

Book Review

David McGowan. 2019. *Animated Personalities: Cartoon Characters and Stardom in American Theatrical Shorts*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

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As recognized by Richard Dyer in his canonical work *Stars* (1979), one of the fundamental premises of star studies is that stars fundamentally “do not exist” outside of their various media texts (Dyer 1979, 1). Like their celestial namesake—the stars in the night sky that are only visible through light that has travelled for decades towards the observer—their physical existence becomes incidental as their mediated, artificial persona is all that can be seen. Progressing from this starting point, many accounts of stardom conceive of this fundamental artificiality as a sort of game—as in Mark Rapaport’s film *Rock Hudson’s Home Movies* (1992), which suggests how the titular star’s authentic queer sexuality is visible in the gaps behind his official heterosexual screen presence. In his new book, *Animated Personalities: Cartoon Characters and Stardom in American Theatrical Shorts* (2019), David McGowan takes this notion of star artificiality to its logical conclusion, asking whether stardom is still possible when there is no longer any original physical referent at all. To answer this question, McGowan turns to the extensive pantheon of American animated characters (including Mickey Mouse, Bugs Bunny, Popeye, and Betty Boop, amongst others), arguing that they should be understood as legitimate stars. On one hand, this seems like an uncontroversial assertion, as these characters’ personae and physical appearances were developed and disseminated alongside hundreds of live-action stars within the

classical Hollywood studio system. However, in his introduction, McGowan suggests two broad reasons that these animated stars have traditionally been excluded from discussions of stardom: first, their lack of a physical body around which the star persona can be constructed; and second, their consequent lack of a private life for their public to gossip and pore over. As McGowan develops a new model of animated stardom to circumvent these issues, he innovatively bridges the fields of star studies and animation studies to offer indispensable insight into both.

McGowan resolves the question of the animated stars’ lack of embodiment by drawing a parallel to the complete artificiality of live-action stars: “[T]he live-action star was often so heavily filtered through the camera’s gaze, studio publicity, and even the surgeon’s knife that claims to authenticity can be extremely problematic” (McGowan 2019, 4). He further dispels the notion that live-action stars are more legitimate simply for being human as he addresses animated stars’ lack of off-screen lives. Following Dyer, McGowan reminds readers that the various non-filmic sources (fan magazines, gossip media, and more) that promise to reveal stars’ personal lives amount to an artificial “rhetoric of authenticity,” rather than anything verifiably true (7). Because stardom rests upon the mere *impression* of an authentic person underneath a constructed persona, the physical reality of a life

outside of stardom becomes irrelevant—and thus not fundamentally different from the effect created as Bugs Bunny breaks character to address the audience mid-cartoon, or by the outtakes offered by the credits of *Toy Story 2* (John Lasseter, dir. 1999) (Hills 2003). Thus, by asserting the legitimacy of animated stardom, McGowan's book simultaneously reveals and reverses the process by which animation as a whole is de-legitimized and marginalized within critical and historical accounts of cinema.

This innovation is especially apparent as McGowan uses stardom to reintroduce animation into broader industrial histories of Hollywood. Here, the book follows the model set out by its namesake, Richard DeCordova's *Picture Personalities: The Emergence of the Star System in America* (2001). Just as DeCordova traces how the star system develops to ensure continuity between films—and to encourage audiences to return to see the same figure in a new situation—McGowan traces the animated star system's growth out of serialized newspaper strips, presenting recurring characters to foster audience interest and to streamline production. This account of animated stardom also serves to compliment the history traced by Donald Crafton's *Before Mickey: The Animated Film, 1898–1928* (1982), as McGowan follows how animated films gradually shift their focus away from the illusion of animation itself (through the figure of the on-screen animator) and towards a system populated by recurring characters well-known to the viewing public.

Beyond merely drawing a historical parallel between the formation of live-action and animated stardom, McGowan's book provides a valuable analysis of how cartoon stars serve a similar sociological purpose to their human counterparts throughout film history. One particularly illuminating chapter discusses how scandal is used to develop animated stars' personae—a claim that may initially seem incongruous given these characters' inherent lack of independent agency. However, McGowan unearths a fascinating trove of archival promotional materials to demonstrate how, like live-action stars, the inference of so-called deviant behaviour underneath cartoon stars' officially wholesome image provides an essential tool to shape their personae.

This dynamic, as well as the book's wider concern with the complete artificiality of human stardom, is evidenced in an "interview" with Mickey Mouse in the August 1930 issue of the fan magazine *Motion Picture Classic*:

You ask, can an animated cartoon have intimate moments? Naturally, I answer. Why not an animated cartoon just as well as any of the human cartoons who call themselves stars in Hollywood, nowadays? Intimate is hardly the word for some of my moments—and, if you will excuse the vulgarism, how! (McGowan 2019, 53)

This quote succinctly summarizes many of McGowan's principal concerns. By tracing the gradually diminishing capacity for Mickey's interior life to be at odds with his official image as his star image develops, *Animated Personalities* does no less than to reconstruct an entirely neglected chapter of popular film history. Just as Nicholas Sammond's *Birth of an Industry: Blackface Minstrelsy and the Rise of American Animation* (2015) revealed racist minstrel tropes as a constituent (and consciously erased) aspect of American animation, here McGowan recreates the forgotten history of how animated stars' supposed deviance—and its censorship—served to construct the images commonly known of them today.

This focus on animated deviance and its suppression brings needed attention to the live-action studio system's problematic history of labour exploitation. McGowan argues that because the animated star (who, if considered separately from the animators who create them, cannot be exploited in and of themselves due to their lack of a physical body) does not need to be paid for their apparent labour, they can be used to uphold the studio system's exploitative status quo. At the same time that Bette Davis and James Cagney openly challenged the restrictive nature of their contracts, a cartoon like "You Ought to be in Pictures" (1940) paints their fellow Warner Brothers stars Daffy Duck and Porky Pig as grateful for their studio's benevolence (McGowan 2019, 188–193). In this portion of the book, McGowan makes a fascinating suggestion: that animated stars (as pure, malleable image) represent what the studio system would ideally like human stars to be: infinitely available to appear in

as many productions as desired, and divorced from any need to sleep, eat, or be paid.

Of course, this notion of the animated star's supposedly infinite capacity for labour reveals a major risk posed by the reimagination of animated characters through the lens of human stardom: the potential erasure of the animators responsible for creating these stars. While McGowan recognizes the presence of animators' strikes and similar events in his history, it is certainly not his central focus. This is understandable, given that the book is generally more concerned with how stars (human and otherwise) are received and understood by their publics than the material processes by which this stardom is created. The question of how McGowan's historical account—which traces how animated stars gradually come to be understood by the viewing public as autonomous beings—interacts with the diminished visibility of animators' labour bears further analysis.

That said, McGowan's overall concern with how the image of the animated star is seen and understood provides an indispensable entry point to the vast and largely unexplored history of television stardom. By tracing the various ways in which animated stars' bodies of work are curated and presented for television audiences (often within compilations and syndication—analogue to many live-action stars' afterlives on late-night television), McGowan provides a fascinating overview of how stars' personae continue to be shaped retrospectively following the collapse of the studio system. The ways in which these animated stars are adjusted to fit within the new medium of television—as hosts, salespeople, and individuals whose (illusory) authenticity is newly on display—provides a valuable pretext to better understand this same process for human stars.

Ultimately, the primary usefulness of McGowan's account is how it divests itself of any illusions about the importance of the physical body within stardom—compellingly and honestly referring to stardom (in all its on- and off-screen manifestations) as pure, artificial image. While this understanding allows a better understanding of how stardom operates in a variety of historical contexts, it also proves to be better-suited for a present in which live-action and animated stardom are in-

creasingly intertwined. To this end, the book closes with a brief consideration of the increasing presence of synthespians (performers created through CGI that are positioned as live-action performers) within contemporary Hollywood cinema. Frustrating the false dichotomy between animation and an indexical, photographic real that Thomas Lamarre suggests has “served to ignore or significantly devalue the cartoon,” (McGowan 2019, 5) as these digital performances “de-age” living performers, and resurrect dead ones, they reveal a point at which the distinction between animated and “authentic” images becomes increasingly irrelevant.

While much of McGowan's book considers how live-action stardom provides a valuable theoretical and historical context to better understand its animated counterpart, these closing moments turn their attention towards the future. Given that the brief time since the publication of McGowan's book has brought both the controversial proposed resurrection of James Dean for the upcoming *Finding Jack*, as well as the absurd attempt to maintain the appearance of humanity within the digital stardom of *Cats* (Tom Hooper, dir. 2019), *Animated Personalities* provides not only a useful reframing of stardom's past, while setting the groundwork for a better understanding of its future.

Combining historical, formal, and theoretical modes of analysis, *Animated Personalities* represents a vital contribution to both star studies and the study of animation in classical Hollywood and beyond. By embracing a key problematic of the study of stardom—the inability to take any element of its construction as authentic—McGowan does not undermine the validity of this approach so much as craft a more honest and complete understanding of it. While animated stars have long populated the global landscape of popular culture, historically situating them within the specific context of classical Hollywood stardom proves an effective way to better understand their sociological function—on- and off-screen, in the past and the future.

References

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