

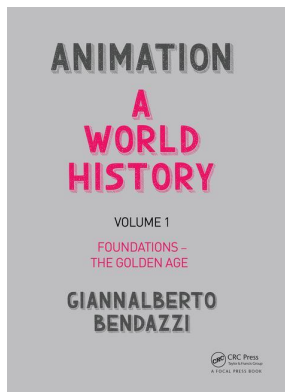
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THE GOLDEN AGE
(1928–1951)

What for animation was the Golden Age covers one of the worst ages in modern history. In October 1929, the Wall Street stock market crashed. The Great Depression followed, hit the whole planet, and lasted a long time. In Russia, Spain, and Germany, countless people were murdered out of political dogmatism. China was involved in a civil war, which didn't stop even during the bloody Japanese invasion of 1937. World War II led to more than 50 million casualties. After its end, the Cold War started.

To nobody's surprise, in such a situation the Dream Factory bloomed. A spectator could buy a cheap ticket and then watch a feature film, one or two short comedies (often cartoons), and a newsreel: a luxury.

In 1939, World War II started, and Hollywood turned out *Gone with the Wind*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *Stagecoach*, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, and *Ninotchka*. In December 1941, Pearl Harbor was bombed, and Preston Sturges' *Sullivan's Travels* hit movie theatres.

The message of this latest *conte philosophique* disguised as a light film comedy has seldom been emphasized. A Hollywood director of 'escapist' comedies (Joel McCrea) wants to become a serious intellectual and depict 'a true canvas of the sufferings of humanity'. In order to learn how to do so, he mingles with the poor, the tramps, and even (unwillingly) the jailed. One night, among his fellow citizens condemned to hard labour, he attends a screening. Watching a funny film,¹ these desperate people at long last have a laugh.

This description is an idealized depiction of the situation; the actual reactions of the audience and the style and content of the films being made during those times did not always live up to this ideal.

French cinema was ruled by master directors Jean Renoir, Jean Vigo, René Clair, and Marcel Carné; in

1934, Robert Flaherty made *Man of Aran*; Ozu Yasujiro was active in Japan; and after World War II, Roberto Rossellini, Vittorio De Sica, and Luchino Visconti produced the best works of Italian neorealism.

The 1930s and 1940s were, in a way, the last hurrah of the Western modernity fighting with itself. The original ideal of civilizing and expanding had become the obsession of taming and subjugating. The oligopoly of nations didn't result in a mutually advantageous agreement: politics is not economics. By 1945, only the United States and the USSR would be standing up, and modernity would slowly die, making room for the ideological clash between liberalism and communism.

For animation, these were the years of wine and roses. The Golden Age affected society as well. For the first time in history, animation was influencing feelings, tastes, and common language. The shapes of Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, Bugs Bunny, Tom & Jerry, Sylvester the Cat, and Woody Woodpecker became the common iconic heritage of various peoples of the world and would continue to do so for decades. This also turned them into very effective ambassadors of their home country way of life abroad.

Steamboat Willie

Sync or Sink

On Sunday, 18 November 1928, filmgoers were slowly filling the New York Colony Theatre. A broke Walt Disney was among them. He had been in town for almost three months, trying and trying, and had eventually found an ally in Harry Reichenbach, the Colony manager, who had acceded to bet on – by then – the long-withering genre

¹ Just to stay in tune with the subject of this book, this was Walt Disney's *Playful Pluto* (1934).

that was animation. The feature film was *Gang War*, starring Jack Pickford and Olive Borden. People remember it because people forgot it. The audience only watched the cartoon.

The cartoon was *Steamboat Willie*.² On a riverboat, a mouse dressed in short trousers works as the factotum of the captain, a large cat. His female counterpart is a girl mouse who comes aboard carrying some sheet music and a guitar. A goat devours both of these, but the couple is still able to have fun and play the popular song *Turkey in the Straw*; eventually the captain punishes the timewaster and sends him to peel potatoes. The little film had a perfectly synchronized score (the latest fashion – sound – plus the novelty of synchronization) and was centred on Mickey Mouse (an unpretentious and fresh protagonist).

Maybe not overnight, but in a few months, a global star was born, and animation rose again from the dead.

Walt Disney's extraordinary success completely changed the rules of the game. The older animators found themselves confronted with the choice of either learning up-to-date techniques or retiring. The market expanded, and sales revenues and employment increased. In the gloomy years of the Depression, young artists found opportunities in animation, which in turn was enriched by their leading-edge talent.

Overall, it was a giant step ahead for an industry that, according to a 1931 issue of *Popular Mechanics*, could have been bought for US\$250,000 just a few years before.³

The Non-Concurrence Factor

It is inaccurate to say that the novelty of sound was the cause, or at least the only cause, of such a sensation. In fact, the Fleischers had already released sound cartoons; a couple of months before *Steamboat Willie*, Paul Terry distributed his *Dinner Time*.

The film itself was far from perfect – perfunctory personality animation, no dramatic climax, a weak ending: In most aspects, it was a recipe for mediocrity. The one novelty it did have, however, was synchronized sound.

Although we will never be able to verify *Steamboat Willie*'s sound design as the element that triggered the public's subsequent enchantment with the character, we must

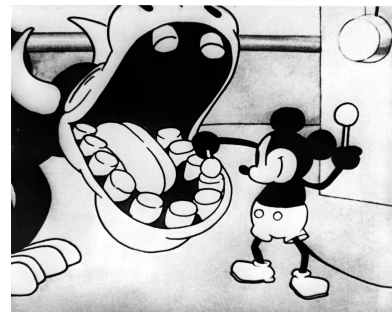


Figure 11.1 Walt Disney, *Steamboat Willie*, 1928. © Disney

pause to consider its stylistic value to animation history and especially focus on the way its synchronized sound was used.

In the very first frame, we see the steamboat moving along – but the sound we hear is that of a steam locomotive pulling along its heavy load. Later in the film, Mickey beats on the teeth of a cow and we hear the notes of a xylophone.

As he pulls a tail or strangles a whole menagerie of characters, we hear the various instruments of a band, and a little concert results. There is a non-concurrence between what we see and what we hear. Although hardly surprising today, this was an astonishing acceleration of filmic language in 1928.

One of the best-known theoretic essays in all of cinema history is *Statement on Sound* by Sergei M. Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin, and Grigory Aleksandrov, which was published in August 1928.⁴ Among other issues, it asserted that ‘the first experiments in sound must aim at a sharp discord with the visual images’ and that

Sound, treated as a new element of montage (as an independent variable combined with the visual image), cannot fail to provide new and enormously powerful means of expressing and resolving the most complex problems, which have been depressing us with their insurmountability through the imperfect methods of a cinema operating only in visual images. The contrapuntal method of structuring a sound film not only does not weaken the international nature of cinema, but gives to its meaning unparalleled strength and cultural heights.

² Curiously, *Steamboat Willie* was released at the same time another musical show set on a river triumphed on Broadway: Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein's *Show Boat*.

³ Leslie Cabarga, *Fleischer Story*, Nostalgia Press, New York, 1976, p. 27.

⁴ *Zayavka* (Statement), in ‘Zhizn’ iskusstva’ (Living Art), Leningrad, 5 August 1928.

When the essay came out, Disney, who couldn't have read the Russian even if he were interested in theory, had already finished his film. Working without 'theory', what the three world-famous film directors and theorists⁵ wished for as a hope for the distant future, the then-almost-unknown American animator had already achieved by himself. Did this make Walt Disney an avant-garde artist? Most people would have scoffed at the idea, as most certainly would have Walt himself. As so often happens, the point is terminological, just as in those other instances when we have to deal with such abused and hazy words as 'non-representational art', 'art of research', 'experimental art', 'non-objective art', and so on.

Steamboat Willie was decidedly groundbreaking in animation history. In the field of audiovisual language, Disney and his crew had achieved what only some Soviet dreamers had longed for and big-budget companies hadn't even yet imagined. At the same time, it was just entertainment, show business, after all: Walt was using the non-concurrence factor as a way to make better products that he could sell more easily. The idea of using film techniques to express inner emotions or offer up his view of the world would not even have occurred to him. 'Avant-garde' is actually a term that should apply to the audience, not to artists.

Sound

Until the late 1920s, films themselves, aside from a few earlier experiments, did not provide sound.⁶ Typically, they were accompanied by live music performed by pianists, organists, or sometimes orchestras. In 1923, American inventor Lee de Forest (1873–1961) projected some shorts with his Phonofilm process in New

York, a direct sound-on-film system that had only brief success because of its poor fidelity.⁷

Historians conventionally agree that the 'first' film with synchronized music and dialogue was Alan Crosland's Warner Bros. feature *The Jazz Singer*, starring Al Jolson (1927). Initially, the producers opted for the Vitaphone system based on one-sided phonograph disks: These were played on turntables mechanically connected to the projector so that the film and the disc were started together and played in sync. The system was, however, soon abandoned in favour of the competing optical sound-on-film method.

Optical sound is imprinted along one end of the film between the frame area and the sprocket perforations. Looking at a piece of film, we see a parallel stripe of fluctuations in light and dark patterns. This is the optical sound track, which is analogous to the sound wave of the original recorded sound and is reproduced by projecting light through the film from an exciter lamp and detecting the transmitted fluctuations in intensity with a solar cell, which electrically converts the changes of brightness to audible changes in volume and pitch.

Two optical sound track processes in common use were: 1) variable density, which was used in the de Forest and Fox Movietone systems, in which sound was represented by continuous gradations in light-to-dark tones (ultimately, this was not as successful: If a print of the film was not perfect, the variable-density sound track would be unable to be listened to); and 2) variable area, which is still used today; an example is the RCA Photophone.

⁵ To be precise: a genius (Eisenstein), a brilliant mind (Pudovkin), and Aleksandrov.

⁶ The idea that motion pictures could talk had occurred as early as Edison's development of his Kinetograph which, from the start, he had conceived as a visual accompaniment to his phonograph; with his employee W. K. L. Dickson, Edison created a rough working prototype of synchronized sound as early as 1889. Numerous other inventors and studios made their own attempts, including, notably, Georges Demeny, August Baron (in France), and William Friese-Greene (in England). Several other prototypes were exhibited at the Paris World Exposition of 1900, including Léon Gaumont's Chronophone system, which would subsequently also enjoy a limited run with exhibitors in England. Other early systems included Oskar Messter's Biophon (circa 1903 in Germany), Cecil Hepworth's Vivaphone (circa 1910, also in England), and (in the United States) Edison's Kinetophone and, later, Cinephonograph (circa 1911). Because these first systems attempted to synchronize with the film sound recorded on separate phonograph discs, they were awkward to use and invited synchronization problems.

⁷ Inventors before de Forest had experimented with various sound-on-film processes, including Eugen Augustin Lauste (circa 1904–1907 in Britain); Katherina and Ferdinand von Madaler (circa 1916 in the United States); and Josef Engl, Joseph Massole, and Hans Vogt (1919 in Germany). However, de Forest's patent of the Audion three-electrode amplifier tube (in 1907), enabling sound amplification that could be heard in a theatre auditorium, likely ensured his system's early success.