

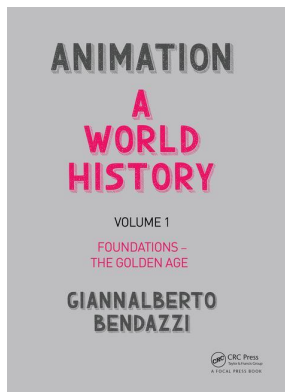
This article was downloaded by: 10.3.97.143

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

Silent America II

Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.1201/9781315721057-5>

Giannalberto Bendazzi

Published online on: 17 Nov 2015

How to cite :- Giannalberto Bendazzi. 17 Nov 2015, *Silent America II from: Animation: A World History, Volume I: Foundations—The Golden Age* CRC Press

Accessed on: 26 Mar 2023

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.1201/9781315721057-5>

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.

5

SILENT AMERICA II

During the 1920s, animation grew its deepest roots in the United States, although it would be wrong to think of it as a flourishing industry. With the exception of Disney's small group in California, operations concentrated in New York, where a few dozen people founded and dissolved production companies, moved from one studio to another, and constituted what in the industry was called the 'cartoon racket'. It cannot be said, either, that the public loved the films produced by those groups: As many veterans later recalled, animated films were more or less considered fillers; whether they were shown or not was of no major consequence to the audience.

The three most prosperous enterprises were the Fleischer Group, which underwent a number of organizational changes before ending in a takeover by Paramount; Pat Sullivan's group, which thrived on the extraordinary domestic and European success of *Felix the Cat* and its clever merchandising strategies; and Terry's Aesop's Fables Studio, of which 90 per cent was owned by its distributor, the Keith-Albee Theatre circuit. From time to time, films served to support the more lucrative field of comic strips by reminding the audiences of their favourite characters. The world of New York animators was a closed group, dominated to a certain degree by a 'ghetto' mentality: The artists who did not belong to 'the racket' were outsiders, branded as lacking in humour and incapable of inventing comic situations. Quality artists were both envied and despised, and newcomers were discouraged from attending art schools and pursuing anatomy studies or etching.

The desire for experimentation and discovery also suffered: Forms, actions, and movements became routine, and learning animation basically meant learning the recipes for what were openly called stock actions. Despite a few exceptions, the industry's assembly-line systemization

did not inspire competition between the companies, nor did it instigate demanding consumers; consequently, this led to inbreeding. Winsor McCay was correct in reproaching his colleagues for their lack of artistic impulses in the mid-1920s.

The Fleischer Brothers

Max Fleischer (Krakow, Austro-Hungarian Empire,¹ 19 July 1883–Woodland Hills, California, 11 September 1972) was the second son of an Austrian-Jewish family that left Europe in 1887 and moved to New York. Interested in both drawing and small mechanical inventions, Max invented the rotoscope (around 1915), a device that permitted a live-action sequence to be transferred to drawings frame by frame. His collaborators were his brothers Joe and Dave. Before the patent for the rotoscope became active in 1917, Max showed a short film sample to producer John Randolph Bray, whom he had met ten years earlier when they both gravitated around a newspaper, the *Daily Eagle*. Bray hired both Max and Dave.

During the war, Max worked successfully on military training films. Promoted to director of his own group, in 1919 he created a series featuring Koko, a clown emerging from an inkwell in every new episode (the series was entitled *Out of the Inkwell*). The format was standard for the time: Max, the artist, would create Koko, a character that would live out its own adventures in a drawn world and would play tricks on its creator.

In 1921, the Fleischer brothers left Bray and founded their own studio, which was to be second only to Disney's both in America and worldwide until 1942. The enterprise was largely a family business. Dave (New York, 14

¹ The Austro-Hungarian Empire is now Poland.

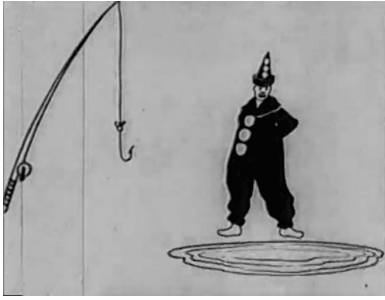


Figure 5.1 Bray Studios – Max Fleischer, *Out of the Inkwell*. Fishing, 1921.

July 1894–Hollywood, 25 June 1979), always second in command, had a position that could broadly be defined as artistic director. Max's other brothers, Charles, Joe, and Lou; his sister Ethel; and his son-in-law Seymour Kneitel all participated in the enterprise at various times. In 1924, the economic expansion of *Out of the Inkwell* Films (as the company had been first named; it later became Inkwell Studios) led Max to found the Red Seal Distribution Company, which was to circulate the short films of Koko the Clown, the Song Car-Tunes; documentaries; and live-action series and comedies. The distribution company lasted only one year, after which Alfred Weiss handled the films; Paramount eventually took over in 1927. The production company continued its operations and in 1928, after ups and downs among its shareholders, the company was renamed Fleischer Studios.

The Song Car-Tunes were short films based on the sing-along formula – i.e. a song that was a known classic of American light theatre was sung by the whole audience. In place of a singer on the stage, it was the film that invited the audience to join in the melody. The Fleischers introduced the concept of the 'bouncing ball': Bouncing on the words of the song projected on the screen, the ball directed which word was to be sung. In the finest films, these drawings were much more than a simple ball bouncing on title cards; Koko or another character often appeared on the screen, and the words of the song were visually interpreted by comical drawings. An orchestra or a pianist provided the music, except for the few short films that had been synchronized with Lee de Forest's Phonofilm system. Although not much is known about this system, at least four or five experiments were produced in 1924–1925, the first of which might have been *Come Take a Trip in My Airship*. While the Fleischers did not actually introduce a new age, they preceded all other animators in the rush towards sound.

Among other enterprises of this decade of production, two educational-scientific documentaries made Max Fleischer especially proud: *The Einstein Theory of Relativity* (1923) and *Evolution* (1925, based on Charles Darwin's theory). Only parts of the two documentaries were animated.

Along with the films featuring Felix the Cat by the Sullivan Studio, the films starring Koko (who later became Ko-ko) and his dog Fitz were the most lively, clever American productions of that time. Koko does not have a very distinct personality (his main trait is a hilarious insolence clearly borrowed from clowns in the circus), and his world is rigorously graphic: Every object can become something different at any time because everything is, after all, nothing but drawing. While this principle was more or less shared by American animators of the 1920s, it found its best expression in these films, in which the character always emerged from the artist's inkwell and returned to it at the end of the adventure.

Within the silent production of the Fleischer brothers, some sequences are so wildly nonsensical as to remain unparalleled, worthy of the honour list of twentieth-century comedy. Regrettably, the Fleischers bet everything on gags. There is no doubt that a collection of good gags can make up a good film, but this must be done with restraint: a simple yet very strong character must handle them, such as Charlie Chaplin's Tramp, Buster Keaton's Stoneface, and Harold Lloyd's Optimistic Young Man. Koko the Clown is flimsy and vague, and it is no surprise that his films were never as popular as (for instance) the ones of the well-shaped Felix the Cat.

The Fleischers' style fluctuated constantly, depending on the 'hands' of several animators (the company's organization of labour remained informal, even in the highly departmentalized age of sound cinema). A few elements, however, remained from the beginning as a sort of trademark: the 'rubbery' animation of characters, which moved constantly, and a taste for black humour, perhaps distantly rooted in middle European influences.

Felix, Pat, and Otto Messmer

Until the late 1960s, producer Pat Sullivan was considered the creator of Felix the Cat, the most important character in American animation before Mickey Mouse and the prototype of the 'animal hero' that reigned supreme in the next twenty years. The rules of the studio system, as well as the reserved character of Felix the Cat's actual creator, Otto Messmer, contributed to the longest-lasting case of embezzlement in the history of cinema. Otto Messmer

was born in Union City, New Jersey, on 16 August 1892 and died in Teaneck, New Jersey, in October 1983. A lover of drawing and cinema, in 1913 Messmer met the cartoonist-animator Hy Mayer, who taught him the basics of the craft. As an assistant to Mayer, Messmer created comedies and some advertising films. In 1916, Pat Sullivan noticed Messmer's skills and hired him for his small, recently opened studio. Their collaboration was to last the next twenty years.

In 1919, in his own time, Messmer created Felix for Paramount's newsreel *Screen Magazine*. The cat was well received, and Paramount patented its name and rights. In order to continue to have Messmer draw the black cat, Paramount chose the easiest way, asking the Pat Sullivan Studio to produce the episodes. When, in 1922, the Paramount newsreel began having problems, Sullivan cannily acquired the rights to Felix. Thereafter, Messmer directed a long series of animators that included, at different times, Bill Nolan, Vernon George Stallings, Raoul Barré, Burt Gillett, and Al Eugster (1909–1997). For years, films were produced at a pace of one every fifteen days; they were distributed by Educational Films. Messmer also created comic strips with Felix for the Sunday comic page.

A difficult man (he even served some months in prison for the rape of a minor), Patrick Peter Sullivan was born in Paddington (New South Wales, Australia) on 22 February 1885. He moved to London in 1909 to further his cartoonist and music hall ambitions but was unable to make a name for himself. By early 1910, he was in New York, where he boxed for prize money, and in 1911 he eventually created a couple of short-lived comic strips, Willing Waldo and Old Pop Perkins. In October 1914, Sullivan joined the Raoul Barré studio and was laid off after nine months because of unsatisfactory work. He stubbornly managed to open his own factory, and by 1916 his staff was producing films under his name. Winning the approval of the usually very cautious Charlie Chaplin, he created an animated series based on Chaplin's comic character. Even though he was quite occupied with business affairs, he signed every graphic or cinematographic creation produced by his company. He also capitalized on the great success of Felix with one of the first instances of merchandising, a phenomenon that Roy Disney later developed and mastered for the Disney Company. Toys, stuffed animals, and various objects displaying the image of Felix increased Sullivan's profits. The films – and from 1923 the published comic strips – spread to Europe and in 1924, when the producer and his wife toured England, Felix was so famous that entrepreneurs were producing

pirated dolls and toys. Sullivan managed to obtain a share of the royalties.

Felix disappeared from screens at the height of his success. Pat Sullivan no longer had the strength or the determination to adapt his studio to the changes that sound cinema required. He suffered from syphilis, and his mental faculties declined; the death of his wife, in 1932, further undermined his health, and on 15 February 1933 he died of pneumonia and alcoholism in Sharman Square Hospital, New York.

The disposition of Sullivan's estate was so intricate that Messmer could not continue with the production of Felix (it was first necessary to determine who owned the rights to the character). Messmer retired from cinema and devoted himself to comics and illustrations.

In the panorama of the decade, Felix was uniquely complex, being at the same time feline, human, and 'magical' (to avoid using 'surreal', an improper term here). His shape cleverly mixed rounded and gracious forms, with corners suggesting the character's shrewdness and naughtiness. Felix was probably the only example of a great animated mime that did not need situations or comic accidents to provoke laughter; his habit of walking in a circle when worried or thoughtful is still famous. Messmer's work on the animated version of Charlie Chaplin probably helped him to understand how a movement or a typical gesture, used with the appropriate timing, could become by itself a powerful, humorous technique. The smooth use of every element in Felix's graphic world contributed to the character's magic. His tail transformed itself into all kinds of useful objects; exclamation and question marks that the animator superimposed on the character could become baseball bats or fishhooks – even the door of a faraway house could be used, regardless of perspective, as a hatch in a blank wall.

As the creation of a great scriptwriter, artist, and filmmaker who was assisted by a staff of professionals that provided a unique style, Felix was an isolated case in the panorama of American animation of the times. Messmer's animation, sober yet elegant, did not result from an imitation of other animators. It is ironic that Felix's originality cost its creator years of dispossession.

Terry and the Fables

Back home after having served in World War I, Paul Terry formed the Fables Studio in 1920 along with Amadée J. Van Beuren (1879–1938), introducing to audiences a new series entitled Aesop's Fables. Actually, the only common

link his fables shared with Aesop's stories was the fact that they both were populated by animals of all kinds and that they had a more or less appropriate moral ("Three thousand years ago, Aesop said . . .") concluding the story. Terry's character, the old farmer Al Falfa, as previously mentioned, was inserted in this new thespian group. The films, which were produced at the suffocating pace of one every week, could not compete in terms of quality among the other films of the time. They were, however, influential for the then-debuting Walt Disney, for they were filled with all kinds of animals and mice – some characters even resembled the early Mickey Mouse of 1927. There is actually tangible evidence that the young Disney and his staff imitated Terry's output and that even after the success of *Steamboat Willie*, Walt considered him an example to match.

Financially, the Keith-Albee Theatre Company,² which took care of film distribution, held the majority of shares until 1928, when the group sold its shares to Amadée J. Van Beuren. The friction between the two partners grew intolerable and ended only when Terry and the majority of the animators left and opened the Terrytoons Studio in 1929. (At the same time, his former partner created Van Beuren Studios.) One of the reasons for the disagreement between Terry and Van Beuren was the advent of sound, which Terry, reluctant to undertake additional expense and innovation, opposed. Ironically, it was one of Terry's productions (*Dinner Time*) that preceded *Steamboat Willie* by a few weeks in becoming the first really popular animated sound short. By the end of this first decade, Terry demonstrated a tendency that was to characterize his career: stylistic and organizational conservatisms striving towards maximum savings, regularity, and punctuality in delivery to distributors. Overall, his films were of average quality, with occasional instances of comic creativity.

Bowers Unbound

Born in 1889 in Cresco, Iowa, Charles R. Bowers lived a gypsy-like childhood and youth, moving from place to place and from job to job. Fascinated by animation, Bowers collaborated briefly with Raoul Barré, as previously

mentioned. In 1916, he began working independently on the production of the Mutt and Jeff series. Filled with energy and ideas – and with no scruples – he plotted against Barré but in turn was expelled by Bud Fisher, who had remained the company's sole owner. The rich, resolute Fisher owned all rights to the characters he had created and made successful for comic strips years before. Fisher also claimed all credit for himself, demanding the rights to every film made in the studio, when in fact he appeared there only sporadically. It did not take long for Bowers to re-enter Fisher's good graces, and he returned to work again on the production and design of the series, albeit as a subcontractor, for five or six more years after 1919.

Bowers' most ambitious project (which he planned with unique precision for such an explosive personality) concerned live-action cinema. From 1926 to 1928, he produced, wrote, acted in, and directed about fifteen comedy shorts in which animated objects and puppets were his co-stars. As Louise Beaudet wrote:

The dichotomy between the animated films of the Mutt & Jeff series and the comic films called 'novelty type' of Bowers is startling. Setting aside the surrealist aspect of the two kinds of films, the construction and orchestration, the manner of expression, the spirit and the letter of the two styles do not come together in any way.³

Judging from the few that remain, Bowers' films were extremely fascinating, characterized by a striking originality. According to Beaudet:

He succeeded in bringing about an almost unique kind of marriage of slapstick with frame-by-frame animation. Moreover, he had a mind and spirit too bizarre to fail to delight today's lovers of the fantastic.

Bowers disappeared from public life after 1928 to occasionally resurface by the mid-1930s when he was briefly hired by the New York Universal branch in competition with Walter Lantz (already based in California) on the claim that he could provide better work at a lower price. He died in New Jersey on 25 November 1945.

² The Keith-Albee Group, later Keith-Orpheum, the largest vaudeville circuit in North America, was the foundation on which RKO, one of Hollywood's major production companies, was later built. RKO stands for Radio-Keith-Orpheum and is the result of the merger of Radio Pictures with Keith-Orpheum.

³ Louise Beaudet et Raymond Borde, *Charles R. Bowers ou le mariage du slapstick et de l'animation* (The Marriage of Slapstick and Animation), Cinemathèque de Toulouse: La cinemathèque québécoise, 1980, p. 13.

Lantz's Debut

Walter Lantz made his directorial debut in the 1920s. Born on 27 April 1900 in New Rochelle, New York⁴ (he died on 22 March 1994 in Los Angeles), to a family of Italian origins (the Lanzas), at the age of fifteen he moved to New York. While working at Hearst's *New York American*, he took a correspondence course in drawing and practiced tirelessly. Impressed by the boy's enthusiasm, the newspaper director, Morrel Goddard,⁵ sent him to Hearst's newly founded International Film Service, where Lantz, then sixteen years old, learned animation from the twenty-four-year-old Gregory La Cava. When Hearst's venture ended two years later, Lantz moved to Charles Bowers' group at Mutt & Jeff Cartoons. In 1921, he was hired by Bray. He advanced quickly and in 1923 became responsible for all of the animated production as well as for his own series entitled Dinky Doodle. Dinky Doodle was a boy with a cap and a dog called Weakheart – like Wallace Carlson's Dreamy Dud and Earl Hurd's Bobby Bumps, the character was unappealing. Lantz himself appeared regularly in the films, continuing the formula of 'live action plus animation'.

During the four years in which Lantz worked in Bray's studio, he was the artistic driving force. When the studio closed in 1927, there were few opportunities in New York, and Lantz decided to start over in Hollywood.

Bray, Hurd, and Mintz

In the 1920s, John Randolph Bray (now associated with Samuel Goldwyn and strongly influenced by him) continued to diversify his company. Busy with newsreels, live-action comedies, and educational films, he left more and more of his artistic responsibilities to others (Max Fleischer first; Walter Lantz later). His enterprises in the field of animation ranged from the temporary resurrection of Colonel Heeza Liar in 1922 through Lantz's Dinky Doodles to the series Unnatural History, which had been initiated autonomously by Earl Hurd. A risky project (a documentary on the Colorado River that endangered the life of the crew during filming and later led to legal

troubles due to a delay in delivery to the distributor) accelerated the pioneering tycoon's growing dissatisfaction. In 1927, he closed the entertainment department of his company and concentrated on more modest, but safer, educational works.

After a stint at Paul Terry's, Earl Hurd began his own business in 1920, continuing his Bobby Bumps series and producing more aesthetically good but unsuccessful films. After the aforementioned Unnatural History series, Hurd created the Pen and Ink Vaudeville Sketches, a series of unrelated episodes set in a true puppet theatre, complete with rising curtains. After he resumed working for Bray, he disappeared from the scene until the 1930s, when he joined Charles Mintz's studio. In 1934, he moved to Disney, where he worked on films such as *Snow White* and *Fantasia*, where he remained until his death in 1940.

Charles Mintz (1889–1940), along with his brother-in-law George Winkler, founded Winkler Pictures in 1925 to produce a Krazy Kat⁶ series.⁷ The new version, originally handled by Bill Nolan, was subcontracted to Emanuel 'Manny' Gould (1904–1975) and his associate Ben Harrison and, although it was hopelessly bad, lasted until the relocation of the studio to Los Angeles in 1930.

Sarg and Dawley

Anthony Frederick 'Tony' Sarg was born in Cobán, Guatemala, on 21 April 1880, to a German father (Charles Francis Sarg) and an English mother (Mary Elizabeth Parker). In 1887, the Sarg family returned to Germany, and at the age of fourteen, Tony embarked on a military career, though he was more interested in painting and drawing than he was in weapons. In 1905, he resigned and moved to the United Kingdom, where he married the American Bertha Eleanor McGowan. He began to enjoy some success as an illustrator and then as a puppeteer.

To avoid World War I, he moved with his wife and child to the United States – first to Cincinnati and then to New York. From 1917, his passion for puppets became a means of earning a living; he was naturalized in 1920 and set up his own company. Obviously endowed with a flair for publicity and commerce and unbelievable energy, he became

⁴ In the last couple years of his life, Lantz maintained that he had discovered that he was actually born in 1899.

⁵ In the history of journalism, Goddard deserves credit for having created the Sunday colour insert.

⁶ George Herriman (1880–1944) first published the Kat's strip in 1913 in the *New York Evening Journal*. The daily's publisher, William Randolph Hearst, and a horde of intellectuals loved it enormously, although it never really became popular with readers.

⁷ The character had appeared in its first cinematographic performance in 1916 under the care of Frank Moser at Hearst's International Film Service; in 1920–1921, it was taken care of by Bray Studios.

the most famous string puppeteer in America. He went on to become a millionaire, but finally his company was dissolved in 1939, leaving him bankrupt. He died in New York on 9 March 1942 of appendectomy complications.

Born in Chillicothe, Ohio, on 15 March 1880, Herbert M. Dawley⁸ was actually a jack of all trades. On the stage, he would direct 115 musicals, comedies, and dramas over a fifty-two-year period. From 1912 to 1917, he was the head of the art department and a designer of special cars for the Pierce-Arrow Company and was credited with having originated the placing of automobile headlights on fenders. He directed quite a few live-action films, often including some animation in them. In the 1930s and 1940s, he appeared as an actor in such radio serials as *Gang Busters* (started in 1935 as *G-Men*) and *Hilltop House* (started in 1937). Herbert M. Dawley died in New Providence, New Jersey, on 15 August 1970.

On 13 May 1921, a front-page article in *Variety* announced the creation of Sarg-Dawley Co., a film production company.⁹ This article talked of a secret process, not patented, developed by Sarg and his associate Dawley, to synchronize ‘the limbs and organs of dumb animals to perform on the screen as if photographed from nature’. It also said that Sarg-Dawley Co. was limiting its production to twelve films per year. This may seem enormous for such a small organization, but one of the characteristics of the silhouette film, as cited by Sarg, is its economy of means: ‘I am able, in conjunction with Herbert Dawley, my associate in production, to average 100 feet a day, which ordinarily would represent 960 drawings in celluloid. It is naturally a very much cheaper process than anything hitherto employed.’

At the time the article was published, Sarg was already planning three projects: *The First Circus*, *The Tooth Carpenter* (also known as *The First Dentist*), and *Why They Love Cavemen*, which are mentioned in the piece.

Two more films would be released before the year’s end. In 1922, the series was augmented by a further twelve titles, including *Adam Raises Cain*, one of the first films to have been found and restored. The series ended in early 1923 with a final episode entitled *The Terrible Tree*.

⁸ Also known as ‘Major Dawley’ for his military rank during WWI.

⁹ ‘Tony Sarg’s Invention’, *Variety*, 13 May 1921, p. 1, column 4.

¹⁰ The technique used by the two filmmakers is somewhat mysterious. In his *The Silhouette Film* (Le Mani, Genoa, 2004), Pierre Jouvanceau writes:

In an article of 1921 (*Movies on Strings*, ‘Photoplay’ n. 21, December 1921, pp. 36 and 114), Tony Sarg lifted the veil on his method to a certain extent: ‘The making [of the silhouette film] begins with a rough pencil sketch which I make on paper, of the scene which I wish to represent. I transfer this drawing to cardboard and generally colour the figures black. Then I cut them out with scissors. The next step is to turn the cardboard figures into marionettes by equipping their legs, arms, neck and other parts of their cardboard bodies with tiny hooks and hinges so that they move freely. By means of miniature mechanical contrivances hidden in back of the figures, and worked by buttons, I am able to make them actually seem to be breathing and their eyelids to move.’



Figure 5.2 Tony Sarg, *The First Circus*, 1921.

The series was bravely original, as silhouette films were unusual in the United States, but it was the omnipresent humour that made it work. The recipe was simple: contemporary life transposed into prehistoric times. This kind of situation comedy, reinforced by gags based on anachronistic objects and behaviour, was conveyed in highly polished animation with many examples of visual inventiveness that would not have seemed out of place in a cartoon. Domestic situations, alcohol, cinema, compromises – Sarg and Dawley put all their contemporaries’ problems through the prehistoric grinder. Thus, one of the first films, *The First Circus*, brings together – with farcical results – the theory of evolution, Prohibition, and Barnum’s circus. The series gained a wide distribution, and not only in the United States.

Herbert M. Dawley took up the torch as soon as *Tony Sarg’s Almanac* had come to an end, with a new silhouette series entitled *Silliettes*, adaptations of classic European tales, for inclusion in the *Pathé Review*. The first episode, also entitled *Silliettes*, was released on 24 March 1923, followed by three other films. The following year, Dawley finished another eight films. After a final episode in 1925, *Jack and the Giant Killer*, the series came to an end.¹⁰

Let’s now examine *Adam Raises Cain*, possibly the most interesting and surprising film among the few that have been preserved.

The title is based, of course, on a pun, and synopsis remarkably well the issues and context of the film. At the primary level, the title announces a film about the problems of a puny, retiring man struggling to bring up a difficult baby who is always ready to get into new mischief. This, along with the second meaning of ‘raising Cain’ – ‘creating a monumental scene’ – is where the film derives most of its comedy.

Throughout this silent adventure, the main characters open and close their mouths incessantly, using all possible gestures to symbolize their right to speak.

There is Adam, a slight and sickly creature, trying, via a discussion, to stand up to Eve; there is the shrew, Eve, yelling insults and threats at her husband; then there is the doctor, called in as backup, who constantly grumbles about the working conditions he suffers around this infernal family. Monkeys, lions, an elephant, a wasp, poultry, and dinosaurs fill the space with an inaudible cacophony. Even objects have their acoustic place: the plate breaking over Adam’s head, the phonograph that he cranks up to settle Cain. The visual suggestion of sound is such that it even seems as if an orchestra is accompanying the performance – at once graceful and comic – of the dancer before Adam.

The latter plays the role of the misunderstood lover, mismatched with his wife, lumbered with a mischievous child, under attack from the vicissitudes of everyday life; a creature full of uncertainties and frustrations, constantly inhibited, though his subversive ramblings compensate for his powerlessness in the marriage. The silhouettes’ jumpy movements explain in turn – but always from an exterior point of view – his isolation, his difference, his impotence, and his desire to run away.

Sarg and Dawley bring movement to every slightest detail in the images that have any connection with the supposed emission of a sound – even in the establishing shots where, under normal projection conditions, such movements would be too small to be seen.

The Young Walt Disney

Walter Elias Disney was born in Chicago on 5 December 1901, the fourth son of the Irish Canadian Elias Disney and Flora Call, an Ohio teacher. The Windy City did not stay long in Walt’s memory because in 1906 his father moved the family to a farm in Marceline, Missouri, in one

Except for the mechanical contrivances, the principle of puppet construction that he describes does not seem too different from that developed by [other silhouette animators]. However, precise as this first-hand account is, it is nevertheless contradicted by what a viewing of Sarg’s surviving films would suggest.

It is hard to believe that the suppleness of the silhouettes and the fluidity of their movements could derive exclusively from as rigid a material as cardboard, no matter how numerous and how ingenious these mysterious mechanisms developed by the animator. The dinosaur whose back serves as a toboggan for the characters in *Adam Raises Cain* demonstrates a flexibility such that his neck, his backbone and then his tail become hollow under the presumed weight of the people sliding down; the snake in *The First Circus*, which is attached like a rope between the neck and the tail of a dinosaur to allow a tight-rope walker to demonstrate his art, manifests the same effect; everywhere animal and human silhouettes come and go and pirouette with a surprising ease, with no trace even in their most complex movements of the inevitable jolts that cardboard produces. . . . A frame-by-frame examination of the undulating movements of the massive tails of the dinosaurs demonstrates that the plasticity of the silhouettes, which is at no time below par, could not possibly have been achieved merely by a large number of joints. . . . Sarg and Dawley, unlike most silhouette animators, used a horizontal shooting set-up identical to that used in the shadow theatre, as is demonstrated by a photograph published in *Photoplay*. His silhouettes, placed upright against a translucent screen, obviously needed great solidity. Given these facts, cardboard or any other rigid medium seems unlikely as a material.

So how did Sarg and Dawley make their puppets? Two theories could be advanced.

Either the silhouettes were indeed cut out of cardboard, as Sarg himself maintains, with the body parts that require the greatest suppleness made from a semi-rigid material, which could, without the help of joints, take on any form and hold it for the time it takes to shoot a frame – rubber with a lead wire insert, for example. But the writer does not make any allusion to such a possibility.

Or else – but this contradicts what Sarg has said – he used three-dimensional puppets made of clay or any other material with sufficient malleability – which would explain both their stability and their suppleness.

Two observations tend to give credence to this second hypothesis. In *The First Circus*, the tail of a dinosaur just happens to pass in front of its body during a movement. At the same moment, a ray of light, very noticeable on the blackness of the silhouette, catches the tail and emphasizes its volume. Second, the way characters turn around in *Adam Raises Cain*, when examined frame by frame, demonstrates without any risk of error that at each phase of the movement all the logical perspectives of a three-dimensional body are preserved. However, neither of the two hypotheses can marshal enough evidence to be definitively accepted. Each of them is opposed by factors that could demolish it. It seems that Sarg did not choose to unveil the essential element of his technique, perhaps to avoid competition and – who knows – perhaps to deliberately throw out a few red herrings.

of several attempts to find a better life. The four years spent in the country (the Disneys moved once again in 1910, this time to Kansas City) remained in the future filmmaker's mind as a symbol of childhood happiness. Disney constantly returned to pastoral themes in his films, and he often gave interviewers nostalgic, detailed descriptions of Marceline's paths, willows, and prodigiously large apples.

In 1918, motivated by his desire for adventure as well as by disagreements with his father, Walt decided to volunteer for the Red Cross. Although World War I ended precisely at that time, he was transferred to France with the occupational troops. There, his drawings and caricatures found favour with his fellow soldiers, to the point that, once back home, he decided to become an artist or, more modestly, a 'comic strip artist'. After a brief stay with his family, who had returned to Chicago, Disney moved to the Kansas City of his youth. One of the first people he met was a gifted graphic artist who was working with him at the Pesmen-Rubin Commercial Art Studio, Ub Iwerks. They both loved their jobs: Walt was inventive and enterprising, while Ub was a born animator.

In 1922, Disney founded Laugh-O-Gram Films. Having hired Iwerks and other promising young artists, including Hugh Harman and Rudolf Ising, he began producing fables, such as *Cinderella* and *Puss in Boots*, retold in a comic tone.¹¹ The young entrepreneur also produced the pilot film for a new series, *Alice's Wonderland*. The beginning of what seemed to be a bright career, however, was interrupted when Pictorial Clubs from Tennessee, the distributors, remained insolvent. In October 1923, the company was declared bankrupt, while Walt himself had already taken a train for Hollywood with the intention of leaving animation for live-action cinematography. Fortunately, *Alice's Wonderland* turned out to be a success with a New York distributor, Margaret J. Winkler,¹² whose company had already taken Fleischers' and Sullivan's movies.

In October 1923, Winkler placed an order with Disney for the continuation of his series. In partnership with his brother Roy (Chicago, 24 June 1893–Los Angeles, 20 December 1971), who was to remain his lifelong business advisor, the animator resumed working, this time alone. The series, based on the idea of a live child¹³ in a world of animated images, continued for four years.

The first to be hired was a Californian, Rollin Hamilton; then, one at a time, the Laugh-O-Gram veterans joined Disney from Kansas City: Iwerks first, then Harman, Ising and, eventually (but briefly), a friend of Harman's, Isadore 'Fritz' Freleng. In 1927, Disney created another character, Oswald the Lucky Rabbit, the protagonist of a fully animated production without live actors. The distribution was entrusted to distributor and producer Charles Mintz, Margaret Winkler's husband and successor, and was supported by Carl Laemmle's Universal. Following the success of Oswald the Rabbit, Mintz managed to hire the studio's best animators, who were resenting Walt's bossy and hot-tempered behaviour. On his side, he had Universal, who owned the copyright for the character. (Mintz's victory lasted only one year, when Universal took Oswald away from him and gave it to Walter Lantz.) Once again, Disney had to start anew. The story goes that after his disagreement with Mintz, Disney sketched the figure of a small mouse and that his wife decided to name it 'Mickey', a much more familiar name than the serious 'Mortimer' suggested by Disney himself. In fact, the credit for Mickey Mouse should be shared equally by Disney, who traced the character's personality, and Ub Iwerks (the only animator who had refused Mintz's offer), who drew the mouse.¹⁴ Ub Iwerks had marked his style in animation: quick, fluid – even gummy – but mechanical and formulaic and based on elementary drawings. Walt's stories and gags were rather good. The young Californians from Kansas City were making the best animated films of their time, second only to the Felix cartoons.

¹¹ These films still have a certain value today. Disney displays his skills as a scriptwriter and his expert sense of rhythm and timing.

¹² A native of Hungary, Margaret Winkler (1895–1990) immigrated to the United States with her family at the age of nine and attended public school, then secretarial school. . . . During her seven years as [Harry] Warner's secretary, Margaret cut her teeth in a decisive way. . . . By 1921, she had amassed a wealth of practical experience and, equally important, a nationwide network of contacts. Armed with these advantages . . . Margaret left the employ of the Warners and went into business for herself.

J. B. Kaufman, *The Live Wire: Margaret J. Winkler and Animation History*, in Maureen Furniss (ed.), *Animation – Art and Industry*, John Libbey/Indiana University Press, New Barnet (UK)/Bloomington, Indiana, 2009.

¹³ This role was first played by Virginia Davis, then by Dawn O'Day, Margie Gay, and Lois Hardwick.

¹⁴ From Alice or Oswald to Mickey, the look of the output remains uninterrupted. In the best films of the series about Alice, the girl had a very small role, while the action focused on several animals, particularly a cat named Julius (who looked like a carbon copy of Felix the Cat). As for Oswald, he was a sort of pre-Mickey, albeit less sweet and more adult; he shared Mickey's same gestures and mimicry and even the same . . . desire to kiss his girlfriend whenever possible (*Oh, What a Knight!*, 1928).