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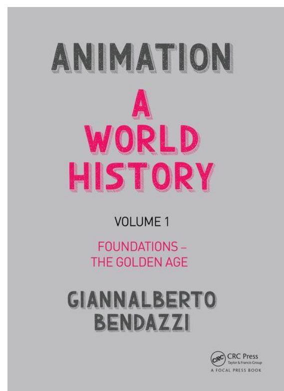

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Volume I: Foundations—The Golden Age

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Silent America I

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4
SILENT AMERICA I

The Fathers' Sons

Comics, Animation, and Cinema

The link between the two very American forms of art – comic strips and animated cartoons – was clear from the start (although comic strips had fed live-action cinema itself since its early days[1]). Many animators were either creators of comic strips as well or had started in that field. Many characters also moved to the screen directly from the printed page, and for the most part they communicated through the balloons typical of comic strips.

The man in the street – and not only he – for many decades believed that printed comic strips and film cartoons were almost the same thing and often called one the other's name.

The influence of the former on the latter was strong in the formative period of American drawn animation. The films inherited the shape of the characters, their behaviour, some graphic gambits (a big exclamation mark for emphasis, a big question mark for doubt, flashing short lines around the face to represent surprise, movement lines around the body or the limbs to signify quick action, broken lines starting from the eyes to show the trajectory of a look, etc.), and some comedy gambits (pratfalls, takes, double takes – often borrowed from vaudeville acts).

With time, the roads diverged. By the end of the 1920s, it was apparent that a character could maintain more or less the same physiognomy but had to display different psychology and behaviour to succeed in both media. By the late 1930s, everybody in the business was aware that filmic gag-linked Popeye, Donald Duck, and Mickey Mouse were just distant relations to their narration-linked likes of the printed page. At the same time, Walt Disney and Don Graham together had made a clean sweep of any graphic gambits.

The most successful comics of the 1930s – Alex Raymond's Flash Gordon, Harold Foster's Prince Valiant, Roy Crane's Captain Easy, and Milton Caniff's Terry and the Pirates – did not influence animation. If they had any connection with filmmaking, it was with live action. These comics were influenced by Western, action, noir, horror, and gangster films.

Birth of the Industry

After 1911, pioneers of American animation emerged everywhere, but with little organization. New York City became a major centre, housing the most thriving studios that offered the best opportunities and the most efficient systems of production. It's often difficult to find a way out of the maze of studios that have opened, closed, and been renamed. This is further complicated by those that are working on a subcontract or sub-subcontract or have hired full-time employees and freelancers. We'll try our best to sort it out.

Raoul Barré

Raoul Barré, a French-Canadian painter and cartoonist (born in Montreal on 29 January 1874) moved to New York in 1903 after a few trips to Europe. From 1912 to 1913, he collaborated with William C. Nolan (1894–1956)

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[1] For instance, Frederick Burr Opper's Happy Hooligan (which first appeared in the *New York Journal* on 11 March 1900) was portrayed in various sketches by James Stuart Blackton in the summer of the same year; Richard F. Outcault's Buster Brown (whose comic strip began in the *New York Herald* on 4 May 1902) was the protagonist of a series produced and directed by Edwin S. Porter in 1904.

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to produce and direct animated advertising films. The following year, they set up their own studio for entertainment films. Shortly thereafter, they were joined by some future talents, including Gregory La Cava, Frank Moser,[2] Dick Huemer (1898–1979), and Pat Sullivan (1887–1933).

Barré introduced the use of standard perforations in the drawing paper – thus avoiding jerkiness from one image to the next – and the slash system.

Cut, Insert, Replace

The slash system consisted of drawing the set only once, leaving a blank space for the characters' movements, and inserting sheets of paper cut to fit in the blank space. The character was drawn in progressive phases of movement on these paper cuttings. This was Barré's solution to what had been the animator's problem from the very beginning: how to animate a character that operates in a particular environment without having to draw both the character and the environment each time.

In 1915, Barré produced *The Animated Grouch Chasers* for distribution by Edison. In this series, live-action film clips introduce the animated sections: Whenever an actor reads a caricature album entitled *The Grouch Chaser*, this comes to life. Here, Barré's drawings are sharp and purposely ungraceful.

In 1916, Barré was commissioned by the International Film Service (which will be discussed later) to film seven *Fables* based on a comic strip by T. E. Powers[3] (other episodes of the serial were created by Vernon George Stallings and Frank Moser). That same year, in partnership with Charles Bowers (1889–1945), Barré successfully produced the animated adventures of Mutt and Jeff. Bud Fisher (3 April 1885–7 September 1954) had invented the comic strip 'odd couple' of Mutt (tall, skinny, and smart – the straight man) and Jeff (diminutive, irascible, and clumsy – his funny counterpart) in 1908. The success was instantaneous, and Fisher, money minded as well as creative, copyrighted the strip in his own name. Various live-action Mutt and Jeff comedies were made from 1911 to 1916, and eventually the artist licensed the production of animated Mutt and Jeff comic strips with Raoul Barré and Charles Bowers. The series continued until 1927 with more than 300 episodes.

In 1919, Barré, a victim of a plot allegedly masterminded by Bowers – apparently, Bowers consistently ostracized sensitive Barré, who had a nervous breakdown and left the company – abruptly abandoned his business and took up painting in a Long Island country house. He made a fleeting return in 1926–1927 as the animator of *Felix the Cat* for Pat Sullivan. Then he went back to Montreal, where he devoted himself to painting and political satire until his death on 21 May 1932.

John Randolph Bray

In the first decade of American animation, a dominant personality was John Randolph Bray. Resolute, manipulative, and far sighted, he laid the foundations for the American animation industry and gave it direction. Born on 25 August 1879 in Addison, Michigan (he died at nearly 100 years of age on 10 October 1978 in Bridgeport, Connecticut), he became successful as a cartoonist and an illustrator in New York between 1906 and 1907. He probably moved to cinema in an attempt to emulate Winsor McCay; however, his attitude differed greatly from McCay's creativity. According to Bray, the field of animated drawings was a for-profit enterprise. From the very start, he sought ways to rationalize labour, eliminate unnecessary effort, and speed up production time.

The *Artist's Dreams* (or *The Dachshund and the Sausage*, July 1913) tells the story of a drawing that comes alive as soon as the artist leaves the studio. In this case, the drawing represents a dog hurriedly eating sausages until it explodes, exactly like McCay's mosquito. Here, Bray experimented with the technique of printing background scenes rather than drawing them repeatedly by hand. The film was received with enthusiasm by Charles Pathé, a leader in world cinematography who at the time was visiting New York. Pathé postponed a trip to Paris so that he could sign a six-movie contract with Bray, then a 34-year-old novice.

[2] Born in Oketo, Kansas, on 27 May 1886, Moser died in Dobbs Ferry (New York) on 1 October 1964. Parallel to his career in animation, he made a name for himself as a distinguished painter.

[3] Thomas E. Powers (1870–1939) was a political and satirical cartoonist for the Hearst newspapers for nearly forty years.

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Bray Studios was founded in December 1914 on the basis of competition, commission, and the subsequent need for constant production. When the United States intervened in World War I, Bray promptly began marketing government-funded instructional and training films, a move that was later echoed by Walt Disney during World War II. Bray's studios were almost contemporary with the founding of Raoul Barré's group, but their structure was very different. In Bray Studios, work was divided and compartmentalized. Having become a businessman, Bray laid down his pencil and employed animators who were responsible for the creation of the movies. In turn, the animators supervised assistants and helpers.

Bray stressed technological development. Within two years, he had filed three patents: in January 1914, the use of printed background scenes; in July 1914, the application of grey shades to drawings; and in July 1915, the use of scenery drawn on transparent celluloid to be applied over the drawings to be animated. These patents made him a leader in the field and ensured that he would have an effective monopoly over his competitors. Bray was equally prompt at averting the danger posed by Earl Hurd (Kansas City, 1880–Hollywood, 1940), who had filed a patent for an alternative technique on 19 December 1914.[4] In fact, Hurd's process was not only alternative, but ultimately more important than Bray's: It consisted of the cel process, involving the drawing of characters on transparent celluloid sheets, which were then applied over painted background scenes. The transparent sheet was called *cel* in English and *cellulo* in French (from celluloid). Most animated movies worldwide were to be produced with this technique. At a time in which the animation industry was still developing, the importance of Hurd's discovery was not immediately apparent. For good measure, Bray hired the inventor/moviemaker in late 1915 and made him a partner in the Bray-Hurd Patent Company, a firm that sold licenses for the patented techniques. Until the patents expired in 1932, the company earned healthy profits from royalties.

The hero of Bray Studios was the comic character Colonel Heeza Liar. A short, bald, nearsighted man, the colonel was a Münchhausen-like character: physically unassuming but exuberantly daring. His first adventure (January 1914), entitled *Colonel Heeza Liar in Africa*, jokingly referred to the big-game hunting experiences of former US president Theodore Roosevelt, whose expeditions were a popular topic in the media. The colonel went through several changes as, in time, different animators were assigned to draw him (a phenomenon typical in American animation until the 1930s), but he always maintained his place in the comic category of aggressive rascals.

Another protagonist of Bray Studios was Bobby Bumps, a creation of Earl Hurd, who brought his character along when he left Bray. Bobby was a little boy who experienced daily life in the inseparable company of his dog Fido. With the exception of McCay, Hurd was probably the best American animator of his time. His well-structured movies display an uncommon visual inventiveness, gentle humour, and attention to drawing and theatre background design.

The International Film Service

In 1916, William Randolph Hearst's media empire of newspapers, news agencies, and movies opened a new branch: the International Film Service (IFS). Hearst is known among cinema devotees as the stubborn promoter of his companion Marion Davies's acting career as well as the model for Orson Welles's character of Charles Foster Kane in *Citizen Kane* (1941). The goal was to use the copyrights of several popular comic strips published in Hearst's newspapers for cinematographic purposes. These strips included *Bringing up Father*, *Krazy Kat*, *Happy Hooligan*, and *The Katzenjammer Kids*.

Gregory La Cava (1892–1952) later pursued a career as a director of live-action movies. His masterpiece was *My Man Godfrey* in 1936. Gregory La Cava was in charge of the service and was able to obtain the participation of old friends such as Bill Nolan and Frank Moser, whom he had met when working with Barré, as well as newcomers such as Alabaman Jack King (1895–1958); Grim Natwick; Burt Gillett; the former comic strip artist Leon A. Searl; the sixteen-year-old Walter Lantz; and, from Georgia, the self-taught Vernon George Stallings (1891–1963). Despite its promising beginnings, the IFS was forced to close after two years on 6 July 1918, a victim of changes in the policies of its mother company. The magnate still wanted his characters animated, so he licensed various studios (Barré's was one of them) to continue the series. Most of the staff got jobs with John Terry's studio for a few months before Terry's studio went out of business as well. The animators were

[4] Approved on 15 June 1915.

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then hired by Bray Studios. The IFS's productions were not able to surpass those by the competition, and the only relevant achievement of Hearst's foray into animation was to launch talented artists who later emerged on their own.

Other American Artists

Henry 'Hy' Mayer (1868–1953) was born in Germany. Originally a prolific illustrator, he moved on to animation from 1913 to 1926. Among his various (and still understudied) creations are various 'lightning sketch' films; two *Topical War Cartoons* (1914; probably vignettes for newsreels); and the Such Is Life series, with titles such as *Such Is Life at the Zoo* (1920), *Such Is Life in Italy* (1922), and *Tripping the Rhine* (1926). This series combined animation with live-action films taken in exotic locations. Mayer also was the first employer and mentor of Otto Messmer, later to become famous as the 'father' of Felix the Cat.

In 1915, Paul Terry made his debut with the distribution of his *Little Herman*, featuring the caricature of a popular magician. Born in San Mateo, California, on 19 February 1887,[5] Terry studied in San Francisco. In 1911, he moved to New York. After attending a vaudeville performance by McCay, he decided to forget his ambitions as a cartoonist and become an animator. A modestly gifted artist (after many rejections, his *Little Herman* was bought by a minor distributor for little money), Terry was nevertheless a hardheaded, independent spirit.

For the major part of his career, he worked on his own, sometimes accepting commissions from other studios. Despite endless disagreements over the use of animation techniques, Terry did work briefly as a hired animator for John Randolph Bray (in the 1920s, an altercation between Bray and Terry led to a lawsuit). In 1916, he directed eleven Farmer Al Falfa films for Bray and then left, taking the rights to the character with him.

Terry's first important character, Farmer Al Falfa, was a representative of rural America; Al Falfa was a bald old farmer, bearded and good natured. Although the character was never deeply developed, it survived several changes and lasted until the late 1930s.

The work of other New York animators is less well documented. Harry S. Palmer, creator of the series Keeping Up with the Joneses[6] for Gaumont America, had to give up in 1917 when Bray accused him of using patented techniques without a license. Palmer was also the author of animated satirical vignettes, which were inserted in newsreels. Several students of Bray's also became caricaturists. They included painter and illustrator Louis Glackens (1866–1933), F.M. Follet,[7] and Leighton Budd, who worked for Pathé's newsreels between 1916 and 1918 and later focused on comic strips. John Terry (Paul's older brother) and Hugh M. Shields had distinguished themselves with some experimental animation work in 1911 in San Francisco.

In Chicago, Sidney Smith (Bloomington, Illinois, 13 February 1877–Chicago, 20 October 1935) became famous with his comic strip based on the human goat Old Doc Yak, which first appeared in the *Tribune* on Monday, 5 February 1912. Only one year later, Smith produced and directed a series based on this character that was distributed by Selig Polyscope. The first film, called *Old Doc Yak*, was screened on 8 July 1913; nineteen more would follow until 1915. In 1917, Smith introduced a new comic strip starring The Gumps. It was a drawn situation comedy featuring the everyday adventures of a middle-class family, and it enchanted readers. Fellow Chicagoan Wallace A. Carlson (1884–1967), who had worked on animated vignettes and series, created the character Dreamy Dud (1913) for Essanay, founded his Carlson Studios in 1919, and was asked by Paramount to work on an animated version of the strip. In 1920–1921, with writing credited to Smith, Carlson produced and directed more than 50 Gumps shorts.[8]

Howard S. Moss, a specialist with animated puppets, also worked in Chicago. His *Motoy Films*, produced around 1917, were based on caricatures of movie stars such as Charlie Chaplin, Mary Pickford, and Ben Turpin.

Willis O'Brien

In the field of puppet animation, Willis O'Brien (Oakland, 2 March 1886–Hollywood, 8 November 1962) played an important role in the 1910s. After an adventurous youth

[5] He died in New York on 25 October 1971.

[6] Cartoonist Arthur R. 'Pop' Momand invented this domestic comedy for Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World* in 1913. Today it survives only as a catchphrase.

[7] Follet is credited with an uncommonly political short called *The Mexican Crisis* (1917). What's more, this short also dealt with foreign affairs.

[8] A good artist of his own, Carlson later teamed with Gumps writer Sol Hess; together, the pair started a successful strip called The Nebbs, which lasted from 1923 to 1946.

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(he even led a paleontological expedition in Oregon), O'Brien discovered how to animate clay figurines in the laboratory of a San Francisco marble cutter. Later, he substituted India rubber for clay and made figurines equipped with metal skeletons. In 1915, he completed his first short, *The Dinosaur and the Missing Link*; Edison's company bought the movie (which was distributed one year later) and invited the sculptor-director to continue his work in New York.

In addition to some animated works, such as *R.F.D. 10,000 B.C.* and *Prehistoric Poultry, the Dinornis or Great Roaring Whiffenpoof*, O'Brien made other films mixing live actors and animated figurines. Towards the end of 1917, he left the economically troubled Edison and accepted an offer by Herbert M. Dawley, a wealthy New Jersey sculptor, to work on *The Ghost of Slumber Mountain*.

Dawley had already experimented on his own with the animation of prehistoric monsters. *The Ghost of Slumber Mountain* (1919) is about a man who befriends an old hermit who gives him a special telescope that allows him to see the most remote past. O'Brien made his new dinosaurs quite realistic, although they were still far from being credible. It is still unclear whether the film originally was a feature or a featurette, but Herbert Dawley, unsatisfied with the result, cut it down to sixteen minutes. Furthermore, he took all screen credit, so that for many years to come he was labelled by specialists as the villain against the genius. Puppet animation film historian Stephen Czerkas disagrees:

> Contrary to popular belief, Dawley did a great deal of the animation in *Ghost*. . . . [He] does not deserve the poor reputation that has been created by previous film historians. Dawley treated O'Brien very fairly. It is not true that [he] was untalented or incapable of making his own films. He went on to make *Along the Moonbeam Trail* [1920] completely without O'Brien. . . . Contrary to the suspicion that footage from *The Ghost of Slumber Mountain* was used in this second film, footage from [it] has been discovered recently which conclusively demonstrates that none of it was made using out-takes from *Ghost*. Dawley did all the animation for *Moonbeam*. Also during the following decade, Dawley made many films that were entirely puppet animation. Some of his later films were primarily live-action, but Dawley incorporated puppet animation into some of these as well.[9]

O'Brien's first efforts are excellent for their believable (at the time) animation of prehistoric animals. As works of art, however, they lack substance and display corny, simplistic humour; clumsy rhythm; and uninteresting plots. Essentially, they show that, from the very beginning, O'Brien was above all a master of special effects – a quality that returns in his famous, glorious contribution to later movies, such as *The Lost World* (1925, directed by Larry O. Hoyt), *King Kong* (1933, directed by Ernest B. Schoedsack and Merian C. Cooper), and *The Son of Kong* (1933, directed by Ernest B. Schoedsack).

Instruments and Language

With the exception of Winsor McCay, who can be considered a special case, American animation in 1910 was characterized not so much by valuable productions as by the filmmakers' search for devices, technical processes, and language. In 1913, Bill Nolan used the travelling shot: While the character remained still, the background scene slowly moved under its feet (since the frame-by-frame technique was used, the character would appear to be moving). At the IFS, Nolan introduced the 'rubber hose' animation style – people, animals, minerals, anything was elastic, flexible, ductile, disarticulated. Elsewhere, an assistant of Barré and Bowers forgot to insert the background element and filmed the character walking on air. This episode initiated the immortal generation of characters walking into the void and falling only when they become aware of what they are doing. Another time, Stallings, bothered by the difficult task of drawing on a fixed table, invented the rotating panel, which allowed the artist to work from every side of a sheet of paper. Artists also tried to use many various devices in order to keep the sheets of paper aligned (the most reliable was still Barré's peg system, featuring a standard perforation on the bottom of the paper), although it took years to solve the problem.

The cel was rarely used, and animation was done on paper. Labour was structured in such a way that animators first sketched their drawings with light blue pencils. Since the orthochromatic films then in use were insensitive to a light blue colour, light blue pencils reproduced as white, so lines could be changed and corrected over and over again. The drawings were then passed over to assistants for colouring. The assistants were also responsible for

[9] E-mailed letters to the author, 15 July 2009 and 23 July 2009.

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adding those details that the animators, concerned with the fluidity of action, did not have time to draw: physiognomic traits, clothing details, etc. Theoretically, the task of the animator involved the creation of stories and gags as well as the animation of characters. Sometimes one individual was responsible for a whole movie or a series, but generally the job was divided, and the people who worked on its fragments did not take care to maintain continuity of action. This resulted in unbalanced movies based on incongruous or even non-existent plots. The underlying principle (which lasted for the next twenty years) was to make the viewers laugh at any cost, even if the movie resulted in an assembly of primitive, expedient methods.

Graphically, none of these movies sparkled. Produced at a frantic pace for distributors who did not understand, or did not care about, the details of workmanship, they were unsophisticated and coarse, featuring rounded, simplified forms that were the easiest to animate. For their part, viewers had low expectations: Animation was a curiosity exactly like the many others offered by that popular, populist form of entertainment that was cinema. On the screen, animation mingled with newsreels, slapstick comedies, endless serials, and low-quality fiction (with the exception of the works of T.H. Ince and D.W. Griffith). Animators themselves lacked ambition. They were usually self-taught graphic artists whose education was limited to comic strips and whose commercial craftsmanship was a far cry from fine art. Significantly, their works were called 'animated cartoons' rather than 'animated drawings'.

The early movies were also influenced by vaudeville, a secondary but still-significant element. The commonly used formula of the drawing that becomes autonomous after a real-life artist has sketched it is derived from the acts of vaudeville artists and magicians. In the following years, popular shows still influenced animated movies, but vaudeville was replaced by live-action cinema.