

“Cartoon, Anti-Cartoon” Revisited

George Griffin [1980]

Introduction

This essay, written 30 years ago, summed up my contradictory, almost dialectical relationship with animated cartoons. It ended up being more of a personal manifesto than the reasoned, analytical essay suggested by its title. If I cringe a bit today at the shrill rhetoric (“appalling lack of imagination”; “shocking lack of personal vision”) or the shortsighted prediction that studios would become obsolete, I am gratified that independent animation continues to thrive in new and unexpected ways.

“Cartoon” and its negation were important to me because I felt alienated from both the crass world of popular entertainment and the elite world of high art, still in the sway of an abstract vanguard. This was a time when “cartoony” was a pejorative; my generation wanted to change that.

Unlike most independents I had worked in cartoon studios and valued the apprenticeship experience and my rebellion against it – my discovery of another way of animating. In the late 60s, studios in New York were devoted to commercials or tepid “limited animation” Saturday morning fare. Feature production (“Yellow Submarine” notwithstanding) was in eclipse and the short

film was an orphaned genre, at least in the U.S.

The 1970s changed all that. Independent filmmakers (primarily documentarians and animators) emerged as a creative elite, forming associations, getting grants, expanding their audience base. There was a parallel rejuvenation of experimental (formerly known as “underground”) filmmaking and artists began pouring out of schools after studying painting, dance or film. My original article addressed a community of like-minded artists who felt they were on the verge of a great discovery.

To promote our vision independent animators held meetings in downtown lofts arguing about what “independent animation” meant; published a book of drawings and statements; organized special screenings and collaborated on numerous gallery shows. The New York ASIFA chapter, bewildered by this new form of “non-sponsored” animation during the early 1970s, became wholly won over by it by the 1980s.

Now, a quarter century later, the animation landscape has undergone a tectonic shift. The industry has rebounded from its doldrums with a huge increase in production in an almost textbook case of bifurcated globalism, routinely

outsourcing 2D features and TV series to overseas cartoon factories, while keeping computer graphic feature work at home where, presumably, it benefits from technological innovations.

Television has experienced an explosion of creativity, first with MTV graphics (often based on experimental techniques), then with more sophisticated series largely due to clever, satirical writing and edgy, self-conscious design (e.g. "The Simpsons", "Ren & Stimpy", "South Park").

Film school curricula have absorbed our generation's paradigm of independent animation production, and digital tools make the process easier. But if my own teaching experience is an accurate barometer, students have become more conventional in their work and more conservative in their aspirations, focusing on their portfolios to get a studio job which (in the U.S.) may be nonexistent.

Another ironic twist began with the fall of Communism. Many of us had been influenced by the graphic audacity, deep lyricism and caustic wit of Soviet and Eastern Bloc animation. This work had thrived because of a need for a kind of private language; messages were implied amidst startling visual experimentation. Now those artists too are cast into a free market jungle where brands and folkloric classics are more important than contemporary ideas.

Is there a future for the independent animator? While short films still aren't economically viable in themselves, they do act as crucial laboratories of technical and artistic innovation; they offer artists a form for personal expression, a chance to deal with marginal, risky subjects. And today it is more common for animators to work on personal and commercial projects simultaneously.

It may be too soon to assess fully the effect of computers on experimentation in animation, but I would distinguish between production practice and presentation. The former includes grafting the computer onto an existing cartoon, collage and graphic workflow, as well as using the computer as the exclusive tool, as in CG. The latter includes peripheral developments which in turn fold back to influence what independent artists produce and who sees it. New media such as the DVD have become a cheap, universal vehicle of distribution to mass and niche markets; the Internet makes delivery of animation both free and global; PCs can drive digital projectors in a wide variety of venues, from a multiplex cinema to a storefront gallery or billboard.

When I migrated from film to computer technology to stitch together drawings and graphics, I found that certain intriguing distinctions vanished: photography and drawing melded into one kind of data file; the static image and the movie image lost their paradoxical relationship and became part of the same temporal map; the materiality of the artwork, which often added its own contradiction to film recording, slipped into virtuality. The technology obliterated the visual noise I had become accustomed to. It lurked behind several scrimms (software, operating systems, hardware with its own sets of burned-in codes), essentially inaccessible to self-referential art-making practice, yet requiring constant maintenance.

Another problem lay with the unchallenged, unexamined predominance of photo-realism within the computational esthetic. This is evident in both design (in ever more complex rendering of texture, fur, skin and light) and animation (with motion capture naturalism threatening to

supplant animation’s choreographic invention). Perhaps “lifelike” has become the revanchist cry of all those who hated “cartoony” animation.

For most of us the computer holds enormous promise: cheap software like Flash, intuitive graphic tablets, digital delivery systems for a variety of sites – all converge to enhance production and presentation. Design and animation can be easily synthesized by a single author and distributed on the Web; it can be interactive or in your face.

My generation took an ecumenical view toward experimentation, embracing cartooning, abstraction, puppetry, altered live action and the various direct techniques. This heterodoxy has become even more robust with the digital revolution. And when I fear that technology may inhibit experimentation in favor of the production bottom line, along comes “Waking Life”, Bob Sabiston’s startling cartoonization of live action, or Chris Hinton’s scribble-scrabble “Flux”. There is even a healthy

anti-digital backlash, a return to roots, as in the work of William Kentridge who makes personal narratives by drawing and erasing charcoal. Yet perhaps the most unexpected development has been the recent outpouring of feature films by independent animators Paul Fierlinger, Emily Hubley, Nina Paley, and Bill Plympton.

I cannot help but be optimistic about the future when I regularly encounter animation in galleries, on the Web, at the proliferating festivals; or when 11 young independent animators band together cooperatively to produce a DVD collection of their work called “Avoid Eye Contact”. Sold in stores and on their site, it took only 3 months to show a profit (which then financed a second volume of new animators). All this with a minimum of organization, meetings, and no manifesto.

– George Griffin, NYC 8/2004

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George Griffin is the prototype of the “new” animator. Without ever abandoning the revered methods of traditional cartoon animators, Griffin is striving for liberated and original forms for his works. As he explains, “I came from a self-taught background in drawing, still photography, and poster design. A one-year apprenticeship in a New York cartoon studio and subsequent free-lance work served as an introduction to character animation. I am attempting to reconcile this experience in a popular art form with the medium’s potential for experimentation and self-expression. My work has moved from cartoons with obliquely narrative structures to

anti-cartoons: films that explore the illusionistic process of animation.”

In the most important sense, Griffin’s essay should be taken as a representative statement by one animator for a generation of experimentalists in cartoon animation. But Griffin is a truly important young animator, whose thrilling homage to the early cartoon, Viewmaster (1976), is a certified animation masterpiece.

The studio production system of making cartoons is inextricably bound up with one technique – cel animation – and therein lies its

insurmountable handicap. Central to the technique is an assembly-line compartmentalization of labor, beginning with the separation of two basic functions – “design” (the look of a single frame) and “animation” (the spatial displacement that occurs *between* the frames), and percolating down through other stages: backgrounds, inking, opaqueing, camera, editing. There is no crossover among these functions, no integrated attitude toward the final film, and no personal involvement with the materials and process of creation. The ultimate result is artistic alienation: the separation of worker and product.

For the modern studio cartoon, the designer is usually an illustrator who may or may not develop a storyboard, may or may not oversee or execute the background, may or may not pick the color schemes, but never does s/he make the sequence drawings necessary for animation. The animator, on the other hand, must be content to move a predetermined character within a scene that is already carefully prescribed by someone else’s layouts and track. The animator’s creativity is thus confined to touches, flourishes, and fine points of timing. In most cases, the animator’s duties focus only on creating rough extremes, poses in the character’s action, and filling out the exposure sheet (the sequence plan for shooting the drawings). The task of drawing all the intermediate poses is then left to a Byzantine hierarchy of assistants: clean-up people, assistant animators, in-betweeners. Their responsibilities, of course, are even more restricted, by the character-model sheet and the animator’s spatial notations. As for their “artistry”, it is measured in footage for the animator and actual number of drawings per day for the lowly

in-betweeners. Those who produce the final stage of the artwork, the inked and opaqued acetate cel, are usually accorded the same honor as any factory worker: the time-clock punch.

The collation of all these artwork production stages occurs in the animation camera. Because traditionally thought to be a forbidding, mysterious process where all the magic takes place, photography is left to a “professional”, which means someone who can follow the animator’s instructions, control dirt while changing the cels, and expose the film correctly. This is accomplished on the animation stand, an imposing mechanical apparatus designed to shoot frame-by-frame and move the artwork by slight increments. The operator mustn’t deviate, even by a frame, from the exposure sheet “script”, or the delicate chain of illusion will be broken. Although the animator must know the stand’s capabilities, s/he is never allowed to operate it.

Within this process directorial control is exercised at each stage, but with primary emphasis on the earliest stages: character design, storyboard, recording, layout, and animation extremes. However, once creative decisions are made and the studio organism is set in motion, deviation, or creative initiative, cannot be tolerated.

Historically, the issue of initiative is tied to subjective role designation. The early pioneers Emile Cohl and Winsor McCay worked as artist/entrepreneurs, solely responsible for the story, design, and animation. Because they were inventing a grammar of synthetic figurative movement practically from scratch, the production process was, by necessity, slow paced and experimental. As the cel animation production-line process was perfected, roles became more

differentiated, yet the relationship between character design and animation remained dynamic. One thinks of Otto Messmer’s Felix the Cat, drawn with Deco comic-strip boldness, possessing an indomitable spirit of ingenuity, possible only with animation’s capacity for transformation – the prototypical animator’s character. During the Golden Age of the Hollywood cartoon, background, story, and character design increasingly became the domain of specialists, although animators still retained “authorship” by their use of a highly developed vocabulary of personality. “Squash and stretch” cannot begin to describe the kinetic inventiveness of Donald Duck, Popeye, or Bugs Bunny. But ironically it was the isolating of character animation as a craft at the expense of other formal and narrative elements that led to today’s studio animators acting chiefly as interpreters of pre-sold comic-strip characters (the Peanuts gang, Fritz the Cat, Raggedy Ann). Character animation has thus changed from an experimental interplay of form and sequence to a formulaic technique harnessed to an approved design vehicle. The end product is invariably a television commercial or program material designed to deliver a target audience (usually children) to an advertising sponsor. Is it any wonder that the term *screen cartoonist* now has a hollow ring?

Compare the 1930s–1940s work of the Disney, Fleischer, and Warner Bros. organizations with that of today’s children’s television series, specials, and occasional features to see that dynamic, rubbery characters have become stiff, mechanical, pedestrian; that florid, airbrushed rendering has been replaced by a Xerox edge; that delicate gouache

storybook backgrounds have turned to color-aid monotone; that everywhere there is an appalling lack of imagination.

Outside the dead-end realm of the studio system is a vigorous, expanding art form, which relies so much less on budgetary and marketing considerations and so much more on a personal exercise of the medium in the spirit of the early cartoon pioneers, as well as those whose work has made the very term *cartoon* inappropriate: Hans Richter, Norman McLaren, and Robert Breer. In many cases independent animators began working with dance, photography, painting, or drawing before turning to animation. They have also come from art schools and universities where courses in animation and film production in general developed dramatically during the early 1970s. Including a seemingly equal number of men and women, in sharp contrast to the sexist studio division of male animators and female opaquers, they often perform all the tasks necessary for productions themselves: design, animation, coloring, shooting, even animation-stand building. Because all responsibilities are assumed by the filmmakers, each stage can become an area for experimentation and discovery in itself. And no time clock.

A discussion of all the tendencies within the spectrum of independent animation must be left to a future study. By examining some of my own work as a representative of this movement, I hope to suggest the range of concerns the new animation embraces. My first film, *Rapid Transit* (3 min., 1969), was made at night, after work as a studio assistant animator. Instead of cel animation, or even sequence drawings, I chose to manipulate silhouettes on a simple animation stand that I had set up in my apartment. Upon a

sheet of back-lit white Plexiglas were placed hundreds of dried black beans to form mandala-like patterns that I shot on black-and-white high-contrast film. Compared to the tedium of the daily studio procedures, this technique was immediately satisfying. It broke all the rules of specialization by allowing design and animation decisions to be made simultaneously, recorded on film, then instantly altered according to creative whim or preconceived plan before shooting the next frame(s). After a weekend of shooting I was left with a pound of beans, a three-minute record of their movement, and a vivid illustration of Norman McLaren's suggestion that animation is not moving drawings but the act of drawing movement. For me, the process of animation and the film's eventual shape were discovered in manipulating the material itself, not by imposing a technique from above. The result was a kind of reductive shorthand, not unlike calligraphy, a direct transfer from my hand to the film plane/screen. The process forced me to step completely outside the figurative complexity of my previous concerns and deal with the problem of drawing in time.

In *Rapid Transit* the design as well as the animation tended to be both abstract and highly personalized. Besides circular and square patterns shifting and bouncing off one another, associative elements were included: silhouettes of a film reel, a hand, and a bean-patterned self-portrait that vibrates briefly before being whisked away unceremoniously. I had originally planned to use only circles and lines to discipline and "purify" the design, but as references to both the film process and my own presence kept creeping in, I decided to allow these impulsive flights to remain, contending with the anonymity of the

abstract forms. The film owes a debt, more in spirit than in style, to Robert Breer, whose work fuses both abstract and representational ideas into unified, pulsating exercises of perception and form. Technically it is similar to the direct approach of Eli Noyes, whose *Sandman* (3 min., 1973) is a whimsical, kinetic poem executed with textured and silhouetted grains of sand.

Besides blurring the distinction between abstraction and representation, the new animator can also operate within the pictorial cartoon tradition. As above, this new cartoon may bear only a passing resemblance to the entertainment short of the past and it may even actively parody its style and intent. One way it often differs is in the treatment of themes once considered taboo – like sex. In the Golden Age, cartoon sexuality was either sublimated (for example, Betty Boop as the cutesy vamp and Disney's infantile barnyard humor, later sanitized for family consumption) or expressed overtly as in *Eveready Harton* (c. 1928), the anonymous stag film classic dealing with the trials of outrageous proportions.

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Seeking to extend *Eveready's* genitalian hyperbole and yet create a cartoon statement on sexual discrimination and male bonding, I made *The Club* (4 min., 1975).

The Club shares with other new animation both a direct technique of manipulating cutout drawings and a focus on personal and cultural secrets. Victor

Faccinto’s cartoons (*The Secrete of Life* [1971], *Fillet of Soul* [1972], *Shameless* [1974]) use highly stylized, almost mythical characters, set in an elaborately patterned fetishistic world, mercilessly to expose the depths of his subconscious.

In 1973 I began to question formally, through my films, the proposition that animation is, in fact, “cinema”. If “bringing to life through the illusion of movement” qualifies as its definition, then animation is well possible without the technology of cinematography, sequence photography, and projection. In fact, animation had its origins in the pre-cinematic phasic constructions that made their way into nineteenth-century parlors in the guise of toys like phenakistoscopes, zoetropes and flipbooks.

Sequence photography from Muybridge and Marey to the Mutoscope, which depended on the individual viewer to turn a crank to read the spool of photographs, worked brilliantly without a projection system. Likewise I began printing and producing flipbooks to keep my film’s images in their original medium. As a cheap, disposable art, flipbook animation depends on viewer initiative and expertise. Page/frames can be read forward, backward, upside down, and at any speed – like the Mutoscope but in contrast to the projector’s uniform direction and speed for “movies”.

A further evidence of animation’s independence from the material and theoretical demands of cinema is the non-insistence on photography. Images can be drawn directly on the film base and brought to life when projected. As developed by McLaren, Len Lye, and Harry Smith, here is perhaps the most perfect form of reflexive animation, in that it continually reaffirms the actual size and properties of the medium.

This ability to bypass either projection (via flipbook) or camera (drawing on film) suggests a potential unity of intention, method, and effect comparable to painting, but with the added dimension of time. To illustrate this unity I made a film of a flipbook, *Trikfilm 3* (3 1/2 min., 1973), in which I intercut between two scenes: the first a normal view of animated line drawings in which there is the typical illusion of movement; the other a wider view showing the physical environment in which this illusion is created. *Trikfilm 3* is one of a series of flipbook films set to sections of Bach’s *Well-Tempered Clavier*, in which I explore variations in shooting small-scale sequences drawn on dime-store memo pads. The title, referring to the German word for animated film, contains an appropriate connotation of magic. The imagery is of a metamorphic fantasy involving Mayan architecture, water, and sex between two New York City skyscrapers. But the real subject of *Trikfilm 3* is the unmasking of illusion. The wide frame shows the artist’s coffee cup, dinner plate, drawing pad, and speeding hands as the drawings unfold. It is an anti-illusionist documentary that suggests that the very mechanism of fantasy is of greater interest than its symbolic content.

Winsor McCay’s *Gertie the Dinosaur* (1914) was introduced by an elaborate live-action narrative using sets and actors to dramatize the artist’s motivation (a wager that he couldn’t do it) and his methods (huge barrels of ink and cartons of paper are delivered to the studio). The opening shot of *Little Nemo* (1911) shows the animation stand and identifying numbers on the animating drawings before moving closer into the drawing field. This preoccupation no doubt derived from McCay’s career as a quick-sketch

artist in a burlesque act (also a setting for his early film presentations). He was already involved with revealing process. Similarly, when we see Max Fleischer drawing Koko the Clown or Betty Boop, or inadvertently allowing them to pop out of the inkwell, he is accentuating the tension between three-dimensional "reality" and flat drawing/film space as well as reaffirming a parental symbiosis between the creator and the created.

Live photography or reference to process was used in this early animation as a framing device. Today it is a key to understanding self-referential animation. *Head* (10 1/2 min., 1975) continues the examination begun with *Trikfilm 3*. It is different in that it relies heavily on structural editing rather than on the linear development of a single concept. I had haphazardly executed a great number of flipbooks, photomat mug shots, and footage of their animation without a clear idea of whether they belonged to the same film. Then, using the camera, both for single-frame self-portraiture and recording masklike sequence drawings (sometimes simultaneously), I constructed a symmetrical scheme that contrasted photography's reality to drawing's fantasy. Where *Trikfilm 3* reveals only the animator's hands at work, *Head reveals* his face as well, setting up a system of mirrored self-images. A sync-sound, live head shot of the animator at the film's beginning, explaining that his drawings have become simpler in style as his face has aged into complex "character", is contrasted to an animated self-caricature who delivers the same monologue at the film's end.

Head then is self-referential in its double focus on the mediating process of art and the image of the artist. Both gain meaning most when seen in relation to

one another. This impulse toward self-discovery in process is also found in the work of Kathy Rose, particularly *The Doodlers* (5 min., 1976). Using an expressionistic linear and color sense close to that of Saul Steinberg, she constructs a bizarre kindergarten of jabbering artists who frantically paint, draw, criticize, until brought under control by their creator, Miss Nose, a realistically drawn character resembling the animator.

My most recent films have dealt with visual and sequential circularity. The most accessible is *Viewmaster* (3 min., 1976) in which a host of running characters (stick figures, cartoon bugs, mechanical men, a happy blob) are slowly revealed by an oddly curved tracking shot. Just as the first character reappears and a sense of déjà vu occurs, a cut to a long shot reveals all the characters jogging in place around a circle. The animation was created by eight drawings, each containing all the characters. By executing a slow circular pan at a very tight field, I scanned the artwork much like a microfiche. Through this process the drawings lose much of their reference to film frames and assume an affinity with a book's pages. In the clearest sense *Viewmaster* reveals animation's power to shape static art by framing, in both time and space. It is a cartoon homage to Eadweard Muybridge, the original sequence photographer of the "wheel of life".

The new animation ranges from cartoon to anti-cartoon, "naive" fantasy to self-conscious examination of form and process. It has grown from both popular entertainment and fine art traditions and now addresses a totally new, expanding audience in museums, galleries, festivals, and noncommercial theatres. But if the new animators gain something in personal expression through their direct control of

the medium, they must acknowledge certain fundamental handicaps. Working alone, for instance, can severely limit the artist’s output. A five-minute film can easily take a year to complete, and anything approaching feature length (at present the only commercially viable format) is out of the question. But even more problematic is the psychological myopia that occurs without the benefit of feedback from collaborators. Having overcome alienation from the process, today’s independent animators might easily become alienated from each other. Many with a few short films under their belts have begun to talk enthusiastically of producing a longer, personal film without reverting to the hierarchic studio system and cel animation. One alternative would be a project involving a group of animators who pool their talents without giving up their individual approach to the medium. This might take the form of a Canterbury Tales-type of narrative collection, each told in a different style and technique: ten diverse animated shorts that add up to a unified whole. Another approach could be the use of music. *Yellow Submarine* (1968) used only the Beatles and, except for George Dunning’s brilliantly rotoscoped “Lucy in the Sky” sequence, Heinz Edelman’s graphics. Imagine a feature incorporating the variety of, say, jazz (classical, big band, bop, free form, avant-garde) as a thematic underpinning, allowing the graphics to range from abstract to

figurative to restructured photographic animation – a contemporary *Fantasia* that would acknowledge the dynamics of variation.

The Golden Age cartoon is dead. As mass entertainment it thrived in a naively optimistic cultural climate when the guys and the gals at the studios were a swell gang; and their innocent art still delights even the most hard-nosed realist. But it is a serious error to resort to the same production apparatus for contemporary animation. As an independent animator I deplore the spectacle of a \$4 million production like *Raggedy Ann and Andy* (1977), in which fine animators, a competent director (Richard Williams), and composer (Joe Raposo) could not get close enough to their material and their personal sense of fantasy to make a satisfying film. Nearly every scene and musical number is designed for aesthetic overkill, and although there are flashes of individual animator’s genius, the film as a whole is impoverished by a shocking lack of personal vision. *Raggedy Ann and Andy* operates as a merchandising gimmick on the part of an anonymous media concern: a pre-sold product, not a work of art.

It is the task of the new animation, whether it addresses a limited art audience or a more general entertainment audience, to stretch and redefine its form through experimentation while realizing the medium’s potential for expressing a personal vision. 🍷