

## Animating Theory

*Hollywood Flatlands: Animation, Critical Theory and the Avant-Garde*

by Esther Leslie

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Reviewed by Matt F. Connell

Leslie's title samples from that of Edwin Abbott Abbott's satirical fantasy from the 1880s, *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions* (1952). This headmaster's adventure 'begins in a two dimensional world, populated by a socialized hierarchy of regular geometric figures,' and becomes a 'satire on Victorian hierarchy' in which 'an Einsteinian dimension beyond the earth's three dimensions is struggled for imaginatively' (Leslie, 2002, p. 21, 22). In Leslie's similarly imaginative reading of the aesthetics of cartoons in the context of the utopian yearnings of critical theory, the new technologies of animation in the early twentieth century prompted hopes that the two dimensional cartoon flatland could provide a critical take on one dimensional capitalist society, and a way of conceiving something different.

Despite the necessary disclaimers about selection and compression, *Hollywood Flatlands* provides a very useful account of the surprising entwinement of the early history of animation with the political and artistic avant-garde. As a result of this entwinement, the book manages to stand as a cogent introduction to the modernist aesthetic milieu of Western Marxism, as well as to the history and aesthetics of cartoons. Many modernists were convinced that animation was the true telos of film, because it could emancipate the new medium from the pitfalls of theatrics and realistic representation. Critical theorists simultaneously politicized these animated tropes of aesthetic emancipation, linking them to the social and technological forces that were both unleashed and constrained within capitalist modernity. With a bit of help from modernism and critical theory, the transfixed highbrow viewer of early animation could easily imagine for a moment that it was poised to transform the popular surface of the emergent celluloid medium with a new and subversive aesthetic: an aesthetic of fantasy and freedom.

Happily, as well as writing with due academic rigor, Leslie also lovingly evokes the diverting aesthetic of animation in a playful act of sensitive theoretical fidelity to the child's wonder at the heady promise of the cartoon's alter-world of transformative and utopian possibility. This childlike openness to new possibility is one reason for the modernist left's interest in animation. Of course then, as now, even revolutionary reality failed to live up to the promise of the aesthetic autonomy of the cartoons' liberated lines. This, together with the inevitable absorption of that autonomy by the cultural, advertising and propaganda industries that financed it from the start, tempers Leslie's exuberant fidelity to the childlike and utopian with the melancholy of maturity, echoing the dialectic characteristic of the European avant-garde in general and Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno in particular.

It certainly helps that the book is evocatively illustrated. What a treat it is to get a book of weighty theory in which one can nevertheless still flick straight to a few pictures, colour ones at that, and on such nice glossy paper. These material qualities of the book are not incidental to the experience of reading it, for they initiate the playful oscillation of surface seduction and serious in-depth analysis which animates the whole work, as well as characterizing its subject matter. For example, we are presented with a selection of frames from Emile Cohl's early cartoon, *Fantasmagorie* (1908). The cartoon is a simple hand drawn affair, white on black, depicting the chaotic, surreal and chameleon adventures of a clown. By revealing the hand that animates the line, the cartoon also initiates a sophisticated play with issues of transparency and technique in the new medium of film (and now also toys with any postmodernists who still think they invented ironic self-deconstruction). In *Hollywood Flatlands*, fifteen loosely sequential frames of the cartoon are arranged on three facing pages (pp. 3, 5, 7), in marginal columns of five frames to a page, to the right of Leslie's text. As well as suggesting a celluloid strip, this arrangement also immediately recalls an even earlier type of animation by pleasurably reminding one of a simple flick-book cartoon - though I confess to a twinge of childish disappointment that the frames were not distributed singly across fifteen pages, in the corner, so that we could actually animate them for real. But this is to quibble, for useful though these carefully chosen illustrations are in animating the text, it is really Leslie's stylish literary mimesis of the cartoons' hallucinatory imagery and lightning wit that brings the stills to life, not the other way around.

That deep questions of the giving, thwarting and resurrecting of life continually surface in *Hollywood Flatlands* is no surprise, for animation as a concept is after all precisely about life, death, breath and spirit: *anima*. In Leslie's hands, the cartoon double-act of simultaneously endowing objects with life and turning the living into objects, all by the technological emancipation of the line, becomes an invitation to consider the development of drawing alongside the Marxist concepts of commodity fetish and reification, and then to assemble an essayistic collection of energetic shorts exploring a cluster of fascinating encounters: between Mickey Mouse, Eisenstein and Walter Benjamin; between Kracauer and Dumbo; and between the Nazi film propagandist Leni Riefenstahl and Walt Disney, whose cartoons were a big success in Germany, despite some fascist rumblings about that verminous American, Mickey Mouse.

The artistic rise and fall of the Disney cartoon provides a continual point of reference for Leslie's explorations. Without ever claiming to be comprehensive, Leslie commands a good number of angles on the Walt Disney story. She touches on everything from the artistic radicalism of his dadaesque early shorts to his political conservatism and eventual battles with the unions over conditions on the shop floor of the cartoon industry that had to churn out and aggressively market ever more formulaic features in order to survive in the perilous global marketplace. This focus on Disney does mean that the reader learns less than they might want to about the output and political aesthetics of other studios, but along the way Leslie successfully zooms out to consider wider innovations in the animated use of synaesthetically synchronized music and colour, as well as some of their origins in the graphics of children's books and the Victorian crazes for mechanical and optical toys. These considerations are underpinned by chapters examining Adorno's musicology and Goethe's critique of Newton's theory of colour (which also sheds much light on all that enigmatic talk of prismatic illumination in Benjamin and Adorno). Occasionally, Leslie's forays into the intellectual genealogy of leftist critical theory begin to seem a trifle tendentious, becoming what we might expect in advance of a committed socialist and Benjaminian scholar of the visual arts - but at the majority of such points the twist that takes us squarely and convincingly back to animation is just around the corner. By the end of the book, I felt as though Leslie's childhood fascination with the free world of cartoons must have been

an early impulse from the same wellspring as later watered her interest in socialism and critical theory, rather than this project being a dry academic 'application' of a certain prior political-theoretical commitment to the handy topic area and research market-niche of animation.

None of this is to say that the book is not a scholarly academic intervention in the field of cultural studies. Part of the motive force for *Hollywood Flatlands* is the author's frustration at certain entrenched battle lines drawn across that field. She has had enough of 'the phoney war between high culture and popular or low or mass culture' (v), in which each side pops away at a row of straw images in a predictable showdown between philistines and elitists. Still, Leslie certainly fires a few shots as a part of that showdown, rather than simply pleading for peace. It's just that it is sometimes delightfully hard to pin down which side she is on. Ultimately, I would say that Leslie's carefully arranged *homage* to animation is a marriage of critique and celebration dedicated to defending the German critical family against certain postmodern influences, but that the marriage is scandalous enough to carry through that defense in a manner also calculated to provoke purist devotees of that family.

Tongue firmly in cheek, yet deadly serious, she manages to subvert both postmodern stereotypes of the killjoy leftist German intellectual and also those defenders of the faith who today try to live out those stereotypes through an over-identification with the Puritan current of critical theory. Leslie hints that behind the heavy suits, boy, those dour old Marxists longed to really swing. And sometimes, they even did. Fascinating little vignettes show that the critical theorists' serious study of popular forms was actually no stranger to the pleasures of the text - or, indeed, to pleasure full stop. My favorite examples in *Hollywood Flatlands* lead from the hallucinatory imagery of the surreal cartoon world to Benjamin's experiments with subcutaneous injections of mescaline, and from the dialectic of comedy and critique to images of Theodor W. Adorno schmoozing with Charlie Chaplin at a Malibu party.

The critique of Chaplin in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* has led to a feeling that Adorno disliked his work, but the short piece in which Adorno recounts the meeting in Malibu is reverential, dedicated to Chaplin on the occasion of his 75th birthday. At the party, Chaplin mercilessly imitated Adorno's

surprised expression and over-exaggerated correction when attempting to shake the non-existent hand of a Hollywood veteran with iron claws. Adorno's account of the incident becomes a compressed exegesis of his theory of *mimesis* (1969). As it happens, the spirit of Chaplin seems a constant presence in the early history of animation, as well as in the theory of film. He nearly usurps Mickey's putative role as the hero of *Hollywood Flatlands*. His influence on both Mickey Mouse and Felix the Cat is well-known, but *Hollywood Flatlands* prompted me to wonder if we should also trace the relationship the other way. Animation casts a backward light on the workings of mime and clowning, rather than simply being influenced by the latter. Was Chaplin himself, with his extraordinary talent for gestural exaggeration, mimicry and caricature, actually an early animation, the puppet who pulled his own string? Was his skin and frame - rather than paper or celluloid - the recording surface that presented an imprint of the artist's impressions to the camera's eye?

Leslie's exploration of the clownishly melancholy tension between the hedonistic and Puritan currents of both critical theory and modernist aesthetics provides much of the richness of the positions examined in *Hollywood Flatlands*. An acute awareness of the double-edge of pleasure and laughter, which can so easily be conformist rather than critical, informed the left's concern about popular forms, including cartoons, as well as bolstering their defense of the rebellious element of that pleasure and laughter. Leftists charted the rapid commercial amelioration of the cartoons' sharp edge - noting, for example, how Mickey Mouse himself transmuted from a rather ratty and hobo early look into the more rounded and chirpy corporate chap we recognize today. Leslie has us imagine Adorno and Horkheimer mourning the sanitization and then demise of their favorite, the flirtatious Betty Boop. In drawing attention to these perhaps unexpected contributions from the Frankfurt School, Leslie continues a recent vein of reflection concretized by Kate Soper's talk of their 'critical hedonism' (1999), in which a concept of thwarted or twisted pleasure is used to subvert the conformist morality and repressive reality which distorted it in the first place (also see Connell 1998, 2000).

Just as anyone who wonders whether modern art can really be critical should ask themselves why the Nazis attacked it as degenerate, anyone who considers the notion that the pleasures of animation could unleash repressed

political-libidinal forces to be mere Freudo-Marxist hyperbole should wonder why one of Walter Ruttmann's early animated experiments with abstract shapes and shifting colours attracted the unwanted attention of the Munich censor. *Lichtspiel Opus II* (1921) was given an X-rating amid fears that its play of spiked and curved forms might be hypnotically erotic!

One can only hope.

#### *References.*

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