



Impression and Expression : Rethinking the Animated Image Through Winsor McCay

by Daniel McKenna

In July of 1927, Winsor McCay held a private exhibition of his animated works, during which he told his audience, according to a New York Times reviewer, that “the art of animated cartoons had not progressed, and that its possibilities were unlimited”.¹ McCay’s contentious statement dismissed contemporaries such as John Randolph Bray and Max Fleischer, who had pioneered the industrialization of the animated film and whose early successes paved the way for Disney’s eventual domination of the film industry. American cartoons circulated freely in mainstream venues on both sides of the Atlantic, while lively formal experiments in animation were undertaken by thriving European avant-garde movements. Considering the popularity and diversity of animation at the time, one must wonder exactly what McCay wished the animated image to progress towards, and what possibilities he longed for it to explore. Interestingly, an examination of his work reveals that McCay might have stumbled upon the answer almost two decades earlier in his first film, *Little Nemo* (1911), when an animated figure springs to life from the page on which he is drawn, exclaiming, “Watch me move!”

Though film scholarship has traditionally marginalized animation, it has emerged in the digital age as a way of highlighting a decline of photochemical technology in cinema. The moving image has a tendency to be defined by the technology which produces it. For instance, to speak of a digitally animated production as a “film” in the familiar sense is perhaps a fallacy, as these productions do not use celluloid or the analog film camera, but the label persists, stemming from a history of defining cinema through photochemical technologies. This historical conjunction enabled a link between cinema and a pre-existing external reality, often understood as an indexical relationship, but this

sense of indexicality has been questioned by the digital turn in moving-image entertainment. This essay concerns how early film animator Winsor McCay first confronted this relationship by placing technology in the service of projected motion, prefiguring the production of digital animation. For this pioneer animator, the photographic elements of cinema were merely a means to achieving illusions and abstractions of moving images.

The same could arguably be said for early trick film directors who manipulated staging and editing to produce illusions of physical impossibilities. However, unlike trick film artists, whose deception relied on manipulating photographed reality, McCay filmed hand-produced images in sequence, introducing his training as a static imagist into a kinetic medium. Moreover, McCay's "tricks" were not hidden, but put on display as a spectacle of movement. His images were real in the sense that their movement, or their imbuelement with *life* as such, was perceived as real, even as his films openly declared and embraced their artifice. Drawing on the idea that the impression of movement amounts to a continuous thread that links early and contemporary film practices, I argue that revisiting the role of animation in early film history provides new perspectives on its contemporary manifestations. Specifically, the case of Winsor McCay demonstrates the ability of the animated image, even in its most nascent stages in film history, to negotiate the *impression and expression* of reality.

DEFINING ANIMATION

It is worthwhile here to consider first the thorny question of what exactly constitutes an animated image. It is hardly necessary to note that defining animation has never been a simple task. The earliest animated films were not described as such, and were often grouped by exhibitors and trade journals with single-reel cinematographic productions, such as trick films. Many were described in terms equivalent to "moving pictures" or "drawings that move", and words like "animation" or "animated" were used in varying ways to describe cartoons and live-action images alike, often to denote a heightened intensity about the movement of the picture.² Only after major animation studios moved towards a streamlined industrial production process, making the individual artisan

largely obsolete, did the term acquire its dominant associations with the hand-drawn, non-photographic image. This was reflected in the first manual of animation written by Edwin G. Lutz in 1920, entitled *Animated Cartoons: How They are Made, their Origin and Development*, which concretized the main principles of the medium at that time.³ The first book to be solely devoted to the craft of animation, it emphasized the importance of producing as few drawings as possible for efficient output, and described various techniques in successfully carrying out this process. It was a process that was entirely geared towards the studio production of cartoon characters, which looked similar to those found in comic strips (as evidenced by the book's explanatory illustrations). Most importantly, it provided a simplified aesthetic and technological script for any aspiring animator to follow, one of whom was a young Walt Disney, who familiarized himself with Lutz' basic strategies and applied them to his own work.⁴

In recent years the term "animation" and its historical separation from cinema has come under more scrutiny, brought under the spotlight so its contours can be defined in the context of digital technology. The tangled threads of its knotted history have frequently led scholars to the idea that "animation begat cinema", insofar as animation as a concept and practice predates the introduction of the film camera.⁵ However, as Donald Crafton has argued, a logical fallacy emerges with this genealogy of animation technology in that it forges misleading causal connections. The supposedly "linear path" traced from 19th century animation technology to cinema, for instance, "has been formed by our unreflective familiarity with animation cinema and with cinema, luring us to give a name to what formerly were artifacts and techniques without a classification".⁶ In other words, it is an outlook which fashions a convenient genealogical niche for different cinematic technologies, but which is hindered by a sense of teleological progression in a questionably unified historical lineage. Nonetheless, it is a framework which has largely been adopted in an attempt to account for the digitally animated image and to legitimize its placement within contemporary film studies.

One such conceptualization of animation comes from Lev Manovich, who concludes that digital cinema is a type of animation in which live-action footage is merely one of its many compositional elements:

Manual construction and animation of images gave birth to cinema and slipped into the margins...only to reappear as the foundation of digital cinema. The history of the moving image thus makes a full circle. Born from animation, cinema pushed animation to its periphery, only in the end to become one particular case of animation.⁷

This is echoed by animation theorist Alan Cholodenko, who goes even further by sweeping still photography into the equation:

...not only is animation a form of cinema, cinema – all cinema – is a form of animation. To which I would now add: so too is photography. Photography – all photography, photography “as such” – is a form of animation. Which would allow me to put it the way I have put it before: not only is animation a form of film, film – all film – is a form of animation. This includes photography as a form of film.⁸

These definitions are grounded in the indexical properties of film and photography, presupposing a link between reality and the photochemical technology that captures it—a link that digital cinema is said to have severed by compromising the immutability of the photograph. Manovich, for example, uses animation as a way of describing contemporary cinema as if it is no longer the “art of the index”, or “an attempt to make art out of a footprint”.⁹ Cholodenko, for his part, extends animation’s fundamental relationship with motion to still photography, arguing that the photograph’s *lack* of movement constitutes a reversal of the cinematic tradition of bringing deathly still images to life.¹⁰

These definitions, compelling as they are, tend to broaden animation into a nebulous umbrella term which attempts to reconcile the presupposed tension in the moving image between its mutable digital form and the immutable indexicality of its photochemical form. It is possible here to question these definitions by re-examining their reliance on the index in cinema’s relationship to reality. Tom Gunning, for instance, has maintained that the notion of the index is too often misunderstood and over-privileged when looking at cinema’s relation to reality:

Cinema has never been one thing. It has always been a point of intersection, a braiding together of diverse strands[...]the discussion of cinematic realism cannot be allowed to ossify into a dogmatic assertion about the photographic nature of cinema or an assumption about the indexical nature of all photography.¹¹

This has resulted, as Manovich also notes, in a marginalization of animation, but Gunning argues that “far from being a product of new media, animation has always been part of cinema and that only the over-emphasis given to the photographic basis of cinema in recent decades can explain the neglect this historical and technological fact has encountered”.¹² In this vein, motion is more significant to cinema than indexicality. Yet “motion” or “movement” in the general sense alone does not constitute “cinema” writ large—clearly, it is not enough to rely on the ingenuous tautology that “movies move”. Rather, it is movement which produces the spectator’s perceptually active kinesthetic instinct that provides him or her with the sense of being *in the presence* of something—an impression of reality.¹³

In light of this, I wish to suggest that the dominant thread in the history of animation is movement as both the *impression and expression* of reality. Movement is the key to this because it invokes a sense of vitality in the still image that is perceived as “real”. This has been called the “illusion of life”, a phrase Cholodenko puts forth to describe that which constitutes a “fascination with the way in which an apparatus animates—gives movement and life to—images of people and things”.¹⁴ However, a twofold problem emerges in this approach. The first is the indebtedness of this “illusion” to the production of an axiomatic truth, of something that aspires to resemble a reality which exists on its own terms. This might be more accurately rephrased as the “imitation of life”, which, given its widely divergent aesthetic from the live-action image, positions animation simply as an attempt to mimic live-action cinema, and nothing more. Related to this is the second problem of attributing life-giving powers to the apparatus, a fundamentally inorganic mechanical object which produces the expression of its operator. Cholodenko observes that the phrase “illusion of life” was used both by the Lumière brothers and Walt Disney, independent of each other, to describe their work in live-action and animation respectively, implicitly positioning the inviolable reproduction of reality as the

point of convergence between the two. But one could point, for instance, to the diagonal composition of the Lumières' image of the train at Ciotat as a unique formal choice of that time,¹⁵ just as no one would deny the formally manipulative hand of the animator in a Disney production. As Gunning reminds us, "the apparatus, in itself, can neither lie nor tell the truth"¹⁶—it produces the image which is mediated by both author and spectator, by expression and impression. As such, animation cannot be swept wholesale into the index-as-trace argument, nor can it be discounted solely on the basis of a different form of indexicality.

However, one important concept can be drawn from the "illusion of life". Central to this illusion is the presence of the animator in their work, which, as Crafton has argued, places them in the role of "life-giver"—a role that is fulfilled by endowing the image with movement. This argument entails that the "genesis theme" found in the animator's presence has been gradually masked over the years, but it is always there, unfolding with "increasing subtlety and expertise until finally we take for granted that the animator can vivify things that could never otherwise have existed".¹⁷ The degree to which this "masking" occurs varies between animators, but it is certainly more prevalent now than in the early days of animation, where the largely artisanal filmmaking process was mythologized as a triumph of creation. The labour-intensive nature of early pre-cel animation seems to have lent it a propensity for the conspicuous presence of the animator in their work. Emile Cohl, for example, a French contemporary of Winsor McCay, was thought to have exaggerated the number of drawings produced for his film *Fantasmagorie* (1908) by twice the actual amount, and the film itself prominently features the creator's photographed hands manipulating the drawings. McCay turned the animator's presence into the primary spectacle of his oeuvre, frequently deploying a "wager" narrative in which he proved to a sceptical audience his ability to draw thousands of drawings which, when displayed in rapid succession, were brought to life. This usually took the form of a live-action prologue to the actual animation, which featured illustrations that were previously thought impossible to visualize in motion. Significantly, in almost all of McCay's narratives, movement directly corresponded to liveliness.¹⁸ This genesis theme thus speaks to the existence of what might be called an

animated reality, an *interior* space which consists of those things which could not exist in an *external* physical reality, a realm that the indexical photograph is incapable of capturing. This allows for an expansion of the theory that an impression of reality is forged from the spectator's visceral experience of kinesthesia when perceiving projected motion.¹⁹ If one's *impression* of reality derives from this interior phenomenological experience, then animation constitutes an *expression* of reality which both consciously and unconsciously plays to this experience, questioning the primacy of photographic reality in the process.

This effect has been explained elsewhere without direct reference to animation. Gunning argues that a semiotic view of the index—a sign with a referent—is insufficient in describing the entire effect of the photographic image, an image which “opens up a passageway to its subject, not as a signification but as a world, multiple and complex”.²⁰ He aligns this with André Bazin's view that the photographic image places the spectator in the “presence of something”, noting how the critic's ontological musings are often over-associated with the prevailing view of the index as a trace of reality.²¹ Bazin himself noted that the expressive power of photography surpassed the boundaries of its basic reproductive function when he wrote that the photograph “actually contributes something to the natural order of creation instead of providing a substitute for it”.²²

This speaks to the phenomenological approach toward the impression and expression of reality in animation, which attempts to articulate its anchorage in the “real”. Vivian Sobchack offers a useful framework for this reality in her discussion of film as embodied vision. Observing major trends in film theory, she terms realist tendencies as treating film as “perception-in-itself”, or “objectivity freed from entailment with the prejudicial investments of human being”—and conversely, formalist tendencies treat film as “expression-in-itself”, which is “subjectivity freed from worldly constraint”.²³ Sobchack further argues that neither tendency should necessarily exclude the other, as both are bound up in intentionality, an act of consciousness through which the spectator is brought into the presence of by the film image. Therefore, “the *existential and embodied act of viewing* becomes the paradigm of this exchange of both perception and

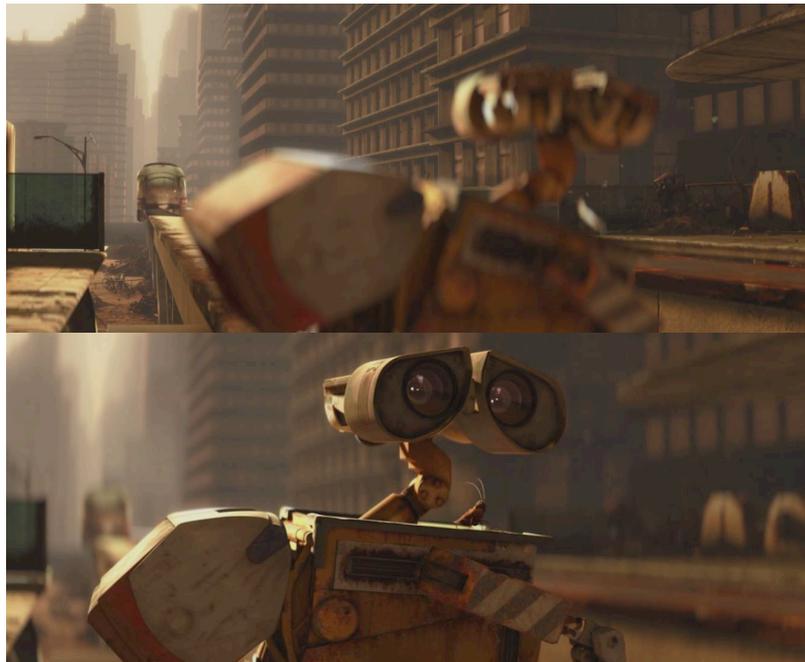
expression” in the image.²⁴ The film experience can be articulated thusly as simultaneously the “perception-of-expression” and the “expression-of-perception”.²⁵ If we substitute the term “impression” for “perception”, the bridging of physical and animated reality surfaces within this framework. That which is experienced in the world is filtered through a subjective act of consciousness and mediated through the technology of projected motion.

This, I believe, helps to account for the animated image in its wide array of technological incarnations, including the digital. It avoids defining cinema as a strictly photographic medium and steps away from doctrinal reiterations of its traceable origins in tangible reality, which discussions of the digital image often tend towards. One notable example of this is Stephen Prince’s analysis of the emergence of digitally-animated effects. Pre-empting Manovich by several years, Prince writes that the “flexibility” of digital imaging “frees it from the indexicality of photography’s relationship with its referent”, while ascribing this emphasis on the indexical relationship to Bazin’s ontology of the cinema.²⁶ In this vein, he argues that there has been a “perceptually realistic” approach to digital imaging:

A perceptually realistic image is one which structurally corresponds to the viewer's audiovisual experience of three-dimensional space. Perceptually realistic images correspond to this experience because film-makers build them to do so. Such images display a nested hierarchy of cues which organize the display of light, color, texture, movement, and sound in ways that correspond with the viewer's own understanding of these phenomena in daily life. Perceptual realism, therefore, designates a relationship between the image or film and the spectator, and it can encompass both unreal images and those which are referentially realistic. Because of this, unreal images may be referentially fictional but perceptually realistic.²⁷

Prince makes several useful observations here, but the overall concept remains porous for several reasons. Perceptual realism begins to account for *what* digital imagists have created, but insufficiently explains how or why it generates these particular effects. It assumes that reality is one physical, tangible realm that is passively perceived and congruently reproduced *ad infinitum*. Unsurprisingly, perceptual realism does not concern itself with fully animated productions which do not necessarily attempt to

correspond to the viewer's experience of physical worldly space—one needs only a cursory glance at various animated productions to note their aesthetic heterogeneity in this regard. For example, Disney's *WALL-E* (2008), in which a fictional future is digitally rendered in a way that attempts to mimic photochemical technology—lens flares, rack focusing, hand-held camera movement—is strikingly different from digital image artists taking their inspiration from animators such as Norman McLaren and Oskar Fischinger, who rejected photographic reality in favour of the impression of movement.²⁸



Digital imitation of rack/pull focus in *WALL-E* (Stanton, 2008)

Finally, perceptual realism insists upon an imaginary referent for the digital creation, which implies that the referent of the digitally-created sign has only an illusory anchorage in reality. Again, this assumes that a prerequisite for the indexical relationship is that which exists in the image must also exist in the world. But as animation repeatedly demonstrates, the only requirement for perception-as-real is perception itself, resonating with Gunning's assertion that "no difference exists between watching a film of a ball rolling down a hill, say, and seeing an actual ball rolling down a hill".²⁹

This is where we can begin to identify *movement* as a starting point for describing this impression of reality. Animation is conducive to this, not just because it appears to move (as do cinematic images in general), but because marginalizing animation on the basis of indexical difference elides its similarities with live-action in terms of producing and depicting movement. As animators have generally rejected the desire to approximate photographic reality, animation is in a position to be examined for its awareness of what the moving image does, both for and with its audience. As such, animation is less about recording and representing the sensation of movement as much as it is concerned with producing the sensation of movement, which in turn offers unique insights into phenomenological experience. It is for this reason that, as Crafton suggests, defining the material borders of animation is merely a matter of semantics, as its classification under these terms only serves to further marginalize the study of its phenomenology.³⁰ This may be an overly polemical suggestion for some, but in any case, it draws our attention to the possibility that outlining the material contours of such a pliable object provides only short-term gain, which makes the historicizing of their transformations all the more essential. If we can't define animation in terms of its materiality or differing indexical relationship, how do we then define it? If we define it solely at the level of movement, then what makes it distinct from other forms of moving image? Here, the work of the early film animator Winsor McCay forms a useful case study that shows how movement is the key to the impression *and* expression of reality, both of which act on each other a mutual exchange in the animated image.

WINSOR McCAY AND THE REALITY OF ANIMATION

McCay was an early animator who showed, on some level, an awareness of the true function of movement in the filmic image. This was evident in his work as a cartoon strip artist and editorial illustrator prior to his animation career. He combined humorous jokes with the unbounded freedom of dream logic and its physical and perceptual impossibilities, expressed through highly detailed drawings that transformed from panel to panel. Much has been made about McCay's transition from comics to film, inspiring extensive work on how the cartoon strip, as the elder medium, directly influenced film form.³¹ However, the influence of cartoon strips on early animation is often

overestimated, allowing immediate aesthetic similarities—namely the use of hand-drawn images—to form claims of causation with little empirical evidence.³² Drew Morton expands on this idea, noting that McCay, as a Vaudeville lightning-sketcher, in all likelihood frequented nearby cinematograph displays that exhibited short film programmes.³³ Thus the influence of cartoons on early animation, and cinema in general, likely runs both ways in a common negotiation of aesthetic form.

Given his relationship to the Vaudeville circuit and his aesthetic interest in depicting movement and transformation, it is thus unsurprising that McCay made the transition from static cartoons to the kinetic film image. Sometimes, his comic images almost appeared as if the panel frames were unable to contain the fantastical movements and transformations of his characters. One particular instance of McCay's cartoon series "Little Sammy Sneeze" is illustrative of this. In this series, the titular child character builds up a sneeze in six rigid, equidimensional panels. In the penultimate panel, the violent sneeze climaxes in a scene of destruction, with the following panel usually depicting Sammy being humourously booted for his crass behaviour. McCay regularly maintained this formula for Sammy until he began to play with the medium itself in one strip from 1905, when Sammy breaks the square panel with his powerful signature sneeze.³⁴ The cartoon anticipates McCay's animation in demonstrating his awareness of the frame as a boundary between the viewer's physical reality and the animated reality of the image contained in the frame, as well as a willingness to symbolically break this barrier. Unlike previous Sammy strips, there is no background action in the frame, and the tactless child performs his trademark routine in a blank white space. Morton draws a connection here between Sammy and Fred Ott's live-action sneeze filmed by William Dickson ten years earlier.³⁵ The sneeze in Dickson's film is performed directly for the viewer, drawing attention to the camera's capacity for capturing and framing real movement. McCay enacts a reflexive spin on this by adapting the frame's capacity for staging reality in his own hand-drawn film. Thus when Sammy shatters the frame, it signals to the viewer that they have, up to that point, perceived the static images of the strip as real—not in the strictly photographic sense, but rather in the

sense that the viewer is in the presence of the images presented in the panel, only for the presence of the frame to reinforce their artificiality.



McCay's "Little Sammy Sneeze" (1905)

An interesting feature of this particular Sammy cartoon is found in the fragments of a broken window attached to the shattered frame, as if to suggest the comic panel literally offers a transparent view into another world, an animated realm not governed by the laws of physical reality, but by dream logic and animistic energy. In the final panel, Sammy looks directly at the reader while sitting amidst the debris of the frame, a reflexive gesture which recognizes the presence of an audience and initiates an interaction with their physical realm, calling their attention to the hand-drawn construction of the images and frames.

In McCay's comics, the static frame of the comic strip panel frequently interrupts animated reality, insofar as it freezes movement and temporality. That is to say, each panel offers an instance of characters contained in an animated reality that move and transform in narrative time, with each panel capturing a particular moment of these transformations, much like iconic photographic experiments in observing motion, such as Muybridge's galloping horse or Marey's chronophotography. McCay's cartoons consistently testify to the inability of the static frame to represent everything he wished

to portray within the confines of the page, as evidenced by the way in which the frames frequently stretched and warped to suit the images. This was a central aesthetic feature of his popular “Little Nemo” Sunday series, wherein the child hero falls asleep and embarks on magical adventures in his mind. Nemo’s oneiric journeys showed how cartoon illustration, as a static medium, seemed ill-equipped to capture the dynamism of McCay’s work, leading him to adjust and modify the panel frame.

Thus, film animation’s ability to depict movement and vitality made it an ideal platform for McCay’s creations, and *Little Nemo* was predictably the subject for his first foray into animation. The first half of the film is live-action, starring McCay as he details the process of bringing Nemo to life. The live-action segment abruptly switches to animation when a hand-drawn figure from the cartoon strip, having just been drawn by McCay, announces his newfound ability to move.



Little Nemo (McCay, 1911)

Here, McCay directly juxtaposes physical and animated reality and bridges them through movement. The film identifies movement as the key to its impression of reality through its repeated emphasis on mobility as the essential component in bringing the characters to life. The remainder of the film follows a loose dream narrative, as Little

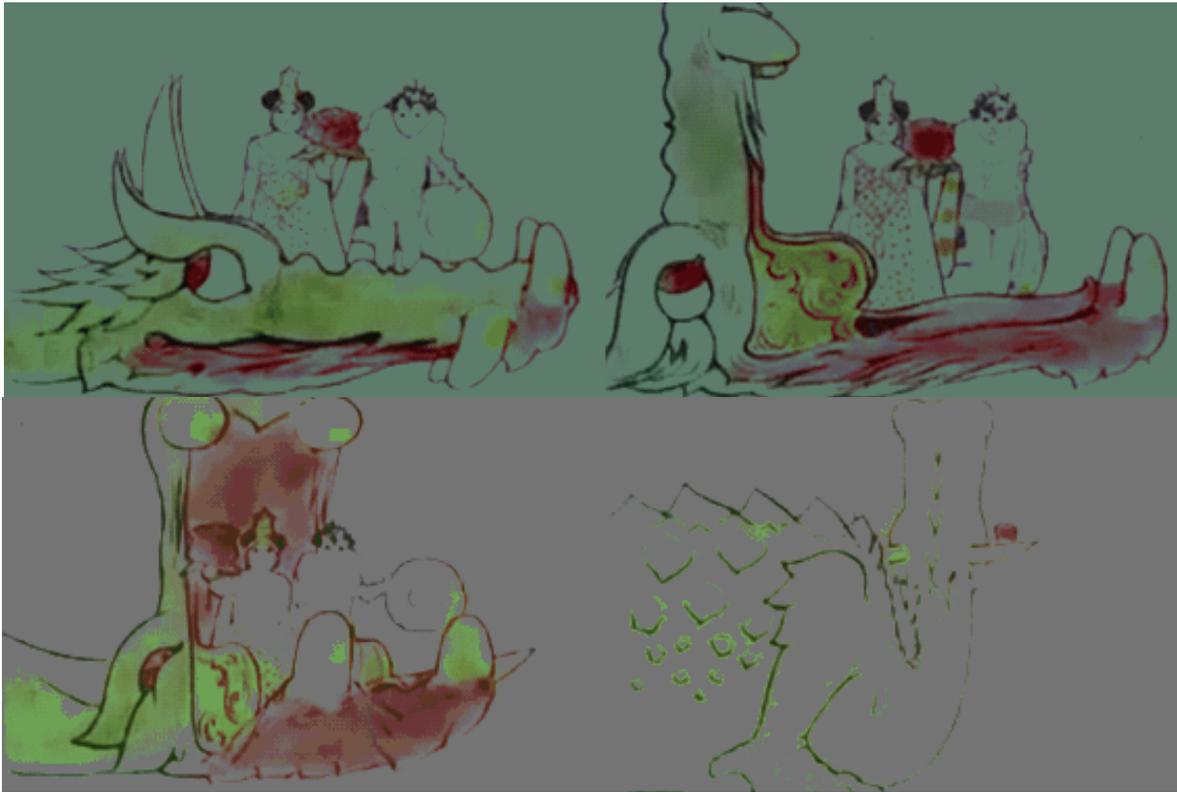
Nemo and company show off their ability to move and transform in fantastical ways, with this emphasis on movement giving each figure a sense of plasticity. In order to capture the transformations of this animated reality, McCay discarded the use of backgrounds. The film frame instead acted as sufficient containment for his characters. This is a practice that Morton terms “re-enforced framing”:

Re-enforced framing, like the frame and the gutter of the comic panel and the framing articulated in the cinema of attractions, asserts itself as a physical boundary. In the case of the film adaptation, it acts as a barrier between on - screen and off-screen space. Much like the comic panel and the cinema of attractions, the frame of McCay’s film allows the duo a space to perform, stretching their bodies to the edge of the frame, but limits the space of that performance at the same time. Specifically, as the exercise continues, the duo’s stretching is stopped and squashed by the assertion of a physical boundary between on-screen and off-screen space.³⁶

What is significant about this practice is in how this assertion of the frame as a physical boundary immediately speaks to the perceived physicality of the cartoon characters—their movement signals their existence in some form of reality, evoked by the interplay of on-screen and off-screen space. Moreover, it is an evocation of an animated reality, as the characters move about in a space which first denies, then begins to insinuate the presence of an off-screen reality:

Re-enforced framing is one of the formal characteristics that turns the spatiality of a composition inwards. By denying the existence of an off-screen, diegetic space, re-enforced framing essentially projects the traditional comic strip framing of McCay’s earlier work on to the screen. This form of aesthetic adaptation channels the viewer’s gaze inwards rather than outwards towards off-screen space. In this sense, it takes on the classic compositional style of “Little Sammy Sneeze”, rigidly formal in its denial of external space. However, as the film progresses, McCay shifts his compositional tendencies, also pushing the viewer’s gaze outward toward off-screen spaces.³⁷

This gaze is pushed outward towards these spaces when a dragon pushes inward from the left of the frame to transport Nemo away; up to this point, no indication of off-screen space is given. In a strict sense, McCay’s sequential drawings have no “out-of-frame”, but he supersedes this by creating the *perception* of it, which gives further concreteness to the animated “world”.



Off-screen space and three-dimensional perspective in *Little Nemo* (McCay, 1911)

Little Nemo thus follows a trajectory that first establishes an interior animated reality, one which McCay as the artist initially governs—as indicated by the live-action prologue, he is the literal life-giver to these images. He then gradually relinquishes control as this animated reality overwhelms the frame, crossing into the realm of physical reality that is normally evoked by off-screen space in its suggestion that the apparatus is placed before a world to capture a part of it.

McCay repeated several of these strategies in his best-known film, *Gertie the Dinosaur* (1914). What makes *Gertie* even more interesting is how McCay makes *himself* a part of the act, placing himself within his dinosaur's animated reality. The film cuts between animated segments of Gertie and live-action shots of McCay. At the end of the film, he physically enters Gertie's world as an animated figure, highlighting their physical and animated interaction. McCay did this not only within this film, but also in his live

Vaudeville performances, where he projected animated portions of the film on a screen, which he would then interact with. For instance, he would often dress as a showman with a whip, directing his animated dinosaur to dance and bow to the audience by synchronizing his live performance with Gertie's actions on the screen. J.P. Telotte notes how both aspects of *Gertie's* exhibition played with the implications of on-screen and off-screen space on the perception of reality, arguing that one of the fundamental properties of early animation is:

...the space that the animator or cartoonist must fill up or leave empty, the space that through his or her own creative efforts the animator must, like McCay in *Gertie the Dinosaur*, almost literally enter[...]when we look more closely at how McCay's films engage with space, we can see another dimension of that modernist spirit at work, for we find that his work implicates an assault not simply on the social status quo, but also on what we might term the phenomenological status quo, that is, on both the organization of, and the audience's experience of, space itself.³⁸

This "assault" on the status quo of the organization of space is linked again to the way in which McCay negotiates the tension between on-screen and off-screen space as a tension between seeing reality presented within the frame and being forced to imagine what lies beyond the frame. In a way, McCay pre-emptively undermines perceptual realism by staging his space as a negotiation between the physical world and the intangible world of dream narratives, the latter of which can only be manifested through imaginary means:

...both [films] are actually set up as dream narratives, and thus ultimately suggest a level on which McCay's films almost invariably proceed from an oneiric impulse, one that, as with all dreaming, always seems to be negotiating between our sense of real space and imaginary space, and thus is always speaking to the sort of spatial negotiation that, as I have suggested, seems fundamental to much early animation.³⁹

As Telotte also points out, McCay's animation almost always builds itself on a rational foundation which grounds its fantastical subject matter.⁴⁰ In most cases, this is achieved through the live-action display of McCay himself, who testifies to the reality of his images. In addition, his onscreen presence signals himself as the creator, a form of authorial self-inscription that denotes his text as both real and constructed.

McCay repeats this tactic in perhaps his most fascinating yet under-examined work, *The Sinking of the Lusitania* (1918), which plays an important role in his canon because it shows how the animator's bridging of physical and animated reality could go both ways: just as he crosses into Gertie's animated realm, animation could cross the other way into representing the physical realm.⁴¹ The film, likely the earliest example of the animated documentary, presents McCay's account of the passenger ship's demise, and displays a clear inclination for a verisimilitudinal depiction of the event.



The Sinking of the Lusitania (McCay, 1918)

This is emphasized in the film's live-action prologue when McCay films himself using a portrait of the ship as a reference point for his drawings, and in the animated re-enactment that follows, characterized by their strikingly detailed images and fluid movement, which were drawn based on survivors' recollections of the event. The film thus stakes a deep claim in reality despite the absence of live-action or archival images of its subject, demonstrating that even early on, "animation was seen to have a unique representational function for the non-fictional moving image, one that could not be fulfilled by the conventional live-action, photographic alternative".⁴² The power of its representational truth claim is reinforced by its emulation of propagandistic newsreel

footage of the time, weaving together images of the ship with dramatic intertitles calling Americans to join the fight against Germany.⁴³

In this way, the images function as “mimetic substitution”, in which the animation stands in for the live-action image, assuming its privileged position in representing reality, while prompting one to question whether animation can hold the same truth value as photography.⁴⁴ Moreover, this mimesis is not merely a reproduction of images that already exist in photographic form, but rather a reflection of the artist’s impression of what visible form those images might take. Thus, as Annabelle Honess Roe notes, the film is an instance of animation which “goes beyond just visualizing unfilmable events”, instead inviting us “to imagine, to put something of ourselves into what we see on screen, to make connections between non-realist images and reality”.⁴⁵ McCay achieves this by foregrounding his presence again, while making the bold claim that its hand-drawn images represent the first documented account of the event. He acts as a mediating presence for the film’s reality, compensating for the fact that the hand-drawn representations of the event cannot act as photographic evidence. McCay must act as a different form of evidence: he is a witness who testifies to the veracity of his images. As the life-giver to these images, he endows them with movement and heightens the film’s ability to compel belief in its claim to truth, dispensing with the need for the discrete physical reality of photography.

CONCLUSION

McCay’s films have illustrated how, despite the discursive promise of a digital “revolution”, technological change has not necessarily revolutionized the relationship between physical and animated reality. If we take *The Sinking of the Lusitania* as an example of this suggestion, the recent proliferation of the animated documentary subgenre no longer seems so symptomatic of its technological environment. It is worth noting that these documentaries, though they are often digitally composed, tend to market themselves as “film”,⁴⁶ ostensibly as a nostalgic appeal to an art cinema audience and to align themselves with the presumed veracity of photographic images.

The Sinking of the Lusitania demonstrates the ability of animation to testify to the veracity of an animated reality, which it achieves by expressing an external historical reality through the lens of an individual subjectivity. Significantly, it demonstrated this ability long before the contemporary emergence of photochemical nostalgia. It is a film that displays the idiosyncrasies of McCay's work while effectively illustrating the uncanny ability of animation to take an internalized impression of reality and give it a visible aesthetic dimension. Ultimately, the effect of this ability is to qualify the truth value of animation, especially in the face of the prevailing trust in photography which tends to codify the animated image as unreal.

The question now becomes one of how to historically connect the images of early animators to the contemporary moving image. Clearly, it would take a more expansive project than this one to trace the lineage of digital animation back to these embryonic stages. A genealogical project, however, is not the only recourse for this task. As Thomas Elsaesser argues, an archaeological model of inquiry could prove more conducive to connecting the old and new:

An archaeology is the opposite of genealogy: the latter tries to trace back a continuous line of descent from the present to the past, the former knows that only the presumption of discontinuity and the synecdoche of the fragment can hope to give a present access to its past.⁴⁷

In other words, there is much to be gained from making connections between old and new historical sources from different eras without attempting to unify each within a continuous historical narrative. Though animators such as McCay predate the digital by nearly a century, studying the way his films were produced and experienced serves up connections to the way in which digital animation operates. Assuming a percolation of old to new animation practice exists, the link between early and contemporary animators and their media environments can be more fully explored. Accordingly, this essay has tried to highlight the major phenomenological trends that emerged in early animation so that they can be evaluated within a digital context. In doing so, we might be able to suggest that while the digital turn has complicated debates over the materiality and indexicality of the photographic image, it has not necessarily

revolutionized the way in which images negotiate a common space between their impression and expression, insofar as this negotiation appears in animation from the outset. Through its kinesthetic intuition, animation consistently illustrates its ability to appeal to a sense of lifelike presence usually attributed to the indexical or iconic, even as it eschews the photoreal across photochemical and digital platforms.

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- 1 "Winsor McCay gives exhibition." *The New York Times*, July 20, 1927, 29.
 - 2 Donald Crafton, "The Veiled Genealogies of Animation and Cinema," *Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 6.2 (2011), 103.
 - 3 Donald Crafton, *Before Mickey: The Animated Film 1898-1928*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1982, 201.
 - 4 *Ibid.*, 201.
 - 5 Crafton, 2011: 107.
 - 6 *Ibid.*, 97.
 - 7 Lev Manovich, "Digital Cinema and the History of a Moving Image", *The Film Theory Reader: Debates and Arguments*, ed. Marc Furstenau, New York: Routledge, 2010, 252.
 - 8 Alan Cholodenko, "Still Photography?" *Afterimage*, 32.5 (2005), 5.
 - 9 Manovich, 246.
 - 10 Cholodenko, 2005: 5.
 - 11 Tom Gunning, "Moving Away from the Index: Cinema and the Impression of Reality", *The Film Theory Reader: Debates and Arguments*, ed. Marc Furstenau, 259-60.
 - 12 *Ibid.*, 261.
 - 13 *Ibid.*, 264-266.
 - 14 Alan Cholodenko, ed., *The Illusion of Life: Essays on Animation*, Sydney: Power Publications, 1991, 20.
 - 15 Michael Renov, "Toward a Poetics of Documentary," *Theorizing Documentary*, New York: Routledge, 1993, 32.
 - 16 Tom Gunning, "What's the Point of an Index? Or Faking Photographs," *Still/Moving: between Cinema and Photography*, ed. Karen Beckman and Jean Ma, Durham: Duke University Press, 2008, 28.
 - 17 Crafton, 1982: 12.
 - 18 *Ibid.*, 134.
 - 19 Gunning, 2010: 264.
 - 20 Gunning, 2008: 35.
 - 21 *Ibid.*, 35.
 - 22 André Bazin, *What is Cinema?* Trans. Hugh Gray, Volume 1, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967, 15.
 - 23 Vivian Sobchack, excerpts from "Phenomenology and the Film Experience", *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film*, ed. Linda Williams, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 46.
 - 24 *Ibid.*, 50.
 - 25 *Ibid.*, 48.
 - 26 Stephen Prince, "True Lies: Perceptual Realism, Digital Images, and Film Theory," *Film Quarterly*, 49.3 (1996) 28-30.
 - 27 *Ibid.*, 32.
 - 28 McLaren's definition of animation—the art of "drawn movement"—is relevant here, as it implies that movement is at the heart of the expression of animated reality. Fischinger subscribed to a similar ideal by attempting to "draw" music, an aural art form which he expressed visually as a medium indebted to movement and transformation, as well as a reflection of inner perception. One of the more intriguing digital artists working within this tradition is Germany's Max Hattler, whose abstract installations are popular with musical acts as visual accompaniment for their stage shows.
 - 29 Gunning, 2010: 264.

30 Crafton, 2011: 94.

31 See John Fell, Pascal Lefebvre, and François Lacassin for notable examples of this work.

32 Crafton, 1982: 47.

33 Drew Morton, "Sketching Under the Influence? Winsor McCay and the Question of Aesthetic Convergence Between Comic Strips and Film," *Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 5.3 (2010), 302-303.

34 John Canemaker, *Winsor McCay: His Life and Art*, New York: Abbeville Press, 1987, 65.

35 Morton, 299-300.

36 *Ibid.*, 304.

37 *Ibid.*, 304-305.

38 J.P. Telotte, "Winsor McCay's Warped Spaces," *Screen*, 48.4 (2007), 464.

39 *Ibid.*, 468.

40 *Ibid.*, 468.

41 This effect was also achieved by rotoscoping as a production method, but McCay's contribution in *The Sinking of the Lusitania* is doing this through cel animation, his first attempt at working with cels.

42 Annabelle Honess Roe, "Absence, Excess and Epistemological Expansion: Towards a Framework for the Study of Animated Documentary," *Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 6.3 (2011), 218.

43 Crafton, 1982: 116.

44 Honess Roe, 226.

45 *Ibid.*, 217.

46 See Ari Folman's *Waltz With Bashir* (2008) or Vincent Paronnaud and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2007) as notable examples of the "festival film" sentiment underlying the animated documentary.

47 Thomas Elsaesser, "Early Film History and Multi-media," *New Media Old Media: A History and Theory Reader*, ed. Hui Kyong Chun W and Keenan T., New York: Routledge (quoted in Honess Roe, 218).