

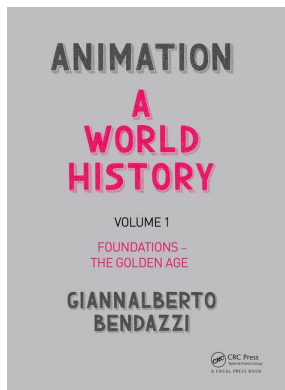
This article was downloaded by: 10.3.97.143

On: 26 Mar 2023

Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *CRC Press*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



Animation: A World History Volume I: Foundations—The Golden Age

Giannalberto Bendazzi

The Silent Pioneers (1908–1928)

Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.1201/9781315721057-3>

Giannalberto Bendazzi

Published online on: 17 Nov 2015

How to cite :- Giannalberto Bendazzi. 17 Nov 2015, *The Silent Pioneers (1908–1928)* from:
Animation: A World History, Volume I: Foundations—The Golden Age CRC Press

Accessed on: 26 Mar 2023

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.1201/9781315721057-3>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: <https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms>

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

3

THE SILENT PIONEERS (1908–1928)

The Cradle

Days of Heaven and Hell

Politically, economically, and militarily, the first fourteen years of the twentieth century were the continuance of the century before. The only novelty was the dawning of Japan as a modern power after the Meiji Restoration of 1868, the annexation of Formosa (which later became Taiwan) in 1896, the victorious war against Tsarist Russia in 1904–1905, and the conquest and colonization of Korea in 1910.

The global map was only slightly and peripherally retouched according to new colonized areas or because of changes of influence (since 1898, for instance, after having defeated Spain, the United States has exercised a de facto protectorate on Cuba, Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines). In 1901, Australia became independent; in 1910, Mexico was the scene of the first revolution of the century, with many social and political implications; and in 1911, the Chinese Empire became the Chinese Republic.

In the developed countries, the middle class was in such full bloom that the era was called the Belle Époque.

On 28 June 1914, in Sarajevo (Bosnia), a student by the name of Gavrilo Prinčip assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Habsburg, heir to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The Viennese Chancellery regarded the government of Serbia, Prinčip's country, as responsible. A month later, the chancellery declared a war that would become the largest slaughter in history up to that point in time.

Six or seven years later, after the end of World War I and the signature of various peace treaties, the map of

Europe was almost intact on the western side but was completely new on the eastern one. Austria had become a small country; Poland was independent again after more than 120 years; independent again, although territorially mutilated, were Hungary and Ireland; a new republic combined the Czech and the Slovak peoples; a new kingdom tried to glue together, under the name of Yugoslavia, Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, Bosnians, Macedonians, Montenegrins, and various minorities; and Albania, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and Finland made their debut on the international stage.

Germany and Austria-Hungary had lost the war, but everybody in Europe lost peace.

Economies were out of breath. Great Britain started to realize that her gigantic empire was more expensive than profitable; France suffered from a chronic political instability; and Italy fell into a fascist dictatorship. After the Bolshevik coup d'état and a civil war (1917–1920), Russia had become everybody's bugbear. Her new name was the Union of the Socialist¹ Soviet Republics, and until the late 1920s her project was to expand the proletarian revolution to the whole planet. The threat was real: In many states, communist parties were active and had well-organized groups of devotees.

The United States, whose intervention in 1917 had tipped the scale in favour of England and her allies, eventually disagreed with European politics and chose isolationism. She enjoyed a good economic situation and experienced exciting times that were called the Roaring 1920s, the Jazz Age, or the Lawless Decade – depending on the standpoint.

Culture

Intellect ran a different course. Most revolutions took place before World War I. In 1900, Sigmund Freud

¹ Why 'socialist' instead of 'communist'? According to Marxist principles, 'socialist' is the temporary system that eventually leads to a 'communist' society. Of course, democratic socialist parties such as the British Labour Party gave the word a very different meaning.

published *The Interpretation of Dreams* and Max Planck developed quantum theory; in 1903, Ivan P. Pavlov discovered conditioned reflexes; in 1905, Albert Einstein introduced the theory of relativity, while Fauvism (Matisse, Derain, and Vlaminck) was marking French painting and the artistic movement Die Brücke was founded in Dresden. In 1907, Pablo Picasso painted *Les demoiselles d'Avignon*, starting cubism, and Georges Braque enthusiastically seconded him; in 1908, Wilhelm Worringer published *Abstraktion und Einfühlung – Ein Beitrag zur Stilpsychologie (Abstraction and Empathy: Essays in the Psychology of Style)*, one of the most widely read books on the theory of art; in 1908, Arnold Schönberg started atonal music, the first phase of dodecaphony (and in 1908, Émile Cohl created *Fantasmagorie*). In 1909, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti published the 'Futurist Manifesto'²; in 1913, Marcel Proust published *Swann's Way*, the first tome of his *In Search of Lost Time*. In the same year, Igor Stravinsky wrote *The Rite of Spring*, Ferdinand de Saussure wrote the *Course in General Linguistics*, and Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore was given the Nobel Prize.

The rush would slow down but not stop. During the war, James Joyce, Luigi Pirandello, Franz Kafka, and Vladimir Mayakovsky published their works; various artists founded the Dada movement; and Piet Mondrian and Theo Van Doesburg founded De Stijl. After the war, Walter Gropius founded the Bauhaus in Weimar and American writers such as Gertrude Stein, Ernest Hemingway, Sherwood Anderson, Eugene O'Neill, and later Francis Scott Fitzgerald (the 'lost generation') gathered in Paris. In 1922, poet Thomas S. Eliot published the verses of *The Waste Land* and philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein published his *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*; one year later, another German philosopher, Martin Heidegger, published *Being and Time*. In 1923, Lu Hsun published his collected short stories with the title of *A Call to Arms*. Surrealism was born in 1924, the same year as George Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* and the first jazz orchestra conducted by Duke Ellington. German physicist Werner Heisenberg developed the uncertainty principle in 1927.

Cinema

The world of film expanded vigorously, too. Production companies stopped aiming at an illiterate and proletarian audience, as middle-class customers proved that they considered cinema as entertaining as legitimate theatre. Movie houses began to replace itinerant shows more and more, distribution became a well-organized profession, and the star system gained a footing.

By 1915 (the year of David W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*), the cinema of attractions had given way to classical cinema (or the cinema of institutions). By the end of the 1920s, cinema was already considered the Seventh Art,³ and some masterpieces had already made their mark, including Charlie Chaplin's shorts and features *The Kid* (1921) and *The Gold Rush* (1925); Robert J. Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1921); Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922), *The Last Laugh* (1925), and *Sunrise* (1927); Sergei M. Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925); Buster Keaton's *The General* (1927); Carl Th. Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928); and King Vidor's *The Crowd* (1928).

Within this general outline, silent animation matters for the specialists only. Although some good animated films were made, the phenomenon as a whole was little more than a curiosity.

Narrative and Non-Narrative

Handbooks tell us that the cinema of attractions was based on non-fiction films, while the classical cinema was based on narrative and narrative language. The shift took more a decade, but little by little audiences were driven to agree that consecutive scenes meant various moments of the same action; that a close-up didn't imply that the actor had been beheaded; that an iris in/iris out signified the passing of time or a change of place; and so on. In other words, via trial and error, an alliance of audiences and filmmakers created the special visual (later audiovisual) language of cinema.

² Futurism was unique in that it existed entirely on paper some time before any actual works were produced. It was, in fact, not only an artistic but also a cultural, political, and ethic movement, and the Manifesto was basically a harangue. Its aim became the representation, by distorting and disarranging images, of the ceaseless activity and confusion of modern urban life. It was an age in which intoxicating new forms of transport and communication – bicycles, motorcycles, cars, express trains, planes, ocean liners, the telegraph, the telephone – seemed to be transforming the globe and even the human race. The initial futurist exhibition opened in Paris in February 1912, eliciting outraged criticism, and then went on a tour of northern European capitals, taking in London, Berlin, Amsterdam, and Brussels, from which news of the movement rapidly spread, soon reaching the United States, Russia, and Japan.

³ Italian-French critic Ricciotto Canudo created the definition in 1911.

It would be an international language. It would also be the first example in history of global cultural colonization, as the rest of the world, without exception, accepted what had been decided in Europe and in the United States.⁴

Handbooks, however, don't clearly tell us what narrative is. Is it just a duplicate of a novel on the screen? Or is it the linking together of various expressions in time, according to a rule?

Actually, non-narrative films do tell a 'story' – for instance, the story of the evolution of a feeling – via analogy or metaphor, and in this writer's opinion, in order to avoid misunderstandings, the appropriate term could be fourth-dimensional art.⁵

Terminological fussiness? Maybe – but for a reason that will be clarified in the next paragraph.

Fantasmagorie

A hand draws a little white clown on black scenery. The character disappears behind a man who drops from above and who we then see sitting in a movie house, disturbed by the enormous hat of the lady before him. He takes all the hat feathers away one by one. The clown comes out again from the lady's *lorgnette* spectacles; engulfs the man; plays jokes; meets a soldier, sees a bottle, and meets an elephant; enters a house, goes to the first floor, falls down, and loses his head after falling on the sidewalk. The hand glues the body together again; the clown swells like a balloon, mounts a horse, and eventually rides away with it.

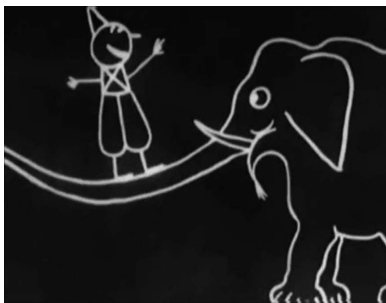


Figure 3.1 Émile Cohl, *Fantasmagorie*, 1908.

⁴ The writer remembers a late twentieth-century conversation with some Arab live-action filmmakers who confessed that pan shots and travellings from left to right still make them feel uneasy. (Arabs write from right to left.)

⁵ Neither musical symphonies nor abstract films tell the tale of somebody's adventures (narration); instead, these develop in time according to a precise artistic project (fourth-dimensional art).

⁶ *Fantasmagorie*, *L'Hotel du silence*, *Le Cauchemar du Fantoche*, *Un Drame chez le Fantoche*, *Les Allumettes animées*, *Le Cerceau magique*, *Les Frères Bout-debois*, and *Le Petit soldat qui devient Dieu*.

⁷ Nowadays we would call this 'morphing'.

Running time: about two minutes, with about seven hundred drawings.

Fantasmagorie was made by Frenchman Émile Cohl, whose career we'll discuss later, and screened at the Théâtre du Gymnase on 17 August 1908.

Do these two minutes start the history of our art?

First remark: The public welcomed this new type of show. The people of 1908 recognized that an animated film was different from a *film à trucs* (a film with special effects) or a *féerie* (a fairy tale or magic story) and wanted as much as possible of it. The producers entrusted Cohl with the creation of more new films. Before the year 1908 had ended, Cohl had made eight animated pictures.⁶ In the future, people would ask for animation; other people would go in for the newborn profession of animation filmmaker. In history, a process 'begins' when it gives rise to a new productive stage.

Second remark: Worried about verisimilitude, James Stuart Blackton and the other lightning sketch specialists were always careful to *justify* the presence of a cartooned world next to a real world. On the contrary, the Frenchman jumped into a graphic universe filled with graphic characters. The hand was not a conjurer's hand, and the drawn figures were not moving out of magic; they were living a life of their own, thus establishing that a separate artistic universe existed.

Third remark: There is a concatenation, a flow of incoherent images there; in other words, no narration but fourth-dimensional art. It was an uncommon thing, yet nobody cared about this. It was accepted into the moving image arena the same way that limericks or nursery rhymes had been accepted in literature.

Fourth and most important: The frame-by-frame system, alone, successfully portrays those events that develop in time. And what events do we see? An elephant becoming a house, people becoming somebody else, a thin character inflating like a balloon. Metamorphoses. The metamorphosis⁷ is an inborn possibility of frame-by-frame shooting, and of frame-by-frame shooting only.

Hence, a conclusion: The first stage of a new language was born. Since 17 August 1908, live action and animation would live parallel but distinct lives.

The Fathers

Émile Cohl

Émile Cohl was born Émile Courtet on 4 January 1857 in Paris. He was proud of his surname, as Parisian as the Seine. His family, he wrote, had lived for centuries in the neighbourhood where the Bourse is situated, and his most distant ancestor was mentioned in the civil annals of 1292. Courtet worked as an apprentice to a jeweller and an assistant to a magician. He developed his congenital talent for drawing while serving in the military when he sketched portraits of the entire regiment, including his colonel. Having returned to civilian life, he studied with artist André Gill. Just as he was about to become famous, he changed his name to the Alsatian-sounding Cohl, thinking that a pinch of the exotic might be helpful. ('Cohl' sounded a bit Jewish, too, and this would ingratiate him with the Parisian press, whose ruling class was mostly Jewish.)

Cohl was a chameleon of many colours. He worked as a caricaturist for several magazines, such as *Les hommes d'aujourd'hui*, to which he supplied caricatures of Verlaine and Toulouse-Lautrec. (In 1894, that same magazine confirmed Cohl's vast notoriety by dedicating to him a cover caricature signed by Uzès.⁸) It must be noted that *Les hommes d'aujourd'hui* was a four-page magazine, each issue being monographic on the person whose caricature was published on the cover. In the 1880s, Cohl turned successfully to photography. His light comedies were performed in the theatres of the boulevards and, last but not least of his numerous hobbies, he was interested in puzzles, riddles, and toy making.

Cohl did not enter into cinema until 1907, when he and a friend, Robert Péguy (later a film director, scriptwriter, and actor), tried their luck on the travelling show business with a projector and a tent. They quickly went bankrupt. Just a few weeks later, Cohl entered Gaumont's offices; he had noted that Gaumont had plagiarized one of his vignettes and was now demanding compensation. Not only did Gaumont make no objections, but he also invited Cohl to join his 'brain trust' in the department of film tricks. Cohl accepted. At this point, history and legend

overlap. According to the latter, at the same time that Cohl entered the world of cinema, Blackton's *The Haunted Hotel* arrived on French screens. Filmmakers racked their brains to understand how it was done. The legend goes that the only one to solve the problem, discovering the basic laws of what was to become his own art form, was Émile Cohl.

Indeed, the American film caused much commotion. As for Cohl, he did come to understand the technical process, and after a few months of work he completed *Fantasmagorie*.⁹

Production continued frantically until 1923. By then, Cohl remembered having made over 300 shorts, but he certainly forgot some – the actual number was much larger – adding animated films to special effects comedies, live-action shorts, and so on. By the end of 1909, he had made more than forty films. In 1910, he left Léon Gaumont and signed a contract with Pathé. In 1912, after joining the Éclair Company, he was transferred to the American branch office in Fort Lee, where he animated *The Newlyweds*, comic strip characters that were created by George McManus (1884–1954).¹⁰

The possibility that American colleagues had stolen some secrets from him was regularly suggested, but tangible evidence was never found; in any case, studying and copying other people's techniques was common. A passage from a letter he wrote from Fort Lee shows Cohl's high spirits and admiration for the teamwork and for the producers' generous compensation to the artists. His mood changed in the following years when he saw that the rationalization of labour and the economic-managerial machine enabled the Americans to produce films for the European market in such a way as to defeat competition by individual filmmakers.

In March 1914, three months before the outbreak of World War I, Cohl returned to Paris. During the war, he worked on a series similar to the ones he had produced in the United States, this time featuring characters by the cartoonist Benjamin Rabier (1864–1939). The series was entitled *Flambeau*. He also made war propaganda films. The inspiration of his earlier years weakened as he limited his productions to series. Even the famous *Les Aventures des Pieds Nickelés* (Lacking Agreement), with drawings by Louis

⁸ The pen name of Achille Lemot (1846–1909).

⁹ Isabelle Marinone (*Émile Cohl et la bohème*, '1895', No. 53, December 2007, Paris) suggests that the title came to Émile Cohl's mind after a homonymous 1866 illustration of his master André Gill. Phantasmagorias had been in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries' well-attended lantern/horror/necromancy shows, whose master had been the Belgian Etienne Gaspard Robert, also known as Robertson (1763–1837). The only visible connection with this is the 'skeleton' look of the thin white figures on black scenery.

¹⁰ Only *He Poses for His Portrait* is available today. Almost all films made by Émile Cohl in America were destroyed in a fire of the Fort Lee Éclair warehouse in 1914.

Forton (1879–1934), no longer had the stamp of Cohl's personality. Later he concerned himself primarily with scientific and advertising films for other studios before his death on 20 January 1938 at the age of eighty-one.

The most interesting period of Émile Cohl's cinematographic career was certainly the first, which ended in approximately 1911. In an age when cinema was swamped by conceited theatrical costumes, he gave lessons in stylization, visual metaphors, and before-the-fact surrealism.¹¹ His characters create and destroy themselves, are run through by umbrellas without losing a drop of blood, and fall victim to monsters with humanoid faces and eyeballs on the tips of their tails. Nor did Cohl content himself strictly with drawing. He animated puppets, cut-outs, and objects (a famous film of his featured animated matches); studied new tricks; and hand-painted colours on film, as in *L'éventail animé* (The Animated Fan).

Such a fertile imagination commands interest even today when other films of the same period may appear tiresome. The episodes featuring Fantoche are little comedies of intrigue, based on the contrast between characters, the intervention of foils (such as a policeman), and misunderstandings. Cohl's drawings emphasize lines over volume, and his comedies favour gags over psychology, but his films display one exceptional element: the dazzling twist that spurts without explanation or logical connection like a rabbit from a magician's top hat. This joyousness reverberates in the drawings, which are naïve, despite Cohl's fine craftsmanship. Cohl's stylization depended on his need to reduce the number of lines to be animated, but perhaps never before had an artist known how to make a virtue of necessity.

The years directly following 1911 marked a slow decline, although Cohl still released a few good works. His last entertainment film was *Fantoche cherche un logement* (The Puppet Looks for Lodging, 1921). The sixty-four-year-old artist resuscitated a character that had been dear to him in younger times from *Drame chez les fantoches* (Drama Amongst the Puppets) or *Le cauchemar du fantoche* (The Nightmare of the Puppet).

Georges Méliès

The language of animation is less realistic than the language of live-action cinema; in the beginning, it was totally unrealistic. An imaginary world was needed. Somebody had already provided it.

Georges Méliès (Paris, 8 December 1861–21 January 1938) was an illusionist who bought the Robert-Houdin Theatre and became an artist impresario of magic and variety shows. As a prospective client of the Lumières, he was invited to the historical projection of 28 December 1895. That event had a dramatic impact on him: He turned to directing and producing (he projected his first film on 4 April 1896) and was a leader in his field for the next ten years. In a world of 'newsreel' filmmakers, Méliès was the first to view cinema as the realm of the imagination. He was also a pioneer in studying the effects obtainable with the camera, anticipating breakthroughs that have transformed into today's cinematic language. He abandoned cinema in 1913 after having made more than 500 films, about 150 of which still survive. Having explored every kind of trick and special effect – féerie, fantasy, science fiction, horror – Méliès probably shot some scenes frame by frame during his career.¹² But this is not what really matters.

Screening Méliès' films today is like viewing an animated film . . . without animation. The story unravels against unnaturally painted backgrounds; the actors themselves seem purely figurative elements, covered by masks, costumes, or camouflages. In addition to this, the movie camera is stationary (Méliès filmed according to the principle that the movie camera should be like a gentleman in his armchair); therefore, all the action occurs as if in an animated puppet theatre. This is where Méliès' cinema contains the seeds of its own negation; for, if there is a stylistic clash in his films, it lies in the contrast between the two-dimensional scenery and the clumsy movement of the three-dimensional actors. Still, Méliès paved the way for a similarly rooted cinema in which this contradiction would be overcome by improved technology. Characters

¹¹ The artistic group of the Incohérents (1882–1887), which Cohl belonged to, promoted the absurd, the surprising, the vilification of good manners, and the derision of institutions: many things that would characterize surrealism forty years later.

¹² According to Alexander Sesonske ('Sight and Sound', *The Origins of Animation*, Vol. 49, No. 3, Summer 1980):

Méliès produced in 1898 the first sequences of photographed animation in a series of little commercial films made to be projected on an open-air screen on the Boulevard des Italiens. In some of these 'films de publicité' a comic scene would end with a shot of scrambled letters arranging themselves to form the name of the product, e.g. Bornibus Mustard. Méliès achieved this effect, which delighted the pedestrians on the boulevard, by arranging white letters on a black table-top and then rearranging them between the moments when the crank of the camera was given an eighth or quarter turn to expose one or two frames.

and scenery (drawn or modelled) were to be stylistically homogeneous, and movement would no longer be left to the actors but would be created by the directors.

The First Abstract Cinema

Cinema was a new phenomenon and the filmmakers a new breed: Only rarely did artists from other disciplines, intellectuals, or philosophers embrace and praise this new medium. They considered cinema a poor copy of theatre and a place that the artistically gifted should avoid. With few exceptions, a similar attitude greeted the avant-garde movements that were subverting the formal and ideological order of the traditional arts. Facing ostracism by the bourgeois intelligentsia, cinema and avant-garde movements led a somewhat parallel life, and each caused a division in the humanist culture of the century.

Contact between the two, however, was sporadic. While futurists, Dadaists, and Surrealists loved filmed shows, there was no corresponding interest from film producers in the fine arts, and even less in the avant-garde. With a few exceptions, cinema was the industry of the masses.

The avant-garde, restrained by technical and economic obstacles, produced only a few marginally successful films. These include: *Vita futurista* (Futuristic Life) by Ginna; the Dada films by Man Ray, Fernand Léger, and Clair-Picabia; and *Un chien andalou* (An Andalusian Dog) and *L'âge d'or* (The Golden Age) by Buñuel-Dalí. Why were these artists interested in film? Because cinema offered movement. The search for movement, which had constantly marked the history of art, had become pressing after impressionism, when paintings strove ever more to capture life itself, leaving static representations to photography. Seurat succeeded in painting the vibrations of air, while the futurists, who believed in 'dynamism' as an ideological and aesthetic principle, forgot the figure and painted the action. Balla painted the scurrying of a Basset hound in *Dog on a Leash* (1912) and hands moving rapidly on an instrument in *The Violinist's Hands* (1912). Bragaglia actuated 'photodynamics', synthesizing the development of a gesture in a single image; during the same years, Marcel Duchamp created the *Nude Descending a Staircase*, and the list of examples continues.

These artistic currents were all based on a 'plastic' concept of movement: The new mode of painting and taking

photographs tried to express optical effects or psychological concepts of action. From here to film was a short step. Capable of moving – or, in futurist terminology, rendering any object mobile – animation was the medium closest to the purposes of designers, sculptors, and painters. The history of animation is marked by contact with painters as well as the equally fertile attention of animators to the innovative currents in graphics and plastic arts (Picasso himself was on the brink of entrusting some of his drawings to animator Giulio Gianini). Curiously, the Spanish master had another bout with animation: Animated experiments featuring his drawings appear in *Le mystère Picasso* (1956), a documentary by Henri-Georges Clouzot. In the 1950s, the birth of 'kinetic' art supplied the missing link in the evolutionary chain that tied the traditional plastic arts to animation. Europe, a cultural centre for the first forty years of this century, was also host to experiments, debate, and a large number of talented animators. In America, experimental art films began in the late 1930s.

Arnaldo Ginna

'Since 1907 I understood the kinetic-pictorial potential of cinema', Arnaldo Ginna recalled. 'In 1908–09, a movie camera which could film one frame at a time did not exist. I thought of painting directly on the film.'¹³ A writer, futurist theoretician, painter of some of the first abstract paintings in the history of Western art (*Neurasthenia*, 1908), and director of the only official futurist film, *Vita futurista* (Futuristic Life, 1916, filmed in Florence with the participation of the movement's major exponents), Ginna created a radically new technique for film animation – a technique that Len Lye and Norman McLaren would skillfully develop 25 years later.

Ginna, whose real name was Arnaldo Ginanni Corradini, was born in Ravenna, Italy, on 7 May 1890. With his brother Bruno (Ravenna, 9 June 1892–Varese, 20 November 1976), who used the pen name Bruno Corra, he developed an original theory of the arts. According to the two brothers, a mutual relationship exists among the arts: *A musical motif* is formed by sounds changing within a time sequence; likewise, in painting, a *chromatic motif* can be obtained by cinematographic techniques that offer colours changing within a time sequence. Just as the musical chord is a fixed sound in space like that emitted by

¹³ Mario Verdone, *Cinema e letteratura del Futurismo* (Edizioni di Bianco e Nero), Rome, 1968.

an organ when one presses a key, the ‘chromatic chord’, in Ginna’s terms, defines what would later be called an ‘abstract painting’. Ginna wrote:

Pointillism was the starting point for the studies on the chromatic chord, the chromatic symphony and so on, because the different dots or segments of painting paralleled the succession of different musical notes. This allowed us to approach certain areas of colour in the paintings of Segantini. For example: a particular colour area in a field by Segantini was a chromatic chord taken precisely from the nature of those mountain meadows.¹⁴

Ginna painted four works directly on film: *A Chord of Colour* from Segantini, *Study of the Effects of Four Colours* and *Song of Spring* from Mendelssohn, and *Flowers* from Mallarmé. While the first film was the development of a colour chord, the second studied the effects among complementary colours (red-green, blue-yellow), and the last two were chromatic renderings of music and poetry.

I have not seen frames of the experiments done in 1910 for many years. Perhaps someone has them? Are they lost? Or destroyed? You will understand, it was so many years ago, with so many events and moves from one city to another! Besides, no one gave them much importance. Those experiments, especially the sequence regarding Segantini’s work, were made in order to produce chromatic music, chromatic motifs and symphonies. Even small black and white animations were made. The very earliest consisted of a little book whose many pages, when flipped quickly, yielded the impression of movement. These were then transcribed by hand on to the celluloid film, but without pigment sensitive to silver nitrate. This film was sent to us by our optician Magini, in Ravenna. That’s all: very distant recollections, almost a dream. I noticed later that these little books with animated drawings were being sold to entertain small children.¹⁵

¹⁴ Letter by Arnaldo Ginna to Giannalberto Bendazzi, 1 March 1972.

¹⁵ Letter by Arnaldo Ginna to Giannalberto Bendazzi, 18 February 1972.

¹⁶ In those times, occultism was largely practised in aristocratic circles of the Ravenna area. After having left futurism, Ginna would paint ‘animistic’ portraits for many years, aiming at depicting the ‘soul’ in addition to the body of the subject.

¹⁷ William Moritz, *Abstract Film and Color Music*, in Maurice Tuchman (ed.) *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985*, Abbeville, New York, 1986.

¹⁸ Isadore Klein, ‘How I Came to Know the Fabulous Winsor McCay’, *Cartoonists Profiles*, No. 30, June 1977.

It must be clear that these experiments did not belong to futurism. The two artists joined Marinetti’s movement about one year after having abandoned them, and only vaguely, later, some mention was made in futurist manifestos of abstract cinema. The experiments still had a definite symbolist aura, aimed at inner life, spiritualism, and intra-sensorial and extra-sensorial correspondence.¹⁶ As William Moritz sharply put it, the late ones ‘relied . . . on the sort of symbolic color drama dear to the Theosophists’.¹⁷

Ginna continued his unpublicized artistic activity, but he never ventured into cinema again. He died in Rome on 24 September 1982.

Léopold Survage

Around 1914, the Cubist painter Léopold Survage, of Scandinavian, Russian, and French descent, wanted to make a film based on the rhythm of colours, filming image by image according to traditional principles. ‘Coloured rhythm is not at all an illustration or interpretation of a musical work. It is an autonomous art form, even if it is based on the same psychological data as music’, Survage wrote on the pages of Apollinaire’s magazine, *Soirées de Paris*. Survage’s long but ideologically weak manifesto, however, explored the same field as Ginna and arrived at somewhat similar conclusions. The war put an end to Survage’s cinematographic ambitions, and the film never came to be. As a result, only a few preparatory paintings remain.

Winsor McCay

Animation should be an art, that is how I conceived it. But as I see, what you fellows have done with it is make it into a trade . . . not an art, but a trade . . . bad luck.

Winsor McCay did not mince words when closing the dinner party his fellow New York animators had given in his honour one night during the fall of 1927.¹⁸

What Émile Cohl was to Europe, Winsor McCay was to America: the beginner. A wonderful cartoonist (his comic strip *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, published from 15 October 1905 in the *New York Herald*, is still one of the best in the field), Winsor Zenis McCay can be considered the first ‘classical’ artist of American animation. McCay was born in Canada in 1867¹⁹ and, like many of his colleagues and contemporaries, basically was a self-taught artist who started by drawing billboards, vaudeville stage settings, and newspaper comic strips. After fifteen years in Cincinnati, he was invited to New York by James Gordon Bennett, a legendary figure in American journalism, publisher of the *New York Herald* and the *New York Evening Telegram*. There, McCay made a name for himself. Admired and respected by his colleagues, he was an amiable artist who managed to combine high-quality work with mass success, topped with a keen intuition for public relations.

‘In mid-April 1906’, writes McCay’s biographer John Canemaker, ‘a representative of E.F. Proctor, famous vaudeville producer and theatre owner, approached Winsor McCay with an offer to appear at Proctor’s 23d Street Theatre, a top vaudeville house, twice a day for two weeks in June’.²⁰ For eleven years, the artist toured with his successful show, never neglecting his comic strips and illustrations.

It was for his vaudeville act that McCay prepared his first animated movie.

In early 1911, under the supervision of [James Stuart] Blackton, both the drawings and a live-action prologue and epilogue for the film called *Little Nemo* were shot at the Vitagraph studio on Avenue M. . . . Vitagraph released the short in movie theatres on April 8, and McCay used it in his vaudeville act. . . beginning on April 12 at New York’s Colonial Theatre.²¹

The excuse (as told in the live-action segments of the short) was a bet with some of his fellow cartoonists, who challenged him to film the thousands of drawings he tirelessly created. In January 1912, McCay created *The Story of a Mosquito* (or *How a Mosquito Operates*). This time, however, he requested that the movie not be distributed while he was exhibiting it in the theatre. *Little Nemo* is truly a ‘first movie’; without plot or background, it is little more than a sequence of images,

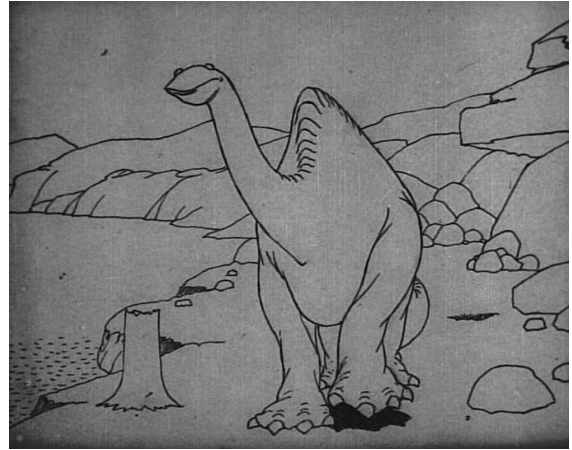


Figure 3.2 Winsor McCay, *Gertie the Dinosaur*, 1914.

materializing and then vanishing as if to prove their ability to exist on screen. This experimentalism is overcome in *The Story of a Mosquito*, the funny, ironic tale of a huge mosquito wearing a top hat that is insatiably hungry for the blood of a drunkard. The gluttonous bug ends up exploding.

The first part of McCay’s production is characterized by extraordinarily sharp drawings and animation. The rich, elegant art nouveau style of his comic strips is simplified but not impoverished. Movements are slow, fluid, perfectly suited to such personal graphics, with a display of elegance that is nearly unmatched in the history of animation. Since McCay produced his own movies, he could afford expensive workmanship, using thousands of drawings on paper and careful control over the fluidity of animation (he used an old mutoscope roll to flip through the drawings before filming them).

On 8 February 1914, at the Palace Theatre in Chicago, McCay showed his masterpiece, *Gertie the Dinosaur*.

The film features the unlikely act of an animal tamer and his dinosaur. The large animal peeks from behind some rocks, eats an apple, drinks a lake, plays with a mammoth, and dances at McCay’s command. Sometimes she is reluctant and, when scolded, she cries. The animation and drawings are not only admirable but also surprising for the personality they give to this puppy-like brontosaurus. Certainly the animal’s performance, well endowed with

¹⁹ The date is uncertain.

²⁰ John Canemaker, *Winsor McCay – His Life and Art*, Abbeville, New York, 1987.

²¹ John Canemaker, *Winsor McCay – His Life and Art*, Abbeville, New York, 1987.

timing and mimicry, reduced McCay's stage role to that of a straight man. A unique chronicler, Émile Cohl, wrote in a letter from the United States:

The main actor, or perhaps the sole actor, was a prehistoric animal. . . . McCay stood very elegantly in front of the screen, armed with a whip. He would give a short speech and then, turning toward the screen like an animal trainer, he would call the animal. (Gertie) would come out of the rocks, and at this point, an exhibition of the highest quality would begin.

McCay ended his theatrical career when the newspaper for which he worked claimed the exclusive rights to his performances of *Gertie the Dinosaur*. Because he wished to avoid any battle, McCay first limited his performances to New York and eventually quit. He re-edited *Gertie* by adding a prologue and a few live-action scenes; by the end of 1914, he delivered it to William Fox for distribution in the movie circuits.

Four years were to pass before another movie by McCay could be seen on the screen. This time it was a totally different film, lasting over twenty minutes. Entitled *The Sinking of the Lusitania* (July 1918), it was based on a sad episode of wartime history, the sinking of the British ship *Lusitania* by a German submarine in May 1915. Of the 1,198 passengers who died, 124 were US citizens. American public opinion was indignant, and the accident played a determining role in favour of American participation in the war. An outraged McCay created a dramatic, extremely detailed, gripping movie that maintained the rhythm and style of contemporary documentaries or newsreels. Basically, it was a filmic version of the very popular illustrated re-enactments of accidents, which appeared in American and European newspapers of the time. McCay's characteristic floral style emerged even in the ethical and dramatic undertones of the movie, as can be seen in the beautifully drawn head of the child surfacing in the waves.

Among McCay's remaining movies and fragments, the most relevant are the three *Dreams of a Rarebit Fiend*, filmed by McCay and his son Robert around 1921. The first, *The Pet*, tells the story of a dog that grows to a monstrous size and wanders around the city. The second, *Bug Vaudeville*, features non-anthropomorphic insects performing sleights of hand, dances, and bicycle acts. In the third movie, *The Flying House*, a middle-aged husband and wife equip their house with wings and an engine and fly away through the universe. *Bug Vaudeville* is a serene and elegantly animated film with much originality; undoubtedly, it is the best of the three. Yet, these movies are far from McCay's initial efforts. Having

abandoned the technique of drawing on paper, he used the cel process, with sometimes unfortunate results; his inspiration and his rhythmic sense, similarly, seemed less assured.

In the following years until his death in Sheepshead Bay, New York, on 26 July 1934, McCay limited his production to drawings and illustrations. Even so, he always considered himself an animator, declaring in an interview that he was most proud of his movies. For many years, in fact, no animated film showed so great a drawing craftsmanship and so fine a sense of movement. More than anything else, he had marked forever the American approach to animation: characters, personality, and acting. Gertie is tender, naughty, and capricious, like every baby; being a dinosaur, she's at the same time a giant and a child, and the contrast moves us and makes us laugh. In the decades to come, Americans would always look for *personality animation*; this would not be Europeans' strength, causing them to pursue other types of animation.

Colour

Contrary to what many still believe, silent cinema was never solely in black and white. Often the individual positive film copies were subjected to staining procedures such as imbibition, toning, *pochoir*, and various others. (To clarify: The *negative* film was not yet able to reproduce the colours of reality; *every single positive* copy in black and white was coloured by special craftsmen.) In the case of imbibition or toning, an entire sequence was tinted monochrome, and this established conventions. It was intended that such a scene coloured in blue took place at night; in yellow, sunlight; in orange, artificially lighted indoors; in red, near a fire; in green, in the fields. Sometimes the colour had psychological meaning (red for anger). An example of good use of this early colour is the final sequence of F. W. Murnau's live-action film *Nosferatu* (1922). Sinister, the vampire enters the bedroom of the girl and moves towards her (blue, night). When he passes in front of the window, lo: a few pink frames, the first beacon of dawn. Exposed to the sun, he winces and dies while the scene turns to the daylight's yellow.

Despite hundreds of attempts and useless patents, in the 1910s and 1920s, the negative colour film stock made its real debut in the 1930s and began to be the standard only in the early 1960s.