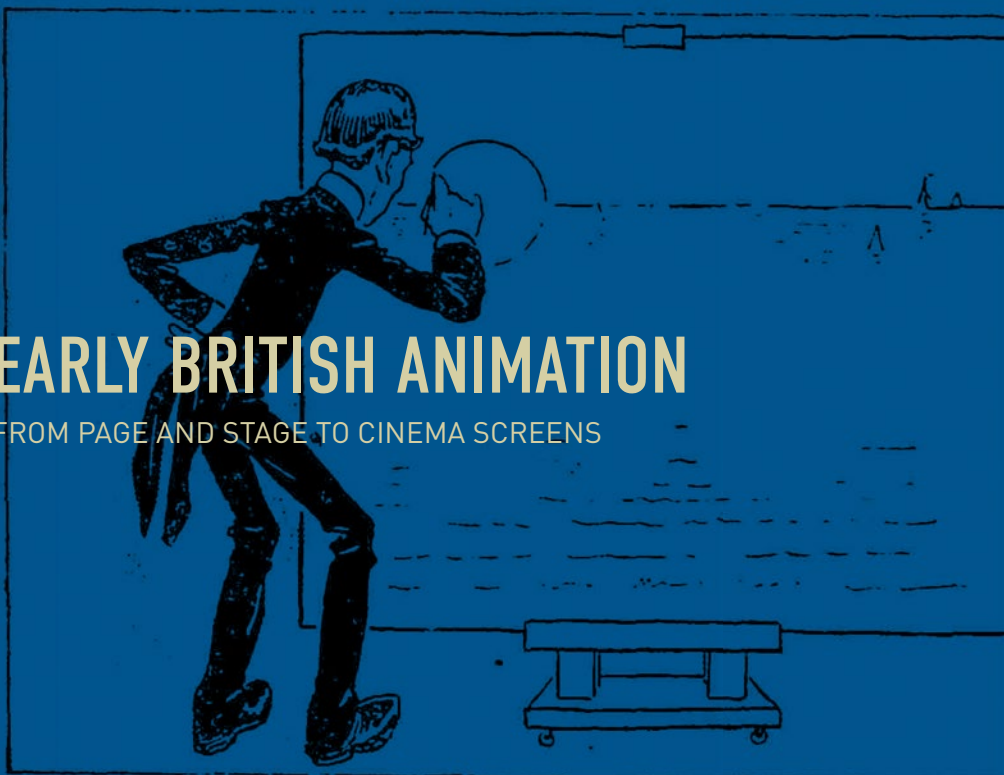


I.



EARLY BRITISH ANIMATION

FROM PAGE AND STAGE TO CINEMA SCREENS

II.

Malcolm Cook



Early British Animation

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From Page and Stage to Cinema Screens

palgrave
macmillan

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For Rachel, Clara and Oliver

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Early British Animation

This book tells the story of the emergence of animation in Britain during the silent era.

From the earliest days of cinema, performers and cartoonists came to film to expand their artistic practice, bringing with them a range of techniques and concerns that shaped the development of British animation. Nineteenth-century entertainments provided the personnel, institutional structures and aesthetic model for the incorporation of graphic material into moving images, not only at their inception but through into the 1920s.

There are three big ideas put forward here. Firstly, that early British animation should be considered a form of artists' film, commensurate with, but distinct from, more famous and celebrated films associated with art movements like Cubism, Dada, Surrealism and Constructivism. Secondly, that while a range of characteristics link British animation with other types of early twentieth-century filmmaking, the overriding one, the organising principle that can make coherent sense out of them, is their engagement with visual perception. Thirdly, that those perceptual concerns became increasingly bound up with discourses of the primitive. These artists and their films participated in a type of primitivism, reflecting both social and political contexts, and aesthetic movements.

Categorising these largely forgotten and unloved works as artists' films may provoke two contradictory responses. On the one hand, the observation is incontrovertible and obvious. These people were artists. They made films. Lancelot Speed attended Slade School, studying with Alphonse

Legros.¹ Alexander Penrose Forbes ('Alick P. F.') Ritchie was a society portraitist whose work is held in the National Portrait Gallery, as is the work of Harry Furniss. On the other hand, suggesting this tradition is comparable to celebrated works of the modernist avant-garde might seem disingenuous. Aren't these commercial artists producing generic, comfortable entertainment? The wrong type of artists, the wrong type of films? There is substantial cause to think otherwise. None of these artists were admitted to the Royal Academy of Arts, and Furniss had staged a 'burlesque' of Royal Academy members' work in 1887 that might be considered a very British variation on the *Salon des Refusés*.² Lightning cartoonist Tom Merry was jailed in Wandsworth Prison for bankruptcy in 1895, a penniless artist in the same year he produced one of the earliest examples of cartoon performance in moving images, for a kinetoscope film.³ British animated cartoons had some direct links with the canonical avant-garde. Alick P. F. Ritchie was described by *The Bystander* as 'the originator of Cubism in the London illustrated press' and 'our own Cubist artist'.⁴ Adrian Brunel played an active role in the London Film Society and therefore was at the centre of alternative film culture in Britain, but he also served as scriptwriter for George Studdy's 'Bonzo' in the 1920s.⁵

More than these occasional direct connections, the work examined here is abundant in the characteristics that typically distinguish artists' film. These artists embraced formal and technical experimentation, having worked in a mass-reproduced popular art form. Lancelot Speed spent two years 'experimenting exhaustively' before the production of his first film.⁶ Walter Booth's work incorporated a wide range of trick film techniques and combined them with a variety of materials, including chalkboard and paper drawings, scissor cut-outs, and string. Political and social engagement was fundamental to the print and performance background of these artists and it was demand for this that led to the huge growth of animated cartoons during the First World War. These artists came to film with pre-existing networks and institutions that supported their work, independent of the mainstream film industry. The challenge in recognising these as artists' films is not only to re-evaluate this tradition of British animation, but also to think critically about the criteria of categorisation and valuation used to define particular films.

These artists used the new medium of cinema to engage with the modern concerns of the early twentieth century, and especially to interrogate and play with perception. A Victorian music-hall performance, the lightning cartoon act, takes centre stage here in demonstrating that while the

physiology of visual perception may not change, our historical understanding of it certainly does. To present-day eyes an entertainment in which someone draws a cartoon on stage might seem rather mundane, but this only serves to indicate that our expectations of art and entertainment are the product of historical and cultural specificity. As the audience tried to discern what would appear from the lines on the page or chalk on the blackboard, they became alert to the process by which the brain resolves ambiguous images. When Professor Thornbury or Erskine Williams drew faces upside down it was a sensation – how many earlier works of art had posed this perceptual challenge to its viewers? The guessing game involved in the lightning cartoon played upon audiences' basic visual perception, drawing attention to the newly recognised role of the observer in constructing what is seen. However, a fundamental tension arises here between inherent perceptual faculties that only change on evolutionary timescales and the rapid and far-reaching upheaval of modernity.

Ultimately, this is best approached through close attention to specific historical and cultural shifts, which determined many of the changes evident in British animation in this period. Britain's relationship with the rest of the world was being transformed during this time and this influenced how animation developed in both economic and aesthetic terms. The First World War stimulated demand for topical and political films, and cartoonists were well placed to satisfy this, resulting in the growth of animated cartoons seen in the period. The war also cemented American control of the film industry, creating stiff competition domestically and closing overseas markets. This resulted in a set of expectations about what animation was and how it should be judged, and British animated cartoons were increasingly seen as primitive in comparison to American equivalents.

That primitivism of British animated cartoons extended beyond simple aesthetic judgements. The perceptual concerns seen in earlier animated cartoons became bound up with ideas of the primitive that provide another point of comparison with better-known modernist artists' films. The representation of other cultures through stereotypes and discriminatory images seen in some films is undoubtedly objectionable. However, it was also an exploration of more than just a derogatory cultural primitivism, embracing evolutionary, developmental and perceptual implications. Such ideas would become central to Ernst Gombrich and Sergei Eisenstein in their analyses of the appeal of cartooning and animation. Eisenstein's ideas of the 'plasmatic' nature of animation are here found to be derived from a

long intermedial history that is highly applicable in the British context. The ‘plasmatic’ is also more clearly distinguished from mere transformation, recognising its source in basic perception, adding to scholarship on this influential writer and his foundational animation theories. These theories provide insight into the process by which the modernity of 1920s British cartoons was paradoxically expressed as a form of primitivism.

Readers will be forgiven if they express surprise at discovering this history, as it has been almost wholly hidden from view. If pushed to name examples many people will remember that, before Aardman appeared in the 1980s, the Halas & Batchelor studio was synonymous with British animation, especially their celebrated 1954 feature *Animal Farm*.⁷ Amongst the credits for that film is the name S. G. (Sid) Griffiths, who was by then a veteran of the industry. Griffiths had been responsible for Jerry the Troublesome Tyke, an animated star of the 1920s, indicating the longer history of British animation to which the Orwell adaptation belonged. Similarly, Bonzo, a peer of Jerry’s in the 1920s, also has a lingering half-life. As well as a steady trade in memorabilia and collectables in antique shops and online auctions, Bonzo inspired the name of British musical group The Bonzo Dog Doo-Dah Band, founded by Vivian Stanshall in the 1960s.⁸ A combination of art-school happening and comedy performance, the band’s link with British animation is somewhat tenuous, but it does indicate a shared rich vein of surreal British humour to which the animated cartoons discussed here made a contribution.⁹ Beyond these fragments of cultural memory, however, British animation prior to 1928 has been roundly ignored. As suggested above and further explored in Chap. 5, this in part reflects historical conditions, with the First World War seeing the rise to dominance of American film interests that remains to the present day. But our ignorance of this British tradition of animation is also the result of neglect by later historians.

BRITISH ANIMATED CARTOONS: A NEGLECTED FIELD OF STUDY

British animated cartoons have received little attention within the disciplinary fields that might have been expected to study them: British film history and Animation Studies. They are simply absent from most British film histories,¹⁰ or given extremely brief asides.¹¹ Elaine Burrows’ chapter on animation in the important collection *All Our Yesterdays: 90 Years of British*

Cinema devoted several pages to early British animation, but offered a muted account of limited ‘success against the odds’ and criticised British filmmakers’ reluctance to move from cut-out to cel techniques.¹² These histories may well reflect the influence and judgement of Rachael Low, whose multi-volume *The History of the British Film* must be considered a founding document of British film history. Low, writing immediately after the Second World War, dismissed cartoons from the earlier world war, judging that ‘the appearance of movement so far achieved [by 1918] was still so rudimentary as to offer little aesthetic satisfaction or even the hope of a better future’, before moving swiftly on to other areas of study.¹³ Her assessments of the films that followed in the 1920s were equally dismissive; she described Dudley Buxton’s work as ‘very elementary’ and noted that these films, as a whole, were ‘not taken seriously as an art’.¹⁴

The field of Animation Studies might be expected to be more receptive, given its axiomatic belief in the value of studying animation. Yet landmark studies and histories either make no reference to British animation of the silent period,¹⁵ or cover the whole period in a short paragraph or two.¹⁶ The key exceptions to this are Donald Crafton’s *Before Mickey* and a series of articles by Paul Ward on First World War animated cartoons. Crafton gives considerable space to the discussion of British films in his study of pre-Disney silent era animated cartoons, but this extends only up to the start of the war, after which he implies British films fell behind their American counterparts, noting with surprise that straight lightning cartoons were ‘still’ being released ‘as late as 1914’.¹⁷ Paul Ward calls this assessment into question, yet ultimately agrees that this work would have appeared ‘incredibly dated’.¹⁸

This marginal position within specialised histories has perpetuated the economic and aesthetic situation at the time of the films’ release, when American producers’ ascendant control of the marketplace established the aesthetic criteria by which animated cartoons were to be judged. Film and animation historians have continued this bias, either ignoring British cartoons completely, or criticising their failure to fit essentialist definitions of what constitutes (good) animation. For both Low and Bendazzi, questions of technique and technology were central to their dismissal of British animated cartoons of this period. Bendazzi implied that British cartoonists were slow in ‘learning new techniques’.¹⁹ Low devoted half of her two-page discussion of a decade of animated cartoons to describing the latest production line techniques used in the United States, and condemning British animated cartoons for their failure to adopt these.²⁰

REASSESSING BRITISH ANIMATION: NEW SOURCES, NEW METHODS

In the time since those older accounts were written, a number of new resources and scholarly developments have appeared that demand a reassessment of these engrained views. Discovery of new physical archival material has contributed to this book, including the personal collection of lightning cartoonist Erskine Williams and important films by Walter Booth that were previously thought lost. The availability of digitised versions of other sources provides an even greater benefit. Digital archives of print sources, such as the British Library's nineteenth- and twentieth-century newspaper collections, allow the identification of references which could not be accurately found via older paper or microfilm/fiche-based research, and offer the opportunity in future of adding accurate statistical analysis to traditional textual methods.

Online video services allow an unprecedented access to films for close analysis, although this book is also the product of many hours spent in the basement of the BFI in Stephen Street viewing rarely screened film prints as yet unavailable in digital form. Given the dynamic nature of the internet any listing would be inaccurate and incomplete long before publication, but readers will find many of the films discussed here are now freely available online. The British Film Institute's BFI Player now includes many of the First World War films analysed here, including those by Dudley Buxton, Anson Dyer, Harry Furniss, George Studdy and Lancelot Speed, with new films being added regularly.²¹ British Pathé offer access to their archives on their own website as well as their YouTube channel. This company's newsreels and screen magazines often included animation, such as the 'Jerry the Troublesome Tyke' series, as well as 'Pongo the Pup' and a number of one-off lightning cartoons.²² Other sites contain occasional gems, such as clips from Booth's *Hand of the Artist* (1906) from the National Film and Sound Archive of Australia, *The Adventures of "Wee" Rob Roy* (1916) from Scotland on Screen or *Meet Mr. York! A "Speaking" Likeness* (1929) from the Yorkshire Film Archive.²³ A general online search will often identify the appearance of a previously unavailable film, whether through official or unofficial channels.

Archival material still requires theoretical frameworks and methods to order and interpret it, and this study is also the product of new scholarly developments. The changes to the study of early cinema that started with

the 1978 FIAF meeting in Brighton can hardly be considered recent, nearly forty years later, nevertheless those ways of thinking about early cinema are foundational to this study.²⁴ As well as the general adherence to a historical method based on the discovery, selection, ordering and interpretation of primary archival sources, this book inherits two linked principles from this tradition of early cinema study. First is the rejection of a teleological approach to film history, which sees early cinema only through the frame of what came later. As will be discussed in Chap. 6, early cinema is not merely a primitive form of later dominant narrative modes. This is closely linked to the second principle that recognises early cinema as intermedial, arising from the intersection of different art forms and cultural practices rather than having inherent medium-specific characteristics.²⁵

This book is also the product of the growth in Animation Studies as a scholarly discipline. The founding of the Society for Animation Studies by Harvey Deneroff in 1987 and the launch of the peer-reviewed *Animation Journal* by Maureen Furniss in 1991 heralded the recognition of a form of filmmaking that had long been denigrated. A resurgence in animation production shifted the popular view of animation, reintroducing it to an adult audience, whether for the ‘Disney Renaissance’, television shows like *The Simpsons* (Tx. 1989–present) and *South Park* (Tx. 1997–present), or the introduction of Japanese *anime* to the West.²⁶ Alan Cholodenko had made earlier claims for a reversal of the hierarchy between animation and cinema,²⁷ but the growth of digital technologies in moving image production has reinforced this new centrality of animation, signalled by Lev Manovich’s claim that

digital cinema is a particular case of animation that uses live-action footage as one of its many elements... Born from animation, cinema pushed animation to its periphery, only in the end to become one particular case of animation.²⁸

Like early cinema, animation has now been recognised as an intermedial form. Yet the much longer history of animation has yet to be renewed and revised in this light. In their own time the hybridity of British animated films was the cause of their denigration. Re-examining these films now offers an intervention in these contemporary debates, and reveals the much longer genealogy of these characteristics in moving images.

DEFINING ANIMATION AND ITS TECHNIQUES

These debates also raise the important question of defining animation. The terms 'animation' and 'animated' commonly serve as standalone descriptions of a particular mode of filmmaking in the present day. However, in the research carried out for this study in trade and popular press from the turn of the twentieth century, it is clear the terms 'animation' or 'animated' were never used unequivocally in the ways described above. On the contrary, in 1896 all moving images were described as 'animated photographs' or 'animated pictures'.²⁹ This more general use continued into the teens, where the titles of films such as *Animated Putty* (1911) or *Animated Toys* (1912) does not reflect a categorisation of a particular technique or genre, but a more widespread use of the term to describe something brought to life through movement.³⁰ In contrast, the term 'cartoon' was consistently used to describe a distinct type of drawn material, optionally with 'animated' prefixed to emphasise the movement of those drawings distinct from their print equivalents in newspapers and magazines. Throughout the period in question it is the dominant term 'cartoon', and not animated or animation, that described a distinct body of work, and following this historical definition serves a number of purposes. Firstly, it bypasses the complex present-day debates about the definition of animation. Secondly, it emphasises the study of drawn work, excluding stop-motion filmmaking, which is not differentiated by the term animation, for instance in Denis Gifford's *British Animated Films*, which lists both types of films.³¹ While many issues identified in this study may equally apply to stop-motion films, such as industry practices and economics, the central argument rests upon the specificity of the perception of hand-drawn images. In this respect the photographic images of objects used in stop-motion films are clearly distinct from the animated cartoons that are the primary focus here.

It is useful at this point to briefly survey the range of animation techniques that were innovated or adopted by these artists as they came to film. It is indicative of the experimental nature of this period that there is no clear delineation or categorisation of approaches, and it would be reductive to attempt to retroactively apply one. In the present-day cel, stop-motion and computer animation have common-sense definitions that are associated with particular genres or animators, even if these start to breakdown when examined closely. Such clear-cut distinctions are not

evident in the rapidly changing early period, but there are a number of tendencies that can be discerned as a baseline against which individual examples can be compared.

The first approach is the direct performance of the lightning cartoon act from music hall, the details of which are explored further in Chap. 3. In examples like Tom Merry's films from 1895 there is limited overt intervention in the pro-filmic event and some readers may feel this excludes such films from being categorised as animation. As I discuss in that chapter and elsewhere, it would be naïve to ignore the complex temporal patterns of the performance itself, incorporating rehearsal, presentation and reception, as well as the way the act anticipates qualities commonly associated with animation, such as transformation and imbuing drawings with life and movement.³² Anson Dyer describes the practice of outlining a pre-planned cartoon in faint blue that would not register on film but allowed the artist to very rapidly execute a detailed drawing, a technique undoubtedly inherited from music hall.³³ Furthermore, the manipulation of time is always present in moving picture technology, no matter how naturalised it may appear. That early cinema was often called 'animated pictures' or 'animated photographs' indicates an awareness of this, which has often since been forgotten. The most obvious example of this manipulation is the frequent use of under-cranking the camera on exposure, thus enhancing the 'lightning' speed of the drawing when the film is projected at conventional speeds.

That manipulation was increasingly evident as trick film techniques like stop-camera or splice substitutions and reversed footage were combined with the lightning cartoon performance to produce a variety of effects. Walter Booth's work, discussed in Chaps. 3 and 4, is typical of this. As Booth's films *Comedy Cartoons* (1907) and *Animated Cotton* (1909) demonstrate, there were probably as many variations in these techniques as there were films made. Dyer used related techniques such as painting over a completed picture and then reversing the film, making the drawing appear from a black background. In a retrospective review of earlier techniques written in 1936, Dyer described the technique of 'ghost drawing', an important development where 'the cartoonist's hand disappeared, and the pictures evolved on their own. This was the simple technique of one-turn one picture, 1/8 inch being added to the drawing between shots'.³⁴ Clearly this corresponds more closely to the frame-by-frame construction that is commonly seen as central to animation, as in Norman McLaren's

famous statement that ‘what happens between each frame is more important than what happens on each frame’.³⁵ However, the effect of this could be quite distinct, producing not objects or characters that move around, but rather a single image that develops over time. This effect lies closer to what Corrie Francis Parks calls ‘fluid frames’, commonly seen in the types of experimental animation techniques she examines, rather than more familiar styles of character animation.³⁶

The distinction between drawn and stop-motion animation was also ill-defined at this time. As indicated earlier, animation produced with three-dimensional objects or puppets is largely excluded from the discussion here because there is a quite distinct perceptual difference between photographic images of real-world objects in comparison to two-dimensional drawings. The former were a part of the British film industry, most notably in Arthur Melbourne-Cooper’s work, but were generally classified as ‘trick’ or novelty films and understood as a different genre from animated cartoons.³⁷

Some techniques and materials produced a hybrid aesthetic that has a resonance with the arguments that will be made here. Many animators, especially during the First World War, adopted the use of cut-out animation, in which a flat paper character with articulated limbs was manipulated under the camera frame-by-frame to produce motion. The appearance of this is similar to two-dimensional drawings, but the production process is more akin to that of stop-motion in which a single object is repeatedly manipulated, rather than the replacement of a series of individual drawings. This technique would later become associated with low-cost production, such as the television show *Captain Pugwash*, first transmitted in 1957.³⁸ While more efficient than producing individual drawings, Dyer points out that there was greater risk as ‘one slip would ruin an entire shot’.³⁹ The motion produced by cut-outs is typically less fluid than that seen in the cel animation techniques emerging in the same period, but does allow greater textural detail. Both economic and aesthetic valuations contributed to later historians like Low and Elaine Burrows criticising the use of cut-outs.⁴⁰ Other animation artists, notably Lotte Reiniger in Germany in the same period, used comparable techniques.⁴¹ Reiniger’s work has been celebrated for the expressivity this technique produces, but a similar re-evaluation has not been applied to British animation until now. Resituating British cut-out animation as a form of artists’ film allows us to recognise that the adoption of this technique can be understood as an alternative signifying practice. Aesthetically, it offered an anti-illusionistic

and self-reflexive style, while economically it allowed independence from dominant American interests and much greater creative control and expression by individual artists, rather than requiring industrial mass production.

The main alternative to cut-outs was cel animation. Initially developed by John Bray and Earl Hurd in a series of United States patents starting in 1914, cel animation actually covers a whole range of techniques, as described in those patent applications.⁴² The principal innovation was the use of transparent celluloid sheets, or cels, on which animation drawings were made. Rather than redrawing all elements of a scene on a single piece of paper, the use of cels meant only the elements of the image that would move in any given frame needed to be redrawn, while static elements such as the background, or even other body parts of the same character, could be kept the same, visible through the transparent layers. As well as huge efficiencies in avoiding redrawing, this also enabled other industrialised production processes, such as a greater division of labour and the reuse of animation drawings. British animators did use cel animation and it was the dominant technique by the mid-1920s for series like ‘Jerry the Troublesome Tyke’ and ‘Bonzo’, but it was not adopted with the same rapid enthusiasm as in the United States. While knowledge of these techniques may not have immediately travelled to Britain, by 1920 an edition of E. G. Lutz’s 1920 book *Animated Cartoons: How They Are Made, Their Origin and Development*, was published in London and described the main principles of this technique.⁴³ As argued further in Chap. 5, a lack of knowledge or imagination cannot explain animators such as Lancelot Speed and Anson Dyer continuing to use cut-outs, and this is best understood in relation to their prior training and the intermedial focus of their filmmaking practice.

ANIMATION AND THE BRITISH FILM INDUSTRY

As these shifting techniques and definitions of animation might indicate, this form of filmmaking did not hold a stable position within the British film industry during its first thirty years. Three main phases can be discerned in this period, while recognising that patterns develop incrementally and are not absolutely discrete.

Prior to 1914 only a very small number of short British films, perhaps ten or twenty, incorporated drawn images using the techniques described above. These were typically considered a subset of the broader trick film genre, epitomised by the work of Walter Booth, a former stage lighting

cartoonist who played an important role in early British cinema, as well as animated cartoons specifically, as detailed in Chap. 3. Booth worked for the companies of two of the most important figures in early British film, R. W. (Robert William) Paul and Charles Urban. These filmmakers are more commonly associated with the large volume of actuality films they produced, but Booth's work for them indicates that early forms of animation played a small but significant role in their output.⁴⁴

If the early phase was marked by hesitancy, scarcity and diversity, First World War animated cartoons were marked by purpose, consistency and abundance. The exigencies of conflict saw a large number of print cartoonists and illustrators embrace film as a new medium for their topical work, adopting and adapting the lightning cartoon as the basic mode for animating cartoons. The 'Kineto War Map' series ran from 1914 to 1916 and included at least 15 entries, the 'John Bull's Animated Sketchbook' series ran from 1915 to 1916 with more than twenty entries, and other series like 'Bully Boy', 'Dicky Dee Cartoons' and the 'Topical Sketch' produced multiple episodes, alongside many standalone films. Over one hundred British animated cartoons were produced in this four-year period, and by 1917 *The Bioscope* commented that 'no programme can be considered complete which cannot find occasional space for one of these highly ingenious forms of artistic entertainment'.⁴⁵

In addition to the competition posed by American imports, examined in Chap. 5, these films were not fully assimilated into the prevailing British film industry. The involvement of Urban's Kineto company, which was associated with non-fiction films, is indicative of the way animation was simultaneously an area of vigorous activity and held at arm's length by the large film companies concerned with feature-length narrative films. The leading animation production companies were specialised and independent, such as producer Frank Zeitlin's Kine Komedy Kartoons, the Cartoon Film Company and Speed Cartoons. These companies were associated with specific artists, such as Lancelot Speed's eponymous company, with the cartoons largely being their own work rather than the product of industrial scale. Animation production had some associations with larger British firms, such as Kine Komedy Kartoons with Broadwest, Anson Dyer's work with Hepworth Picture Plays or Speed with Percy Nash's Neptune Film Company, but each of these were short-lived relationships.

The third phase of activity in the 1920s, after a lull in production in the immediate post-war period, saw much greater investment by British film companies in animated cartoons. Pathé produced the 'Pongo' and 'Jerry the Troublesome Tyke' series for their magazine newsreels, the latter

running to more than forty episodes between 1925 and 1926. Ideal supported the ‘Alfred and Steve’ series based on newspaper cartoons by Tom Webster, and the ‘Singsong’ series that heavily featured animation to support their audience involvement, with the production of at least 12 episodes. New Era launched the ‘Bonzo’ character series in 1924 with considerable fanfare, with 26 regular episodes planned and creator George Studdy supervising ten animators in an industrial production process.⁴⁶ Yet even with this increased recognition by British film companies of the value of animated cartoons, their position was tenuous. American imports were seen as just as attractive, with Ideal also investing considerably in funding the famous ‘Felix the Cat’ series, resulting in a dispute with previous British distributors Pathé.⁴⁷ Equally, this mainstream funding pushed British cartoons to adhere to the model of animation established by American imports, with anthropomorphised animal characters becoming ubiquitous. British animation was again being produced in significant volumes, but working within commercial models tempered its distinctive worldview.

In Chap. 2 British animation is argued to be an example of ‘artists’ film’, an attribution that is not purely aesthetic, but also indicates an economic separation. Synonymous terms like ‘independent’ or ‘alternative’ film recognise a distance from dominant industry practices, and this overview indicates that this is applicable to the history explored here. British artists worked in parallel to the main players of the British film industry, intersecting at times, but retaining an independent spirit.

HISTORIOGRAPHY AND ANIMATION

This book not only uncovers the history of animation and its techniques in Britain, but shows how those techniques can also provide a historiographic model by drawing a productive analogy between the two typical principles of animation production of the period and the historical method used to study them. Alongside the technologies and techniques of animation outlined above, two contrasting principles of producing animation, which would later be more strictly classified, can be identified even in this early period: ‘key-frame’ and ‘straight-ahead’ animation. The key-frame technique of character animation may be found to have strong parallels with the teleological history of animation which situates all films in relation to Disney. By looking at the alternatives to key-frame techniques we may locate an alternative historiographic model for animated cartoons that predate Disney’s work.

The dominant technique of character animation for most of the twentieth century was ‘pose to pose’ or key-frame animation, instituted at the Disney Studio in the 1930s.⁴⁸ Disney’s economic and aesthetic dominance of hand-drawn animation meant this technique was widely adopted in the industry. In ‘pose to pose’ animation the lead animator identified and drew the key frames of a character’s action to be animated: the start/end points and the intermediate points that defined the path the action took. These frames would be passed to an assistant to produce the intervening drawings and ‘clean up’ the rough pencil drawings.⁴⁹ These line drawings were then passed to the ‘ink and paint’ department to be transferred from paper to transparent celluloid and painted.⁵⁰

This process may be seen as analogous to the approach most popular historians have taken to the history of animation, often taking their lead from Walt Disney’s own account, in an episode of the television series *Disneyland* entitled ‘The Story of the Animated Drawing’, first transmitted in 1955.⁵¹ In these teleological ‘key-frame histories’ a line is drawn between the start positions (prehistoric depiction of movement in cave paintings, nineteenth-century optical toys) and the end position (the aesthetic and economic success of Walt Disney Productions from the 1930s onwards). Key intermediate moments are chosen that fit on this trajectory; stray lines which lead nowhere are cleaned up and eliminated. Histories that have adopted such a model exclude most British animated cartoons because they did not obviously lead to the rise of the theatrical short featuring anthropomorphised animals and the creation of the feature-length animated cartoon. Even where early British animated cartoons received attention, it was selective, highlighting those points which coincided with the overarching movement being described. For instance, the choice of George Studdy’s ‘Bonzo’ as representative of all pre-sound British animated cartoons in Jerry Beck’s edited volume was possible because it was in keeping with the wider narrative of character animation that the book tracked, in opposition to an international experimental tradition.⁵²

However, there is an alternative to the ‘pose to pose’ technique for character animation, one which was commonly in use in the era prior to synchronised sound: ‘straight-ahead’ animation.⁵³ Here the path the action would take was not predetermined; rather, each drawing was made (or a cut-out figure manipulated) in turn, as it would be shot and projected. This produced a ‘fresh, slightly zany look’, a spontaneity and unpredictability which gave little indication of where the action would end

up; mistakes and missteps were likely to appear; a direction might be tackled then discarded; drawings were furiously produced, the impression of movement being more important than its analysis.⁵⁴

As a historiographic model, ‘straight-ahead’ animation provides an alternative to the teleological ‘key-frame histories’ described above. A ‘straight-ahead history’ is determined by what precedes it rather than what follows and can be closer to the lived experience of the development of British animated cartoons. A ‘straight-ahead history’ may find many of the same ‘key frames’, but these will no longer point self-evidently to a final position. Hesitant lines are no longer eliminated because they distract from the main movement, but are celebrated for the vitality they bring to the overall movement. The topical and propaganda films of the First World War indicate a very different potential future for animated cartoons in their tackling of adult themes that anticipate more recent interest in animated documentary.⁵⁵ The cut-out techniques often used in early British animated cartoons not only necessarily used a ‘straight-ahead’ technique in practical terms, but they also constitute a divergent line in animation history. Scholars like Bendazzi, Elaine Burrows and Low dismiss the use of this technique as ‘primitive’ in a derogatory sense because they approach it looking for signs of a later development, but here these techniques are understood as a product of the historical development that led to them. While the history constructed here aims to identify order and patterns to the development of animated cartoons in Britain, it also recognises that process was messy and hesitant. The originality and energy this brought to British animation is to be celebrated and embraced, and a ‘straight-ahead history’ can best encompass this.

ORGANISATION

This book is divided into six main chapters and organised with two alternating tendencies. Chapters 2, 4 and 6 establish the key arguments being made, addressing their intellectual context and theoretical implications. Chapters 3, 5 and 7 provide historical research, supporting evidence and close analysis of representative films that demonstrate and deepen the core arguments. While the former range across periods to highlight continuities and connections, the latter largely adhere to more restricted timeframes and a chronological progression. These groupings are not discrete and readers will find many instances where these tones are transposed.

Nevertheless, those readers looking to take on the three big ideas expressed here might wish to prioritise the even numbered chapters. In contrast, those looking for the ‘who, what, where, when, and how’ of British animation will find the odd chapters more satisfying. However, only together does the full picture emerge, slowly crystallising from the black ink on a white page, like so many of the cartoons described herein.

Chapter 2 presents early British animation as a form of artists’ film. Unlike more famous avant-garde or experimental traditions, British artists from print and stage were involved in filmmaking from the earliest appearances of moving images and in the following decades. Cinema offered numerous opportunities and points of contact with print culture, while cartooning and book illustration were relegated to the lowest echelons of artistic endeavour, so artists had little loyalty to these fields. The appeal of cinema also ran much deeper, offering a space for political engagement and commentary, technological experimentation and an engagement with the materiality of film. This chapter demonstrates that early British animation was a distinct form of artists’ film and deserves recognition and reassessment on these terms.

Chapter 3 investigates the lightning cartoon stage act, also known as the lightning sketch. This performance involved a cartoonist drawing on stage while the audience marvelled at their skill and tried to anticipate what was being drawn. Popular in British music halls from the 1870s, this act would be crucial to animated cartoons at both institutional and aesthetic levels, providing personnel and establishing artistic patterns. The act is examined in detail and found to have anticipated many qualities normally associated with animation, including transformation, the movement of line drawings and the desire to bring drawings to life. The lightning cartoon act is shown to foreground and play upon spectators’ perception of line drawings, a concern that would continue into early British animation.

Chapter 4 studies the engagement with visual perception that British animation shares with canonical modernist films, and their basis in modernity. Early lightning cartoon films adopted a non-narrative, spectacular mode of address that supports Gunning’s ‘cinema of attractions’ account. Yet a close analysis of Walter Booth’s *Comedy Cartoons* (1907) using contemporary neuroscience demonstrates how the lightning cartoon was concerned with biologically hard-wired basic visual cognition, challenging the idea that modernity could alter perception and result in new modes of representation. It also shows how Booth’s film was involved in a complex

and distinctive narrative of perception. This chapter contributes to the 'modernity thesis' debate by looking at the historical and cultural specificities of the perceptual play evident in the lightning cartoon and early animated films in Britain.

Chapter 5 explores British animation's international relationships up to and including the First World War. The lightning cartoon act originated in Britain before being exported globally, playing a vital role in the development of animation as a distinctive form of filmmaking and placing British traditions on an equal footing with animation innovators such as Blackton and Cohl. The First World War stimulated growth in the production of animated cartoons in Britain, but it also allowed American film interests to become dominant in the British market, and in turn established the aesthetic criteria by which British animated cartoons were judged. The inter-medial qualities of British cartoons were denigrated at that time and by later historians, a position that is reassessed here.

Chapter 6 asks why discourses of the primitive were central to the iconography and perceptual play evident in British animation, especially in the period following the First World War. It is necessary to be sensitive to the varied and contradictory meanings of such ill-informed and often derogatory terms. This chapter reviews ways these ideas have been applied to cinema generally, before turning to cartooning and animation. Ernst Gombrich and Sergei Eisenstein, the latter drawing on the research of Aleksandr Luria, suggest that cartooning and animation have some form of primitive appeal. These theories share with British animation a basis in unsound ideas of cultural primitivism, but they also embrace developmental, evolutionary and perceptual primitivism that provide a valuable framework to approach developments in British animation into the 1920s.

Chapter 7 begins by examining examples of the problematic stereotyped imagery and primitivism present in British animation of the 1920s. While undoubtedly offensive to a present-day audience, these cartoons' inaccuracies reflect that cultural difference is not their ultimate concern. Rather, their consistent interest is in basic visual perception and the diverse primitive appeal of cartooning and animation that Gombrich and Eisenstein theorised. These cartoons embraced altered psychological states, ambiguous dualities of identity and aesthetic play with our perception of basic line drawings. Thus, the cel animated series of the 1920s point in two directions, indicating the historical development of animated cartoons as a result of Britain's changing place in the world, while also referring back to the perceptual play that started in the Victorian lightning cartoon act.