RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Animated Films

James Clarke

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About the Book

Animation is currently experiencing popularity unseen since its golden age in the 1930s and ’40s. Every summer several new big-budget animated films hit the cinema screen. The best films, adored by both children and adults, combine the latest technology with creativity and a flair for storytelling.

With films such as *Monsters, Inc.*, *Shrek* and *Toy Story* capturing the imagination of moviegoers and critics, James Clarke takes an appraising look at animation through the ages. Starting with the earliest full-length feature animation, Disney’s *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, this book follows the evolution of animation through stop-motion and Japanese anime to the advent of CGI and the newest filmmaking techniques. Finally, Clarke explores the infinite cinematic possibilities of animated film for the future.

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For Stephen and Justine. Happy trails.

INTRODUCTION

RAY HARRYHAUSEN PERHAPS put it best when he said of animating his stop-motion models: ‘It’s almost metaphysical in a sense. It’s controlling another object’s life force.’

While Harryhausen was addressing the intrigue and charm of his particular branch of the expansive and glorious animation tree, namely making models rather than drawings or found objects move, the observation is true of all types of animation. In spirit animation reaches back far beyond the modern age to a more primal graphic and illustrative power present in the human imagination and heart.

In fact, this looking back is a key feature of what comes to mind when most people think of animation, because animation is everything from Pinocchio learning to walk, skeletons fighting classical heroes, a Pumpkin King ditching Halloween for Christmas and a truckload of Agent Smiths brawling with Neo in a dingy part of the Matrix.

Despite the rich variety of animation worldwide, most audiences will equate the word animation with childhood visits to the cinema where their first movie was probably a Disney feature. Alternatively, television continues screening the vintage short animated films produced by Hollywood in the 1940s and 1950s. What all of this is bound up in, then, is a powerful quality of nostalgia. Get talking to an adult about childhood and the chances are animated films (long or short) will come into the conversation soon enough. At its best, nostalgia can help reveal the effects of time’s passing and the two hugely popular, widely seen animated features *Toy Story* (John Lasseter, 1995) and *Toy Story 2* (John Lasseter, 2000) very consciously appealed to this nostalgic

spirit and the importance of childhood memories and treasures.

Being such a part of many people’s young years, recollections of favourite animated characters and films is a popular pastime and certainly the collection of animation art has quite a following. Significant, too, is that countless stories that form the basis of animation are themselves strongly tied into a sense of nostalgia, frequently being adaptations of fairy tales and old-time stories, whether from oral traditions, legends, folktales or the more recent iteration, the comic strip.

Undoubtedly, one of the most compelling aspects of animation is its power to remind audiences of the importance of play and imagination in a world that increasingly sidelines such necessities. You could even boldly state that animation is one of the most popular forms in which the spirit of true anarchy and the antic spirit live on.

In Native American mythology, the coyote figure is a central force, playfully and wilfully at odds with the established order that it seeks to mock and undermine. Animation plays this same coyote-like role so perhaps it is no surprise that the American animation idiom has led such a vivid and popular life.

Animation, then, is a liberating form that free associates like crazy and makes audiences see the world afresh and, clichéd though it sounds, with the eyes of a child again.

In the light of this it is easier to see why animation so readily lends itself to investing the worlds of inanimate objects, of animals and of nature with real spirit and character. For thousands of years nature and the animal world were considered to possess these qualities. Only in more recent ages has the pursuit of reason weakened our perceptions. Animation helps resuscitate the human imagination’s more ancient vision and reminds the adult

imagination of that world of possibility that most people get drilled out of them by the necessary evil of having to ‘grow up’. Animation reminds us that seeing isn’t believing. Believing is seeing.

Animated films are the biggest special effect cinema has yet given us. In animation anything can happen. Animated movies are also an immensely common source of reference for people. Even the most casual film-goer probably had their first film-going experience at an animated feature. For many lifelong film fans their love of movies was tattooed on their heart by an animated feature.

The tradition of the animated film is also, in part, the starting point for people’s understanding, appreciation and sheer enjoyment of the magic of what we now think of as special effects. It makes perfect sense when, for example, we remember that George Lucas, who has done so much for the legitimacy of the visual effects format, began his filmmaking career as an animator. Given the continued prevalence of special-effects-orientated films in mainstream movie-going, animation’s legacy is immense. Yet still, there is probably an unhealthy association of the word ‘animation’ with the phrase ‘for kids’. An animated film can be as resonant and meaningful and artful as *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941) or *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972).

A product of the mechanised, modern age, animation often tells stories that play up the usually hapless relationship between humans and their inventions. It is a relationship that cinema has always depicted. Think of Charlie Chaplin being pulled through all those cogs and gears in *Modern Times* (Charlie Chaplin, 1936), or Buster Keaton in *The General* (Clyde Bruckman, 1927) or Laurel and Hardy endlessly trying to fix something and failing hilariously in all that they did, their friendship miraculously enduring every tribulation.

Somewhat ironically, it was by mocking and parodying the modern world of machines that animation really broke into mainstream culture, itself becoming a mass-produced form involving huge numbers of animators, painters, designers and technicians. The assembly-line model of mass production as espoused by Henry Ford was at once the source of many animated shorts' humour but also the very reason that so many animated shorts could be produced.

Initially, animation had begun as the playful domain of individuals such as George Melies, Emile Cohl and Winsor McCay. A hundred or so years later quality work continues to be produced by small teams of animators far from the imposing shadow of the big-budgeted animated features. Czech animator Jan Svankmajer and the London-based Brothers Quay are examples of work on the smaller palette with very vivid and powerful effect.

Many would find it hard to argue that in most animation there is a spectrum of joyfulness, colour and energy at work. Animation wilfully subverts the accepted physical laws of the world; and the law of the body's fragility. When Tom, chasing Jerry, steps on the wrong end of a rake and it slams up into his face, his pain is temporary. The chase is all, and that chase is rooted in all-too-human jealousies and frustrations.

The fantasy dynamics of animation are overwhelming and it is the one form of cinema that can be designed and planned more than any other. The huge cost and labour implications mean that getting everything measured and calibrated just right for emotional effect is paramount. Even editing animated films is a different process to editing live action. In live action, the director typically covers action from a number of angles and chooses what works best during the edit phase. Not so the animated film where these decisions are mapped out and agreed in pre-production.

Like the best fantasy stories and scenarios, animation needs reality and reality needs animation. This notion of the

redemptive possibilities of the imagination and the spirit of the fanciful has been central to countless films over the years. It is an equation that is hard to argue with. Just watch Terry Gilliam's films to see it proved time and again. *Brazil* (1985), *Baron Munchausen* (1988) and *The Fisher King* (1991) exemplify this compelling belief. It is no big surprise to learn that Gilliam too began as an animator.

Animation has yielded such diversity, in part because it is so craft-based and can healthily exist and develop outside the huge influences of major studios. Animation remains a very home-grown form that can still be the domain of one person. Avant-garde they may have been but the short films of the late Stan Brakhage were certainly invested with the animator's spirit and sense of creative liberty. Animation is a worldwide form that calls to mind people's ancient storytelling roots when paintings on cave walls of animals and humans were a powerful way of thinking about the world. Animation is super ancient and ultra modern all in the same frame, sketch or move of a model.

The kinds of stories that animation seems best suited to expressing tend towards some kind of fantastic connotation, association or wellspring of inspiration. Evidently, the form is very much about transformation and the magic involved in the act of making something move that would not do so by itself (subsequently, is computer animation really animation in the conventional sense of the word?).

Whether it is Elmer Fudd looking for Bugs Bunny (again!) or Gollum talking to Frodo in *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* (Peter Jackson, 2002), animation embodies the potential of the cinema to transcend the real and make believability far more important than realism. After all, when was the last time you were handcuffed to a rabbit wearing red dungarees as happens in *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* (Robert Zemeckis, 1988)? We *believe* it is happening though.

Animated film has long been associated with childhood and with a sense of warmth and belonging. Animation allows the audience to dream and let their imaginations go, and as such animation is pleasingly anti-realistic. Everyone loves great big tall stories of wonder and amazement and animation excels at telling such tales through a variety of approaches. At whatever level of simplicity or complexity animation works, it is a magical way to make an image, utterly fake yet with the potential to explore very real emotions and desires.

There is the sprawling and impressively naturalistic fairy-tale aura of the Disney studio film *Pinocchio* (1940) and there is, at the other end of the spectrum, the animation of real objects in the Freudian-fuelled work of Jan Svankmajer in his fairy-tale piece, *Alice* (1987). Vastly different in scope and tone, these two disparate examples are, at the very least, unified by being based on pre-existing stories that owe a huge debt to the fairy-tale impulse.

For psychologist, Bruno Bettelheim, in his landmark book *The Uses of Enchantment: the Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (1977), there is an exciting relationship between the mind of young children and the natural, animal world around them. According to Bettelheim, this relationship is dampened and suppressed by adult life. In effect this animistic aspect of our minds informs and gives so much animation its appeal. ‘Subjected to the rational teachings of others, the child only buries his “true knowledge” deeper in his soul and it remains untouched by rationality, but it can be formed and informed by what fairy tales have to say.’

Furthermore, the other affinity animation has with the fairy-tale form is the emphasis on anthropomorphism, whereby animals are leant human characteristics in their facial and bodily appearance and their modes of expression.

It is appropriate that, in the period in which this book was being written, the European and North American cinema has

been able to see Japan's most successful animated feature ever: *Spirited Away* (Hayao Miyazaki, 2001), a film steeped in the ethos of the fairy tale to dazzling visual and emotional effect.

The bond between film and dream has often been expressed and animation's freedom from certain laws and aesthetic restrictions (notably photographic realism) plunges its potential right into the dream world.

Certainly, enchantment is key to appreciating the form. For sure, animation may be the most artificial form of all cinema, on the surface, yet it repeatedly wires into the most powerfully subconscious circuitry of our emotional lives. As such it is no huge leap of the imagination to equate the essence of animation with the essence of the fairy-tale tradition and undoubtedly the two forms have been mutual friends since cinema began.

Animation functions as the latest iteration of a visual storytelling spirit that creativity has nurtured ever since humans drew bison and ibex in the firelight of caves.

The universality of expression that animation enjoys is unsurprisingly matched by the global interest in animation, so rooted is it in folk traditions, both visual and verbal. Animation offers endless permutations so that even an elementary glance across the terrain takes you from the short piece *Fantasmagorie* (Emile Cohl, 1908) in which stick figures go through a series of dreamlike experiences through to the Chinese animation of the 1920s and 30s with shorts such as the Wan Brothers' *Camel Dance* (1930) and on to the 1962 feature *Havoc in Heaven* in which Chinese folk hero, the Monkey King, must deal with an apocalyptic scenario.

In another direction the work of animators of the 1950s and 1960s such as Oskar Fischinger and Robert Bree displays the versatility of the form. Russian animation, for example, has yielded classics such as *The Snow Queen*,

adapted from the Hans Christian Andersen tale as well as *The Magic Horse* and *Mr Wonderbird*.

The list of achievements, experiments and enchantments is seemingly endless.

So much is possible in animation. From the vaudevillian slapstick of early American animation through to the super-seriousness of contemporary Japanese material, animation embraces so much so easily. Its variations are wide-ranging and animation can handle any kind of dream picture. From the narrative-based, classical animation of characters and dialogue that Disney made an art to the work of animators like Yuri Norstein and the less narratively inclined and intense animated shorts of The Brothers Quay, animation contains all.

Interestingly Norman McLaren, the experimental Canadian animator, said of the form: ‘It’s how it moves that’s the important thing . . . What the animator does on each frame of film is not as important as what he or she does in between.’

Animation has always been popular, possessing great novelty value in its early years and by the 1920s fixing itself as a legitimate means of expression. Two of the earliest achievements that paved the way for animation must be recognised at this point. There was the work of a Briton in America, Eadweard Muybridge who famously photographed a horse in motion, capturing in separate frames the phases of its motion. Muybridge did a similar piece with a baseball batter, naked as he hit a baseball, the movement of muscle and flesh evident with poetic clarity.

In France a precursor to what would be considered animation in its most raw form was to be found in Emile Reynaud’s animation precursor, Theatre Optique. This device projected moving pictures and backgrounds on to the same screen. This was first seen in 1892 and the shows were called Pantomimes Lumineuses and ran 500 pictures in

fifteen minutes. Other experimenters included Etienne-Jules Marey, Thomas Edison, William Friese Green and Martine Evans.

Animation's appeal spread rapidly and in North America and Japan in the 1920s and 1930s the audience for the form grew with ease. Through the 1940s and 1950s animation continued to secure its place in cinema history. By the 1960s, though, the animated feature and short film in its full, classically animated sense (the Disney format is the accepted highest-profile example of it) began to give way to cheaper animation for television and for many what was considered The Golden Age had come to an end. The late 1960s and the 1970s were testing times, though of course shorter, more experimental work that was not dependent on armies of artists and animators continued. The late 1970s and early 1980s saw brave and largely successful (if commercially failed) animated features occasionally being produced, notably *Watership Down* (Martin Rosen, 1977), *Plague Dogs* (Martin Rosen, 1982) and *The Secret of Nimh* (Don Bluth, 1982). Indeed, this period of the early 1980s also saw the emergence of computer animation, notably in the film *Tron* (Steven Lisberger, 1982) that, since its low-key theatrical success, endures on DVD as something of a cult piece.

Without doubt, however, animation has been enjoying a new lease of life since around 1986 and it continues into the early twenty-first century.

This book spans examples of work by the Disney studio, the work of Nick Park and Aardman Animation, the great efforts of Don Bluth and Jan Svankmajer (poles apart in approach but equally committed), the new world wonders of computer animation and the expansive, intricate visions of the Japanese animated form. It goes without saying that this book can only refer to a tiny fraction of all the animated features produced over the years.

This book will endeavour to highlight not just the ways in which these films have been produced but also the thinking behind them in terms of concepts and also be an acknowledgement of the emotional pull of these so-called tall stories.

Certainly the shelves of most homes with video and DVD players will have at least one animated feature in them. It is unlikely, however, that every home-video library will have a Western or a film noir. Yet for all its popularity, animation tends not to have been given the same treatment and respect as other forms of cinema. Animation saturates pop culture and always has done. The massive *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Matrix* trilogies, for example, are films that in large part feature animated characters.

Like all forms of cinema, animation has its pioneers and heroes and their contributions are as important to cinema as any live action or documentary filmmaker's achievements and accomplishments.

So, could it be said that animation is the most aesthetically pure form of cinema there has yet been? After all, the worlds of animation are only able to exist because of the mechanics of movie-making. Animation is not the recording of a reality you can go and look at regardless of a movie camera being there. A cel of animation only exists because a camera is going to record it. Animation offers a world that only exists once an artist sculpts a character in clay and then begins to make it move, to animate it, to give it life. You can't go where an animated movie is set. Animation was virtual reality before virtual reality became a phrase. Famously, Chuck Jones played with this idea in *Duck Amuck*, his legendary Daffy Duck short where Daffy runs off the film and then back into a frame.

At the dawn of its second full century, cinema continues to recognise the commercial viability of animation and its artistic richness. It is a major storytelling format that has certainly transcended any sense of novelty that there may

have been when heroes of the form like George Melies and Winsor McCay were at work in the early twentieth century. Animation is exciting, elastic and highly responsive to new technologies.

Animation was massively popular for about forty years from the 1920s when the short animated piece was a staple of cinemas through to the 1960s when it had flourished into a feature length art form. In the 1970s and for most of the 1980s it was hostage to economics and special effects movies before the 1990s saw it healthily revived. In the early twenty-first century, animation is enjoying the kind of enthusiasm last seen in the 1940s and 1950s and as the culture becomes more global, there is an ever-growing variety of animation available.

In summer 2003, for example, the two strongest fantasy films on offer in London were not from Hollywood but were the Japanese animated feature *Spirited Away* and the French-made animated feature *Belleville Rendezvous* (Sylvain Chomet).

Both of these films are classically animated, cel animation features which is the most well-known form of animation and has been part of cinema-going for seventy years. In the early twenty-first century, cel animation and stop-motion animation has been augmented by computer-generated animation which will become the dominant technique by the end of the decade.

Sadly, in summer 2003, DreamWorks animation, in the wake of the commercial failure of their cel feature *Sinbad*, announced it would be producing no more classical ink and paint features. A few years earlier Twentieth Century-Fox had come to the same decision after the commercial failure of several projects. Of course, regardless of whether it is ink and paint or computer generated, the compelling narrative is what is foremost. Certainly, watching the Pixar-produced computer-animated films, one cannot help but be amazed by the storytelling structure, notably in *Toy Story 2* and

Monsters, Inc. The way the cause and effect pattern clicks and snaps into place is more astonishing even than the believability of the fur on a monster or the action adventure high jinks of Buzz Lightyear as he fights the Emperor Zurg.

Inevitably, the filmmaker most associated with animation was Walt Disney (1901–1966). His name is perhaps now more synonymous with an entertainment empire than with his hands-on supervision of the development of the animated feature and also the creation of a whole cosmology of animated characters for the short form.

Disney was an able illustrator but his real gift was for story development and administrating and organising his company. As noted science-fiction author Jules Verne brilliantly said, ‘What one man can imagine others can make real.’ Disney’s industrial and aesthetic legacy cannot be underestimated but there are others who have been similarly important to the development of the form.

While the burgeoning work of George Melies in the 1890s could be seen as drawing on and advancing animation (and live action) the very use of the phrase ‘drawing on’ suggests other inventive souls had already been at work. In 1900 James Stuart Blackton of Great Britain produced a film called *The Enchanted Drawing* that featured some drawn characters in what is considered a prototype of animation. (This cannot really be thought of as the first piece of animation as the sequence was not comprised of continuous frame by frame filming.)

In 1906, Blackton produced *The Humorous Phases of Funny Faces*, which is considered the first-known attempt at animation. This time Blackton incorporated drawn sequences that have been shot frame by frame using a combination of blackboard, chalk and cut-outs for his animated forms. The following year, Blackton produced another short that this time worked as stop motion. Entitled *The Haunted Hotel*, the film used stop motion of three-

dimensional objects. Wine was poured into a glass, bread was cut and a table was laid without apparent human agency. The film was very successful and helped popularise the potential of animation at its purest, most playful level, exemplifying what Ray Harryhausen and Jan Svankmajer many years later would acknowledge as its mystical and magical quality.

Before the special effects and animated wonders of George Lucas's space adventure fairy tale *Star Wars* movies, another George was wowing imaginations. He discovered the principle of stop motion by accident when a strip of film jammed in his camera. When he re-spliced the film the subject in front of the camera had changed but the background remained the same. George Melies's iconic film, *Voyage to the Moon* (1902), showed that animation was the perfect way to capture flights of fantasy and match the vivid image-making of picture books. Indeed, much of the most popular animation continues to take us away from surface reality and the best of it invests the fantasy with genuine emotion and sensibility.

George Melies built something of a fantasy film empire in Paris years but again others were also at work helping refine and further the new world of film. Emile Cohl, who had been a successful comic-strip artist, made a short film called *Fantasmagorie* (1908), a simple series of dreamlike images of stick figures. Cohl went on to produce hundreds of shorts but died in poverty. Others continued to explore the form such as Arthur Melbourne Cooper in his film *Dreams of Toyland* (1908), which animated real toys in a long-ago precursor to *Toy Story*. Indeed, comic books are also the source for other animation heroes across the Atlantic.

The strongest animation combines the fabulous and the mundane and finds its magic in the space between them. Today's live-action films are even really becoming increasingly live-action–animation fusions, most notably *Star*

Wars: Episode I – The Phantom Menace, The Matrix and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy.

In the United States it was Winsor McCay, the celebrated comic-strip artist of the beautiful art nouveau adventures of *Little Nemo in Slumberland* who created the first major North American animated character in *Gertie the Dinosaur*.

Tragically, McCay's name is little known today yet he contributed so much to popularising the animation form and certainly showed the value in fantasy as an emotionally rich form for movies to invest in. *Gertie the Dinosaur* was premiered in New York and McCay even appeared on stage giving the illusion he was interacting with Gertie.

To know something of Winsor McCay's life and see something of his thankfully preserved output is to be reminded of the joy and pain of chasing a dream and the joy and fun of the imagination.

Born in Canada in 1871, Winsor McCay was a dreamer and an illustrator who could not stop picture-making as a wide-eyed kid. His parents sent him to a business college but McCay never really showed up that much and never graduated. His artwork for a local amusement park (with the terrific name Sacket and Wiggins Wonderland) got him noticed and soon enough he was at work in Chicago on *The Enquirer* newspaper.

At *The Enquirer* he illustrated the very popular *Tales of the Jungle Imps* and he also had a hit vaudeville show doing 'lightning sketches' on a blackboard. McCay's newspaper employer Randolph Hearst was wary of McCay's success away from the paper and created a golden handcuff contract for the artist, paying him handsomely but having exclusive ownership of his time.

As so often happens, it was a quiet, understated, unheralded moment of discovery that resulted in the thunder of innovation and bold artistry. McCay's young son enjoyed flip books and McCay was inspired. In 1909, McCay

set about laying the groundwork for the American take on animation. He found the time to make 4,000 drawings which, when filmed, brought to life his comic-strip creation *Little Nemo*. Intriguingly, the animation for this short animated experiment is bookended by live-action segments featuring McCay himself, a whimsical-looking, slightly built fellow, who agrees to a bet from his friends to make pictures move. A title card announces McCay as ‘The first artist to attempt drawing pictures that will move’. The film shows McCay’s friends laughing doubtfully at his proposal and then we see McCay at work, painstakingly illustrating each image, surrounded by stacks of paper. McCay reviews his work on a rolodex of images. An overhead shot shows McCay drawing the elegant, bold lines of his characters and inking them in. McCay even takes delivery of barrels of ink for his Herculean task. One character smokes a cigar and then Little Nemo appears and does some squash and stretch exercises that recall the effect of a Hall of Mirrors at a funfair.

Finally, a dragon turns up, its mouth open wide and containing a seat on which Nemo and the princess sit before the dragon turns and moves away, its tail arcing gracefully as it fills the screen and moves into the background. The fluidity of the inked images is incredible as is the subtle use of foreground and background. Perhaps most important is how playful and whimsical the short animated piece is, setting something of a standard for the cheerily inventive style of so much American animation that would follow in the 1920s and beyond.

McCay’s second film was the very funny five-minute-long *The Story of a Mosquito* (1912). Again, McCay does more than might be expected, playing with foreground and background as a balding man sleeps and is visited by a big-eyed bloodthirsty mosquito. Every time the mosquito punctures the man’s skin there is a real sense of mass present and as the mosquito gets heavier with blood its

movement becomes comically clumsy until finally it explodes.

The saying ‘third time’s a charm’ was never more true than with McCay’s third animated short. It is the film that assured his legacy and immortality in animation.

Entitled *Gertie the Dinosaur* (1914) the film creates a real animated character with a range of emotions and even manages to integrate live action and animation. It is funny and wondrous throughout. By the time of this film McCay had become aware of his standing and reputation and he acknowledges this in a title card where he describes himself as ‘America’s Greatest Cartoonist’ . Notice the word ‘animator’ does not come into play. It is quite a claim and it is more than matched by the vision on screen.

As with the Little Nemo short, *Gertie the Dinosaur* is bookended by live action again portraying McCay as the hapless dreamer at the mercy of his friends’ scepticism, which will be undone by the end of the film. McCay is out for a ride in a car with his pals when it breaks down outside a museum. While the car is fixed McCay and his friends go into the museum where they look at an immense dinosaur skeleton measuring seventy feet in length and twenty feet in height. McCay bets his friends that he can make the dinosaur live again through a hand-drawn cartoon. The familiar joshing is played out. The youthful genius is shown studying the dinosaur skeleton.

A title card then says that it has taken McCay six months to make the drawings and again he is surrounded by near-skyscrapers of paper. His friend calls in and sees the 10,000 drawings and McCay’s young assistant drops a stack of them.

At dinner, McCay ‘lightning sketches’ a dinosaur but his friends appear to pay scant attention. McCay then shows a previously drawn background image of a lake and cave. McCay tells his friends he will make Gertie come out of her cave and the animation proper begins. Interestingly, the live

action around the animation makes the animated material all the more magical.

An intertitle shows McCay's first instruction to Gertie: 'Gertie, come out and make a pretty bow.' Sure enough, Gertie fluidly emerges from her cave in the background and approaches the camera with a very smiley face. She has the quality of a playful, eager-to-please puppy. A sea creature looks on for a moment from the lake. Gertie gulps down a tree (how familiar the first sighting of a computer-animated brachiosaurus in *Jurassic Park* now seems) and then does a little dance to the camera. As promised, Gertie finally bows to the audience. McCay then instructs Gertie to raise her right foot which she does with ease and waves it. McCay then throws her a pumpkin, appearing about the size of a pea as Gertie swallows it. A woolly mammoth called Jumbo walks past, unfazed by Gertie's antics.

McCay's camera remains fixed in one place as the action plays out but it is never dull to watch. There is a sense of space and dynamism. A dinosaur flies by and another title card continues McCay's conversation with his pet dino-pal. Gertie proceeds to drink the lake dry. The topper, though, is when McCay enters the frame as a live-action figure and Gertie lifts him up on to her back. The animation ends and sure enough the live action shows Winsor McCay winning his bet. Imagination and perspiration have won out again over cynicism and too much faith in reality. The dreamer is victorious and McCay becomes a hero of pop culture in twelve minutes flat.

McCay continued producing animation beyond *Gertie* but it is this film that stands as his great work alongside his dazzling *Little Nemo* comic books.

Just as animation began developing its various aesthetic benchmarks (fluidity of movement, realism of backgrounds, characterisation, a shift from being moving comic strips to

more cinematic pieces) so too its mechanical and industrial processes were taking shape.

In 1914, John Bray opened an animation studio and patented many aspects of the animation process, though not the use of cels (acetate sheets on to which paintings are applied, one sheet per frame). It was a man named Earl Hurd who patented the use of cels. Bray, though, saw the value in creating a production line ethos, a sensibility already at work in growing mass production. Another individual was responsible for developing the registration peg so that animated sketches could be aligned on the drawing board and easily flipped through to check for consistency. His name was Raoul Barre.

For the 1920s and 1930s, American animation (which today dominates the popular animation market) was centred on New York. This would change by the mid-1930s, certainly, when Walt Disney expanded his work into animated features with his Burbank base in Los Angeles, California.

In 1990 a Japanese-produced animated feature was released called *Little Nemo: Adventures in Slumberland*. It was a conflagration of McCay's work. With a script by science-fiction literature legend Ray Bradbury (author of novels such as *Fahrenheit 451* and *The Martian Chronicles*) and screenwriter and director Chris Columbus (*Home Alone*, 1990 and *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, 2001) the film focused on Little Nemo's dream journey and discovery of a power that threatens both the known and the unknown worlds. The character design and preliminary animation on the film was overseen by Roger Allers who went on to direct *The Lion King*. This *Nemo* version had a rather quiet release.

Alongside Disney, the other high-profile animation studio in America during the 1920s and 1930s was that of Dave and Max Fleischer. Indeed, it was the Fleischers who produced

the first feature animation (a documentary), *The Einstein Theory of Relativity*. Based in New York, the Fleischer studio aesthetic was founded less on the realism that Disney pursued and much more on what writer Norman Klein in his book 7 *Minutes: The Life and Death of the American Cartoon* calls turning the world upside down. The studio's greatest early success was the series *Out of the Inkwell* which combined live action (an animator) and animation (a clown called Ko-Ko who climbed out of an inkwell and interacted with the animator). The studio would go on to produce *Popeye* and *Betty Boop*, which the Hays Code deemed too sexy and so had to be toned down.

For the great Russian animator Yuri Norstein, animation is the place where allegory, entertainment and political comment mesh. This sensibility also fuels the work of Jan Svankmajer, the Czech Surrealist who might not even term himself an animator.

Animation has certainly become famous for its cute and warm side but there is a whole other version of the form that plays up its capacity for spikier, abrasive and unsettling characters and stories and Svankmajer's work does just that. He has become a key figure for many animators, especially those working in stop-motion animation.

Amazingly, for all the pizzazz of computer-generated visual effects and lavish, naturalistic animation, two of the funkiest examples of animation in the 1990s were directed by Henry Selick. His preferred medium was stop-motion animation, and after a long period where stop motion had really been the preserve of live-action features where certain visual effects and creatures were best realised using the medium, stop motion was given a very high profile platform. The audience for it was there, ready and waiting.

The global affinity for animation has yielded an exciting cross fertilisation of stories and ways of telling them which reminds audiences of the richness to be found in an increasingly global and connected culture. Just look at the

mega successful live-action science-fiction film *The Matrix*. The film testifies to the arresting influence of Japanese manga and anime on Hollywood since the early 1990s. Watching the Japanese animated feature *The Ghost in the Shell* (Marmoru Oshii, 1995) about a virtual cyber world, one cannot help but see where *The Matrix* sprung from in part. Intriguingly, the debt to anime that *The Matrix* trilogy owes is all the more evident in the anthology of animated shorts, *The Animatrix*.

Indeed, this hunger for something other than cel animation indicates an increasing diversity of animation being made available. Japanese line drawings inspired not just Van Gogh but Hergé's *Tintin* too. In the late 1980s, Europe and America were alerted to the sophistication of Japanese feature animation and Britain's Aardman Animation was beginning to reach audiences and gain recognition for its stop-motion work. In 2002, Texas-based filmmaker Richard Linklater directed *Waking Life* which used a form of animation laid over live-action images to play up the sense of a lucid dream unfolding. There are many other examples of the real and the animated coming together in movie-making harmony.

Animation is typically sold as entertainment. For film writer Richard Dyer entertainment proposes a kind of Utopia which shows the audience something better that our everyday life cannot offer. It shows harmony and abundance. Hence the Hollywood narrative system that underpins so much animation is perfectly suited to it with its high production values, brio and optimism.

From *Snow White* (1937) through to *Shrek* (2001), community and recognising one's place in the world are key concerns that make the fantasy scenarios all the more appealing. Perhaps it is no coincidence that animation's affinity for romance and the nostalgic developed at a time

when the modern world, the mechanical world (through which cinema was born) seemed so brutal.

The animation of the 1930s and 1940s, which largely established an expectation of what the form could be, has been criticised for sustaining stereotypes about gender and the idea of otherness being represented through physical and behavioural tics. There is also the notion that the female form has always been idealised so that from Betty Boop to Jessica Rabbit to all the female figures of anime, they are showgirls to be ogled by men. A 1987 British animated short flips the notion of looking in the animated short *Girl's Night Out* (Joanna Quinn) about a group of women who have headed out for a male strip show.

Animation, then, is not solely the province of fantasy and adventure derived from a comic-strip way of imagining the world. Animation works on its own merits and conventions, as legitimate a medium as live-action cinema. Animation in the short form especially has a liberty to explore and express thoughts and issues that larger-scale films might struggle to handle. Take for example the 2003 Channel 4 series *Animated Minds* or the short film *A is for Autism*, which is narrated by people with autism while images and sequences they have drawn illustrate the kinds of issues autism presents. A visual form makes a very complex psychology somehow understandable in its essentials. Again, that sense of free association that animation has so finely developed is what makes the material work.

In 1992 a collection of animated films was released through the British Film Institute called *Wayward Girls and Wicked Women*, a collection of animated shorts by female directors. It included films such as *The Stain* (Marjut Rimminen and Christine Roche, 1991) and *Daddy's Little Bit of Dresden China* (Karen Watson, 1988), films that both explore incest and abuse. For Jeanette Winterson, writing about this compilation, animation in its broadest application

‘is closer to dance in its human delineation. It offers emotion freed from individual association, and yet is not abstract’.

Like humour, animation (which is often humorous) allows for audiences to engage with an otherwise difficult subject. In the early years of the twenty-first century, animation remains immensely popular with audiences finding more opportunities to view a range of styles. A recent hit has been the virtually dialogue-free *Belleville Rendezvous* directed by Sylvain Chomet in which an orphan boy named Champion enters the Tour de France only to be kidnapped by the French Mafia and then rescued by his grandmother and his faithful dog Bruno.

In Canada, the National Film Board of Canada encouraged innovative approaches to animation and this has yielded a treasury of intriguing animation such as *The Street* (Caroline Leaf, 1976) an adaptation of a Mordecai Richler story in which a boy watches his sick grandma eventually die. Other films supported by the National Film Board were *Pas de Deux* (Norman McLaren, 1967), *Top Priority* (Ishu Patel, 1981), *Getting Started* (Richard Condie, 1983), *The Wind* (Ron Travis, 1975). Indeed, it was a Canadian who directed *Yellow Submarine* (1968).

Commercials and music videos have fuelled an appreciation of animation and often their handsome budgets have resourced very vivid pieces of work. The music promo for the Peter Gabriel track *Sledgehammer* is often held up as an enduring example. Directed by Steve R Johnstone, the video placed Gabriel in a range of fantastic scenarios that were created by different teams of animators. This was a collaboration between Aardman Animation, David Anderson and The Brothers Quay, who were responsible for the sequence of Gabriel surrounded by fruit and vegetables for the Fruit Cake sequence. Aardman handled the stop motion of Gabriel hitting himself with hammers. The promo also included pixilation, so that Gabriel had to strike a range of poses round which furniture was moved incrementally.

This pixilation approach has also been used to eerie effect in Dave Borthwick's film *The Secret Adventures of Tom Thumb* (1993). Norman McLaren's Cold War allegory, *Neighbours*, also uses this device.

There are countless examples of animation's affinity for symbolism and allegory. In France, animation director and figurehead Paul Grimault adapted Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale *The Shepherdess and the Chimney Sweep* into an animated feature called *Le Roi et l'Oiseau* (*The King and the Bird*, 1979) which functioned as a satire on contemporary fascism and tyranny.

Walt Disney, a filmmaker who built his legacy on animation, once said of modern society that it had 'lost the sense of play . . .' and that man 'is the victim of a civilization whose ideal is the unbotherable, poker-faced man and the attractive, unruffled woman. They call it poise.' Animation animates the audience's weary, humdrum life. Isn't one of the main responses people have to animation laughter?

Images of the impossible have been central to human visual expression since the beginning of time. Myths, legends, fairy tales and other more ancient artworks are all imbued with images of monsters, halflings, gods, goddesses and fabulous landscapes that map the human soul.

It is one of the joys of cinema that the fairy tale and stories of legend have been so readily appropriated by animation. To borrow from Paul Klee, animation allows the filmmaker to take a line for a very emotive and motion varied walk.

By the mid twentieth century, cinema was seen as a key way of socialising children, and animation played a significant part in this process. In the West, film has heavily influenced people's sense and reception of fairy tales. Certainly, the films of Walt Disney have led the way in this. Feature-length stories either adapting or drawing heavily on fairy-tale forms will inevitably flesh out and detail the source

material, which tended to be fairly concise, to meet the running time demands of a feature-length format.

For some, film versions of fairy tales dilute the original material and their form. Alternatively, it is seen as valuable that fairy tales have been picked up by film, allowing the medium to reconfigure the stories for a particular era and culture. The animation tradition has, ultimately, been a part of cinema since its earliest days, pre-dating colour and sound.

The word animation is tightly bound to notions of the miraculous, of breathing life into something lifeless. Richard Thompson notes in his vivid essay *Meep Meep* '. . . American animation like American comic strips, was full of weird, twisted, surreal versions of the world, impossible to capture with real life photography. It was powered by glorious primitivism, unlike the increasingly sophisticated live-action film.'

Animation, then, exists in the realm of taking reality and playing with it; distorting and contorting it; making it brighter, faster, bolder, more grotesque, more mesmerising. The animation historian and theorist Paul Wells has commented that, 'Animation can redefine the everyday, subvert our accepted notions of "reality" and challenge the orthodox understanding and acceptance of our existence.'

The best animation is always absolutely true to its promise of giving a soul to the inanimate and this is why the animated feature format is so well suited to tales of the fantastic. In a society so romanced by new technology and gadgetry, animation is perfectly in synch with this mindset. From its earliest days, animation has embraced new technology; what seem like gimmicks initially, often become legitimate conventions and styles.

From the multiplane camera of the Disney studio to the ever more fluid realities of computer animation, the medium retains a welcome spirit of playfulness and real invention