BIRTH

OF AN

INDUSTRY

Blackface Minstrelsy and the Rise of American Animation NICHOLAS SAMMOND

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Dedicated to the Memory of JOHN MCCLOSKEY MOYNIHAN

1960-2004

Animator, Author, Rogue

and

SARA ELIZABETH GARMENT

1960-2011

Poet, Translator, Swami

white blackface minstrel played with the seeming immutability of race (and by extension with anxieties around passing and racial categories), so the cartoon minstrel calls into question the boundary between the animate and inanimate commodity, the person and the thing.

people laugh. an imaginary commodity, a living, breathing embodiment of property rechose as a fundamental template for those creatures a being that is itself President Barack Obama. The purpose of this comparison is, rather, to imagined as having been magically engendered by the fantastic figure of usher in through critique the sort of utopian postracialism that some have pose of this comparison is not to tar American commercial animation as Walt Disney or Max Fleischer to (equally vestigial) interlocutors. The purand in the process compares Mickey and Bugs to Tambo and Bones—and dant in the very American performance tradition of blackface minstrelsy, these questions by considering American animation as a lineal descenenduring and endearing continuing cartoon characters so often show so and why have they kept them for so very many years? It asks why these get their gloves, their huge eyes, and their capacious and voracious mouths belling against the conditions of its existence—and why that still makes puzzle out how an industry whose primary products act like living beings its remaining nonracist fare. Nor is it an attempt, at the end of the day, to racist, nor to root out its contributing villains so that we can then enjoy tence, and so rarely succeed in overcoming them. It attempts to answer little respect for authority, so often rail against the conditions of their exis-So this is a book that asks, quite seriously, where did Mickey and Bugs



PERFORMANCE

BUG VAUDEVILLE, OR, THE CURTAIN RISES AND FALLS ON WINSOR MCCAY

Early animators were not artists as much as they were entertainers. —Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston, The Illusion of Life (1981)

who could draw Disney's trademark characters on spec and could faith years earlier. Thomas and Johnston were skilled craftsmen, animators had not been the order of things during animation's beginnings twenty mon when the two men began working for Disney in the early 1930s. It second (if at all) speaks of a division of labor that was increasingly comthat an animator was an artist (or draughtsman) first and an entertainer tween high art and animation, in the early twentieth century. The notion about the relationship between popular art and entertainment, and be-Old Men," offer a historical snapshot that hints at common assumptions Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston, two of Walt Disney Productions' "Nine animation. Yet they were not entertainers: as workers in a rapidly chang fully contribute to the company's evolving and distinctive style of "full" In their epic review of animation technique à la Disney, The Illusion of Life, tions and conventions, which were based in, borrowed from, and shared gins on the vaudeville stage and its profound debt to that stage's tradi ing industry, they were aware of American commercial animation's oriincorporated film into live performances to an industrial content sup American commercial animation went from an art form that sometimes house in the United States; in the two decades prior to its rise, though blackface minstrelsy. In the 1930s, Disney was the premier animation the spotlight with vaudeville's antecedent forms: burlesque, variety, and

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FIG. 1.1 In the opening title sequence for Bug Vaudeville (1921). Winsor McCay humbly claims to have invented animation.

of that transformation, the visual and performative tropes of vaudeville effect of a widely shared belief that blackface minstrelsy no longer seems not immediately recognize Mickey as a blackface minstrel is in part an to the basic template for trademark continuing characters such as Felix and blackface minstrelsy—well known to audiences of the day—gave rise plier for both major and minor Hollywood film studios. In the process formed the labor that went into their creation. nization of its creative workforce into increasingly rationalized and sysfrom the stage to the screen, a movement whose counterpoint is the orgathat traces the movement of animation's central conventions and tropes mation first as performance, and later as industry, opens up a genealogy of a performative tradition into a commodity-based one. Thinking of anidepiction of the history of early animation as a succession of favorite and performance to animation as industry requires setting aside a standard mation worker. Understanding the rapid transition from animation as mator-the interlocutor to those cartoon minstrels-into that of an animaterial changes that gradually remade the figure of the performing anito be performed on a regular basis (though it is) and of the social and Bunny, with many other versions in between. That audiences today do the Cat, Krazy Kat, Oswald the Lucky Rabbit, Mickey Mouse, and Bugs tematic divisions of labor—the products of which, strangely, regularly per famous texts (i.e., cartoons) and instead thinking of it as the development

The career of Winsor "Silas" McCay spanned the rise of the movies, the birth of American animation, and its rationalization as an industry.

> story of his conception of animation (both the process and its products) dime museums, circuses, and traveling shows, McCay became a newsand Eden Musée. After a few years designing posters and programs for designing posters for the Barnumesque Sackett & Wiggins Wonderland as a vaudeville act, his departure from vaudeville, and the relationship bea sort of vernacular proto-surrealism, and this work led him to begin exand with them McCay gained acclaim as a master of perspective and of self as a newspaper cartoonist, first through editorial cartoons and then accurately. By the dawn of the twentieth century he had established himand grotesque and in part because he could draw incredibly quickly and paper sketch artist—in part because of his skill at drawing the unusual tween the two is illustrative of those changes. A talented artist, gifted per-McCay was the most famous of those early performing animators, and the a very lucrative and satisfying performing career.3 McCay returned to the oping stage acts that would eventually make use of his animated films cessful vaudeville career, working as a lightning-sketch artist and develby Edwin S. Porter. In that same year, McCay began an extremely sucperimenting with the sequential art of animation. Dreams was so populand (1905-1914). Of these, Dreams and Nemo were particularly popular, Dreams of a Rarebit Fiend (1904-1911, 1913), and Little Nemo in Slumberthrough Sunday cartoon series such as Little Sammy Sneeze (1904-1906) former, and tireless self-promoter, McCay began working in the 1880s, and by short-subject films, including cartoons (see chapter 3). because of its replacement by movie/performance combination shows stage briefly in 1927, but by then vaudeville was in sharp decline—in part continued to circulate, this effectively signaled the beginning of the end of ing on vaudeville stages outside New York City. Although McCay's films Hearst, for whom he worked as a cartoonist, forbade him from perform-1914, McCay's new contract with newspaper publisher William Randolph Little Nemo (1911), How a Mosquito Operates (1912), and Gertie (1914).2 In lar that it became a stage show and then was interpreted on film in 1906

Winsor McCay died in 1934 at the relatively young age of sixty-seven, of heart disease probably hastened by alcohol. Yet he had already stopped producing cartoons in the early 1920s, a few years after he stopped performing animation for live vaudeville audiences. Of his final works, Bug Vaudeville (1921) clearly delineates McCay's sense of his importance to animation, while nodding to the rapid changes to moviegoing and cartooning that, during the late teens and early twenties, made him marginal in an industry he had helped to create. More than a visual epitaph for a

fading showman, *Bug Vaudeville* offers a schematic of that marginalization, a means of reading changes to animation as an art, a craft, and an industry. In its self-reflexivity the cartoon performs a struggle to reconcile the contradictions between those three modes of production: art, craft, industry. Like many of the best cartoons of its age, the film tells a story that is as much about the social and material relations that obtained around its making as it is about the acrobatic Junebugs or butterflies on horseback it features. Like its maker, the cartoon is caught between celebrating an onrushing and tranformative technological modernity and recognizing in that transformation a pending obsolescence.

staring out through, and somewhat obscured by, his bold claim. as do the title and topic of the film: in this still image, he sits motionless single person. But McCay's claim suggests that somehow the increasingly mated films at that time were drawn by hand, albeit not necessarily by a product of craft rather than industry." Truth be told, pretty much all ani picture is drawn entirely by hand." This announcement not only posiis part of a series made famous by McCay's comic strip Dreams; it is reville seems a swan song. An opening title card announces that the short ful still of McCay also speaks of his departure from the vaudeville stage human touch of the artisan, of which he remained the epitome. This bale rationalized animation industry of the late teens had done away with the this and other cartoons is different from what other animators do, the but one not entirely without merit—it also implies that what he does in tions McCay as the creator of an entire type of cinema—a dubious claim, "The originator and inventor of animated drawing Winsor McCay. This the audience. Superimposed over this is a characteristically brash claim: placed by a picture of the animator himself, staring rather dolefully out at Even though McCay was only fifty-two when he made it, Bug Vaude.

The rest of the film is no less somber. A hobo enters the frame and settles down by a tree next to a rustic pond. A title card indicates that a handout of cheesecake he's gotten from an unseen woman has made him sleepy, and he's worried that it will give him queer dreams. Lying down to sleep it off, he immediately dreams that he is seated in the front row of an otherwise empty vaudeville house. (We see him there only from behind and in silhouette, as a head and shoulders and a set of applauding hands.) This now two-dimensional hobo watches a series of specialty acts—acrobats, pugilists, eccentric dancers, and the like—all of whom are bugs or spiders. Except for applauding listlessly at the end of each numbers set of the numbers of the sits completely still. Likewise, although every one of the numbers

is ostensibly incredibly athletic and energetic, each unfolds at a lethargic and monotonous pace, and the expressions on the bug performers are anything but animated.

But the existential emptiness of the piece runs deeper. Each act is bracketed by the opening and closing of curtains, and each time the stage is revealed, its elaborate backgrounds display the easy mastery of perspective and rococo detail for which McCay was famous. Yet the bug performers repeatedly undermine the stability of those backgrounds, which in one moment are clearly drop curtains and in the next seem made up of discrete three-dimensional elements on the stage where the bugs move. That is, the bugs appear to move in and out of the backdrops, actually morphing the spatial relations of the stage as they perform. To put it another way, the spatial dynamics of the stage oscillate between two dimensions and three, as if what appears there could at one moment be merely a drawing and in the next become a thing of substance, inhabiting and helping to constitute the material world.

The last number in the show is titled "The Spider and the Fly." The curtain parts and a huge spider begins to perform a very lazy trapeze act, drifting slowly back and forth from upstage to down and from side to side. No fly appears. The spider continues to swing from side to side, then back and forth. As it swings forward, out over the audience, it descends on the hobo, lifting him up into the air, seemingly intent on eating him. With an intertitled cry of "Oh Mama!" the hobo awakes . . . then slowly and silently stands and stares out at the pond. The end.

It would be easy enough to read this twelve-minute film biographically and be done with its contribution to animation hagiography. But juxtaposing the cartoon and its place in the history of American popular culture against the arc of McCay's career allows the film to speak to and for more. By 1921 the meticulous, time-consuming, largely solo-animator animation McCay practiced had been supplanted by a highly rationalized animation industry with a hierarchical division of labor, grueling production schedules, and a high weekly output (see chapter 2). For McCay, though, animation was first and foremost performative. This had certainly been true of his lightning-sketch act, traces of which remain in the live prologues of Little Nemo (1911) and Gertie (1914). Yet performance also lurks in the boastful intertitle at the beginning of Bug Vaudeville in which McCay throws down a gauntlet to other animators, dismissing what they do as somehow inhumanly mechanized.⁵ Artisan-performers such as McCay were, like the hobo in Bug Vaudeville, a slowly and quietly dying

commercial animation was becoming a fully integrated adjunct. Occupy: ning to give ground to an increasingly powerful movie industry, to which others, he seems intent on consuming the hobo, absorbing him into an and out of the indeterminate space of the stage/background; unlike the spider, like the other denizens of the bug vaudeville troupe, moves in animator, his creations, and the audience watching the performance.6 The as "animation performativity," the cocreation of the animate world by the ters to life). In this he invokes what Donald Crafton has recently described member of the audience and McCay's stand-in (he who dreams the characing an indeterminate space between house and stage, the hobo is both a breed. At the same time, vaudeville, while still quite popular, was beginelegaic, paying homage to not one but two embattled performative forms: apparently dying form of performance, and of sociality. This short film is a lively colloquy that punctured the boundaries between stage and house. ment in which performers and audience members sometimes engaged in simply another form of performance; it was a distinctly social entertainartist, part magician, and part raconteur. And vaudeville was more than it was an attraction centered around a performing animator who was part For McCay, animation was more than simply a mode of visual narrative; vaudeville generally and hand-drawn, performed animation in particular.

gic pacing and its sad sparsity. McCay was known as a master of depth of strange spatial relations of the piece are as important as its dolorous, letharartisanal production, and to the fading of vaudeville in general. But the at the outset as both its creator-it's his dream that produces the per-The hobo, the lone human figure at this performance, is acknowledged as well as those between two-dimensional and three-dimensional space. in which the boundaries between audience and performer are occluded merely strange happenstance, they present a troubled metaphysics, one two. Whether the cartoon's indeterminate backgrounds are intended or is unsettling, and it seems unlikely that he would accidentally confuse the field and spatial relations in both his still and animated work.8 In Bug move freely between the two-dimensional backgrounds and the ostensibly the performers have more volume and substance than he does, they can formers—and its consumer. Yet he himself is insubstantial: not only do Vaudeville, the confusion between the background and the plane of action three-dimensional space of the stage, while the hobo is trapped in his seat ally morph the space itself, turning curtains into a stage and vice versa. Ir and in silhouette. More than that, the movements of the performers actu-In this light, the film becomes legible as a paean to a dying mode of

the end, the tramp's creation is so powerful that it attempts to absorb him into its lethargic, chthonic realm. He dreams of the vaudeville show that will consume him: in an empty house, it preys on the last live audience member, without whom there is no show. Animation, which McCay conceived of as a performative form, had transformed before his eyes into an industry, one in which the products consumed their producers—in which animators became anonymous workers and the characters, the product, were the stars. When the product consumed its producer, the boundaries between representational realms—the painted drop, the thin sliver of the stage apron, and the "real" world of the house—collapsed. In this short tale lies a history of spatial metaphysics and material relations, of an oscillation between the factory floor and the final product, of the performance of real social change at the level of both content and form.9

EFFICIENTLY PRODUCING FUN

early animators and producers as they navigated this changing social, magloves on characters or of characters speaking directly to the audience). common we scarcely notice them today (such as the convention of putting ciency, management, and regulation that are today often grouped under undergoing a radical transformation: the industrialization that had begun tury, modes of production (and their attendant social relations) were also when motion pictures were emerging as a dominant form of entertainby a relative few practitioners, and at a very specific historical junctureplainness. Commercial animation in the United States was first created were bound to the interests, tastes, and cultural expectations of those landscape, the roots of commercial animation's aesthetics, in tropes so the sign of "Fordism." Within this rapidly changing social and material in the previous century was approaching its apotheosis in regimes of effiment. At the same time, in the first two decades of the twentieth cen-This history is rather mundane, and very important because of its very terial, and industrial landscape.

American animation came of age in a historical moment when the tensions between dying craft systems of industrial labor and an emerging rational industrial economy found their expression in regimes of efficiency (and in resistance to those regimes). The first two decades of the twentieth century witnessed a craze for popular systems of time and motion management, the two most notable of which were the "stopwatch studies" of F. W. Taylor and the self-aggrandizing time and motion cine-

of production in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries found 1948/1950]). Efficiency experts such as the Gilbreths and Taylor argued of that resistance as well. tion through the product of that process, and, strangely, the punishment rationalization, the animator performed a resistance to that rationalizahe himself had created.11 In an emergent industry increasingly subject to formed the regulation, if not punishment, of the very bad behaviors that cult character, during the course of the cartoon short the animator perlious, disobedient, and disruptive. Having intentionally created a diffianimator created a cartoon character who by its very nature was rebelperformed relationship between animators and their creations, enacted more fantastic expression of that struggle took place in animation—in the and in armed responses to those strikes by owners and by the state, a visible and often violent expression in strikes and walkouts by laborers diminuation of their humanity.10 While struggles over the rationalization in the new regimes a loss of productive freedom and in automation the Workers used to a degree of workplace autonomy, on the other hand, saw would increase productivity and the health and happiness of employees that the application of rationalized modes of management to production ized in the book and film Cheaper by the Dozen [Gilbreth and Carey/Lang matography of Lillian and Frank Gilbreth (later sentimentally memorial first on the vaudeville stage and later on-screen. In that performance, the

Animation, then, offers more than simply an example of that historical change; it is a visible (and eventually audible) expression of the struggles inherent in that process. For in the repeating themes and characters of American animation one witnesses both the violence that lay behind regimented labor and its resistance by the products of that labor. This relationship was so deeply embedded in the cartoon that when vaudeville began to yield ground to the movies, the performing animator did not go softly into the night but lived on as a signature trope, a story repeated again and again, compulsively. As the performing animator was replaced in the 1920s by the producer performing as animator, who then performed the management of the labor of animation in the public relations of the 1930s, there remained nonetheless in each iteration a performance of labor, its resistance, and its eventual subjugation—all in the service of giving life to a cartoon.¹²

INDEXICALITY AND IMMEDIACY

While it is possible to trace animation back centuries, to precinematic technologies such as the camera obscura, zoetrope, or phaenakistiscope, or to elaborations on the magic-lantern show such as Reynaud's Théâtre Optique—not to mention to the nonperformative realms of graphic arts in general and the comic strip in particular—in the United States hand-drawn animation had its public debut around the turn of the twentieth century, often in conjunction with staged performance.¹³ There, cartooning met the vaudeville stage in the form of the lightning-sketch. Popular even before the emergence of the cinema, on film the lightning-sketch act was of a piece with trick films, such as Living Playing Cards (Méliès, 1904) or The Haunted Hotel (Blackton, 1907). The lightning-sketch added the presence and mastery of the artist to early cinematic experiments in double-exposure, stop action, matte painting, and what Tom Gunning has called the "splice of substitution," all of which characterized the illusionism and misdirection of the trick film.¹⁴

ance was a hotly contested issue for the middle-class audiences vaudeville of a Jewish man-or in his and McCay's winking references to drinkshouter" or blackface minstrel and "Cohen" into a stereotypical image in the racist transformations performed in Blackton's Lightning-Sketches drag for a time). Topicality also lent a quality of immediacy to routines, as audience (or hers: early practitioner James Stuart Blackton performed in animator's hand and on the back-and-forth between the artist and his ture in an emerging industrial society—articulated through the distorwith the vagaries of meaning in a quasi-pluralist society, play with the an enduring legacy of the stage as a location for play and struggle—play stability of an image or word. This type of early animation participated in of his own drawing, revealing other meanings hidden within the apparent the artist's intervention in and disruption of the seemingly stable world chains were attempting to attract.15 The lightning-sketch always involved ing, smoking, and other vices in acts that played on stages when temper-(1907)—in which he converts the word "Coon" into the image of a "coon act of pointing to the process of making, depended on the skill of the the previously impossible alteration of time into the unreasonably fast or tion, manipulation, and puncturing of spatial boundaries and through logical invention and intervention, and play with the forces of manufacdissolving limitations of the physical world in an age of intense techno-In the lightning-sketch film, the indexicality of early animation, the

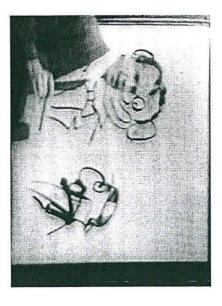


FIG. 1.2 James Stuart Blackton performs in Lightning Sketches (1907). glancing back at his audience to affirm their relationship to him as he transforms the words "Coon" and "Cohen" into racist caricatures

of what Leo Charney and Vanessa Schwartz have called the "shock of the of early animation, the means by which animators reminded audiences described as a cinema of attractions), it would continue to persist and even tive struggle to the ghetto of trick photography (and of what Gunning has ing."16 While the increasing dominance of narrative cinematic realism in morphosis is built. The audience is supposed to sense the hand intrud-Perhaps I should simply call it a meta-fable, but the subject is how metaor loss; in other words, the loss of control, the loss of the past, the loss of "All these fragments make a sum effect, a condensed narrative about decay an animorph, the trace of a performance sympathetic to that dislocation: possible transformations and with their own intruding hands, produced modern." Animators, by exposing the seams of the illusion through imthe incredibly slow. Norman Klein has described the self-consciousness flourish in drawing-based films.17 the live cinema of the decades to come would doom this sort of performarepresentation. I hesitate to call it a fable, because it is so architectonic.

With the backward glance of the artist toward the audience, the lightning-sketch film divided its diegetic space into layers of proximity to the real world: it referred simultaneously to the object being created and to a bond between the performer and the audience witnessing that creation, with the additional audience pleasure in jokes about the contemporary cultural or political issues to which the routine referred.¹⁸ The deep-

gave way to the theater where the lightning-sketch film was screened ability to make of the ideal something approximating the real—including boundary between the real and the ideal, and that the animator had the implicit understanding in this metaphysics was that there was no clear deployed a common trope of a mise en abyme that explicitly linked the alize, early animated films—that is, films involving moving drawings a space the film often shared with other, live, performances. To generimplicit, sometimes depicted. Finally, at the screen boundary the diegetic where a Blackton or McCay capered, demonstrating their mastery over the mals. The next diegetic layer was the stage on which the artist performed world of the audience) was the sketch pad or blackboard itself. There the est space of creation (that is, the diegetic space most removed from the the real of the social and material relations that obtained outside the thein the push-and-pull of maker and made, performer and audience. The all were animate beings, differing in kind and degree, but all engaged finity between the performing animator, his creations, and his audience: contiguous realms.19 Animation as performance, then, suggested an afreal of the audience to the cinematic real, and to the drawn, treating all as pad or blackboard. Next was the layer of the filmed audience, sometimes replaced, or metamorphosed into other things, other people, other anicreatures the animator drew lived for a moment before being erased and

of American animation's enduring tropes—self-reflexivity, the acknowlgorie (1908) and The Hasher's Delerium (1910).21 Yet from the perspective with its metaphysics of enlivening the inanimate, suggested a crossing convention common. But first and foremost, the form of animation itself specific to the production of animation that make this conservation of signatures that quickly became conventions. There are practical reasons acters—certain animators stand out as having introduced performative edgment of its audience, and the tricksterish resistance of its main charing George McManus's popular newspaper comic The Newlyweds for the in France as early as 1908, and by 1913 was in the United States adaptshy Emile Cohl—who produced elaborate and engaging drawn animation tence were made manifest through the animator's labor. Even camerawork suggested a spatial metaphysics in which those other planes of exismating living beings could be drawn.20 As a performance tradition, this planes of existence, regions on, into, and from which something approxi American branch of Éclair—inserted his hand into the frame in Fantasma. The work of the lightning-sketch animator offered access to other

over, a calling forth of life.²² Even if not every animator expressed his craft on the stage, animation was understood from the outset as being at least as inherently performative as it was representational.²³ This was true of Blackton, of Felix the Cat producer Pat Sullivan, and particularly of Winsor McCay at the height of his career.

THE PLAY'S THE THING

and spatially dislocated from the film's plot, an animated interlude. And ville act in the middle of a play, this dancing teddy bear scene is narratively a comic retelling of how President Theodore Roosevelt got his nickname. was a friend of McCay's, and his Vitagraph corporation shot the finished and technology, not only preceded McCay with filmed sketch acts but also American animation, as well as to early experiments in film technique which he was only one lone and somewhat peculiar practitioner. Yet there ger of drawing overly broad conclusions from a relatively small sample, Still, given how few cartoons were made before 1913 and how few films strokes before the eyes of the audience. My own almost popped out as I attend a 'chalk talk' given by the cartoonist from the Detroit 'Journal.' His its the lightning-sketch with getting him into cartoons: "I was about fifin rationalizing animation, opened his first cartoon, The Artist's Dream even John Randolph Bray, who with his wife, Margaret, played a key role which features a stop-action teddy bear dance that takes place in an indecomic strip, Edison director Edwin S. Porter made The Teddy Bears (1907). he made Dreams of Rarebit Fiend, a live film based on the popular McCay likes of Walter R. Booth and Georges Méliès.)25 Similarly, only a year after based his lightning-sketch films on works from England and France by the product of Little Nemo (1911).24 (As Crafton points out, Blackton may have are other antecedents. Blackton, who also has a strong claim to initiating making someone like McCay stand in for an emergent set of practices of an artisan like Winsor McCay made during his lifetime, there is a dancameos in McCay's film version of his stage show.27 In the American con-And although the cartoonists Tom Powers and George McManus turned watched him; and I decided that night that I, too, would be a cartoonist."26 lecture was illustrated with drawings, which he made with quick, bold teen, and we were living in a little town near Detroit, when I happened to (1912-1913), with the conceit of a sketch coming to life. Indeed, Bray credterminate space located somewhere beyond a crack in a wall. Like a vaudetheir comic strips over to other artists to be animated, even they made

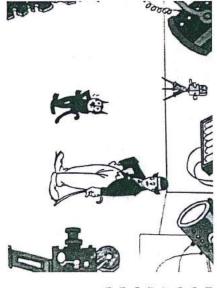


FIG. 1.3 Felix the Cat imitates Charlie Chaplin in Felix in Hollywood (1923).

a Pat Sullivan Cartoons creation that brought the two stars together.

text, at least, Blackton, and then later McCay and Bray, placed animation firmly in the tradition of the lightning-sketch, and it was widely accepted that the lines between media such as comic strips and film, and between independent texts and stage performances, were not fixed.

I was a little too young then. . . . Sullivan would come out and he would a fella, I think it was J. Stuart Blackton, he just had a face changing ex of a trick where Calardey [sic] on the other side would, the face would ani draw like a whatdoyoucallit? Gra-feet-ti, draw a face, they had some kind ville act with a fellow named George Clardey. I never saw them. Guess got his start in a lightning-sketch act: "I know he [Sullivan] had a vaudeknow-he did animate it." Messmer also claims that his boss, Pat Sullivan pressions [The Enchanted Drawing, 1900]—and the people howled, you thing moving. And the people thought it was terrific. You know. Actually showed, as one of the acts, just a one-minute film showing motion; some in those days was vaudeville; motion pictures weren't here yet. So they old. My aunt took me to a theatre in Hoboken [New Jersey], all they had later: "Moving pictures began when I was a kid . . . about six or seven years by Blackton's early efforts, about which he reported, almost seventy years move."28 Even before he caught McCay's act, Messmer had been moved ville. That was an act, you know. It was quite a thing to see drawings ville theatres," Messmer recalled, "he used to appear personally in vaude mosquito thing [How a Mosquito Operates (1912)], that ran all over vaudeearliest memories of animation was of McCay: "After he [McCay] did that well. Otto Messmer, the creator of Felix the Cat, claims that one of his That syncretism would inspire the next generation of animators as

mate. They would make a real red nose on this face and somehow or other Calardey would substitute a red balloon, blow it up."²⁹

For Messmer, film and animation were part of continuum that included vaudeville. Although Messmer is generally acknowledged as creating and drawing Felix, Sullivan, his producer, took credit for the cat, a character that became incredibly popular during the 1920s—so much so that both Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin (of whom Sullivan's studio created an animated version) sent photos of themselves to Messmer so that he could incorporate their signature gestures into the cat's repertoire. Orafton also reports that a young Keaton appeared on the same bill as McCay and Gertie and that parts of his *Three Ages* (1923) were inspired by McCay's act. 11

animation. Lightning-sketch artists, like other vaudeville performers, ensame approach marked the conventional performance of their predecesand Costello, or Burns and Allen, to name but a few; Abbott and Costello's ence through double takes and asides. (Think of Laurel and Hardy, Abbott ciate to see common sense, during which both partners enlisted the audithe running gag of the (seemingly) smarter partner failing to get his asso that vein. Likewise, the classic vaudeville two-comic act was built around interplay between the performing animator and his creation followed in gaged in colloquy with their audiences and with fellow performers, and the ditions, such as the lightning-sketch, to the development of American in the direct address to audiences by continuing characters such as Bugs the sparring between the performing animator and his creation, and later circulated and evolved between performative forms and media, including The trope of the comic duo, then, with its alloy of humor and annoyance Bones would frustrate and amuse with his willful minsunderstandings. off of Zip Coon, or that role would fall to the (white) interlocutor, whom either Tambo would take the part of the more worldly minstrel, a spinsors, blackface minstrelsy's end men Tambo and Bones. In minstrelsy, "Who's On First" routine is perhaps the act's most famous example.) The Bunny or Screwy Squirrel. This suggests, first, the importance of vaudeville's performative tra-

Beyond their conventional contribution to gag structure, these earlier stage forms played a significant role in the development of the aesthetics and styles of animators, or what Mark Langer has referred to as the "polyphony and heteregeneity" of forms that came together in American commercial animation.³² For example, Dave Fleischer—before he and his brothers founded the studio that created Ko-Ko, Betty Boop, Superman,

conventions and practices as well.36 in live cinema the two not only shared the stage, but traded performative often suggest that the movies killed vaudeville, in animation as well as hood as the Fleischers and recalled seeing McCay's Gertie at the Cretona aesthetics and later to the emerging swing music scene of the late 1920s. 35 back to the studio, the Fleischer operation was first indebted to vaudeville vaudeville theaters and jazz clubs after work, bringing what they had seen suggests that because the Fleischer animators would often adjourn to the animation technique of rotoscoping in the late teens. Norman Klein This is the costume in which he was filmed when the Fleischers developed a costume he'd made for a clowning job at Steeplechase Park in Brooklyn. his gags from vaudeville, Fleischer based the look of Ko-Ko the Clown on and the audience, the smarter half looking to the audience for support, these two-acts winkingly punctured the boundary between the performer stage and eventually appeared in films.34 Like many vaudeville routines, playing the clever half, Fields the simpleton—that began on the vaudeville fire patter. Weber and Fields were another famous comic duo-Weber Palace, I saw them. Weber and Fields were very funny."33 Timberg and An Irishman and a Jew . . . they were very funny. . . . If they played the changed programs. . . . Timburg [sic] and Rooney was a very famous act. then a comedian, then they'd have a sketch, every week or whenever they an act, something like acrobats in the beginning, then there was a singer, I watched the laughs, and I watched the reactions. . . . There always was his style and ideas: "What I enjoyed about that was watching the shows. he later recounted the influence of the vaudeville he watched there on and Popeye - worked as an usher in the Palace Theater in New York, and the vaudeville stage. Although popular histories of the rise of Hollywood Theater in the Bronx, also traced his early influences in animation back to Likewise, animator Dick Huemer, who grew up in the same neighborthe simpler half gaining it through his or her innocent goodwill. Getting Rooney were a comic two-act that combined eccentric dancing with rapid-

This genealogy of influences partially explains the convention of ongoing antagonism between so many performing animators and their creations, a tradition that continued whether the animator was onstage or not. In spite of animation's rapid industrialization, the performance of the *act* of animating continued throughout its rationalization, in the Fleischers' Out of the Inkwell series as well as in a number of the Felix shorts, Wallace Carlson's Dreamy Dud series, Walter Lantz's Pete the Pup, and elsewhere. (Producers Max Fleischer and Lantz favored appearing as

the live animator dueling with his creation; in other studios' output, a metonymic photograph of an animator's hand indicated his performative presence.) Even after the introduction of sound, performative animation continued in a reduced form, from Hugh Harman and Rudy Ising's introduction of the minstrel character Bosko as a two-man act between Bosko and Ising (1930) to Disney's public-relations performances of the father-son relationship between Walt Disney and Mickey Mouse. Animation's ongoing celebration of the technology of industrial production (which Disney made central to its public relations beginning in the 1930s) shifted performances of skill from the vaudeville stage to the behind-thescenes promotion of the animation studio as factory floor, and from the celebration of cartooning's raw labor to that of its management—but they were performances nonetheless.

When the animator or his metonymic hand appeared on-screen, though, the animated character inevitably resisted, as if embodying the frustrated labor of the animator himself. This struggle sedimented the convention established between McCay's fetishized piles of individual drawings and Emile Cohl's anonymous hand alternately aiding and tormenting Pierrot, through which the metaphysical power of animation was understood from its inception as ineluctably tied to the physical labor of its creation. The performance of animation was from the first also a performance of labor.

THE PERFORMANCE OF PREINDUSTRIAL ANIMATION

When he designed Little Nemo (1911) and Gertie (1914) McCay created the conceit that the lightning-sketch was the motivating force from which his animation sprang. There was a practical reason for this: both the fragmentary Little Nemo and Gertie were films and filmic elements in stage shows. (Compare them with his How a Mosquito Operates [1912], which, though included in his stage show, stands alone as a film.) In both films, McCay played himself as animator, a character somewhere between a circus ringmaster and the interlocutor of a blackface minstrel show, engaged in the push and pull of control and resistance. Beyond this pragmatic explanation for their narrative structure—the filmed prologues of these animated shorts replaced a stage act that was itself modeled on a lightning-sketch act in order to retain the performative thrust of the animation—the use of the familiar lightning-sketch to introduce the unfamiliar form of animation points to the ongoing tension between conservation and marginal

differentiation that marked vaudeville performance. Henry Jenkins has argued that vaudeville audiences were treated to the pleasure of repetition in the form of familiar jokes, songs, and routines and took yet more pleasure in witnessing the innovative skill with which individual performers remade familiar acts.³⁸ Likewise, McCay presented a new marvel (animation) via a comforting context (the lightning-sketch).

as if they actually emerged ex nihilo there on the stage. details of animation's production, reducing it to the simple act of drawa solitary occupation. These apparent acts of revelation also occlude the precede the social event at which the bet is won (a generic social gathertwo distinct ways of presenting the act of animation. The prologues that of the drawn. These performance films offered the spectacle of melding seeming to ride off on the dinosaur's back, leaving the "real" world for that sketch that comes to life. Gertie also ends with the stage trick of McCay is revealed to his friends, and to an appreciative audience, as a lightning drawings, aided only by bumbling assistants. Finally, the finished product mation, portraying McCay as a lone craftsman toiling over thousands of ings come to life. A series of scenes then lays out the intense labor of anistar John Bunny, McCay makes a bet about his ability to make still drawfellow artists such as George McManus and Tom Powers or comic film the direct descendant of the lightning-sketch and presenting the cartoons itself, contradicts the prologue's focus on labor by framing animation as ing.39 Yet the scene of the bet's payoff, a framing device for the animation ing for Nemo, a formal dinner for Gertie) depict animation as a craft and The setup for his early pieces was simple: socializing with friends and

Ultimately, both of these frames—the prologue and the payoff—present animation as performative. Yet one offers that performance as the revelation of otherwise invisible labor, the other as the visible performance of drawing skill elevated to the level of magic. More specifically, the performance of the bet's payoff effaces that of the work that preceded it, replacing images of protracted labor with those of instantaneous leger-demain. McCay's performance for his friends suggests that animation is simply a lightning-sketch performed in long form, over months instead of minutes, and this gesture creates a historical continuity between the practices of the lightning-sketch and of film animation, effectively erasing the break between performative and productive practices that McCay had announced in earlier scenes. This origin story grounded in the labor of animation hints at the potential anonymity of the laboring animator, yet the device of the lightning-sketch attenuates that danger by relocating



FIG. 1.4 Winsor McCay performs the labor of animation for Little Nemo (1911) on a movie set that does not attempt to appear real.

the product of that labor as still under the control of McCay as a performing animator.

gially present in McCay's winking address to the camera which these cartoons premiered have become gestural referents, vesti film audience. The audiences who would have attended the live shows at to greet them . . . and so when she bows, it is both to them and to the he is performing for his friends, Gertie because she has been ordered Gertie acknowledge the presence of outside observers-McCay because at the beginning of the film, and an implicit audience: us. Both he and into fore-, middle-, and background), an on-screen audience that appears his magic in a liminal zone between drawn space (itself further divided to his friends. Occupying a space that is obviously a stage, McCay works inforce the sense that those scenes are set within a proscenium, as does payoffs in both films, and the framing and composition of the shots, rewalls and its giant barrels indexically marked "INK" (like the huge bales obvious stage set, right down to its shaky trompe l'oeil flats depicting competing planes of cinematic space. Unlike the relatively more realistic McCay's declamatory mode of address when he presents his creations labeled "paper" in Little Nemo). Likewise, the design of the sets for the bet (1919-1928), McCay's "studio" in his framing narrative was a patently office set that the Fleischers would use for their Out of the Inkwell series McCay also presented this spectacle as a complex interaction between

Although at first glance the space of the studio and the space of the din-

ner might seem contradictory—one the space of a budding cinematic realism, the other closer to declamatory vaudeville—they are joined through McCay's performance: each is ultimately structured as a location for a vaudeville sketch, with what narrative there is in service of the gag. In the first, he demonstrates with significant self-reflexivity that his labor is invested in the thousands of drawings he has produced. In the second, that labor becomes manifest as the motive force behind a lightning-sketch that can live and change without the constant intervention of his hand. That hand had intervened already in the studio, and all that is required now is that he reinvoke its mastery through spoken commands. As John Canemaker has suggested, Winsor McCay was proud of his control over the products of his own labor, and Gertie in particular was its embodiment, obedient yet willful. The conceit of the lightning-sketch cemented this relationship, as McCay performed the act of creation in long form, with his own body on the stage the embodiment of his drawing hand in motion.

That tension between obedience and willful resistance is important. Gertie's momentary petulance when she ignores a command, as she does several times during the short film, is a performance at a distance: having made a great show of creating Gertie, McCay now seemingly cannot fully control the product of his own labor—or he has created her resistance so that he may reassert that control after losing it.41 That performance of control, of course, hinges on his ability to penetrate animate space, which itself depends on the permeability of the plane that separates the drawn world from the cinematic real. At the historical moment of its performance in the early teens, the control that McCay performed was passing from the individual artisan to the manager who oversaw increasingly divided labor: it is a performance of control being lost and a fantasy of it being regained.

EARLY CARTOON MODERNITY: GERTIE ON BROADWAY

From its opening sequence, *Gertie*, made seven years before *Bug Vaudeville* and arguably one of the founding texts of American animation, celebrates rather than mourns the performance of individual skill and of labor. The film opens with a lugubrious pan of the exterior of the American Museum of Natural History in New York and an equally slow establishing shot of McCay, fellow newspaper cartoonist George McManus, and other friends, riding in an open car. Fortuitously (an intertitle tells us), they get a flat



FIG. 1.5 Winsor McCay, in the style of a lightning-sketch artist, glances at the camera as he pretends that a still drawing of his dinosaur, Gertie, is animated in the live prologue to Gertie (1914).

tire outside the museum, and while their driver fixes it the friends tour the dinosaur exhibit. The group pauses to admire the skeleton of an apatosaurus (identified as a "dinosaurus"). Within moments, McCay has bet McManus that he can create an animated film of the dinosaurus in six months' time. So, the framing narrative for the film leaves the hurly-burly of Manhattan's streets to contemplate a relic that is located in an evolutionary time frame, then proceeds with a bet that has a time limit of six months. Time is of the essence. This is followed by a sequence of scenes portraying those six months in which we witness McCay single-handedly producing the ten thousand drawings required to bring Gertie to life, showing off the drawings to McManus, then revealing the completed film to his friends at a formal dinner party.

But McCay doesn't actually reveal a film to them. Instead he proceeds in the fashion of a vaudeville lightning-sketch act, first drawing his dinosaur on a blank pad of paper. Challenged that he had promised to make it move, McCay tears the drawing off the pad, revealing a rocky paleolithic landscape. He leans in and draws the snout of his dinosaur peeking shyly out from between some rocks, then invites her to come out. Having introduced this performance as operating somewhere between the pace of evolution (or extinction and fossilization) and that of the rapid new technology of film, McCay recapitulates the importance of time to his narrative by invoking another popular amusement. He offers up a lightning-

sketch—the magical revelation of an artist's skill in transforming one object or person into another in real time—as an evolutionary precursor to animation... a craft that itself requires laborious operations that unfold over months (instead of seconds) and that he has just demonstrated in the framing narrative.

off into the distance. In that final sequence the film changes from a study screen with a whip in his hand, climbing onto Gertie's back and riding end of the film, McCay seems to clamber into a corner of the sketch pad emerge from her cave and perform tricks for us at McCay's bidding. At the and imagination, and in the end the animator who created it slips into its are witnessing the reanimation of the extinct and the performance of the time frame and blindingly fast in an evolutionary one (remember that we this with the labor of animation, which is achingly slow in a performative tive time and its immediacy relative to longer time frames. It contrasts this shift encapulates the historical moment when the film was made. It in time to one that troubles space. Far from being disjunctive, though prehistoric world.⁴² The film is also a demonstration of the intense labor mation as magic: a long-extinct creature is brought to life through skill evolution of new technologies of amusement). The performance is anipresents to its audience an understanding of the linearity of performaing toward extinction. product that is kittenish in its playful disobedience and massively lumber magical powers, yet he then embodies and occludes that labor in a final documentary medium that reveals the labor lurking behind the hand's hand of the animator to overcome geologic time, and he uses film as the drawing in the form of a reanimated dinosaur. He uses the omnipotent main of the lightning-sketch and animation's repetitive task of iterative the magic of animation by embodying the tension between the legerde tailed drawing, and careful filming. Winsor McCay has chosen to perform behind that magic: the act of animation requires months of planning, de-Cutting to a close-up that obscures the framing story, we watch Gertie

In the film, McCay seems to be in colloquy with the creation on his lightning-sketch easel, and he creates the illusion that the projection screen itself is a permeable giant sketch pad that permits him passage between the drawn and real worlds.⁴³ Even more, perhaps, than in the live version of his show, he presents himself as a master of time and space and of everything that dwells within the world he creates. In the filmic version, we are reminded of this at moments such as when he appears to feed Gertie—playing with scale by tossing a large pumpkin in to her from

the stage, which then appears the size of a pea when she catches it in her mouth—with the bonus of having witnessed in the act's preamble the intense labor that went into creating that illusion. In this, *Gertie* offers up a crystallization of tropes that were already becoming conventional in the emerging form of film animation: the permeability of the screen surface, the performing animator as animating force, and the animated creature's awareness of its creator, its audience, and its own production. These performed gestures link a celebration of the intense creative labor of the craft to its fluid temporal and spatial metaphysics.

This was an evanescent moment, passing even as it emerged. While McCay celebrated his mastery over the cartoon world onstage, other animators and producers, such as Earl Hurd, Raoul Barré, Bill Nolan, Gregory La Cava, Paul Terry, and John and Margaret Bray, were laying the practical, technical, and hierarchical groundwork for an animation industry that would mass-produce this magic for a growing movie market. Indeed, in the same year that McCay produced Gertic, the Brays began hiring animators (as workers) to put out their Colonel Heeza Liar series (1913–1924). And while producers in the emerging live-feature market were articulating norms of narrative continuity that would consign gestures toward screen permeability and the fluid relationship between performed and textual space, such as those practiced by McCay and Gertie, to the ghetto of trick photography, McCay was still drawing attention to the metaphysics of animate space and its ineluctable link to the labor of creating it.⁴⁴

At a historical moment when the social spaces of entertainment were being transformed (such as from vaudeville theaters and nickelodeons into movie palaces) and the social spaces of work were also undergoing radical change (through the rise of the Fordist factory), McCay's was a performance that ran against the grain of modernity even as it celebrated its advances. To reiterate, in the teens and early twenties, the United States witnessed a popular mania for tropes of efficiency and rationalization that linked time and space through the figure of the laboring body.⁴⁵ In industrial management, F. W. Taylor had popularized "stopwatch studies" of workers' movements, and Lillian and Frank Gilbreth then made films that charted the flow of work against the organization of work spaces, calling their research "time and motion study" (see chapter 2). Yet McCay's stubbornly preindustrial practices—he drew the action for virtually every frame himself, and (for his early films) on rice paper, not celluloid—actually flew in the face of efficiency. (In this vein, Scott

under the ultimate control of their creators. These film shorts were profworkers and his creation, eventually escaping into the drawn world he individual drawings into an assistant's arms, higher and higher, until filmic preamble to Gertie's appearance, McCay's cinematographer piles mocked the pretensions of time and motion study by appending chaos to Bukatman has argued that in works such as Little Sammy Sneeze, McCay at the same time as films produced in the industrial mode, the fantastic in which they emerged. Yet even though this preindustrial film was made that inhabited it as themselves performative: malleable, permeable, and preindustrial animated films presented drawn space and the creatures has created. Like the lightning-sketch that McCay invokes in Gertie, the the animator be ever-present in the frame, directing and controlling his form, McCay's is an obstinately inefficient system, one that requires that the pile falls to the ground, hopelessly shuffled. At least in its fantasy the slow-motion study of Sammy's sneeze and its aftermath.) 46 In the live very beginning. industry, a standardized celebration of a relation largely fantastic from its became a durable convention in the products of the emerging animation relation between the animator and his creation that McCay performed fered as artisanal products crafted to the particulars of the time and place

performance than as a practical reality), to the systematic and highly orgasaving techniques as well. (It is worth noting that McCay made a great both the talent and the willingness to engage in intense artistic labor; as a steady supply of product on a reliable schedule. The form's requirement of was a boutique version of animation not well adapted to producing a reproduction (the lithographic and later xerographic mass production of ment of successive images on a drawing surface or photographic stage), flurry of patents for improved techniques of registration (the stable aligneventually, by departments of tracing, inking, and so on. From 1914 on, a of animators, themselves supported by journeymen and apprentices and nized production of animated shorts, with a producer managing a group directing a collection of amateur assistants (which had existed more as a was effectively reorganized from an artisanal model, with a sole animator for his performances.)47 Within a few years in the midteens, animation deal of his money performing, earning in some years over \$1,500 a week for-profit business with a very tight margin, it demanded labor and timeing about seven minutes of film) effectively limited the field to those with thousands of drawings for even a short film (ten thousand drawings yield-From the perspective of distribution and exhibition, McCay's approach





Libraries, Karnes Archives and Special Collections. motion study of a typist, c. 1914. Courtesy of Purdue University FIG. 1.6 Lillian and Frank Gilbreth's set for a cinematic time and

drawings into McCay's assistant John Fitzsimmons's arms, FIG. 1.7 Winsor McCay's cinematographer and his assistant pile performing the material enormity of the task of making Gertie (1914).

> accumulation of animators' labor power in the hands of their managers signal the consolidation and control of the industry by producers and the and licensing, beyond indicating the rapid rationalization of animation, rapid technological developments, and their regulation through patents was performed into an industry that performed its performativity. These in many mass-produced cartoons as well McCay adapted from the vaudeville stage quickly became standard tropes Yet in spite of this, or perhaps because of it, the performative conventions This intense legal and technical activity effectively transformed a craft that use of celluloid ["cels"] instead of rice paper) contributed to rationalizing backgrounds), and materials (from inks and their carrier solutions to the the production of animation and to intensified commercial competition.

a purer or more genuine form of animation. What is more important is cess of popular performance at the turn of the last century, and in this way ments. The reappropriation of conventions and tropes was hardly unidisuch as burlesque and blackface minstrelsy.48 Indeed, just as performed conventions circulated and metamorphosed between media over time. rectional: borrowing and reworking material was part of the creative provaudeville, burlesque, and minstrelsy coexisted at different historical moanimation overlapped with its mass-produced cinematic "descendant," so developed them from their antecedents in popular stage entertainments, he adapted them from others on the vaudeville stage, who had in turn tion. McCay didn't invent these conventions; like any other show person, ents in staged animation, and all became enduring tropes in film animato, but different from, that of the cinematic real—all have their antecedcharacter and its creator, and a metaphysics of time and of space linked permeability of screen boundaries, the interplay between the animated the conventions McCay celebrated in his early films—self-reflexivity, the dustrialization. Yet in spite of the brevity of that interval, a number of ans of animation mark as its beginning in the United States and its inthat only a few scant years (at most) passed between what most historiromantically glorify McCay's idiosyncratic style as somehow producing vation and origin that crowds around every story of invention. Nor is it to The point here is not to rehearse the tiredly glorious narrative of inno-

whence some of its most enduring conventions derive—its self-reflexivity, back toward a variety of staged entertainments, particularly vaudeville boundaries (either the screen surface or the borders of the frame)—leads the playful trickery of its trademark characters, its puncturing of screen Thus, revisiting the origins of American animation and considering

These tropes were established not only in the practical and theoretical working out of how to draw convincing narrative cinematic space, or how to model realistic motion and form, but also in the live performance of manufacturing, the demonstration of artisanal mastery in creating and controlling ostensibly living beings.⁴⁹ That this performance of animation featured the labor and materials of animation also hints at why the American cartoon, as living commodity, found its most durable form in a precursor to vaudeville, blackface minstrelsy.

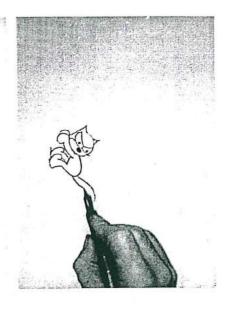
HOW ARE YOU TODAY, MR. BONES?

and thwarted. Writing about morphing in cinema, Vivian Sobchack astion wherein the possibility of transformation is simultaneously evoked seeming immutability and absolute plasticity, a tense locus of contradictasy of effortless change that they seem to thwart-all find their apomous self. It is a compressed and localized narrative in which all of the about becoming and changing, about becoming an ostensibly autonoated stories people who participate in cinematic, Western cultures tell the metamorphic act simultaneously encompasses the historically situinvolves some degree of hesitation, difficulty, and effort." For Sobchack, familiarly strange insofar as the realization of most of our conscious acts tence is something transparently operational and continuous to us, undeeply uncanny: strangely familiar insofar as much of our physical exisserts that "the morph's effortless and elastic ease at 'realizing' itself is and its frustration and constraint. The minstrel is a meeting place for embodies both the American fantasy of self-invention and refashioning Far from arbitrary in its signification, the minstrel, animate or otherwise. effortful process of one's birth and then in the effortful progress of one's time and space as the culmination of a laborious business-first in the theosis in the morph: "Thus, in human terms, being is narrativized in hesitations and obstacles, the impediments to our desires - and the fanrecognizability. Invoking the Bakhtinian chronotope, the intersection of tion-those moments of either/or and neither/nor-as from a space of speaks to us as much from the lacunae lurking within its transforma-Like Klein's animorph, Sobchack's morph (the thing metamorphosing) quick physical change in space, and effortless transformation in time."50 throughout Western literature, marked as it is by the sudden appearance life. Hence the uncanniness of metamorphosis as it is figured generally time and space through language, to name the experience of metamor.

> quick-change, the lightning-sketch, the transformation by hats, the blackand remaking was presented, critiqued, celebrated, and parodied.54 The bility of human existence expressed in the American Creed of self-making of stage and screen in the early twentieth century, the purported mutasibility in which, between the technologies and performative conventions slipped the yoke of their own ethnicity and even winkingly celebrated it.53 and self-transformation were the ideological currency of the early twenface minstrel, and Felix the Cat's detachable tail were all of a piece. Yet despite those exceptions, what Rogin invokes is a shared fantastic sen-Cantor or Jolson, despite their successes in blackface (and out), never fully class advancement than for ethnic revision, and Jewish minstrels such as performers such as Eddie Leonard also blacked up with greater regard for roots seemed to allow.52 Yet, as some of Rogin's critics have pointed out, invent themselves as (at least marginally) whiter than their immigrant Cantor, and Al Jolson, blacking up or "coon shouting" was a way to remigrants in the entertainment industry, such as Sophie Tucker, Eddie the vernacular arts. For example, as Rogin has suggested, for Jewish imtieth century, and that fantasy found its popular expression throughout tio Alger and Dale Carnegie, fantasies of self-making, self-improvement, cult process of personally becoming/being.51 In an era bounded by Horaattraction of the morph as a condensation of the discontinuous and diffiphosis in twentieth- and twenty-first-century arts, Sobchack describes the

Of course, as both Rogin and his critics have suggested, that mutability was not experienced equally by all. Even if the act of blacking up offered Jewish entertainers access to previously foreclosed precincts of whiteness, or provided ostensibly white entertainers performing in German, Irish, or Chinese acts further distance from the stigmata of ethnicity, to be African American was to stand as the baseline against which the relative mutability of others could be gauged, both onstage and off. Nowhere was this contradiction more evident than in the oxymoronic dictum "separate but equal" enshrined in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896): African Americans were by law understood to be simultaneously the same as, yet immutably different from (and implicitly less than) others.⁵⁵

Within the melange of transformational performances that filled the vaudeville and theater stages at the turn of the twentieth century (including in movies), the seeming immutability of black skin added a transgressive frisson to blackface minstrelsy and its adjuncts. To black up was to invoke that immutability in the service of vernacular metamorphosis and in the process to reinforce its apparent impossibility for African Americans.





Messmer, draws Felix the Cat, who impatiently awaits his FIG. 1.8 A photograph of a hand, presumably that of Otto

under the burnt cork in Wonder Bar (1934). FIG. 1.9 Al Jolson makes a visual joke about the ethnicity completion as a highly mutable animated minstrel.

> expected to transform themselves as they became American.57 whether live or animated, always invoked the thingness lurking behind being Human, that from which, as Sobchack reminds us, Americans were imagined to be created in and through the act of animation, the minstrel ing state they were minstrels. Like the plasmatic material that Eisenstein popular continuing characters could have become anything, in their restmatter what it becomes—for its trademark continuing characters. While minstrel to provide the prima materia—that which is always also itself no in the turn-of-the-twentieth-century United States turned to the blackface ingly limitless possibilities morphing afforded it, commercial animation the infinite; the morph can become anything imaginable. For Bukatman, specificity, while morphing extends its possibilities beyond the specific to ways: minstrelsy, he claims, is always grounded in racial and historical share a playful relationship to regimes of similarity and difference—part that makes morphing a "caricature of blackface." 56 Yet despite the seem-According to Bukatman, this is where minstrelsy and animation—which

was its visual equivalent. Just as Blackton could in a few strokes conver and wonder through the apparent free association between one image and of entertainments in which ideas and conventions were worked and reformability to other purposes: the minstrel could demonstrate the plasticity of spoken language, its de the words "Coon" and "Cohen" into their derogatory visual equivalents played on the free association of words and ideas, and the lightning-sketch tween minstrelsy's interlocutor and end men, Tambo and Bones, had also the next, the transformation of one thing into another.58 The repartee bening of the twentieth century. Lightning-sketch animators such as J. S. worked, adapted and revised. American animation shared the stage with ville, and minstrelsy were all part of an early twentieth-century matrix Blackton, Pat Sullivan, and Winsor McCay developed a language of humor blackface minstrelsy, where both were performed/practiced at the beginmative conventions of vaudeville and minstrelsy. Rather, cartoons, vaude-All of which is to say, animation was not simply influenced by the perfor-

INTERLOCUTOR. — In what aesthetic garden of thought does your TAMBO, leaning on his head and meditating mind now wander?

TAMBO. - Eh?

INT.—You were meditating; and while gazing on your mobile face, I was forcibly reminded of a painting I once saw, representing—

BONES (interrupting). — The Russian bear driving the Hungry-uns from Turkey.

TAMBO. — There you go, rushin' your nose where your mouth shouldn't

BONES (to audience).—Were he a Turk, he would gobble it.

INT. — Bear with me gentlemen (reprovingly to Bones); and it would at such an unseasonable juncture. better become you, sir, not to strut your unsolicited wit before us

BONES.—All right; I'll set still and do eggsactly as you say

INT.—Very well. Now, Tambo, I will repeat my question: What were you meditating upon . . . ? 59

struggles between Russia, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the failing In this short exchange, dated roughly 1880, the interlocutor, Tambo, and required contemporary and historical knowledge, a pleasure in the mugobbling, strutting, and laying eggs. As with the lightning-sketch, the gag powers carving up the Baltic region into a gaggle of puns about turkeys Ottoman Empire into a reverie about eating, thence from a tale of world Bones play with double entendre, converting recent news of alliances and minstrel performed as an engine of metamorphosis. performers and audience members. Representing immutability itself, the tability of terms, and a quick facility with language on the parts of both

a tension between the real and the ideal resident in black bodies was remedium. By the turn of the century, with the stand-alone minstrel show beginning of the twentieth century as much as it changed venue and ville was perhaps the first, but not the last. The rise of Bert Williams and in decline and vaudeville absorbing minstrel acts, the blackface fantasy of elaborate stage spectacles with names like In Dahomey (1902), Abyssinia and well-paid performers of any race, Williams and the Walkers mounted can performers of the early 1900s, and by 1910 some of the most famous shows, is a case in point. Without doubt the most famous African Ameribined minstrelsy with the Broadway musical to create elaborate stage George and Ada Overton Walker, who, after a start in vaudeville, comlocating to an emerging complex of mass entertainments, of which vaudeblackface minstrel character known for his self-abnegating routines, slow to and erased a black body wearing burnt cork. Ada Overton Walker was takes, and songs such as "Nobody" (from Abyssinia), which drew attention (1906), and Bandannaland (1908). In these programs, Williams played a Viewed in this light, the minstrel show did not go into decline at the

> American authenticity. between African Americans and Africans, and with fantasies of African split their dramatic action between the United States or Europe and the and raconteur George Walker. 60 Williams and Walker shows, which often African continent, played with the substantial and mythical relationships for popularizing the cakewalk, as was her husband, the comedian, dancer, particularly famous for her version of Salome's dance of the seven veils and

as the form itself was fading. This widespread sentiment was echoed repeatedly, as in this review of the same tour: the troupe straying from the stereotypical conventions of minstrelsy, even fusion of body and soul, a fantasy used in this instance to complain about can negro, who sings from the heart out, dances with his whole soul and and amusing and which only they can portray—we mean the real Ameri-"real American negro" of which the reviewer speaks was imagined as a voices his droll and leisurely philosophy of life with such unction."61 The of them. . . . So it seems a waste of effort that they should try for such seemed to properly perform "the Negro" and criticized when it seemed to [Broadway] effects and meanwhile deprive us of so much that is both true ing of Abyssinia there: "The show is creditable, but it is not representative veer from expectation, as in the comments of a Chicago critic on the open-It was through those terms that the company was praised when it

rollicking humor of the black man of all time . . . they constructed a melodies and characteristic dances of the colored race, the laughing, into the foreground the barbaric splendor of middle Africa, the simple he tries to speak, do, and look like a white man that he is at his worst. so heartily that every one within earshot must laugh too. . . . It is when go-lucky fellow who can rattle a pair of bones, pick a banjo, and laugh loose-jointed copy of a Broadway musical comedy. That is the reason Abyssinia failed last night. . . . Instead of bringing in the world. He can sing simple melodies to perfection. He is a happypossible as long as he remains a negro. He is the most natural dancer Nobody will deny that a negro can be one of the most amusing persons

audiences to see African American performers enact its stereotypes rearticle in Theatre Magazine in 1906 titled "The Real Coon on the American speak back to stereotype even as they confirmed its underlying logic. In an Walkers were astute performers and business people and knew how to mained strong enough to border on a command. Yet Williams and the Even if the blackface minstrel show was in decline, the desire of white

Stage," George Walker recounted that as he and Williams developed their act, "Bert and I watched the white 'coons' and were often much amused at seeing white men with black cork on their faces trying to imitate black folks. Nothing about these white men's actions was natural, and therefore nothing was as interesting as if black performers had been dancing and singing their own songs in their own way."62 Even as he mocked white minstrels, Walker affirmed a notion of the superior naturalness of African Americans as "coons." Likewise, in the lead-up to a run of Abyssinia in Toledo, Ohio, Walker told the Toledo Blade:

I attribute our success to our knowledge that to please an audience we must give them the real negro character. Few negroes will burlesque their own race; in fact, we don't have to be burlesqued if we stick to nature. That's where the average darkey loses out. We know that when we try to act like white folks, the public won't have us; there are enough bad white actors now. . . . There is no reason why we should be forced to do all these old-time nigger acts. It's all rot, this slap-stick-bandanna handkerchief-bladder in the face act, with which negro acting is associated. It ought to die out and we are trying hard to kill it.⁶³

"white" and "black" acting, an insult couched in self-deprecation, should celebrity. Yet at the same time, the "burlesque" Walker invokes seems in the worst of racist stereotypes demonstrates even more the reach of his indicate the degree of the troupe's fame in 1907. His claim to want to end after George Walker's sudden and tragic death in 1911, the New York Times gently but firmly resisting reductive minstrel-based stereotypes, soon produce a burlesque. Yet even after several more years of fame, and of those self-same racist fantasies, in which sticking to nature will of itself one light to be of actual African American life and culture, in another of Walker's gentle yet provocative dig at the policing of boundaries between negro": "The same fault is to be found with this entertainment that has treated Ada Overton Walker to a review of her new show, His Honor: The erness of the performers. Had it not been for the characteristic staging of imitate white performers and very little attempt at showing the racial clev-Barber, that scolded her company for straying from the fantasy of the "real of an indifferent burlesque company."64 the choruses the performers for the most part might have been members been found with numerous other negro shows. There is too much effort to

Ada Overton's mistake, it seemed, and the mistake of other popular "negro shows" of the day, was in turning their backs on their native racial

when a strange unassimilated element exists in a nation, it almost imof the original white minstrel performers but because of the African was the original American art. And, he continued, it was so not because can comic spirit; and syncopation or 'rag-time,' an African contribution. is Negro music. Minstrelsy is now firmly imbedded [sic] in the Ameriminstrelsy. The only music that may be regarded as typically American developed in this country is of plantation origin; I refer, of course, to Bert Williams put it in 1910: "The one new stage form which has been ments but at the expense of exuberance and unbridled physicality. As the less native and more European stagecraft, admitting of finer sentimeant to imitate white performers, the assumption being that theirs was jos, bones, and in the end, the cakewalk. Much less was said about what it cleverness, which found its best expression through stump speeches, banself a minstrel, collapsed Jim Crow and "his fellows" into the first Amerithrough them all, without losing his ability to entertain."65 Williams, himthe Italian. . . . But the negro, an unamalgamated element, has persisted lows. Then with succeeding waves of immigration came the Irishman and So the first American comic role was the negro-'Jim Crow' and his felmediately finds its way to the stage in comic types, usually caricatured Americans they imitated: "My observation has led me to the theory that plantation, the minstrel show and its attenuated forms, Williams claimed has tinged all the popular balladry of this generation." Deriving from the ence to the powerful tropes of assimilation and the plantation fantasy of ness of "the negro," is well within reach. 67 Yet at the same time its defersentiment as perhaps a little parodic, as playing on the very constructed discussed at length, it seems reasonable to assume that a reading of this and the Walkers offered to budding nonminstrel talent in New York in the tain because he could not assimilate.66 Given the support that Williams stereotype and actual African American life, could still (and always) enter-The "negro," unamalgamated and existing somewhere between comic that amalgamation lost something essentially comic about themselves. hinted, "amalgamated" into whiteness eventually, and in the process of can comic role, "the negro." The waves of immigration that followed, he it seemed to call into question. African American life could reaffirm for a white audience the very terms predawn of the Harlem Renaissance, which Chude-Sokei and others have

Why, in a discussion of the animated minstrel, this detour to examine a single troupe, only one of whom was a minstrel, that seemed to defy stereotype even as they played in and with it? First, to demonstrate

that although the traditional minstrel troupe may have been in decline in the early 1900s, the blackface minstrel continued in related performance forms. But more than that, the discourse around the relative "realness" of Williams's and the Walkers' performances of fantastic African and African American characters offers an example of the persistence of the minstrel as a fantastic trickster figure, one still in active circulation at the dawn of American commercial animation. That persistence begins to suggest why, when animation producers developed characters that appeared to tread the boundary between the fantastic and the real, coherent expressions of a metamorphic, plasmatic, prime material, they might turn to the minstrel for a model.

On the vaudeville stage of the early twentieth century, as Jenkins has pointed out, not only was mutability important, but interchangeability between forms of performance was key.⁶⁸ Animation acts were but one of a variety of bits that made up any vaudeville program. Alongside the dog acts, the acrobats, dancers, and comics, there were also "Dutch" (German). Irish, "Hebrew," and blackface minstrel acts.⁶⁹ As Williams hinted in 1910, in a performance style that had its roots in working-class burlesques, a shared experience of oppression ideally allowed one to laugh at being stereotyped, because in theory everyone else in the theater had also gone through it at one point or another. The transformational ethos extended to what contemporary celebrants of the form described as vaudeville's "democratic impulse": the vaudeville house was imagined as a melting pot unto itself in both its transformational acts and (save for segregation) in the nearly free mixing of its patrons.⁷⁰

Yet the mutability that vaudeville, animation, and minstrelsy shared was not shared equally, and the transformation of ideal forms took place against a seemingly fixed backdrop of imagined "real" blackness. The early minstrel show had been a peculiar animal, one in which the usually white performers who blacked up had traditionally claimed that they were reenacting genuine dances and songs that they (or their forebears) had witnessed slaves perform on southern plantations. Later minstrels, such as Eddie Leonard, who got his big break in George Primrose's troupe in 1903, or Al Jolson, who joined Lew Dockstader's spinoff from Primrose in 1905, maintained the conceit that the African Americans they caricatured were nostalgic, nineteenth-century throwbacks, denizens of the plantation or the Ethiopian show, or northern dandies such as Zip Coon or Jim Dandy. Even the African American minstrel troupe Brooker and Clayton's Georgia Minstrels touted a heritage that traced back to the planta-



Plantation l'anjo Nong.

Plantation l'anjo Nong.

Plantation l'anjo Nong.

Plantation l'anjo Nong.

Perce Duet.—Walk in Joe

Ol' Zip Coun.

Raynor, Pierce, Vaughn, Abbott, and Genere Christy
Plantation Jig.

Raynor, Pierce, Vaughn, Abbott, and Genere Christy
Rail Koud Overture.

Raynor, Pierce, Vaughn, Abbott, and Genere Christy
Rail Koud Overture.

Full Pand
Picas une Kutler.

The 'stalfrom the South.

L. V. H. Crosby
Medley ('hiruts.

Compa',
Parewell Ladres.

Farewell Ladres.

Farewell Ladres.

Christy
Parewell Ladres.

Christy
Congo Green Dance with Specimens of Ethopian Status y.

Peirce & G. Christy

FIG. 1.10 A detail from a playbill for Christy's Minstrels, which promises to portray the "Peculiar Characteristics of the Southern Plantation Negroe." Courtesy of the Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

tion, with many of its members claiming (truthfully or not) to be former slaves.⁷²

Because minstrelsy traded on access to an imagined blackness for its aura of authenticity (particularly in its early days), it was a performance form built on the free appropriation (i.e., theft) of others' material—first from (real or imagined) African Americans and then from other minstrel troupes—yet it conventionally stressed an intimate knowledge of the transitory routes between the real and the ideal.⁷³ At the same time, the figure of the minstrel pointed to the black body as an object available for (re)use, like the clothing that T. D. Rice borrowed from Cuff, and this idea circulated beyond the bounds of minstrelsy proper. And that black person, that black body, was always understood as socially less than but performatively more than his white counterpart. The interlocutor lorded it over Tambo and Bones, but they always had the last laugh. So it would be with the animated minstrel—the tug-of-war between interlocutor and end men became one between animator and animated.

a practice of marginal differentiation, the changing of a bit or routine diacy," a hook, an instant identificatory link to the material.75 Performers complained about that appropriation.74 And with that borrowing came one of the central organizing principals in vaudeville was theft: percirculating cultural goods in both burlesque and vaudeville. To be blunt depended on this fantasy of fungibility: the very authenticity of the mawould be transformed in a given bit. Like the notion of "folk" art originatmisdirection, and identification-knowing the material but not how it trademark voices, gestures, and tics. Audience pleasure lay in recognition. and ethnic stereotypes-and branded the familiar as their own through built on known tropes - popular songs, current events, hot dances, racial tural information was central to the experience of vaudeville theatergoing was just as important as its uniqueness, and the sharing of common cul formers regularly poached material from each other and just as regularly mized minstrelsy fed into and was supported by an assumption of freely his/her lack of control over his/her/its own person. The continuing ani the originary performer behind the blackface minstrel depended on its, terial was its denial of absolute possession; likewise, the very realness of ing nowhere but in the ethos of a people, the stuff of variety performance It provided both legibility and what Jenkins has called "affective imme the audience's recognition of a bit's origins, conventions, and references just enough to fend off accusations of outright lifting. In this practice The real and feigned appropriation of black performance that legiti

mated character was built the same way: seemingly autonomous, its freedom was the fantastic construction of its maker, its rebellious nature a manufactured nod toward its ultimate constraint.

Gesturing toward empirical authenticity yet free to ignore nascent regimes of social-scientific falsification, ministrelsy and its descendants offered up a fantastic liminal realm between civilization and savagery, a realm where animation was happy to lease property. This faux anthropology operated on a continuum with the Zulu shows and traveling exhibits of native villages popular in the world's fairs at the turn of the century. Even George Walker and Bert Williams performed the anthropologist. Pitching their new African-themed review In Dahomey (1902), Walker explained its origins:

In 1893, natives from Dahomey, Africa, were imported to San Francisco to be exhibited at the Midwinter Fair. They were late in arriving ... and Afro-Americans were employed and exhibited for native Dahomians. Williams and Walker were among the sham native[s].... After the arrival of the native Africans, the Afro-Americans were dismissed ... [but] we were permitted to visit the natives from Africa ... and the study of those natives interested us very much. [We decided] that if we ever ... [had] a show of our own, we would delineate and feature African characters.⁷⁷

The distance between the African folk Williams and Walker studied and the characters they derived from them, and the indissoluble bond between the two, even as it reinforced their performance of mastery over racial charade, bound them to a fantasy of immutable originary blackness.

DRAWING THE COLOR LINE

As the reviews of this and other of their shows indicate, that delineation had in some degree to align with prevailing ideas of what blackness, savage or otherwise, looked and sounded like—and those notions followed from popular amusements such as minstrel and Zulu shows.⁷⁸ When it came to creating characters that were literally or figuratively black, the same expectations dogged the performing animator, and as Daniel Goldmark succinctly puts it, with the rise of cartoons "minstrelsy never died—it simply changed media."⁷⁹ So it wasn't just that early animators performed their craft on a stage also populated by minstrels, or that animators frequented vaudeville shows where they witnessed minstrelsy and its pale shadows

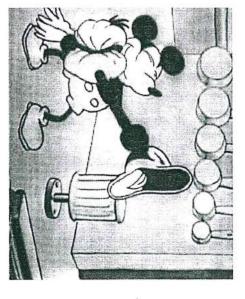


FIG.1.11 In Disney's Steamboat Willie (1928), Mickey Mouse plays "Old Zip Coon" on a variety of farm animals.

(which some did).⁸⁰ It was also true of early animation, with its frequent colloquies between animators and characters, and between the animator and his audience, with its play with the tropes of creation and transformation—that when it chose the gloves, the wide mouth and eyes, and the somatic elasticity of the minstrel for its popular continuing characters, it also adopted the power dynamics of minstrelsy. Mutability—the ability to transform one's self or the world—far from being disinterested, was heavily invested in the racial formations of the day. This provides the backdopted literally) against which to read early American animation's indebtedness to the minstrel show, and its use of racial alterity. Animation is related to blackface minstrelsy in its performative history, its visual iconography, and its description of power relations.

Drawn almost exclusively by whites, and in the early sound era voiced largely by white talent, animation had its own means of segregation, and its violation. Even in the silent era, the visual representation of blackness—whether in the literal form of the racist caricature of the human form or in the oblique form of the upright animal—followed the conventions of blackface minstrelsy in the large, pale lips, wide eyes, and elastic loping movements of the minstrel.⁸¹ With the coming of sound, the voice followed the same rule: "black" characters spoke with the long, slow, southern, and stupid cadence of the minstrel. This minstrel trope was also repeated in cartoon music. For example, Disney's Steamboat Willie

such as Felix would be.84 nal blackness, yet it was always present, as Otto Messmer's explanation cality, joy, humor, agility, and resistance to oppression. As with Mickey's also projected onto and through the minstrel: feral cleverness, musigloves, and so on—were combined with the fantastic qualities whites vous, and potentially violent—everything that nonhuman characters the page as it was on the stage, and translated it into cartoon form. Like standard racist trope of the "pickaninny," as common a stereotype on ninnies."83 For Messmer, the circuit was explicit: Sullivan had taken the pickaninny. Now that was going along pretty good, but it didn't through most Felix, at least in my mind anyway. Same kind of a, only he was a little Negro Pickaninny [Sammie Johnsin]. Which later on became alworked with Raoul Barré, see, so he started off on his own, doing his of Felix the Cat's origins makes clear: "[Producer] Pat Sullivan . . . had choice of music, these vestigial markings didn't necessarily directly sig Kat, Ko-Ko, Oswald) the visual markers of minstrelsy-the mouth, eyes, twenties of trademark animal and quasi-human characters (Felix, Krazy mals' bodies.82 Even before that moment, with the rise in the teens and formerly known as "Old Zip Coon," very violently on various farm ani lar at the time, the pickaninny character was willful, energetic, mischie-Topsy in the many stage and screen versions of Uncle Tom's Cabin poputhe South, that little anti-Negro feeling. They wouldn't run the Pickathe rising star Mickey Mouse playing the tune "Turkey in the Straw," (1928), famous (erroneously) for being the first sound cartoon, featured

Yet the minstrel was not chosen simply because it was playful and popular: deriving from a fantasy of forced plantation labor (or of northern black dandyism and lassitude), it signified a willful refusal to serve obediently. So, while Messmer may have taken up Sullivan's work already in progress, he also entered into a community of practice in which blackness and slavery signified very specifically, even when they did so indirectly. As a review of Sullivan's Trials of a Movie Cartoonist (1916) in Moving Picture World put it, "The figures that he draws become rebellious and refuse to act as he wants them to, so he has a terrible time to make them do his bidding. They answer back and say that he has no right to make slaves of them even if he is their creator." The short was made the same year as the first Sammy Johnsin cartoon, Sammy Johnsin Hunter.) The figure of the minstrel epitomized the rebellious commodity, and the performing animator (whether onstage or in in the press) produced that commodity, then punished it for the very refusal that defined it.

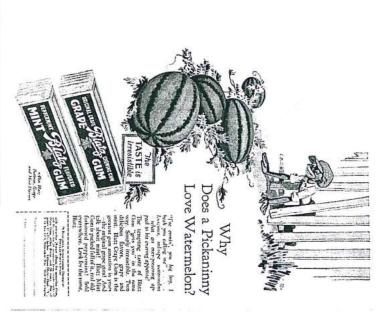




FIG. 1.12 A Blatz gum ad from a 1928 issue of Photoplay blithely asks, "Why Does a Pickaninny Love Watermelon?"—implying that his uncontrollable appetites will lead him to steal.

FIG. 1.13 Felix dreams of an ideal future in which he can eat endlessly in Futuritzy (1928).

PERFORMING LABOR (AND MANAGEMENT) AND TRAINING AUDIENCES

REPORTER: How many drawings does it take to make an animated cartoon?

MAX FLEISCHER: Why, we make from twelve to fourteen thousand drawings for

every picture.

REPORTER: That's a lot of work! That'll make an interesting story for my paper.

Mr. Fleischer, can you let me see how Betty Boop does her stuff?

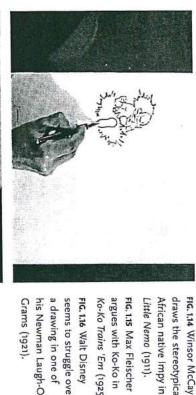
MF: Yes, I'll have her ready for you in just a moment... and I'll have her go through some of her stuff for you.

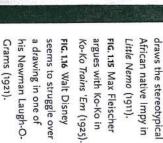
—Betty Boop's Rise to Fame (1934)

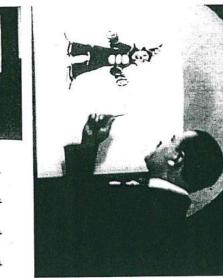
Even before studios such as Bray or Fleischer industrialized cartoon animation and perfected the public-relations gambit of the studio tour, early animators such as James Stuart Blackton and Winsor McCay built on the even earlier tradition of the lightning-sketch performance to demonstrate to their audiences the magical transformations, technical wizardry, and intense manual labor that went into producing a short animated cartoon. The theatrical convention of the technological reveal also attempted to train audiences in how they were meant to understand and relate to animated films. This training took two forms. First and foremost, it asked audiences to celebrate the magic of animation and the skill of the individual animator. Second, from McCay on, animators regularly touted the very difficult labor of animation as worthy of its own performance, and asked audiences to appreciate not just their art but also their work.

While it is important to remember that the live-action preludes to both Little Nemo and Gertie helped to take the place of McCay's curtailed live vaudeville performances, they nonetheless helped set the tone for future cinematic performances of the magic and labor of animation by other animation studios. But this sort of routine wasn't limited to the screen: it also found its way into both the trade press and popular journalism. Whether through a studio tour or an interview with an animator (usually actually a producer) or as the more fanciful interview with the character itself, the oddly contradictory tropes of celebrating labor and celebrating the magic of creation sometimes shared the same page.

Or was it a contradiction? Another way to understand the relationship between labor and magic was that the animated character embodied that contradiction, that it revealed labor as the force that animated the cartoon. While most commodities remain still and mute, unable to express the









and intertitles). The cartoon character, if not the entire cartoon realm (any an expression of profoundly mundane magic. part of which could come to life), embodied the labor of its making, was too (although prior to that moment it had its share of dialogue bubbles about.86 With the coming of sound, that commodity would gain a voice, character can (like Marx's imaginary table gone mad) dance and jump social and material relations that have shaped their creation, the cartoon The performance of animation as a feat of modern technology, then

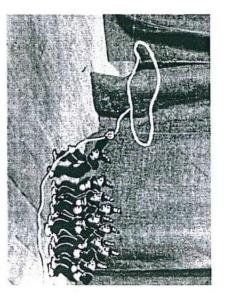
of will and cunning business acumen, would tell readers of the fan magadolph Bray, often credited with industrializing animation through force cesses, it will be seen that a thousand feet of animated pictures involves of the animated photo comics. Six cartoonists, twelve assistants and four mous article in the Los Angeles Times admonished her readers in 1916 zine Photoplay: from 102,000 to 136,000 processes."87 Less than a year later, John Ranfeet of completed film and as each cartoon undergoes thirty-four promated cartoons. There are from 3000 to 4000 cartoons in each thousand cameramen are included in the average staff of a studio turning out anithat "few realize the enormous amount of work entailed in making one make them into even a short film. For instance, the author of an anonylabor of producing volumes of images and the many hours required to ter to life, early animators and their public relations touted the immense hinged on that contradiction. Opposite the magic of bringing inert mat-

or sixteen thousand separate pictures to the thousand-foot reel. A oneeach to be done in one week. If this isn't "struggling," what do you cartoons. In my studio we turn out not less than one a week. Allowing dred and six months, or nearly nine years to finish one reel of animated take him, at that rate, three thousand two hundred days, or one hungling" newspaper artist . . . draws five pictures a day. Therefore it would reel cartoon contains, therefore, sixteen thousand sketches. A "strugthat there are twenty of us at work, it makes nearly six months work In each foot of moving picture film there are about sixteen pictures,

their managers) detailed how arduous the job was, they also took great itself in the products of others. Yet at the same time that animators (or the "struggle" was not for labor to be free of its exploitation but to realize Gertie. Here the magic of animation was quantified in man-hours, and This was the flip side of McCay's performance of geologic time in

own destinies pretty well. In fact, Mutt and Jeff now almost control Bud ist Bud Fisher assured fans that "having created Mutt and Jeff doesn't living, autonomous beings. Writing in Photoplay in 1920, popular cartoonpains to suggest that their audiences' favorite creations were nonetheless separate drawings. And 3,000 to 4,000 drawings to a picture, when picdolph Hearst, for whom he had worked until 1913. For a brief while, Fisher ally meant wresting copyright control of the characters from William Ranincome at the ripe age of thirty-five or so." For Fisher, "struggle" had actuhim from realizing his youthful ambition to settle down and live on his Fisher. They make him work hard for eight hours every day and prevent mean that I control their destinies—not by a long shot. They control their characters, even as they controlled his destiny, weren't actually alive or authey work him hard: "The thing that concerns me the most, of course, is instance, power relations are inverted: the creations own the creator, and hadn't controlled the destinies of the characters he'd created. Yet in this eventually returning to his employ.) a fifteen-hour week, then attempted to open their own studio but failed Strike, in which Mutt and Jeff went on strike, demanded a pay increase and action."89 (The series carried this joke a little further in the 1920 short On them. All I have to do is give them some scenery and they supply the tion picture cartoon stories,' but I don't make them. Mutt and Jeff make ers), Fisher does an about-face, telling his readers that "I say 'making modone by Fisher himself but jobbed out to Raoul Barré and Charles Bowtonomous. So, after celebrating his own labor (almost all of which was not low hustling, let me tell you." Yet this seemed to suggest that his famous tures are coming out every few days, is a shirt-sleeve job that keeps a felthe fact that to make one half-reel picture requires from 3,000 to 4,000

One of the performances of animation, then, was that of the public secret of the magic of labor and its alienation (aka mystification). On the one hand there was the long-standing convention of paternalism—as when Winsor McCay scolded his young assistant, John Fitzsimmons, or employed a tone with Gertie that fell somewhere between master and parent—of treating the animated character as if it were a pet, a line worker, or a child. Yet these creations were neither docile nor obedient: a running gag that reached its epitome in the struggles between Max Fleischer and Ko-Ko the Clown in the 1920s involved repeated attempts by characters to escape the film frame and the control of the animator's hand.90 On the other hand the studios' repetitive performances of the mundane details of the labor of producing a cartoon, which seemed to run counter to its





FICS. 1.17-1.18 Made of magical and mutable ink, Ko-Ko the Clown multiplies and revolts against Max Fleischer in Jumping Beans (1922).



FIG. 1.19 A caricature of John Randolph Bray mocks the cartooning process in a feature in *Photoplay*, c. 1916.

magical aspects, presented animators as every bit as much workers as the creatures they spawned with their pens were actors. From McCay's performance of his voluminous output of drawings, and the herculean task of maintaining order in the face of always encroaching entropy, to the public-relations performances of Bray, Fisher, and others, the need to impress on potential audiences the sheer difficulty of animating a seven-minute short was framed within narratives of magic and mystery.

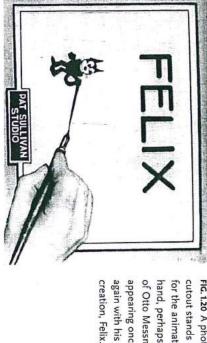
To reiterate: after McCay, the "animators" who publicly performed the backbreaking labor of making cartoons—Bray, Pat Sullivan, Max Fleischer, Disney, and others—even if they had once been animators, were producers. The "children" they managed were not the characters (those were product) but the animators who actually put in the long, repetitive hours in a process that animator Shamus Culhane, recalling working on Krazy Kat in the 1920s, referred to as a "sausage mill." For animation producers—who faced increasingly demanding production schedules and tighter profit margins as animation found a larger place in short-subject catalogues—the rebellious charges they managed weren't their trademark

characters but the animators responsible for actually churning product out on time.

This would eventually lead to a subsidiary performative trope of the animator as willful and childlike, captured in tales of Warner Bros.' Termite Terrace in the 1930s and 1940s, or in an account of the business of cartooning in a 1927 issue of Moving Picture World that asserted that a "movie cartoonist has to be more than just a little bit crazy, he must in most cases be a raving maniac. . . . It is not unusual in a cartoon studio to see several artists doing high dives off their desks, or playing leap frogmaybe doing a dry swim on the floor while several others stand by and watch to study the timing of the action." This fantasy of the animator as childish and playful aligned him with the characters he was charged with producing and suggested that the effort of putting out a cartoon was really more play than work.

GET OFF THE STAGE

audience."93 This is an accurate and very astute survey of changes to the ing invisibility while seeming to perform a service for the audience, enterteens and twenties. Performing animators such as McCay, Blackton, or dominant visual and narrative conventions that had been instituted in the about his relation to his drawings, but about concerns shared with his bility does not mean he no longer exists. . . . His statements are no longer taining them with these diverting adorable protagonists. But his invisithrough which his presence is known. . . . The animator opts for increasoccupied by the characters who become agents of his will and ideas and beings, he asserted that the hand of the animator vanished, "its place now ing that at that point the 'toons seemed to become relatively autonmous resent the progressive retreat of the animator behind the screen." Argu-"films with human characters and then the films with animal stars repand audience, Crafton noted that in the late teens and early twenties, the work on performance and the relationship between animator, animated tion changed inexorably from a craft to an industry. Presaging his recent ance of the performing animator in the early twentieth century as animahistory of cartoons prior to the coming of sound, takes up the disappear-A thread that runs through Before Mickey (1982), Crafton's touchstone tor, but as such it says little about how that animator left the stage, or why. Bug Vaudeville may stand as an elegy for the departing performing anima-



again with his of Otto Messmer, cutout stands in FIG. 1.20 A photo hand, perhaps that for the animator's appearing once

and reliable: by virtue of its lack of movement, it seemed more like a real alongside their characters. Even in the animation industry's early days, ous with itself. A flat photograph of that same hand was more manageable closer or farther from the camera lens, it appeared strange and discontinudrawing: if, from frame to frame, it moved too far to the left or right, or not maintain as stable a position relative to the image it was purportedly of a hand holding a pen. While the registration pegs that held the drawings moving body of the lightning-sketch artist with a close-up photo cutout regimes of efficiency had negotiated this convention by replacing the producers such as Max Fleischer and Walter Lantz appeared regularly tooled the figure of the performing animator. Until the coming of sound restructured animation on a production-line model, they retained and reproducers such as Bray, Sullivan, Paul Terry, the Fleischers, and Disney long after individual animators stopped performing. Even as animation tional status, as a trope onstage animators remained a staple of the form years before animation became rationalized. Yet in spite of their excep-Pat Sullivan were relatively rare and trod the vaudeville stage for only a few dexical marker. Animators were reduced to line workers and replaced onrationalization required that the animator himself be replaced by an inhand. So, while the convention of the performing animator continued ing. A live hand in the act of drawing, photographed in a sequence, could positioning the animator's hand from shot to shot proved more challengin place could guarantee continuity between one frame and the next, rescreen by performing producers and cutouts.94

Yet there is one noteworthy exception to take with this narrative: the

struggle in the absence of the animator. of labor was rapidly contained within the emergent discourse of industrial management, and it was the product, the 'toon, that carried on the constructing his Pierrot in Fantasmagorie was replaced by producer Max more than a little of his resistant nature to the vestiges of the struggle animator did not necessarily willingly cede the screen to his creations, and to represent the animator's studio. Animation's celebratory performance Fleischer doing battle with a relatively autonomous Ko-Ko on a set meant Randolph Hearst; Emile Cohl's anonymous hand constructing and dethat marked the departure of the animator in the face of industrialization. the figure of the animated trickster that remained (and remains) owes Winsor McCay was forced off the vaudeville stage by his boss, William

a series of gestures by other workers, more distant from the finished prod as the work of an individual assembly-line worker became one gesture in creation and as having a more limited commerce with that creation, just going rationalization. The meaning of animation production as a perforchanges to the labor of animation and its performance echoed changes were of a piece with the modes in which those concerns circulated, and animator to his avatar was not simply a change in aesthetics distant from alizing society was a shared concern. So, that shift from the performing a shared concern, just as the disappearance of craft work in an industriaudience that were significant to each party. It is not entirely the case that positioned the animator as occupying a separate realm from that of his mance underwent important changes in the teens and twenties that reto the social and material relations of workers in other industries underthe social concerns of the day. The ways animation was made and received that he "shared with his audience." The visible performance of craft was to the drawn world had been supplanted by more amorphous concerns the animator left the screen because the performance of his relationship generated in the interplay between the animator, his creation, and their of this it persisted as a trope in film animation, points to a set of meanings tion was only briefly considered significant and enjoyable, and that in spite carried a complex of social meanings. That the live performance of animabetween animation producers and their audiences, and each convention ing his presence, were conventions worked out over time in the interplay performing animator-producer, or by the (photograph of a) hand suggest-The performing animator and his replacement by the cinematically

Thus, at a moment when tensions between a craft system of industrial

a whip, and she willfully disobeyed him; when the Fleischers introduced mator and the creatures he made. Cohl made Pierrot in part to torment centered around the playful yet contentious interactions between the anistruggles inherent in that process, an expression that in its early stages change. It also offers a visible (and eventually audible) expression of the animation in the teens is more than simply an example of that historical in fantasies of efficiency (and its resistance), the industrial organization of labor and an emerging rational industrial economy found their expression in which the character offered little more than a wink and nod to the cineand the denizens of Paul Terry's Aesop's Fables in self-contained stories tured relatively unremarkable characters, such as Carlson's Dreamy Dud of industrial animation in America that were less self-conscious, that feaon. This is not to say that there weren't many cartoons in the first years drawing board and wreak havoc in their (cinematic) real world, and so Ko-Ko in 1919, the clown regularly made it his business to escape the then reassemble him; McCay handled Gertie with stern commands and day, acknowledged their audience, and in doing so hinted at their own au matic spectator. Even those less-revered cartoons, popular in their own tonomy from time to time.

Yet in those cartoons that repeated the trope of interaction between the performing animator and his creation, the nature of that interaction was one of struggle. The animator created characters who were by their nature willful and disobedient and which he was then obliged to discipline. This convention would all but define the figures who became the trademark continuing characters in American animation. Each would have a definite personality, yet that personality would always be one that resisted the conditions of its creation and questioned the limits of its existence. When it came to trademark continuing characters, the work of the commodity was to perform its subjugation, its resistance, and its final capitulation to the animator who created it.

So, one way to understand Winsor McCay's choice to foreground his own productive process, and the durability of that convention even after his methods had been superseded, is to read the continuing character as a commodity, the embodiment of the animator's labor. The continuing characters that became the popular center of American commercial animation by the early 1920s—Felix, Mutt and Jeff, Ko-Ko, Krazy, and others—were fetish figures who, in their struggles with their creators to escape or remake their world, encapsulated labor's struggle to claim some control over the means of production. Read in this light, the repetitive

performance of regulating fantastic black bodies. and likewise animation offered to blackface minstrelsy a new home for its disciplining resistant labor, offered conventional form to that struggle, pression of that resistance. Blackface minstrelsy, itself a performance of counting the performance of that labor, and the form in which that perforof early American animation as a history of labor necessarily involves reacter was simultaneously the embodiment of the alienation of the producanimator/producer to control it, becomes a ritual reenactment of indusstruggle of that commodity/character to become independent, and of the for the resistance of the very industrial labor that created it, and the supthe embodiment of that labor, the culturally and historically specific ideal mance and that labor were embodied, the trickster or minstrel became than the figure itself) was also implicated in that expression. A chronicle ing artist and the product of his labor, and the space of animation (no less the production and regulation of bodies in those regimes. The drawn charthrough which to understand the emergence of new regimes of labor and behind that motion, early American animation is a place and a process tion of apparent motion and the demystification of the creative process trial alienation. Self-reflexive, simultaneously involved in the mystifica-

CONCLUSION

By the end of the 1930s, the depiction of animators as childlike and of the work of animation as play would give way to strikes and the formation of animation-industry unions. The most important issues in those strikes were clear-cut rules for pay scales and job security, but another issue was that of acknowledgment: working animators wanted adequate screen credit for their work; many had grown tired of toiling relatively anonymously while directors, lead animators, and producers took the lion's share of credit.⁹⁵ Animation was a popular art form, yet it was also the product of intensive repetitive labor, and they wanted that labor acknowledged in more than just performative terms.

This was the dark side of that happy contradiction between magic and work: the product was magical; the work often wasn't. For betweeners, for tracers, for the ink and paint departments—for all of the divisions of labor that contributed to the industry's efficiency and economy of scale as it expanded—much of the labor that produced its magic was repetitive piecework. While certainly not as grueling as, say, coal mining, textile manufacture, or other line work, animation piecework could be exhaust-

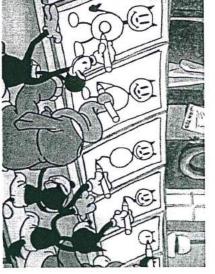


FIG. 1.21 Hand-drawn labor hand draws cartoons to the jazzy beat of an in-house orchestra in Van Beuren's Making 'Em Move (1931).

ing, and doing it anonymously made workers feel less like Disney's seven whistling dwarfs and more like the mindlessly laboring brooms in the "Sorcerer's Apprentice" section of *Fantasia* (1940). 96

catchy swing music. The earlier cartoon, continuing the Fleischer formula schers' Cartoon Factory (1924), or more explicitly in Van Beuren's Making unionization.)98 sympathetic to labor as that might seem, the Fleischers went so far as employees, both the instigator and victim of industrial automation. (As creating and destroying cartoon landscapes and characters - including a Max as a mad animator created machines that automated the process of an unending battle between Max and Ko-Ko, depicted a world in which slaved away to produce more cartoon characters—albeit happily and to depicted animation as a self-contained world in which cartoon characters grunt work of animation was lampooned in a few shorts, such as the Flei to move their studios from New York to Florida in the hope of avoiding tion piecework, but offset that gesture by making Max, rather than his the cartoon seemed to nod toward the dehumanizing qualities of animahybrid version of Max himself as a mindless automaton. In this instance 'Em Move (1931), but for the most part it remained invisible.97 The latter Though rarely referred to directly, the less-than-playful quality of the

All told, as the 1920s progressed, the performing animator (or producer performing as animator) did, as Crafton points out, disappear from the screen. Yet the tension between magic and labor that the figure of the performing animator described didn't vanish. In fact, the performative convention hadn't been the only way tension had been described in car-

to regimes of labor, and it is perhaps best understood in its historical rewas a performative gesture, it was one with roots in fantastic responses resisted in creative, amusing, and interesting ways. Although this, too tasy of the happy and disobedient slave who, though compelled to labor animation industry as competing studios struggled to gain brand recogother half of this dynamic, that of the disobedient, willful, and playfu lation to those regimes. into regimes of labor: the blackface minstrel, a figure based on the fannition—derived from an extant story of a body resistant to impressment it remained an expression of the tensions surrounding the laboring body man, Ko-Ko, Felix, Oswald, Mickey, and others performed the necessary trademark characters themselves. For if Max Fleischer, Walter Lantz, or on animation but on social and material life more generally—was in the rationalization and industrialization had imposed on the craft-not just toons. Another location for expressing the severe social dislocation that These continuing characters—who became ever more the center of the product rising up against its master. The animator may have gradually Rudy Ising performed the role of the animator as comic foil or straight left the screen and the stage, but the other half of the duo remained, and