need to establish the library on the fact that the motion picture as such was “predominantly an American expression” and “the liveliest as well as the most popular of the contemporary arts and one in which the United States is supreme.”²¹ Her admiration extended to animation, to which she gave pride of place in her writings and in the collection. The very first contribution Barry made to MoMA's *Bulletin* in November of 1933 reviewed Disney's *The Three Little Pigs*, which she characterized as a “cinematic gem.”²²

In her remarkable study of MoMA's Film Library, film scholar Haidee Wasson observed that the creation of this unit and the incorporation in the collection of mass cultural, technological, and industrial objects disturbed traditionalist and idealist models of what art was or should be. Therefore, the establishment of the Film Library amplified internal debates about the organization of the museum and its collection: “[t]hrough the film library, an element of modernist debate was institutionalized and made far more apparent than in other museum departments extant: the conviction that modernist art included a multi-faceted—popular, commercial, spectacular and informational—challenge to art itself.”²³ Moreover, Wasson argued that highlighting the “Americanness” of film was part of a strategy aimed at quieting those who criticized MoMA's perceived bias in favor of European modern art.²⁴ The debate about film brought about issues similar to those Zalman highlighted as key for understanding the insertion of Surrealism in the American cultural landscape of the 1930s, and showcased in the “Fantastic Art” show: the prospect of upholding and promoting a vernacular vanguard, and Surrealism as “the site where high and low existed in a collaborative rather than oppositional dialogue.”²⁵

A MoMA press release dated December 3, 1935 reproduced a letter from Disney announcing the donation of a group of films chosen by Barry, and pre-production material, selected “to show step by step the various processes in the production of Mickey Mouse and Silly Symphony cartoons.”²⁶ The following list demonstrates her and MoMA’s tendency to allocate value on first occurrences to compensate for the absence of an historical perspective that would make it possible to discriminate historical importance or meaning: “First animated cartoon made by Walt Disney produced in 1920 [...]; *Plane Crazy*, 1928, First Mickey Mouse; *Steamboat Willie*, 1928, First Mickey Mouse in sound; *Skeleton Dance*, 1929, First *Silly Symphony*; *Flowers and Trees*, 1932, First cartoon in Technicolor; *The Band Concert*, 1935, First Mickey Mouse in Technicolor.”²⁷ Another press release quotes Barry’s comments about the animations, which underscored Disney’s impressive technological advances: “[t]he brilliant use of sound and of music as an integral part of each Disney cartoon rather than as a mere accompaniment, constituted in 1928 a definite advance in sound-film technique.”²⁸

Disney at the “Fantastic Art” Exhibition

The exhibition and catalogue “Cubism and Abstract Art: Painting, Sculpture, Constructions, Photography, Architecture, Industrial Art, Theater, Films, Posters, Typography,” which opened at MoMA in March of 1936, included almost four hundred works of art, designs, and functional objects that fleshed out Barr’s famous *Diagram of Stylistic Evolution from 1890 until 1935*. The catalogue dust jacket featured Barr’s quasi-scientific flowchart, which represented the history of abstract art as a genealogical progression of stylistic movements.

The “Fantastic Art” show, displaying more than seven hundred objects, ran from December, 1936 to January, 1937 and was structured in four sections: “Antecedents and Pioneers,” “Dada and Surrealism,” “Artists Independent of the Dada-Surrealist Movements,” and “Comparative Material,” which included examples of objects generally outside the purview of fine art such as art of the insane, children’s art, and folk art. The catalogue cover showed Man Ray’s *Rayograph*, 1923. The blurred, almost abstract image produced by the placing of objects on, or slightly above, sensitive film seemed to illustrate Panofsky’s point about distance and art historical knowledge. As Surrealism was still not only current but active in America, Barr’s art historical methodology had reached its limits: “[W]e can describe the contemporary movement toward an art of the marvelous and irrational—he wrote in the catalogue—but we are still too close to it to evaluate it.”²⁹

Barr introduced Surrealism as a world-view, a standpoint from which to see the past and the present in a new light: “the study of the art of the past in the light of Surrealist esthetic is only just beginning,” but “its esthetic of the hypnogogic and anti-rational is affecting art criticism and leading to discoveries and revaluations in art history.”³⁰ Having rejected Breton’s request to be the exhibition organizer, and

stretching the role of the art historian and curator to its limits, Barr selected artistic as well as non-artistic everyday material from all historical periods, according to his own understanding of the movement's ideas and principles. He renamed this trend as the art of the fantastic.³¹ Art historian Tessel Bauduin has called attention to the difference between the marvelous and the fantastic, and that, by 1936, Breton had made little use of the term, always preferring the marvelous.³² She quotes Breton's 1934 lecture "Qu'est-ce que le surrealisme" ("What is Surrealism") where the poet stated that "[t]he marvelous is always beautiful, anything marvelous is beautiful [...] What is admirable about the fantastic is that there is no longer a fantastic; there is only the real."³³ Although both terms refer to the happenstance encounter of two dimensions, the fantastic is oriented towards the sphere that is beyond the material realm, whereas the marvelous happens in the real. This context clarifies Breton's praise of *It's a Bird* as a film where the two dimensions could be actually seen.

Even before the movement was officially introduced in America, Disney had been associated with Surrealism by an exhibition held at the Wadsworth Athenaeum (Hartford, Connecticut) at the end of 1931. Six months prior, Leo Hurwitz, in an article on Pierre Roy, a French artist who painted in a surrealist style but was not associated with Breton and his group, observed that there was an "essential identity of method and idea in such surrealist sublimities as Pierre Roy's paintings recently shown at Brummer's gallery and Walt Disney's delightfully ridiculous animated cartoons now showing at the movies around the corner."³⁴ This so-called "method," consisted of showcasing objects' true meanings, often lost in everyday use and routine. At the end of the article, Hurwitz differentiates Roy's "noble" work from Disney's "mythical world of comic incongruities."³⁵ By 1936, when Barr brought Disney and Roy together again by presenting their work in the same section of the "Fantastic Art" show, Disney had become a celebrated American artist.

The first exhibition of Disney's production material in an American art institution took place in Philadelphia in 1932. In her appraisal, art critic Dorothy Grafly concentrated on Disney's animations as she celebrated the "the birth of an American art, something that has yet to be given in the realm of paint."³⁶ A quite impressive list of art galleries and museums exhibited Disney's work in the 1930s. The College Art Association circulated an exhibition, and the cels were also exhibited at the Art Institute of Chicago. These shows were dutifully reported and commented on by the press. Even though Disney became a sort of national hero, one who had created a new form of art, his work was never exhibited as avant-garde art until 1936.³⁷

The *Silly Symphonies* were the favorites of modernist art critics and scholars. In these cartoons music was paramount and hence, they seemed closer to the idea of an abstract work of art. Since the late nineteenth century music had been the paradigm for painters looking to emancipate their medium from the shackles of representation; numerous artists found in film the potential to create visual music.³⁸

Influential film critic Gilbert Seldes in 1931 reminded *The New Yorker's* readers that Sergei Eisenstein considered Disney's animations "America's greatest contribution to culture."³⁹ One year later he commented that the *Silly Symphonies* "[were] the movie developing in its own field, borrowing not at all from inappropriate sources and transforming draftsmanship and musical composition to its own ends."⁴⁰

While describing Walt Disney as an artist who did not fully realize the greatness of his art, the journalists remarked on his business acumen and scrupulously detailed the laborious multistage process of creating an animation; they also extolled Disney's ability to manage a well-organized studio. Most of the news articles rehearsed the story of the boy from Kansas who had conquered the world through his art without losing touch with his roots. It was the story of an American self-made man characterized by homespun ingenuity and shrewdness. Furthermore, the press praised his use of the latest technological advances (sound, color) and his development of new machines (the multi-plane camera) for the creation of novel effects. Barry's selection of Disney cartoons for the Library's collection, as the press release quoted above noted, was based on and highlighted these accomplishments.

Disney protested that he did not know about art and that he was simply an animator who wanted to entertain the public. He explicitly denied being an "artist," although he claimed dexterity in draftsmanship, and tended to obscure the fact that he did not draw the animations himself. An article published in *The New York Times Magazine* in 1939 mentioned that the "drawings" were "a composite produced by possibly 100 different craftsmen," while Disney declared that "we can't have individualists around here not even me."⁴¹ Nevertheless, he answered affirmatively when asked whether he would have been able to draw Snow White.⁴² The need to amend the "Fantastic Art" catalogue to reflect the fact that it was not Disney but the studio's animators who had authored the cels, reflects this equivocal discourse. Between 1932 and 1935 the number of people Disney employed had grown from one hundred and seven to more than three hundred; as a consequence of the intricate organization and the hierarchical structure of the studio, Disney progressively lost touch with his production team but kept tight control of the product. In 1935 he observed that "the plant was becoming like a Ford factory."⁴³

The four cels Barr chose for the "Fantastic Art" exhibit were not part of the production material held by the Film Library, which suggests that he purposefully wanted to associate Disney with a particular topic: fantastic machines. The cels corresponded to *The Three Little Wolves*, the latest spinoff of the immensely popular *The Three Little Pigs*, 1933, whose song *Who's Afraid of The Big Bad Wolf* had become a national hit. With the country in the depths of the Depression, the wolf had been interpreted as the enemy to be defeated: hunger and starvation. In the 1936 sequel, *Practical Pig* creates a contraption, the "Wolf Pacifier," which, when caught, beats the wolf with rolling pins and kicks it with mechanized boots (Fig.1).

MoMA's press release of November 30, 1936 announcing the exhibition



Fig. 1. The “Wolf Pacifier.” Rendering of one of the cels from Walt Disney’s Productions’ *The Three Little Wolves*, 1936, exhibited in “Fantastic Art, Dada, and Surrealism,” MoMA, 1936. Francisco Ortega-Grimaldo, 2018

indicated that the section “Artists Independent of the Dada-Surrealist Movement” comprised “the greatest numbers of American artists in the exhibition.”⁴⁴ Thirty-one of the forty-three artists in this section were Americans. Other than Disney, the list included Alexander Calder, Arthur Dove, Georgia O’Keeffe, and Rube Goldberg, famous for his caricatures depicting unnecessarily complicated machines used to perform simple activities.

Five days prior, the museum had issued the press release quoted at the beginning of this essay, which was specifically devoted to fantastic machinery. By characterizing Mickey as the paradigm of Surrealism, MoMA’s publicist sought to capitalize on the popularity of the mouse in order to portray Disney and Goldberg as American designers of fanciful machines.⁴⁵ A contemporary text by Seldes reveals that Disney was perceived as a satirist of the machine age and that machines were associated with American culture: “to an American familiar with the American habit of tinkering with mechanisms, Disney’s attitude in this respect, is not particularly surprising. An American is not a machine worshiper—he is far too familiar with the machine. He likes machinery.”⁴⁶ Seldes’ statement reflects the then-common belief

that technology was America's main contribution to modernity and that Americans' ingenuity was best reflected in the creation of machines.

Historian Geoffrey Cocks observes that the instruments the three pigs use against the Wolf become more machine-like as the decade progresses.⁴⁷ In the first scene of the 1936 cartoon, the wolf and his cubs speak in German, thus addressing contemporary concerns about Nazi Germany. In this context, and although the story still relied on the old fable of the pigs against the wolf, *The Three Little Wolves* metaphorically underscored the need of Americans to remain united in confronting European fascism.

Disney's fame as an American artist, business man, and technological wizard could explain the inclusion of his work in the "Fantastic Art" show, and how his participation was highlighted in the press releases. MoMA was eager to demonstrate its support to American artists in order to silence those who criticized its internationalist outlook. Moreover, cartoon animation was not only popular but had also been construed as an artistic manifestation in which America excelled. Disney's ambivalent position regarding authorship positioned him as a good prospect to advance the cause of film in the museum. The nature of the pre-production material, which had already been presented in art galleries and museums, should also be added. Despite the recognition by the museum and artistic circles, in 1937 modernist critics such as Seldes, began to complain that Disney's *Silly Symphonies* were becoming too serious, the style dull, the fables too allegorical, and the tone too moralistic.

Wackyland, Animation, and Surrealism

Surrealists were conscious of the differences between popular and mass culture, and how the latter had the potential to quash the independent impulse that characterized the former. Nevertheless, they recognized that the same commercial pressures that shaped mass culture, itself a product of collective efforts, "created a tension that encouraged opposition and allowed for a flowering of a popular consciousness of revolt that could not be suppressed by the dominant ideology, which indeed was oblivious to it."⁴⁸ Seeing popular culture as an activity parallel to theirs, the Surrealists did not seek to appropriate its products.⁴⁹ Richardson uses the expression "popular accomplices," created by the American surrealist writer Franklin Rosemont, to characterize those popular artists who pursued "a certain surrealism 'without knowing it'."⁵⁰

Without calling attention to the medium he used to bring it to life, Disney created a fantastic world parallel to that of the spectators. Other animators, especially those whose studios were not as hierarchical and Taylorized as Disney's in late 1930s, would be potential Surrealists or "popular accomplices." There are many candidates for this category in the early history of animation such as Otto Messmer and Pat Sullivan's *Felix the Cat* (1919-1932), hailed as a surrealist creation by French critic Marcel Brion in 1928.⁵¹ Animation scholar Paul Wells uses the term "surrealistic" to

refer to the work of the Fleischer Brothers. Their character Koko the Clown (1919-1934) moved freely between the real and the animated worlds, and the first cartoons of Betty Boop (1932 to 1939) were notable for their adult content. Working in a less controlled, more improvisational manner, the Fleischers' production system gave room for accidents and happenstance to shape their work.⁵² However, most of these studios' characters lost the traits that appealed to both the public and scholars when strict moral regulations were enforced around 1934. The Fleischer studio was in disarray by 1937, and could not compete with Disney, especially after the release of *Snow White*. WB's cartoon unit, in contrast, was formed in the early 1930s to compete with Disney's in the creation of musical animations. Its first successful character, Porky, was created in 1935, when the influence of Surrealism in the United States was on the rise.

Clampett's *Porky in Wackyland* was one of the first works created in the manner and style that came to be associated with WB cartoons. Three main defining characteristics relate this animation to the spirit of Surrealism and sanction its characterization as a surrealist cartoon: the mode of creation, style and content, and critical fortune. Whereas Disney's studio was specifically devoted to the production of animation, the WB animation unit was a minor division within one of the main and oldest Hollywood film studios. The unit had limited resources, the appointed producer, Leon Schlesinger, was more interested in commercial success than in quality, and the animators' artistic qualifications were often under-recognized. "It is no wonder," writes Pat Power, "that the Warner Bros. cartoons are edgy and pugnacious in their anarchic humor, [as] they embody the work of 'the aesthetically misunderstood and economically disenfranchised'."⁵³ These animators were those who suffered the stringencies of the studio system. The studio itself was a derelict, rundown building in the back of the main facilities, and known as Termite Terrace.

While the Disney studios became more and more like a Ford plant, the animators working at the Termite Terrace had fun.⁵⁴ Animation scholar Bill Mikulak highlights the give-and-take within the animation unit, a communal work environment where no one had complete control of the cartoon.⁵⁵ The WB studio's lack of interest in what the animators were doing gave these artists greater freedom to address controversial issues. Their cartoons dealt with adult themes and were created for adults, providing streetwise humor in opposition to Disney's idyllic romps.

Spurred by the working environment and their situation, WB animators cunningly contravened the standards Disney was imposing and produced cartoons and characters that called attention to the techniques and processes used to create them. They essentially subverted the rules of their own medium. WB cartoons have pride of place in what art critic J. Hoberman calls "vulgar modernism," a category that highlights how the formal structure and graphic devices of some of the creations of the American culture industry anticipated or paralleled innovations

typically found in the avant-garde art.⁵⁶ Arguably, WB animators, working as an artistic community of anti-establishment originals and farcically attacking the system from within, seem to fit the characterization of potential Surrealists or popular accomplices. Considering the particular characteristics of the film industry, their playful and subversive spirit is equivalent to the attitude displayed by the Surrealists in the context of the art world.

Porky in Wackyland's style and content also sanctions the cartoon as a film honoring the spirit the Surrealists sought and admired in popular culture. A paperboy invades the title sequence who sells newspapers that inform the audience of Porky's intention to hunt the priceless "last of the Do-Dos." Porky addresses the audience directly, breaking the fourth wall, a device that inhibits the spectators' immersion in the animation's world. The skit establishes the cartoon as a satire of the crazy pursuit of financial rewards in the Depression years, and as a parody of capitalism, where exchange value and uniqueness determine worth.

Porky as a western adventurer looks for riches in unknown regions of Africa, thus making the cartoon also a parody of the colonial enterprise. His plane flies above the globe until it reaches Dark Africa, Darker Africa, and finally Darkest Africa. Wackyland is designated with a question mark on this last region. A welcome sign on the border alerts Porky that "It Can Happen Here," a warning echoed by a voice-over narrator in an ominous tone. The reference to Sinclair Lewis' 1935 novel *It Can't Happen Here* is highlighted by the fact that the affirmative "can" is underlined. Sinclair's satire reflected on the improbability of the establishment of a totalitarian regime in America. Therefore, what can happen here is totalitarianism. The public did not need to have read the novel to understand the reference, as in 1936 there had been a theater play based on the book. Moreover, MGM's protracted plans to produce a movie based on the novel, kept it in the public's memory between 1936 and 1939. The reference to this political threat, especially because it is not assuaged by a comforting closing or a reassuring message, would have caused unease, particularly when the cartoon shared the program with late 1938 newsreels informing the public of events in Hitler's Germany, Stalin's Russia or Mussolini's Italy. The unsettling and inconclusive way WB animators referred to the historical moment is vastly different from Disney's manner.

Before finding his prey, Porky encounters, among others, a half-cat half-dog creature whose two parts are in a constant fight; a bunny balancing on a swing that hangs from the air; a utility pole/tree hybrid, and a tree with a trunk in its midst, which is then, literally a tree trunk. Porky arrives in Wackyland by going "down the pipeline" and lands on a bassinette. There are references to the cinema industry: a black duck that crosses the scene singing "Mammi" refers to Al Johnson's character in *The Jazz Singer*, for example; and the Do-Do uses the WB logo as a material shield from behind which it slingshots Porky, symbolic of Warner's animators attacking the film industry and subverting conventions.



Fig. 2. The Do-Do bird and Porcky Pig. Rendering of a screenshot of WB's cartoon, *Porcky in Wackyland*, 1938. Francisco Ortega-Grimaldo, 2018

The Do-Do is a two-legged wingless and tail-less bird that is able to produce arms out of his rounded white body when needed. Its elongated conic head is topped by a little parasol, and its feet are of the shape and size of Chaplin's shoes (Fig. 2). The bird uses all the tricks in the animator's playbook to alter the conventions of the drawn world. In addition, the action not only relates to the space of the audience by breaking the fourth wall, but also hints at the existence of an unknown dimension outside the animation's universe. While being chased by Porcky, Do-Do, after showing the audience it has nothing under its "sleeve," pulls a pencil out of thin air and draws a window—a reference to the work of the animators who drew what the spectators are seeing—and escapes to a dimension behind the background. This is one of many occasions when Do-Do enters a space beyond the cartoon's notional graphic world, and to which Porcky has no access: doors and windows are functional for the Do-Do but a physical barrier for Porcky. Do-Do lifts the landscape itself, that is, the animation's background, as if it were a stage curtain, granting only the bird access to that outer world.

There is no final dream frame device to assuage the audience: in the last scene Porcky is surrounded by hundreds of crazy birds and one of them is standing

on its head. The cartoon does not provide any indication that Porky would be able to safely return to his “normal” world.⁵⁷ More importantly, the bird has overturned everything Porky’s adventure stood for in financial gain. As there are thousands of Do-Dos, the bird itself does not have market value. The African bird demonstrates the irrationality of the western expeditioner’s reason.

Porky in Wackyland would be a good contender for surrealist animation status, because the story is not modeled on a traditional fable with a clear allegorical message. The Do-Do’s world is not fantastic, Wackyland is not Fantasyland. The cartoon includes allusions to real life and suggests associations whose interpretation depends on the audience, the time and place where the animation is screened, and the nature of the other films in the program. From within the entertainment industry, the cartoon critiques the industry itself, social conventions, and the pillars of modernity: capitalism and colonialism. The graphic puns contravene animation’s own representational conventions and question the communicational value of word-based codes. Most importantly, it hints at the existence of a world beyond the animated one, a dimension not shared with the audience that is unknown and inaccessible even to some of the animated characters. Wackyland is a mysterious realm beyond the animated one. By erupting into the cartoon’s pleasant fantasy, Wackyland has the power to upset the spectators’ and the animated characters’ universe.

Porky in Wackyland is surrealist when compared with other animations of the period, especially Disney’s, and when considering the stringencies and constraints of the medium, along with the working conditions at Termite Terrace. Clampett did not reference surrealist works of art, but he did use surrealist strategies. In 1969 he declared that he had conceived the animation in a surrealist style.⁵⁸ The comment suggests that he knew about the movement at the time the cartoon was created in 1938. Wackyland might have been indirectly influenced by “Fantastic Art,” as the show established Surrealism as an avant-garde movement with ramifications in mass culture. Furthermore, in 1949 WB released *Dough for the Do-Do* (Dir. Friz Freleng), a color remake of *Porky in Wackyland*. A frame-by-frame recreation, the background in this film has mutated into a parody of Dalí’s famous landscapes populated by limp watches—a clear allusion to the painting *The Persistence of Memory*, 1931. The selection of *Porky in Wackyland* for the spoof indicates that the WB animators recognized it as the closest to Surrealism in structure and story.

The critical fortune of WB cartoons is related to the history of Surrealism after World War II. The Surrealists had just begun to theorize cinema when the war shifted their attention to more pressing issues. Breton’s only essay on film, “As in a Wood” (1951), was published in *L’Âge du cinéma*, a surrealist magazine edited by the young surrealist film critics and filmmakers Ado Kyrou and Robert Benayoun. In their writings, the Surrealists in Breton’s circle—specially Kyrou in his 1953 book *Le surréalisme au cinéma*—attempted to establish the themes and conditions that

would warrant a film be considered surrealist. Kyrou gave pride of place to early animators as “potential surrealists,” and reserved some of his most eloquent praise for the WB artists, whose cartoons he—together with another surrealist scholar Robert Benayoun—celebrated as examples of Surrealism in film. These French writers, by calling attention to the artistic value of the WB cartoons, furthered the animators’ domestic and international recognition and critical acclaim. In brief, *Porky in Wackyland*, as a prime example of WB animation style, goes a long way to answer the question Richardson suggested should be asked: “How does consideration of this particular film or film maker in relation to surrealism help us to illuminate either surrealism or the film?”⁵⁹

Disney’s cartoons, even though historically associated with the spread of Surrealism in America, cannot be considered surrealist animations. Disney’s public persona, the immense international popularity of Mickey Mouse and of the *Silly Symphonies*, and the respectability these cartoons had gained in artistic and intellectual circles in the 1930s, made him the perfect fit for MoMA, a museum whose publicity department was eager to capitalize on anything that would attract press and public attention. Disney’s identification with cartoon animation as a distinctly American art would have garnered Barr’s attention, given his interest in finding a vernacular manifestation of modernism. In addition, the activities of the Film Library and Barry’s writings might have contributed to Barr’s decision to include Disney in the 1936-37 “Fantastic Art” exhibition.

The study of the relationship of cartoon animation and Surrealism in the 1930s illuminates unstudied aspects of the history of modern art. The introduction and assimilation of this artistic movement in America took place at a time when modern art history was being developed as a field of study and art institutions such as MoMA still espoused an all-encompassing approach to art that allowed for animators such as Disney to be considered artists. Nevertheless, a more formalist interpretation of modern art was gaining strength in the art world, as Disney animations were losing the critical support they had enjoyed in the first part of the decade, and, the studio’s style and hegemony were being challenged and parodied by subversive young animators.

One of Clampett’s drawings for *Porky in Wackyland* presents Porky behind a tree looking at Do-Do and the remark, “Dodo appears from screwy places. Porky tries vainly to get a glimpse of him.”⁶⁰ Unlike Porky, scholars studying the interactions of art historical trends considered in this essay can get glimpses of the forces at play in the artworld at the time when Surrealism was introduced in America.

Our heartfelt thanks to the anonymous readers for their comments and suggestions, and to Melissa Kimball for her meticulous review of the essay's final draft. Except when noted, all the translations are by the authors.

1 Ulrich Lehmann, "Assimilation: Objects; Commodities; Fashion," in *A Companion to Dada and Surrealism*, ed. David Hopkins (Oxford, U.K.: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), 431-448; Van Norris, "'Interior Logic': The Appropriation and Incorporation of Popular Surrealism into Classical American Animation," in *The Unsilvered Screen: Surrealism on Film*, eds. Graeme Harper and Rob Stone (London/New York: Wallflower Press, 2007), 72-89. Norris establishes that commentators have discussed this short as the "form's primary tangible flirtation with Surrealism."

2 MoMA, "The Exhibition of Fantastic Art..." [press release] n.d. MoMA Library.

3 MoMA, "The Exhibition."

4 *Fantastic Art, Dada, and Surrealism* (New York: MoMA, 1936), 233.

5 *Fantastic Art, Dada, and Surrealism* [Second edition revised and enlarged], (New York: MoMA, 1937), 279.

6 Sandra Zalman, "The Vernacular as Vanguard: Alfred Barr, Salvador Dalí, and the U.S. Reception of Surrealism in the 1930s," *Journal of Surrealism and the Americas* 1 (2007): 45.

7 Sandra Zalman, *Consuming Surrealism In American Culture: Dissident Modernism* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 48.

8 Sandra Zalman, "The canonization of Surrealism in the United States," *Journal of Art Historiography* 19 (December 2018): 16. <https://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2018/11/zalman.pdf>
Accessed January 2019.

9 This article has greatly benefited from Haidee Wasson's research on this topic. See her *Museum Movies: The Museum of Modern Art and the Birth of Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

10 Michael Richardson, *Surrealism and Cinema* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2006), 13.

11 André Breton, "Le cinéma, dans la mesure..." *Minotaure* 10 (Winter, 1937): 2. On Bowers see: Rob Kin, "The Art of Diddling: Slapstick, Science, and Antimodernism in the Films of Charley Bowers," in *Funny Pictures: Animation and Comedy in Studio-Era Hollywood*, eds. Daniel Goldmark and Charlie Keil (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 191-210.

12 On this topic see Jorgelina Orfila, "John Rewald's Transatlantic Scholarship: a forgotten chapter in the art history of modern art," in *Exile and Expatriate Histories of Art*, ed. Geraldine Johnson (London: Routledge, Forthcoming).

13 Sybil Gordon Kantor argues that Barr's ability to organize complex material in well-organized diagrams derived from his training under the famous medievalist, Professor Charles Rufus Morey. Sybil Gordon Kantor, *Alfred H. Barr, Jr. and the Intellectual Origins of the Museum of Modern Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 22-26.

14 Erwin Panofsky, "Book Comment: 'Plastic Redirection in 20th Century Painting,' by James Johnson Sweeney," *The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art* 2, No 2, (Nov., 1934): 3.

15 Ibid.

16 The lecture was later published: Erwin Panofsky, "On Movies," *Bulletin of the Department of Art and Archaeology of Princeton University* (June 1936): 5-15.

17 Panofsky once more referred to traditional art historical examples in order to highlight the value of new artistic ones: "After 1905, we can witness the fascinating spectacle of a new artistic medium gradually becoming conscious of its legitimate, that is exclusive, possibilities and limitations—a spectacle wholly comparable to that offered by the development of mosaic ... or even of medieval panel-painting[...]." Panofsky, "On Movies," 11.

18 Ibid. 5-6.

19 Ibid. 11.

- 20 Wasson, *Museum Movies*, 121.
- 21 Iris Barry, "Film Library, 1935-1941," *The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art* 8, no.5 (July 1941): 10-11.
- 22 Iris Barry, "Film Comments," *The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art* 1, no. 3 (1933): 3.
- 23 Haidee Wasson, "The Cinematic Subtext of the Modern Museum: Alfred H. Barr and MoMA's Film Archive," *Moving Image, Journal of the Association of Moving Image Archivists*, 1, no. 1 (Spring, 2001): 21.
- 24 "In this scenario, the film was construed as a method to make the whole of the museum seem more American and more in line with the rising populism of the period." Wasson, *Museum Movies*, 124.
- 25 Zalman, "The Vernacular as Vanguard," 45.
- 26 "The 'vamp' and Mickey Mouse join the Museum of Modern Art Film Library," [press release] December 3, 1936, 1. MoMA Library.
- 27 "The 'Vamp' and Mickey Mouse," 2.
- 28 Iris Barry, "Program notes," quoted in "The Museum of Modern Art Film Library" [press release] Saturday afternoon or Sunday morning, May 2 or 3, 1936, 3. MoMA Library.
- 29 Barr, "Introduction," *Fantastic Art*, 13.
- 30 Ibid. 13.
- 31 In the catalogue he explicitly acknowledges the arbitrariness of the selection, as for example, he had not included material related to the occult sciences and the fact that many of the items in exhibition are not masterpieces. Ibid. 13.
- 32 Tessel M. Bauduin, "Fantastic Art, Barr, Surrealism," *Journal of Art Historiography* 17 (December 2017): 12-21. <https://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2017/11/bauduin.pdf> accessed January, 12 2017.
- 33 André Breton, "What is Surrealism," in *What is Surrealism, Selected Writings*, ed. Franklin Rosemont (London: Pluto Press, 1978), 112-141.
- 34 Leo. T. Hurwitz, "Mice and Things. Notes on Pierre Roy and Walt Disney," *Creative Art* (May 1931): 358-365.
- 35 Ibid. 363.
- 36 Dorothy Grafly, "Animated Cartoon Gives the World An American Art," *The Philadelphia Public Ledger*, October 23, 1932, 16.
- 37 Garry Apgar, ed., *A Mickey Mouse Reader* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2014), offers a chronological selection of articles and interviews. A list of early Disney art exhibitions is in Bill Mikulak, "Disney and the Art World, The Early Years," *Animation Journal* (1996): 22.
- 38 On this topic see Kerry Brougher, Olivia Mattis, eds., *Visual Music: Synesthesia in Art and Music Since 1900* (Exh. Cat.) (Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 2005) and Aimee Mollaghan, *The Visual Music Film* (London: Palgrave, 2015).
- 39 Gilbert Seldes, "Mickey Mouse Maker," *The New Yorker*, December 19, 1933, in Apgar, *Mickey Mouse Reader*, 48.
- 40 Gilbert Seldes, "Disney and Others," *The New Republic*, June 8, 1932, 101.
- 41 Frank S. Nugent, "Disney is Now Art—But He wonders," *The New York Times Magazine*, February 26, 1939, n.p
- 42 Nugent, "Disney is Now Art," n.p
- 43 Michael Barrier, *Hollywood Cartoons, American Animation in Its Golden Age* (Oxford/New York, Oxford University Press, 1999), 138.
- 44 "The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street..." [press release] Nov. 30, 1936 [For release December 5 or 6, 1936], MoMA Library.
- 45 A list of themes helped visitors find and group together works in the exhibition according to their technique, media or theme. It was included in the revised editions of the catalogue. See *Fantastic Art*, 65-66.

- 46 Gilbert Seldes, *The Movies come to America* (New York: Charles, Scribners, 1937), 47.
- 47 Geoffrey Cocks, *The Wolf at the Door: Stanley Kubrick, History, & the Holocaust* (Bern: Peter Lang Publishing, 2004), 34. In 1935, Hitler was already threatening to militarize Rhineland, which he effectively did in January 1936. Cocks interprets the whole cartoon as an allusion to the events in Europe.
- 48 Richardson, *Surrealism and Cinema*, 17.
- 49 Ibid. 16.
- 50 Ibid.
- 51 Marcel Brion, "Félix le chat ou la poésie créatrice," *Le Rouge et le noir* (July, 1928): 163-166.
- 52 Norman Klein, *7 Minutes* (London/New York: Verso, 1993), 85; Paul Wells, *Animation and America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 55. The Fleischer Brothers are analyzed as the expression of Surrealism in Norris, "Interior Logic," 77-84.
- 53 Pat Power, "Ludic Toons, The Dynamics of Creative Play in Studio Animation," *American Journal of Play* 5, no.1 (Fall 2012): 35. Power quotes Donald Crafton, "The View from Termite Terrace: Caricature and Parody in Warner Bros. Animation," in *Reading the Rabbit: Explorations in Warner Bros. Animation*, ed. Kevin Sandler (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press 1998), 118.
- 54 See Martha Sigal, *Living Life Inside the Lines. Tales from the Golden Age of Animation* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001); on the place of play in the animation process, see Power, "Ludic Toons."
- 55 Bill Mikulak, "The Canonization of Warner Brothers Cartoons, or How Bugs Bunny Came to the Museum of Modern Art," *The Journal of American Culture* (Spring 1996): 23-24.
- 56 J. Hoberman, "Vulgar Modernism," *Artforum* 20, no. 6 (January 1985): 71-76.
- 57 Donald Crafton notes that the dream-framing device, as one of the most important animation codes, acts to establish strict boundaries between fact and fantasy. Wonderland, a world completely separated from the real one, would be an example. Donald Crafton, *Before Mickey. The Animated Film 1898-1928* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 342.
- 58 Michael Barrier and Milton Gray, "An Interview with Bob Clampett," *Funnyworld* 12, 1970. Posted online in *Funnyworld Revisited*: http://michaelbarrier.com/Funnyworld/Clampett/interview_bob_clampett.htm
- 59 See note 10.
- 60 Scribble on a thumbnail sketch of "Porky in Wackyland." Quoted in Klein, *7 Minutes*, 162.