

## DAVID SURMAN

### **Animated Caricature: Notes on *Superman*, 1941-1943**

#### **Introduction**

How might animation extend the visual modalities of caricature? The following essay develops a primary discussion of animated caricature, supported by a close analysis of Max and Dave Fleischer's animated series *Superman* (1941–1943).<sup>1</sup> The aim of the essay is threefold. First, to demonstrate the importance of caricature in the analysis of animated representation. Second, to investigate the role of caricature in the hyperrealist modalities of certain animations. The investigation focuses primarily on the perceptual phenomena: caricature as a form of a reality *effect* or *affect*. Finally, though to a lesser extent, it discusses the problem of linguistic analytical methodologies in the study of animated representation.

To take the prime example, when we eventually encounter an original Mickey Mouse cartoon of the twenties or thirties (on Disney DVD, or a TV special), it is reasonable to say that we will have seen Mickey elsewhere. In fact, for the vast majority of people I ask, the indomitable mouse figured prominently in their childhoods, in the form of stuffed toys, posters, TV shows and the like. The iconic image of the mouse extends far beyond the relative confines of the rather small number of cartoons featuring Mickey. The “meaning” of Mickey, and his iconic status

in contemporary culture, relates primarily to his merchandising, rather than his classic cartoon appearances. When we do have an opportunity to see Mickey in his animated element—shooting possessed playing cards with a fountain pen, or evading an intelligent tornado—the narrative only marginally extends the pro-filmic cultural meanings of his intense character-image. It is certainly less important to the representational judgments we make that Mickey, somewhat arbitrarily, plays a fireman in one episode or a composer in the next. What is important across the range of representational instances is the ceaseless reiteration of Mickey’s iconicity. Arguably, this visual rhetoric was a significant factor behind the success of the Disney animation studios in their early years.

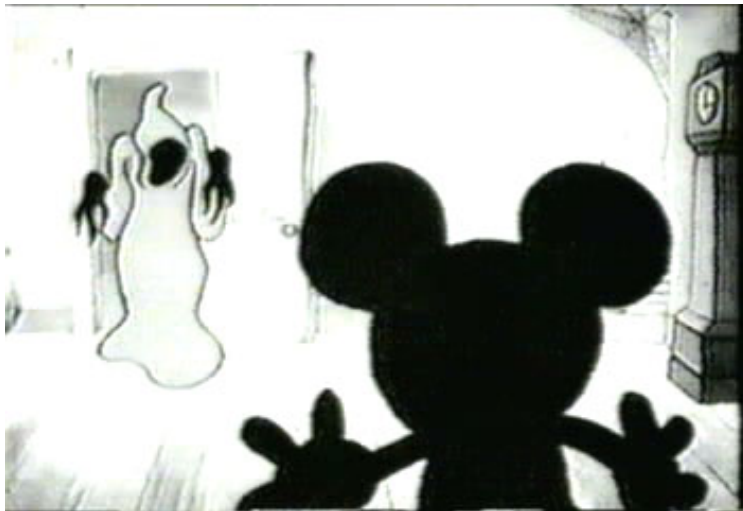


Figure 1. *The Haunted House* (1929)  
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The iconic image (of those three conjoined black circles) dominates the particulars of any narrative circumstance. Mickey is a metonym for an entertainment conglomerate, the Disney Company. Apart from anything else, his image has for the past sixty years expressed the persistence of one particular entertainment empire. Narrative or not, the simple geometry of his design rhetorically promotes the twentieth-century hegemony of Disney animation.<sup>2</sup> The global presence of Mickey’s

image expresses a core problem in the consideration of animated representation; the non-linguistic, non-narrative dimension in which an animated character expresses both its identity and formative contexts. If on certain levels animation is interpreted beyond linguistic and culturally specific barriers (for instance Japanese *anime* in a UK audience context), how do we discuss the representational modalities of animation, aware of the limited applicability of such traditional methodologies as Saussurean linguistics?

Such a problem has been raised in Film Studies, most notably by Stephen Prince, who writes that “film theory since the 1970s has been deeply indebted to structuralist and Saussurean-derived linguistic models.... To speak, for example, about ‘reading’ a film...is to index and enhance this lineage.”<sup>3</sup> In accordance with Prince’s call for the pictorial analysis of the cinematic signifier, I shall similarly account for the iconicity of animated caricature as it is perceived rather than “read.” In this sense, my analysis of animated caricature promotes a cognitive/perceptual approach, and though semiotics does provide useful insights into animation culture, I would like to develop an analysis that is not centrally dependent upon linguistic principles.

Observing the broad critical ambivalence towards animation in both the popular press and film-academic circles, Paul Wells has noted that discussions of animated representation are needed if the role animation has in our broader cultural context is to be reappraised:

The idea that animation is an innocent medium, ostensibly for children, and largely dismissed in film histories, has done much to inhibit proper discussion of issues concerning representation.... Though some attention was paid to the ostensible content of certain films, the complex ways in which animation problematises the representation of gender and race have yet to be discussed.<sup>4</sup>

The ways in which animated representations communicate have evolved as a consequence of the medium's contiguity with other art forms, most notably comic illustration and live-action film. Historically, popular animation and live-action have always been dialectically entangled, each rehearsing the other's codes and conventions whilst retaining an apparent exclusivity from one another. For instance, certain contemporary feature animations emulate the traits of traditional live-action cinematography, such as lens-flare (*Toy Story*, 1995) and camera-shake (*Final Fantasy: the Spirits Within*, 2001). Similarly, live-action now readily employs "invisible" animation to produce a more "complete" *mise en scène*, adding falling leaves to the college campus in *A Beautiful Mind* (2001), or physically correcting Nicole Kidman's nose to resemble that of Virginia Woolf in *The Hours* (2002).

Character-based narrative fiction has dominated the range of moving-image practices broadly termed animation. This hegemony determined the popular imagination, most notably, through Walt Disney's pioneer marketing of the Mickey Mouse character franchise from the late twenties onwards, primarily in the form of merchandise.<sup>5</sup> The exploits of an animated character became recognised as a point of continuity for audiences, ensuring attendance, the persistence of the "cartoon" formula, and a steady stream of capital. As I shall argue, central to the modalities of character animation is the older practice of caricature. If we are fully to understand the experience of viewing character animation and its complex modes of representation, then we must first understand the pictorial properties of caricature. Animation Studies may benefit in the long term should we incorporate the art-theory discourse surrounding caricature into our critical apparatus.<sup>6</sup>

## **On Caricature**

The caricaturist is an idealist of sorts: in the sense that s/he amplifies the dominant characteristics needed for legible recognition, whilst de-emphasising the more generic traits of the subject in question. Further, this idealist expressive mode amplifies, and therefore stereotypes, various shared societal subjectivities: those of race, species, nationality and gender.

In order to develop our current understanding of character animation, we must clearly define what a caricature is. A caricature is a form of representation, and can also be a stereotype, though not always. It is not an image produced by automatic means like photography, and is instead dependent on the creative interpretation of a producer. A caricature is an idealised expression of an individual or object represented: a depiction in which the distinguishing characteristics are exaggerated. In addition, its exaggeration is enhanced by degrees of de-emphasis. In his essay “The Experiment of Caricature,” the art theorist and historian Ernst Gombrich writes that all the “great masters” follow a trajectory beginning with “heavy technique” followed by “subsequent simplification.” “Take Rembrandt’s development: he had learnt to build up the image of sparkling gold braid in all its detail before he could find out how much could be omitted for the beholder ready to meet him halfway.”<sup>7</sup> The caricature crystallises the practice of intensification through simplification, and this principle is most clearly registered and expressed in human representation.

The “portrait caricature” is dependent on some degree of visual analogy to a referent *real*, whereas the purely iconic caricature (or cartoon) need not maintain such a connection. Therefore, caricature oscillates between the opposing poles of indexical realism and iconic cartoon, on what Maureen Furniss has called a “mimesis/abstraction continuum.”

In constructing this continuum, it is probably best to use more neutral terms than ‘animation or ‘live-action’ to constitute the ends of the spectrum.

Although the terms ‘mimesis’ and ‘abstraction’ are not ideal, they are useful in suggesting opposing tendencies under which animation and live-action imagery can be juxtaposed. The term ‘mimesis’ represents a desire to reproduce natural reality (more like live-action work) while the term ‘abstraction’ describes the use of pure form—a suggestion of a concept rather than an attempt to explicate it in real life terms (more like animation)... While it may seem strange to describe *Snow White* as an example of an ‘abstract’ work, its characters and landscapes can be described as caricatures, or abstractions of reality, to some extent.<sup>8</sup>

The correspondent motifs or “cues” of a particular caricature—the rabbit ears and tail of Bugs Bunny for example—“anchor” the character, and are integral to the cognition and plausibility of the design. Recalling the theories of comic-strip inventor Rodolphe Töpffer, Gombrich refers to these character aspects as the “permanent traits.”<sup>9</sup> These constant elements of Bugs’ design define his character, though not his expression. The “impermanent traits” signalled by the animated performance of expression align with those permanent aspects to constitute the character as a whole.

Töpffer’s principle of permanent and impermanent traits is useful for discussing caricature as a representational mode:

We must learn to distinguish between what Töpffer calls the ‘permanent traits’ indicating character and the ‘impermanent ones’ indicating emotion. As to the permanent ones, Töpffer makes fun of the phrenologists of his time who sought the root of character in certain isolated signs. All of a dozen profiles, he maintains, have the same forehead, that of the Apollo Belvedere. But look at the difference in the *Gestalt!*<sup>10</sup>

Bugs is a representational conception of a rabbit, a visual configuration that in its totality (*Gestalt*) is nothing like a rabbit, but which employs perceptual cues to secure a legitimating correspondence to the referent animal. Further, through his wisecracking vernacular and playful carrot-cum-cigar, Bugs is also a parody of Groucho Marx. This is where animated caricature transcends still caricature; the performative, *animate* dimension allows for a greater complexity of exaggeration and expression, and amplifies the symbolic potential of the emphasised cue (carrot-as-cigar). Gombrich notes: “expression in life and physiognomic impression rest on

movement no less than on static symptoms, and [still-image] art has to compensate for the loss of the time dimension by concentrating all required information into one arrested image.”<sup>11</sup> A carrot is not a cigar, and yet Bugs’ performance—in which he fingers and taps the vegetable—suggests precisely that. The non-linguistic, performative process through which animation creates a meaningful mode of expression suggests that we must develop a methodology that moves away from the traditionally applied semiotic models hindering the development of critical frameworks for understanding animation.

### **Animation and Realism**

There are a number of other practical concerns that shape the production of an animated character, aside from those of caricature. As I shall explain later, character animation shares a common trait with the (live-action) action-adventure genre in its core concern with the excess of the body. To clarify, when producing (two-dimensional) animation, the illusion of movement is achieved through the creation of drawings with small interstitial changes from one image to the next:

When the film-maker uses the term ‘animated film’ he uses it in the narrow sense of the work of a graphic artist recreating on paper or celluloid separate phases of movement which give the illusion of continuous action when they are projected in sequence on to a screen.<sup>12</sup>

A character, as a constant and legible creation, is only achieved if the sequence of images is of regulated continuity, recalling Töpffer’s “permanent traits.” In order to maintain this consistency, the animator refers to “model sheets” which show the character from all angles, ensuring a consistent and non-contradictory image. In an effort to produce as realistic an image as possible, an “illusion of life,” the Disney animation studio initiated a number of production strategies to ensure the hyperrealist regulation of the movement sequence from one image to the next. These included the

aforementioned model sheets showing the character from all angles, anatomy classes and life drawing, film reference material, desk-mirrors for studying facial expression, and the development of work methodologies that promoted a process of iterative, continual “line-testing” as a core production practice. The Fleischers’ *Superman* takes this realist production strategy to an extreme. Without these inhibitions, at the very least, the animated line appears to “boil” irregularly, which in some cases is desirable (for instance Bob Godfrey’s *Roobarb and Custard*, 1974).

Therefore, aesthetic realism in animation can be thought of as the suppression of excess itself, since an unregulated animation is pure excess, an abstraction without consistent character (comparable to live-action characterisation). For character to be conveyed through animation, the “permanent trait” of the body must not deteriorate into the “impermanent trait” of pure expression. The reason I suggest that character consistency is a suppression of irregularity (subtractive, like a sculptor carving into the “infinite potential” of a marble block), rather than a “bottom-up” construction, is to recognise the sheer effort it takes to produce a consistent line, as compared to the relative ease of producing a sequence of unregulated abstract forms and shapes. It is important to reiterate that the virtuosity of hyperrealist animation (which actively suppresses its excess) has—in the same way as classical Hollywood cinema—effaced a history of the labour-intensity required to create such images. Indeed, the relationship between the intensity of labour and the quality of the animated representation produced (hyperrealist or otherwise) is an important future discussion. Similarly, regarding the practice of painting, Gombrich notes:

I believe that the student of these inventions will generally find a double rhythm which is familiar from the history of technical progress but which has never yet been described in detail in the history of art—I mean the rhythm of lumbering advance and subsequent simplification.<sup>13</sup>



In the broader contemporary context, clearly there are a number of paradoxes emerging as animated representation moves toward greater and greater realism. An anti-realist “boiling” animated character self-reflexively refers to the mode of production, rupturing the reality effect generated by the diegesis, as Terrence Lindvall and Matthew Melton note: “by commenting on filmmaking and the film industry and by unveiling the raw materials and methods of the filmmaking process, cartoons reveal their own textuality.”<sup>14</sup> True of all animation, the artifice of the image refers to the mode of production, and yet hyperrealist animation employs a range of audiovisual practices that cohere into a plausible reality effect. In these animated worlds, the administration of rules governing objectivity (both environmental and figurative) is integral to a consistently plausible diegesis, and a legitimate reality effect. I use the term “plausible” in accordance with Christian Metz’s definition: “the Plausible...is an arbitrary and cultural restriction of real possibles; it is in fact, censorship: among all the possibilities of figurative fiction, only those authorised by the previous discourse will be *chosen*.”<sup>15</sup> This is particularly illuminating because it reiterates how plausibility is the product of the restriction by an intelligible style (the inhibiting of “boil” through hyperrealist production practice). Secondly, the suggestion that plausibility must be recognised as continuous with permissive prior discourse (of previous related plausible arrangements) supports the notion that the relative unpopularity of *Superman* was due to the fact that it was not perceived to be “continuous” with other animation forms of the time.

Plausible worldviews presented by animation are not simply a formalist cohesion of aesthetic details. I suggest that they are a union between aesthetics, physical principles (incorporating their stylised restriction) and most importantly conducive audience reading practices. A full discussion of those various practices

would warrant a larger debate. The focus here is primarily on the representational capacities (realist or otherwise) of caricature.

Regarding the Fleischers' *Superman*, such “boiling” bodily excess is not evident in the eponymous hero. Preserving the design integrity, the “permanent traits” of the hero over time were central to the hyperrealist character construction, as previously mentioned. Inversely, we see that the excessive facial contortions and serpentine movements of the villains of the series are central to their “evil” characterisation, and their design is not regulated by the strict rules of the “good” Superman character.

Degrees of caricature—varied points on Furniss's continuum between hyperrealist mimesis and cartoonal abstraction—are employed throughout the series to convey the masculinity, femininity, heroism, or ethnicity, evil and even patriotism of the character in question. Stereotypical uses of caricature in these animations communicate a variety of subjectivities. In sum, an extreme cartoonal image is equated with the often villainous “other” in this particular Fleischer series, and seems to be common to the modalities of a variety of animated propaganda.

If we compare the generously spaced, “open” features of the facial design of Clark Kent/Superman with the screwed and knotted facial features of the villains, it is reasonable to suggest that caricature is used to differentiate between “good” realism and “bad” cartoonal aesthetics in this series. In the forties, a more visually complex and contradictory character-design indicated criminality, and the excessive cartoon-aesthetic which opposed the hyperrealist modality was the most immediate means of representing racial or national otherness in animation.<sup>16</sup> Wells observes that

[u]nsurprisingly, the more extreme the caricature, and the more the character was encoded as unpopular and evil, the more it was identified with the people the viewers did not like, and served as a useful vehicle by which to play out the aggression and bitterness unarticulated in verbal terms.<sup>17</sup>

## Animated Representation and Context

Historically, the aesthetic development of animation—in particular contemporary CGI—takes its lead from live-action film. However, to recall Metz’s notion of plausibility and permissive prior discourses, this has proven problematic when the hyperrealist CGI image is not perceived as continuous with the audience’s shared presumptions about animation, the most notable example being *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within* (2001), which flopped at the box office. Giannalberto Bendazzi suggests that the dialectical relationship between animation and live-action is expressed in their respective film content:

Hollywood cinema influenced cartoons in still another way, by becoming itself a source of inspiration—in satire. Several animated shorts were parodies of famous films, others hosted the caricatures of famous stars, and others comically hinted at current events in the world of the cinema. In some cases animation even referred to its own internal situations: one of Frank Tashlin’s characters, for instance, ate spinach saying that if it was good enough for Popeye, then it should work for him too.<sup>18</sup>

Although *Superman* is clearly related to the live-action adventures of the forties, it also takes inspiration from the comic series of the same name that emerged a few years earlier in 1937. In the forties it was rare for a comic character to make the transition into animation. The aesthetic of the thirties and forties comic strip did not translate easily into animation, since the figures in the comic book were only mildly caricatured, and therefore difficult to animate due to their square angular form, particularly when rotating the overall shape.<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, the successful transition from comic to animation was not hinged on the limits of the medium, but more importantly its mass reception, in the light of wartime consumer expectations.

The generic traits of American animations that were produced during this period—humour, metamorphosis, maniacal chases, fantasy, and surrealism—were not applicable to the Fleischers’ *Superman* adaptation, which sought to maintain the

fidelity of the original strip. As Wells notes, in *Superman*, “Even though the comic strip was concerned with a fantasy character, the stories were set in a real world populated by human beings, and little emphasis was put on humour.”<sup>20</sup> Any excess—the uncanny “plasmaticness” of animation that Sergei Eisenstein<sup>21</sup> praised—was reserved for the sinister villains, most notably the mad scientist of the pilot episode.

The uniquely “realist” aesthetic of *Superman*, in the context of a primarily cartoonal animation culture, makes it fascinating from a representational perspective. However, some writers have not appreciated its rogue relationship to the popular forms of the period. Bendazzi notes:

The evolution of the American comic strips into adventure themes, with non-caricatured characters such as Alex Raymond’s *Flash Gordon*, did not influence animators, with the exception of an *insignificant* rendition of *Superman* by the Fleischer brothers.<sup>22</sup>

I hope to suggest that *Superman* is clearly significant in both historical and representational contexts as representative of a relationship between caricature, realism and audience that is currently being rehearsed in the development of hyperrealist CGI animation. Of course, there was nothing particular to animation production that dictated that the comic book style was not viable, though as I have previously mentioned, the animators did find the forms notably harder to rotate and keep consistent since the realist imperative of the comic art made consistency a priority. Also, the audience appear not to have appreciated the hyperrealist *Superman* aesthetic, having formulated certain presumptions about the ontology of animation from the hegemony of anarchic cartoons. The hybrid nature of *Superman*, conceptually and aesthetically, did not complement the frame of reference held by its potential audience. There is a parallel in Gombrich’s reflections on hyperrealism in painting: “The laborious constructions of Uccello and Piero Della Francesca soon ceased to be necessary for suggestion of space and solidity when the public was

prepared to ‘take them as read.’”<sup>23</sup> Likewise the laborious construction of hyperrealist animation extends far beyond the production trends of the predominant practices (for instance juxtaposing Disney studio practices with the limited-animation modalities of United Productions of America [U.P.A.]).

One of the reasons why Bendazzi might note the “insignificance” of *Superman* (in the context of the mainstream forties’ cartoons) is precisely through its rogue relationship to the conventional representation of the body, which (should one temporarily adhere to an essentialist conception of animation) diametrically opposes the excessive and metamorphic tendency at the heart of figurative animation. Wells has emphasised that much of the orthodox studio work of the 1940s and after (excluding Disney) creates a body that is the staple of animation: “malleable,” “fragmentary,” “impossible,” and more generally “uncanny.”<sup>24</sup> He writes:

Orthodox animation and developmental animation, in largely engaging with the figurative, are perpetually concerned with construction and symbolic expression of the body yet, ironically, it is in the design or narrational use of the body that most orthodox or developmental animation moves towards the condition of the experimental. The figurative aspects of the body substantially collapse into the abstract. Bodies merely become *forms* subject to manipulation, exaggeration and reconfiguration.<sup>25</sup>

*Superman* employs a hyperrealist expressive style, which was, more or less, an animated adaptation of the comic art of the period. In this particular mode the strict correspondence to comic-art realism meant that the traditional “squash-and-stretch” animation style (of bendy malleable characters) could not be employed. As such the technique of *rotoscoping* (invented by the Fleischer brothers), where a live-action performance is traced to achieve a realistic movement, was used. Disney used this technique to a far more conspicuous level in its early features, most notably *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937). The clear ontological difference between animation per se and *rotoscoping* in Disney’s animated film was due to the

juxtaposition of cartoonal characters (Dwarfs) and “real body” caricature (Snow White).<sup>26</sup>



Figure 2. An example of the Fleischers' new realist aesthetic style. Still from *Superman*. 1941. © Paramount Inc. All rights reserved.

The ambiguous technique of rotoscoping has been largely unpopular with practitioners and audiences. Gombrich notes that one of the virtues of caricature is that the non-complexity of the image construction minimises the potential for the image to be contradictory: “One effect could do the work of many, provided again that there was no blatant contradiction in the work which hindered the illusion from taking shape.”<sup>27</sup> Responses to rotoscoping, ranging from broad indifference to clear negativity, articulate the feeling that the viewer detects the dual modalities of animation and live-action in a contradictory rather than complementary way, undoing the realist initiative that motivates the intended use of the technique. It is clear that for caricature to work, there must necessarily be no contradiction between the permanent and impermanent traits (character and expression), and the generation of movement

must complement the stylistic principles governing the *gestalt* or overall effect of the design.

In the Fleischers' *Superman*, dramatic tension hinged on the plausible representation of bodily threat, and the style emphasised “real human beings” through the “formal” construction of mortal bodies. Situations where we see Lois being lowered into lava (*The Underground World*, 1943), directed blindfolded to a firing squad (*The Eleventh Hour*, 1942) or burnt at the stake (*Jungle Drums*, 1943), hinged on the underlying drama of mortality conveyed by the realist aesthetic. The life-like physiognomy of the characterisation [fig.2, above] was paired with the drama of a modernist cityscape and the use of German expressionist cinematic devices, such as dynamic perspectives, stark foregrounding and an extensive use of shadow.

In Katsuhiro Otomo's landmark *anime* feature *Akira* (1987) caricature is used in such a way that it dialectically heightens the bodily hyperrealism that thematically underpins the storyline. At the beginning of the movie, the child Takashi is introduced fleeing from a pair of attack dogs. Before Takashi enters the frame, straining to keep up with his adult liberator, we see a regular couple standing in front of a multi-screen TV display. On the screen, two “animated” dogs yap for their dinner in an advertisement for dog food [fig.3], the lump of meat aligned with the bodies of the people walking by. As the cartoon dogs leap to eat the dog food, in the foreground two Alsatian attack dogs run past pursuing the flagging Takashi [fig.4]. The sequence then cuts to the image of the hyperreal “actual” attack dog running directly at the “camera,” teeth bared [fig.5].



Figure 3. Cartoonal Dogs on TV  
© 1987 Akira Committee. Licensed by Kodansha Ltd.



Figure 4. The “hyperreal” and the “cartoonal” are juxtaposed.  
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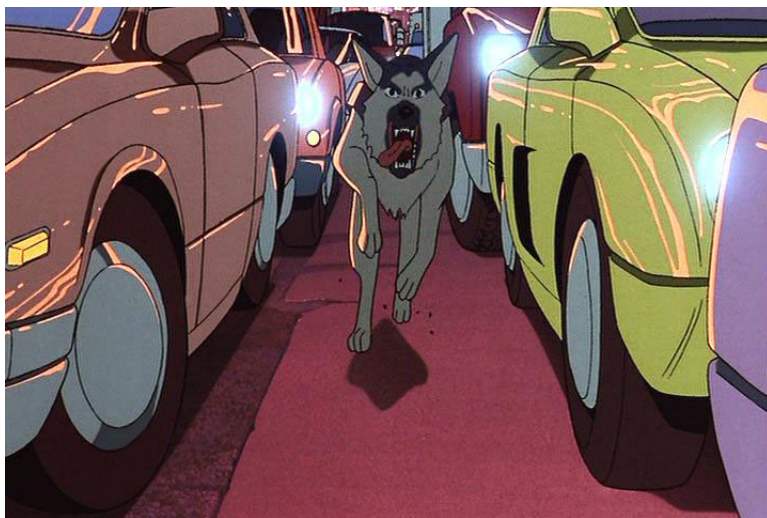




Figure 5. The attack dog attacks us.  
© 1987 Akira Committee. Licensed by Kodansha Ltd.

Within the diegesis of *Akira*, degrees of caricature are used to differentiate clear ontological differences of actual and virtual. Actual attack dogs, virtual cartoon dogs. And yet *Akira* as a whole is an animation, relying on its internally constructed logic to convey a reality effect with the same system of difference we establish between live-action and animation. Of course, this particular system of difference serves the climactic ending of the film when the underdog Tetsuo is transformed from a regular (albeit psychic) boy [fig.6] into a mass of excessive, plasmatic flesh and technology [fig.7]. However, unlike *Superman*, the stylistic governing principles and diegetic logic of *Akira* are not hindered by the contradictory use of caricature and rotoscoping. Such formal contradictions are fully legitimated by the diegesis—and are plausible in the Metzian sense through sheer continuity with the “prior discourse” of the previously released six-volume *manga* publication.

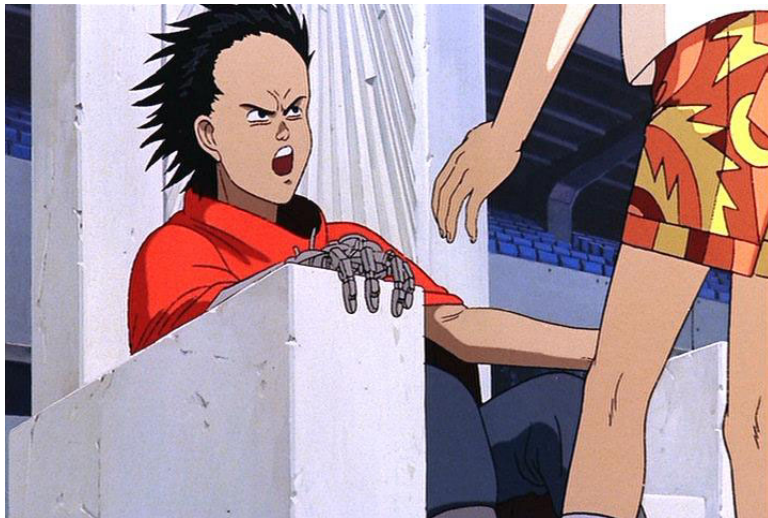


Figure 6. Tetsuo Shima with his “mimetic” metal arm.  
© 1987 Akira Committee. Licensed by Kodansha Ltd.



Figure 7. Testuo succumbs to the coercive effect of Akira and is transformed.  
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In treating the animated caricature in broad socio-historical terms the fundamentals of its mode of communication are marginalised. By examining the modes of caricature in *Superman*, we can help to explain how a critical approach to caricature can be understood alongside existing socio-historical and cultural approaches to animated representation.

Throughout the *Superman* animated series, there are five clear representational types: Superman, ordinary men, women (including Lois Lane), “ethnic” criminals, and white criminals. An understanding of representation through caricature emerges from the oppositions between these various representational types. The clearest of these is the opposition between the representation of Lois Lane, as a woman, and Superman. Irrespective of the episodic villains, Lois and Superman recursively perform the feminine/masculine opposition of almost every episode. Through their caricatured difference the binary of masculine and feminine is made apparent. The representational assemblage of the *Superman* series seems to operate with clear binary structuring, common to the Classical Hollywood model. Moreover, the codes of caricature are opposed on the abstract/real continuum when the characters are of the

same race, for instance Superman and the Mad Scientist in the first episode. However, in the representation of other ethnic types, specifically the Japanese (*Japoteurs*, 1942, *The Eleventh Hour*), a Native American (*Electrical Earthquake*, 1941), and a fictional race of Birdmen (*The Underground World*), caricature creates stereotype.



Figure 8. Superman frees Lois Lane, again.  
Still from *Superman*. 1941. © Paramount Inc. All rights reserved.

We can note the representational cues of the Superman caricature [fig.8]. The design of Superman's face is a highly angular, a primarily square construction. Further, his body shape is analogous to the symbol on his chest—an inverse Triangle—with the width of the chest greatly emphasised over the width of the waist [fig.9]. Scott McCloud notes that “all lines carry with them expressive potential.”<sup>28</sup> If we compare the linear juxtaposition of Superman's head to the breadth and mild curvature of his angled body we can apprehend certain meanings in his representation. I suggest that the shape of Superman's physique is at the root of his iconicity and hyper-masculine representation. Though this is certainly not a revelation, Animation

Studies has yet to fully embrace the reception of formal aspects in the audience's construction of meaning:

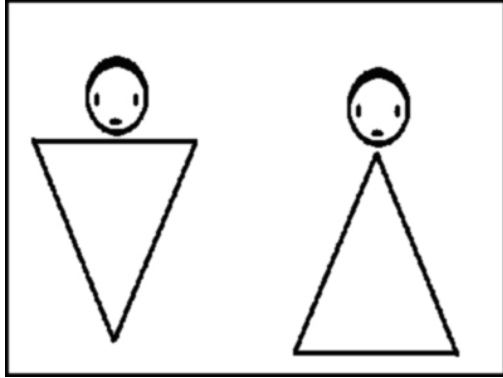


Figure 9. The body-shape *as* gender equivalence.

Diagram © David Surman.

I mentioned the possibility that even man shows traces of such inborn responses, that, in particular, our reaction to faces and physiognomic expression may not be wholly due to learning, and that the mental set which makes us read faces into blots, rocks or wallpapers may be biologically conditioned.... The most astonishing fact about these clues of expression is surely that they may transform almost any shape into the semblance of a living being.<sup>29</sup>

When the iconic configuration of “a face” is arranged within a geometric form, we perceive that geometry meaningfully, as a representation of a *type* of face: “We respond to a face as a whole: we see a friendly, dignified or eager face, sad or sardonic, long before we can tell what exact features or relationships account for this intuitive impression.”<sup>30</sup> Differences of arrangement constitute differing perceptions and varied value-judgements regarding the meaning of “this” face as different from “that” face. To consider Superman, the arrangement of his eyes, nose and mouth in the square-shaped face, with large amounts of space between the features communicates the strength, stability and rationality of the hero: “[f]or any drawing of the human face, however inept, however childish, possesses, by the very fact that it has been drawn, a character and an expression.” Gombrich continues: “Thus a little

experimentation with noses or mouths will teach us the elementary symptoms, and from there we can proceed, simply by doodling, to create characters.”<sup>31</sup> Typecasting is an example of this facial rationale in live-action filmmaking: compare the filmographies of George Clooney and Steve Buscemi for instance. Superman’s face can be explained by figure 10; the image on the left is a hyperbole of the masculine heroic caricature. It conveys heroic masculinity through the perceptual cues of openness, balance, and order. Though in action terms Superman works furiously to save Lois, the caricature of his face maintains an unchanging depiction of his character. In this respect, curiously his face is a permanent trait conveying character rather than expression. He is strangely depersonalised, and in a way through this mode is made heroic/superhuman.

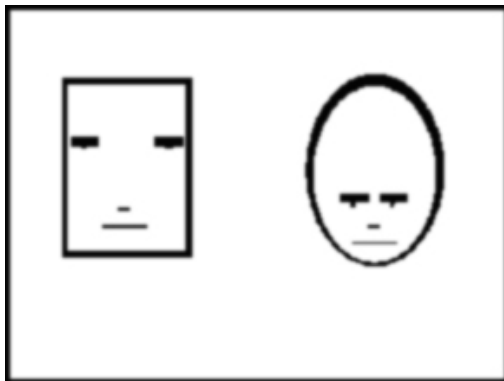


Figure 10. The perceptual significance of shape to the face.

Diagram © David Surman.



Figure 11. The Mad Scientist.

Still from *Superman*. 1941. © Paramount Inc. All rights reserved.

The villain of the pilot episode, the Mad Scientist [fig.11], is caricatured antithetically, inverting the graphic values of the white hero, to create the white criminal. The linear, compositional dimensions of his features converge inwards, and the distance between eyes, nose and mouth is considerably less than that of Superman. The thin eyebrows, hair loss, crooked hands and significantly anthropomorphic eyes coalesce into a caricature representation: the binary opposite of Superman, his “other.”

Expressionistically, his criminality is “encoded” even before he has acted, since his design relates antithetically to the eponymous hero. Any performative action thereafter only legitimates and gives narrative agency to the representational predisposition of the caricature. To recall my opening discussion of Mickey Mouse, we can, in effect, take any single still moment of the Mad Scientist and his narrative trajectory is largely told to us through caricature. Such permanent traits are central to characterisation and its iconicity in the mass imagination, as memorable configurations.

### **Ethnicity, Caricature and Representation**

The caricaturing of ethnicity in the *Superman* series is the most complex, because of the propagandist elements that inflect many of the representations. To understand the role of propaganda, Toby Clark makes a useful summary: “Wartime propaganda attempts to make people adjust to abnormal conditions, and adapt their priorities to accommodate the needs of war.”<sup>32</sup> Throughout the series none of the “ethnic” characters featured is female, bar a single Eastern European heroine, who is white, in *Secret Agent* (1943). Ironically, this is useful, as the representations of non-white ethnicities are all male, suggesting that they are designed in opposition to the protagonist himself—as rivals to his hegemonic patriarchal status. Eric Smoodin reads *Superman* as part of the transition from post-depression thirties America to propagandist wartime:

[Then came]...a superman working to rid the United States of all enemies foreign and domestic. The socio-sexual sphere of the early 1930s became the primary social sphere of the war period, in which all desire must be sublimated to one’s patriotic duty.... Richard Dyer has argued that “the cultural history of the past few centuries has been concerned with finding ways of making sense of the body, while disguising the fact that its predominant use has been as the labour of the majority in the interests of the few.”... “Superman” [represents] that which works for the welfare of everyone, and not while performing everyday labor, but rather, through deeds of global importance.<sup>33</sup>

Concerning ethnic male caricature, the propagandist undertone develops throughout the seventeen-episode series. In *The Eleventh Hour* (1942) the Japanese invaders are made indistinguishable from the shadows, with only the stereotypical ivory white eyes and teeth, glaring out from the darkness [fig. 12]. The body perimeter is blurred, and the caricature expresses the cultural anxiety of the time—that the enemy lurks in the shadows, and attacks without warning and with stealth. This stereotypical caricature is given greater significance in the context of an earlier episode in the series.



Figure 12. A Japanese soldier.

Still from *The Eleventh Hour*. 1942 © Paramount Inc. All rights reserved.

In *Terror on the Midway* (1942) (which preceded the often-noted *Japoteurs*, 1942, as well as *The Eleventh Hour*) a King Kong-like giant gorilla terrorises a circus and the surrounding area. The character motif of blending the figure into the shadows and the surrounding area. The character motif of blending the figure into the shadows is present here, with similar emphasis on the teeth and eyes [fig.13]. This expressionist device, in the evolution of the visual strategy of the series, shows how propaganda adapts the fantastical to the political, through the transposition of the modalities of caricature.



Figure 13. A gigantic, monstrous gorilla.

Still from *Terror on the Midway*. 1942. © Paramount Inc. All rights reserved.



The visual coding of the monster Gorilla, a creature common to the escapist-fantasy narratives of the Depression, is subverted and applied in the representation of the Japanese. As such the intelligibility of the propaganda relates to its previous fantastical application, rendering the Japanese as animalistic and barbarous: occupying the shadows cast by the skyscrapers of the modern city. Like the first villain of the series, the mad scientist, the latter representations function antithetically, and Superman is more defined through greater and greater feats of super-humanism than in the earlier episodes, in order to sustain and reiterate the extremity of propagandist wartime narrative. It is in the later episodes that Superman attains the national body equivalence common to the action-adventure genre, as a fantasy of never failing, insurmountable heroism and metonymic cultural focus. The relationship between nationhood and the body is an important one in the visual rhetoric of *Superman*.

### **Excess, Body and Nation**

Before I conclude my discussion, I would like to put *Superman* briefly in a contemporary live-action context. Though I hope to have outlined a general approach to caricature, there are interesting parallels in the representational strategies of *Superman* and certain live-action films. Many of the critical suggestions I have made regarding caricature are to a greater or lesser extent applicable to certain aspects of live-action film. I would like to sketch out some of those parallels in a specific genre-context.

Contemporaneous with the boom of many “action-merchandise” animation series such as *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe* (1983) and *The Teenage Mutant Hero Turtles* (1987), the Hollywood action-adventure genre emerged. The

icon of the brutalising, powerful male has dominated this genre, which emerged in the late seventies. Irrespective of the narrative ambition of the character, the generic image of a heroic man with a pumped, sculpted body has been the definitive representation of the latter period of the genre, in the mid-to-late eighties.<sup>34</sup>

Arguably, the prime examples of the action-adventure genre (at its zenith) are James Cameron's *Terminator* films (1984, 1991) starring Arnold Schwarzenegger. Throughout, his male physicality is dialectically both technologically upgradeable and fantastically corporeal. At points there are spectacular images of the man-machine obliterating the flesh from his body, consequently exposing his robotic interior. In one particularly lucid scene he removes the flesh from his arm, declaring his superior physique through a "body mastery" common to the "new flesh" cinema of 1980s action sci-fi. This "post-humanism," representations of *bodies without limitation*, created a generic niche for the ongoing development of masculine hyperrealism in the action-adventure genre. Directors who have come directly to epitomise this specific body sense include David Cronenberg and John Carpenter.<sup>35</sup> In sum, there is a notable dialogue between an emergent post-humanism and the horror genre, crystallised by the term "body-horror."<sup>36</sup>

In numerous action-adventure films the significance of body and country are inextricably linked, wherein the individual signifies the nation. The most intriguing films are those that put forward the idea of the international underground fighting championship, such as *Best of the Best 2* (1992), *Bloodsport* (1988), *Kickboxer* (1988) and *The Quest* (1996). In these films martial arts naturalise the "individual as nation" equivalence, whilst in *Superman* the eponymous hero's otherworldly lineage and subsequent adoption of North American constitutional values effect such an association. Most evident in *Bloodsport* and *The Quest*, the combatants that take part

signify their nations through their fighting styles. Place confers identity. A Sumo wrestler is to Japan what a kilt-wearing boxer is to Scotland: individuals iconically (stereotypically and reductively) representing nationhood.

In *Superman* there is the sense that the ideological tones of these animated shorts blur patriotism, physicality and heroism together, manifesting in the action-adventure personality of the eponymous hero. Importantly, caricature as I have outlined it is central to the means through which animation expresses such ideological equivalences. The physically competitive scenario, paired with a body-oriented *mise en scène*—which prioritises the performing figure through a de-emphasised space—makes such “national bodies” both a generic reoccurrence and a repository for ideologies of both realistic and fantastical masculinity. While being narratively mediocre, both the contemporary action-adventure genre and its antecedent *Superman* relay the implicit relationship between imagined heroism, power fantasies and the ideological concept of nationhood—whereby expressions of martial prowess define the sovereign status of the referent country.

Historically, representations of power *as* prowess, though a muscular body, are interchangeable with the concept of masculinity. Bodies that crystallise national and cultural sentiment, be they celebrities or heroes, are predominantly male due to the cultural equivalence made between power, prowess and maleness, though there are exceptions. In the popular fiction of America, the superhero comic has arguably been the remediated<sup>37</sup> source of the action-adventure hero, built upon the muscles-equals-manhood representational archetype. Subsequently, I historically position the American nationalised masculinity of Superman (in his various media incarnations of comic, animation and film) as the predecessor of the contemporary action-adventure hero.

## In Conclusion: Caricature and Identification

...nobody identifying with Superman believes they can fly after the film ends...<sup>38</sup>

Caricature is fundamental to the reception of character-based animation, as a mode of representation. Like all representation, a caricature is a repository for the intent of both creator and interpreter, between which creative and receptive dialectics emerge.

A caricature is an expressionistic device, and can be understood through its expressive faculties. Line, tone, colour, form and movement—the mechanics of caricature—can be apprehended in order to ascertain the intended or unintended *affective representation* of the character. To account for the material processes at work in caricature, it is useful to differentiate between the permanent and impermanent traits that distinguish character from expression. Such a division is key to the discussion of animated caricature. Through a discussion of the Fleischers' *Superman* series, I have attempted to show how the archetypes of villain and hero are embodied in caricature, specific to the North American tradition of comic book superheroes and animated shorts. I have also noted the antecedent relationship between *Superman* and the action-adventure genre, through analogous representations of the bodies of the focal characters.

In conclusion, a caricature is primarily a device for identification. In this respect, the “openness” that characterises the representation of Superman (which is of course a representation of *the* wartime idealised masculinity) facilitates greater spectator identification than the complex, knotted faces of the villain. If caricature is integral to the identification of spectators with characters, then it is integral to the understanding of the ways in which audience members engage with animated images and through what kinds of process they determine character. The domesticity of

daytime TV animation has meant that the animated character is only considered in broadly cultural terms. The modalities of animated caricature will need greater consideration if we are to appreciate the changing style of our animated cinematic icons, which exist free from photographic reproduction.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster created *Superman* in 1938, incidentally prior to America's involvement in World War 2.

<sup>2</sup> I say twentieth-century with regard to the rapid decline of the Disney company in recent years, arguably through the mismanagement of Michael Eisner and the loss of Roy Disney.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Prince, "The Discourse of Pictures: Iconicity and Film Studies," in Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, eds., *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 99-117.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Wells, *Understanding Animation* (London: Routledge, 1998), 187.

<sup>5</sup> For a concise discussion of emergent characters in early animation culture see: Donald Crafton, *Before Mickey: The Animated Film 1898-1928* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

<sup>6</sup> Though I make no explicit reference in this essay, for an excellent discussion of animated caricature in the context of Warner Bros., see Donald Crafton, "The View from Termite Terrace: Caricature and Parody in Warner Bros. Animation," in Kevin S. Sandler, ed., *Reading the Rabbit: Explorations in Warner Bros. Animation* (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 101-120.

<sup>7</sup> Ernst Gombrich, "The Experiment of Caricature," in *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1977), 279-303.

<sup>8</sup> Maureen Furniss, *Art in Motion: Animation Aesthetics* (London: John Libbey, 1998), 5-6.

<sup>9</sup> Gombrich, 287.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 287-288.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 292.

<sup>12</sup> John Halas and Roger Manvell, *The Technique of Film Animation* (London: Focal Press, 1959), 11.

<sup>13</sup> Gombrich, 279-280.

<sup>14</sup> Terrence R. Lindvall and J. Matthew Melton, "Towards a Post-Modern Animated Discourse," in Jayne Pilling, ed., *A Reader in Animation Studies* (London: John Libbey, 1997), 204.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Richard Neupert, "Painting a Plausible World," in Eric Smoodin, ed., *Disney Discourse: Producing the Magic Kingdom* (London: Routledge, 1994), 111.

<sup>16</sup> This paradigm recalls the Victorian science of phrenology in the way in which criminality and facial contortion are clearly equated.

<sup>17</sup> Wells, 236.

<sup>18</sup> Giannalberto Bendazzi, *Cartoons: One Hundred Years of Cinema Animation* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press), 84.

<sup>19</sup> Thanks to Mark Langer for this observation.

<sup>20</sup> Wells, 193.

<sup>21</sup> Sergei Eisenstein, *Eisenstein on Disney*, trans. Allan Upchurch (London: Methuen, 1989).

<sup>22</sup> Bendazzi, 84. My emphasis.

<sup>23</sup> Gombrich, 281.

<sup>24</sup> Wells, 48.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 188. Original emphasis.

<sup>26</sup> A fascinating character in this respect is the Queen in *Snow White*, who switches between the states of realist caricature and cartoony crone: the degree of caricature shifts to complement the diegetic changes caused when she herself changes.

<sup>27</sup> Gombrich, 281.

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<sup>28</sup> Wells, 124.

<sup>29</sup> Gombrich, 288-289.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 282.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 287.

<sup>32</sup> Toby Clark, *Art and Propaganda in the Twentieth Century* (London: Orion Publishing, 1997), 103.

<sup>33</sup> Eric Smoodin, *Animating Culture: Hollywood Cartoons from the Sound Era* (Oxford: Roundhouse Publishing, 1993), 39-40.

<sup>34</sup> See Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>35</sup> Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1982) and Carpenter's *The Thing* (1982) are prime examples.

<sup>36</sup> See: Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>37</sup> See: Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999). Remediation refers to the ways in which ideas pass on from medium to medium, and between coexistent media. The transfer from comic book to cinematic animated film is significant in that (speculatively) the cine-literacy one might bring to *Superman* might have more to do with a spectator's understanding of live-action and comics than with animation per se.

<sup>38</sup> Robert Lapsley and Michael Westlake, *Film Theory: An Introduction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), 179.