

RICHARD NEUPERT

FRENCH ANIMATION HISTORY



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French Animation History

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Richard Neupert

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*In memory of my parents
John and Caroline Neupert*

Contents

Figures	ix
Plates	xiii
Acknowledgments	xvii
1 Introduction: The Rise of Animation in France	1
<i>The Beginnings of Animation</i>	4
<i>Stop-Motion Animation Attractions</i>	19
2 Silent Animation: Emile Cohl and his Artisanal Legacy	22
<i>Emile Cohl, Caricature, and the Rise of Studio Animation</i>	22
<i>Emile Cohl at Pathé, Eclipse, and Eclair Studios</i>	36
<i>Graphic Art and the Cartoon: Lortac and O'Galop</i>	45
<i>But is it "Animation?" French Avant-Garde and Moving Pictures</i>	54
3 French Animation and the Coming of Sound	60
<i>Ladislav Starewich's Fabled Puppets</i>	61
<i>Berthold Bartosch's L'Idée: A Working-Class Allegory</i>	73
<i>Jean Painlevé's La Barbe bleue</i>	78
<i>Alexandre Alexeieff, Claire Parker, and the Pinscreen</i>	82
<i>Niche Cartoons: Lyrical Joie de vivre and the Surreal</i>	
<i>La Fortune enchantée</i>	90
4 Toward an Alternative Studio Structure	99
<i>Paul Grimault and the Artist-Owned Animation Studio</i>	100
<i>Transitional Animation: From High Art to Made-for-TV</i>	107
<i>Toward a New Era of Micro-Studios: Laguionie and Laloux</i>	114
5 French Animation's Renaissance	124
<i>Le Cartoon Plan</i>	124
<i>Michel Ocelot's Alternative Mode of Production</i>	127

<i>Comic Book Aesthetics and Niche Studios</i>	139
<i>Contemporary French Animation: 2006 and Beyond</i>	149
6 Conclusion: French Animation Today	162
References	171
Further Reading	178
Index	181

Figures

1.1	Praxinoscope patent, Emile Reynaud, 1878	7
1.2	Marey's multiple exposure, produced and photographed by Etienne-Jules Marey, 1881	16
1.3	Marey's dragonfly, produced and photographed by Etienne-Jules Marey, 1891	18
2.1	Cohl's rapidly shifting lines. <i>Fantasmagorie</i> , produced by Gaumont, directed by Emile Cohl, 1908	27
2.2	The clown pops out of a woman's ballooning head. <i>Fantasmagorie</i> , produced by Gaumont, directed by Emile Cohl, 1908	28
2.3	Cohl's puppets bow for the camera. <i>Un Drame chez les fantoches/A Puppet Drama</i> , produced by Gaumont, directed by Emile Cohl, 1908	30
2.4	The mother-in-law microbe. <i>Les Joyeux microbes/The Merry Microbes</i> , produced by Gaumont, directed by Emile Cohl, 1909	32
2.5	The clown projects his binetoscope images. <i>Le Binettoscope/The Binetoscope</i> , produced by Gaumont, directed by Emile Cohl, 1910	35
2.6	Waiter's fantasy. <i>Le Songe du garçon de café/The Hasher's Delirium</i> , produced by Gaumont, directed by Emile Cohl, 1910	36
2.7	Cohl's ambiguous space. <i>Les Exploits du feu follet/Will of the Wisp's Exploits</i> , produced by Eclipse, directed by Emile Cohl, 1912	38
2.8	Dialogue dominates the frame in <i>Zozor ruine la réputation de sa famille/How He Ruined His Family's Reputation</i> , produced by Eclair, directed by Emile Cohl, 1913	40

2.9	A cat is dropped into a meat grinder. <i>He Poses for His Portrait</i> , produced by Eclair, directed by Emile Cohl, 1913	41
2.10	Publi-Ciné logo. Produced by Publi-Ciné, title sequence animated by O'Galop, 1920	47
2.11	Lortac's Nestlé commercial <i>Comme au temps des fées/Like in the Days of Fairy Tales</i> , produced by Publi-Ciné, Directed by Lortac, 1920	49
2.12	Lortac's medicine commercial <i>La Réponse de l'au-delà/An Answer from the Beyond</i> , produced by Publi-Ciné, animated by O'Galop, 1920	49
2.13	O'Galop's murderous boy. <i>Petites causes, grands effets/ Great Oaks from Small Acorns Grow</i> , produced by Jean Comandon for Rockefeller Foundation, animated by O'Galop, 1918	52
2.14	Man Ray's rayogram springs. <i>Retour à la raison/Return to Reason</i> , produced and directed by Man Ray, 1923	55
2.15	Ray's leaping man. <i>Emak Bakia</i> , produced and directed by Man Ray, 1925	56
2.16	Fernand Léger's Chaplin. <i>Ballet mécanique/The Mechanical Ballet</i> , produced and directed by Fernand Léger, 1924	58
3.1	A monkey introduces <i>Le Roman de renard/The Tale of the Fox</i> (a.k.a. <i>Story of the Fox</i>), produced and directed by Ladislav and Irene Starewitch, 1946	65
3.2	The fox beats the bear in <i>Le Roman de renard/The Tale of the Fox</i> (a.k.a. <i>Story of the Fox</i>), produced and directed by Ladislav and Irene Starewitch, 1946	68
3.3	Duffy, the mascot, lost in the city. <i>Fétiche mascotte/The Mascot</i> , produced and directed by Ladislav and Irene Starewitch, 1933	70
3.4	Duffy's haunted evening. <i>Fétiche mascotte/The Mascot</i> , produced and directed by Ladislav and Irene Starewitch, 1933	70
3.5	Masereel woodcut. Copyright Frans Masereel, 1920; reissued by Redstone Press, 2000; used by permission of Artists Rights Society	74
3.6	Man contemplates his "Idea." <i>L'Idée/The Idea</i> , produced and directed by Berthold Bartosch, 1932	75

3.7	The Idea, distributed on handbills. <i>L'Idée/The Idea</i> , produced and directed by Berthold Bartosch, 1932	76
3.8	Troops are sent to fight the Idea and her followers. <i>L'Idée/The Idea</i> , produced and directed by Berthold Bartosch, 1932	76
3.9	The pinscreen creates a soft-focus nightmare. <i>Une nuit sur le mont Chauvel/Night on Bald Mountain</i> , produced and directed by Alexander Alexeieff, 1933	86
3.10	The phantom horse in <i>Une nuit sur le mont Chauvel/Night on Bald Mountain</i> , produced and directed by Alexander Alexeieff, 1933	87
3.11	Alexeieff's father figure in <i>Une nuit sur le mont Chauvel/Night on Bald Mountain</i> , produced and directed by Alexander Alexeieff, 1933	87
3.12	Joyous women in <i>Joie de vivre</i> , produced and directed by Anthony Gross and Hector Hoppin, 1934	91
3.13	<i>Joie de vivre</i> 's happy ending. <i>Joie de vivre</i> , produced and directed by Anthony Gross and Hector Hoppin, 1934	92
3.14	Charbonnier's surreal settings in <i>La Fortune enchantée/The Enchanted Fortune</i> , produced and directed by Pierre Charbonnier, 1936	94
3.15	<i>La Fortune enchantée</i> 's mixed performers. <i>La Fortune enchantée/The Enchanted Fortune</i> , produced and directed by Pierre Charbonnier, 1936	95
3.16	Animated police in parade. <i>La Fortune enchantée/The Enchanted Fortune</i> , produced and directed by Pierre Charbonnier, 1936	97
4.1	Jupiter chases Callisto. <i>Callisto, la petite nymphe de Diane/Callisto, Diana's Little Nymph</i> , produced and directed by André Edouard Marty, 1943	108
4.2	Callisto watches an idyllic human family. <i>Callisto, la petite nymphe de Diane/Callisto, Diana's Little Nymph</i> , produced and directed by André Edouard Marty, 1943	109
5.1	Ilona and the graphic novel aesthetic in <i>Renaissance</i> , produced by Onyx Films, directed by Christian Volckman, 2006	152
5.2	Karas and Bislane are doubled in the frame. <i>Renaissance</i> , produced by Onyx Films, directed by Christian Volckman, 2006	154

- | | | |
|-----|---|-----|
| 5.3 | Caricature and culture clash in <i>Persepolis</i> , produced by 2.4.7. Films, directed by Marjane Satrapi and Vincent Paronnaud, 2007 | 158 |
| 5.4 | Marjane's brief happiness. <i>Persepolis</i> , produced by 2.4.7. Films, directed by Marjane Satrapi and Vincent Paronnaud, 2007 | 159 |

Plates

- 1 Reynaud's Pierrot in *Pauvre Pierrot/Poor Pierrot*, produced and directed by Emile Reynaud, 1892 (DVD by Centre National de la Cinématographie)
- 2 Animated spanking "rotoscopes" the filmed event. *Les Métamorphoses comiques/Comical Metamorphoses*, produced by Eclipse, directed by Emile Cohl, 1912
- 3 Fantoche draws himself a new home. *La Maison du fantoche/The Puppet House*, produced by Eclair, directed by Emile Cohl, 1921
- 4 Blue Beard's crusade in *La Barbe bleue/Blue Beard*, produced and directed by Jean Painlevé, 1936
- 5 Blue Beard threatens his Queen. *La Barbe-bleue/Blue Beard*, produced and directed by Jean Painlevé, 1936
- 6 The stop-motion Prince Charming in *La Belle au bois dormant/Sleeping Beauty*, produced and directed by Alexander Alexeieff and Claire Parker, 1935
- 7 Grimault's boy clings to the flying ship in *Les Passagers de la Grande Ourse/The Passengers on the Big Bear*, produced by Les Gemeaux, directed by Paul Grimault, 1943
- 8 Grimault's Scarecrow and collaborating cat. *L'Epouvantail/The Scarecrow*, produced and directed by Paul Grimault, 1943
- 9 Desire in the toy store. *Le Petit soldat/The Little Soldier*, produced and directed by Paul Grimault, 1946
- 10 Jack torments the Doll in *Le Petit soldat/The Little Soldier*, produced and directed by Paul Grimault, 1946
- 11 The King and his portrait. *Le Roi et l'oiseau/The King and the Bird*, produced and directed by Paul Grimault, 1979
- 12 The Chimney Sweep and Shepherdess escape. *Le Roi et l'oiseau/The King and the Bird*, produced and directed by Paul Grimault, 1979

- 13 Grimault's Bird repeatedly humiliates the King in *Le Roi et l'oiseau/The King and the Bird*, produced and directed by Paul Grimault, 1979
- 14 The King's Robot captures the runaways. *Le Roi et l'oiseau/The King and the Bird*, produced and directed by Paul Grimault, 1979
- 15 Anatole plays the spokes. *Anatole fait du camping/Anatole Goes Camping*, produced by Cygne, directed by Albert Dubout, 1947
- 16 A train disrupts Anatole's outing in *Anatole fait du camping/Anatole Goes Camping*, produced by Cygne, directed by Albert Dubout, 1947
- 17 The Eiffel Tower takes a stroll in *Bonjour Paris*, produced and directed by Jean Image, 1953
- 18 Jean Image offers bright, bold characters in *Bonjour Paris*, produced and directed by Jean Image, 1953
- 19 The Eiffel Tower is tickled by a metro train. *Bonjour Paris*, produced and directed by Jean Image, 1953
- 20 Laguionie's cut-out woman and sea in *La Demoiselle et le violoncelliste/The Young Lady and the Cellist*, produced by Les Films Paul Grimault, directed by Jean-François Laguionie, 1965
- 21 Static bystanders on the beach in *La Demoiselle et le violoncelliste/The Young Lady and the Cellist*, produced by Les Films Paul Grimault, directed by Jean-François Laguionie, 1965
- 22 Gwen and Rosalie in the desert. *Gwen, ou Le livre de sable/Gwen, or the Book of Sand*, produced by Films de la Damoselle, directed by Jean-François Laguionie, 1984
- 23 Gwen's townspeople. *Gwen, ou Le livre de sable/Gwen, or the Book of Sand*, produced by Films de la Damoselle, directed by Jean-François Laguionie, 1984
- 24 Terr's mother, killed by a Draag, in *La Planète sauvage/Fantastic Planet*, produced by Argos Films, directed by René Laloux, 1973
- 25 Tiwa and tiny Terr. *La Planète sauvage/Fantastic Planet*, produced by Argos Films, directed by René Laloux, 1973
- 26 Renegade Oms hide in the wilderness. *La Planète sauvage/Fantastic Planet*, produced by Argos Films, directed by René Laloux, 1973
- 27 Kirikou to the rescue. *Kirikou et la sorcière/Kirikou and the Sorceress*, produced by Les Armateurs, directed by Michel Ocelot, 1998
- 28 Kirikou sinks the sorceress's boat in *Kirikou et la sorcière/Kirikou and the Sorceress*, produced by Les Armateurs, directed by Michel Ocelot, 1998
- 29 Karaba the Sorceress. *Kirikou et la sorcière/Kirikou and the Sorceress*, produced by Les Armateurs, directed by Michel Ocelot, 1998

- 30 Karaba's magic kiss. *Kirikou et la sorcière/Kirikou and the Sorceress*, produced by Les Armateurs, directed by Michel Ocelot, 1998
- 31 Ocelot's hinged Prince figure. Photograph by Richard Neupert
- 32 The frog Prince leaps to kiss his Princess. *Princes et Princesses/Princes and Princesses*, produced by Les Armateurs and La Fabrique, directed by Michel Ocelot, 2000
- 33 Baby Asmar in *Azur et Asmar/Azur and Asmar, The Princes' Quest*, produced by Nord-Ouest Production and Studio O, directed by Michel Ocelot, 2006
- 34 Mixed 2D and 3D cues on Jenane in *Azur et Asmar/Azur and Asmar, The Princes' Quest*, produced by Nord-Ouest Production and Studio O, directed by Michel Ocelot, 2006
- 35 Azur and Asmar face off. *Azur et Asmar/Azur and Asmar, The Princes' Quest*, produced by Nord-Ouest Production and Studio O, directed by Michel Ocelot, 2006
- 36 Skan discovers a heartbeat in Callisto's statue. *Les Enfants de la pluie/Children of the Rain*, produced by Belokan Productions, directed by Philippe Leclerc, 2003
- 37 Revived in the pond, Callisto flirts with Skan. *Les Enfants de la pluie/Children of the Rain*, produced by Belokan Productions, directed by Philippe Leclerc, 2003
- 38 Princess Akhesa and Tut in a flat, colorful world. *La Reine soleil/The Sun Queen*, produced by Belokan Productions, directed by Philippe Leclerc, 2007
- 39 Mme. Souza gives Champion a tricycle. *Les Triplettes de Belleville/The Triplets of Belleville*, produced by Les Armateurs, directed by Sylvain Chomet, 2003
- 40 Mobster and Champion at the Tour de France. *Les Triplettes de Belleville/The Triplets of Belleville*, produced by Les Armateurs, directed by Sylvain Chomet, 2003
- 41 Souza rents a paddle boat to pursue the ship. *Les Triplettes de Belleville/The Triplets of Belleville*, produced by Les Armateurs, directed by Sylvain Chomet, 2003
- 42 Girerd's humans resemble the animals. *La Prophétie des grenouilles/Raining Cats and Frogs*, produced by Folimage, directed by Jacques-Rémy Girerd, 2003
- 43 Mia in Girerd's painterly wilderness. *Mia et le Migou/Mia and the Migoo*, produced by Folimage, directed by Jacques-Rémy Girerd, 2008

- 44 Opening at Orly: past and present in *Persepolis*, produced by 2.4.7. Films, directed by Marjane Satrapi and Vincent Paronnaud, 2007
- 45 *Oktapodi* and the international 3D look. *Oktapodi*, produced at Gobelins, directed by Julien Bocabeille, François-Xavier Chanioux, Olivier Delabarre, Thierry Marchand, Quentin Marmier, and Emud Mokhberi, 2007
- 46 *Clík Clak*'s semiotic comedy. *Clík Clak*, produced by SupInfoCom, directed by Thomas Wagner, Victor Emmanuel Moulin, and Aurélie Fréchinois, 2006
- 47 *Imago* mixes old and new in a timeless tale. *Imago*, produced by La Boîte Productions, directed by Cedric Babouche, 2005

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Screenshots from *Kirikou and the Sorceress* and *Triplets of Belleville* are reproduced courtesy of Les Armateurs.

Kirikou et la sorcière, De Michel Ocelot, © 1998 Les Armateurs/Odec Kid Cartoons/France 3 Cinéma/Monipoly/Trans Europe Film/Exposure/RTBF/Studio O

Les Triplettes de Belleville, De Sylvain Chomet, © 2002 Les Armateurs/Production Champion/Vivi Film/France 3 Cinéma/Sylvain Chomet/RGP France

Introduction

The Rise of Animation in France

If cinema marvelously expresses an age dominated by science, it is because cinema is “scientifically founded on movement.” In effect, cinema relies upon a series of mechanisms designed to produce an illusion of animation. (Guido 2007: 28)

Images remained fixed for 32,000 years. Drawings could only move once the camera was invented and put to work reproducing them 24 times a second, filming and projecting them. That is the real cinematic revolution! Animation is a completely virtual art which logically leads into the synthetic image and the modern world. The modern revolution was born with Emile Reynaud and his projected animation in 1892. Live action cinema with actors is merely a pale copy of reality. It is moving photography. . . . But the moving photograph will never be as magical as the moving drawing! (René Laloux, in Blin 2004: 148)

From the very beginning there was great potential for animation in France. Importantly, the French had built up strong traditions in the visual and graphic arts, scientific inquiry, and theatrical spectacles during the late 1800s and early 1900s. Artists from around the world came to Paris to study the fine arts and decorative arts, leading to one of the richest eras for aesthetic experimentation across the media. A number of avant-garde artists, including Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, and Fernand Léger, were drawn toward experimenting with the representation of time and motion and became fascinated with animated cinema’s potential. It is true that France never possessed large specialized commercial animation studios during the silent or classical sound eras. Nonetheless, French animation has

always existed and its animators have managed to turn out some incredibly creative and influential animation over the years. The bulk of that work has been produced by a relatively limited number of small animation firms and individual animators, often working parallel to other modern artists, exploring their media and looking for unique aesthetic approaches to animating images. Until fairly recently, animation remained on the economic periphery of French film production. French animation has also suffered from film critics and historians who have concentrated almost exclusively on France's famed avant-garde movements and narrative auteurism. Yet the history of animation is essential for understanding French film culture, its history, and its reception. Fortunately, there has been something of a renaissance in animation production within France over the past 20 years, which has motivated new interest in the long and, and as we shall see, frequently torturous history of French cartoons.

Animation has always been a more highly visible component of American film production than in France, and Hollywood cartoons have also received much more attention from film studies over the years. American animation began with a wide range of styles, techniques, and subjects during the silent era, much like in France. But American animation quickly became standardized as cartoons shifted from ink on paper to clear cels over painted backdrops. In Hollywood, animation fell into step with many conventions of live action filmmaking. By the 1930s, some major studios, including Warner Bros. and MGM, established their own animation wings while others, such as RKO and Paramount, entered into production and distribution deals with specialized animation companies like Disney and Fleischer. Hollywood's cartoon industry was built around division of labor, recurring characters and cartoon series, fixed durations of 6 to 8 minutes. American cartoons also received guaranteed distribution and thus predictable income. Most animation was commercially viable and highly capitalized. While there was creative differentiation from studio to studio, the output remained relatively similar, as even the series titles such as *Merry Melodies* and *Looney Tunes* (Warners), *Silly Symphonies* (Disney), and *Happy Harmonies* (MGM), suggest. Further, since the cartoons were produced under the institutionalized conditions of classical Hollywood cinema, they were also subject to regulation by the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association, which included censorship at the hands of the Production Code Administration. Cartoons were a very stable, successful, family friendly component of the American film industry.