



Moen, K. (2019). *New York's Animation Culture: Art, Advertising, Design and Film, 1939-1940*. (Palgrave Animation). Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-27931-8>

Peer reviewed version

Link to published version (if available):
[10.1007/978-3-030-27931-8](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-27931-8)

[Link to publication record in Explore Bristol Research](#)
PDF-document

This is the author accepted manuscript (AAM). The final published version (version of record) is available online via Springer Nature at <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007%2F978-3-030-27931-8>. Please refer to any applicable terms of use of the publisher.

University of Bristol - Explore Bristol Research

General rights

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the reference above. Full terms of use are available: <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/red/research-policy/pure/user-guides/ebr-terms/>

New York's Animation Culture: Advertising, Art, Design and Film, 1939-1940

Kristian Moen

Chapter 1. Introduction

In the late 1930s and early 1940s, New York City showcased an extraordinary panorama of animation. Walking through the city and ducking into a cinema, you were bound to catch a short animated film as part of the programme, perhaps one featuring a major star such as Mickey Mouse or Popeye. But you could also settle in to watch one of the feature-length animated films which had begun to appear after the success of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), with *Gulliver's Travels* (1939), *Pinocchio* (1940) and *Fantasia* (1940) playing in cinemas around Broadway. Along your walk, if you had timed it right, you might also watch animated films at a gallery such as the Museum of Modern Art, which was screening works ranging from contemporary Disney cartoons to the earliest animated films of Emile Cohl. If, like millions of others, you also wanted to take in the sights of the New York World's Fair, which ran from 1939 to 1940, a plethora of short advertising and educational films were on display – including a Mickey Mouse film advertising the National Biscuit Company's products, a three-dimensional film advertisement for Chrysler and an animated puppet film extolling the wonders of petroleum.

Animation had also spilled out from cinema screens to a wider visual culture, enlivening spectacles and displays. In a short stroll from Fifth Avenue to Times Square, you could gawk at the animated displays in the shop windows of the most prestigious stores, marvel at the scientific motion exhibits in the Hall of Motion at Rockefeller Center and gaze up at the animated signs lighting up Broadway. The World's Fair offered another vivid landscape of motion, with the editor for *Display Animation*, I. L. Cochrane, excitedly explaining:

The great majority of all exhibits will be made more impressive by means of motion and mobile light – and each will tell in dramatized simplicity the story of an industry or product! That is real achievement for all those who have striven for better sales expression through artistic Animation.

Approximately twenty percent of exhibits were animated in the great [Century of Progress] Chicago Fair of five years ago – and in those of the next year *ninety percent will be animated!*¹

Exhibits were awash with motion, yoking kineticism to the Fair's theme of "The World of Tomorrow." If you were to visit the exhibit for the Ford Motor Company, for example, you could see an enormous animated mural depicting industrial machinery and science, an animated film playfully detailing the process of car manufacturing and a huge rotating display, entitled the "Cycle of Production," that slowly revolved to show dozens of animated models engaged in various activities of production and labour. Amazed by such variety, a British visitor's account began with the observation, "A book could be written about the exhibit of the Ford Motor Company at the World's Fair."² Writing in the journal *Display*, the visitor was astonished by the extraordinary scope of motion: "This Ford exhibit would suggest that these are really the days of animation."

This book is about these days of animation in New York City. Focusing on the period from 1939 to 1940, I trace the diverse routes that animation took during this dynamic period in its history. I explore "animation" in a broad sense, common at the time, as a word that refers to giving motion or the impression of motion to images and objects that would otherwise remain static. Vivifying advertising and educational displays, creating new forms of art, extending the boundaries of cinema and expressing the vitality of modernity, animation was transformative. Whether using modes of producing animated films that had been in place for decades or experimenting with new technologies of mechanical movement, photoelectric cells and hand-painted film, animators were opening up new vistas of motion. Animation's expansive possibilities were evident across different exhibition contexts – projected in cinemas, displayed in galleries and department stores, and promoted in industrial exhibits. Not surprisingly, a vibrant conversation was taking place around these uses of animation, with the popular press joining artists, designers, advertisers, filmmakers and theorists in attempting to understand and explain animation's potentials.

Rather than approaching these disparate strands of animation as separate, I examine how they were interwoven in a distinctive animation culture. I use the phrase “animation culture” to refer to the ways in which animation is understood, created and used in a specific time and place. My focus on animation culture relates closely to established ways of understanding other cultural practices. The notion of film culture, for example, indicates how cinema is something more than a collection of individual films, made up of exhibition practices, theoretical explorations, audience experiences and a host of other facets. Instead of something that naturally developed around cinema, film culture has taken on different shapes in different contexts. For example, Malte Hagener argues that film culture’s network of “film criticism and film theory, festivals and prizes, archives and repertoire cinemas, film schools and museums” emerges at a specific historical moment, in the 1920s and 1930s, shaped by a network of national contexts, institutional bodies and the efforts of an artistic avant-garde.³ And there have been countless variations and permutations of film culture across the world throughout the last century, each situating film within their own distinct circumstances. Animation cultures can be similarly diverse, engaging with different uses, values and possibilities of animated motion in a myriad of ways. While sometimes related to film culture, an animation culture can also follow its own path, separate from a wider cinematic context.

Exploring an animation culture invites us to pay close attention to the ideas that circulate around animation, from theoretical discussions or artist statements to a broader cultural reception. These ideas of animation both reflect and stimulate creative practices. Such practices can involve the use of established production methods, but they can also engage with new technologies, innovative techniques or aesthetic experimentation. This multiplicity extends also to how animation is used in culture; for example, animation has been a delightful children’s entertainment, a visionary form of art, a powerful means of advertising, an effective tool for education or a combination of these and other purposes. These uses of animation are inflected by the specific ways that animation is shown, whether

in a cinema as a feature or a short film, or in other exhibition sites that have also played a significant role in animation cultures, such as galleries or displays. Tracing the ideas, creative practices and modes of exhibition that shape an animation culture – and seeing how they interrelate with one another – can reveal the multiple factors that determine animation’s place in culture.

In his introduction to *The Culture of Print*, Roger Chartier discusses a “dual definition of print culture” that can help illuminate how an idea of animation culture might be understood, despite the obvious historical and material differences between a visual culture of the twentieth century and a print culture emerging after Gutenberg. Chartier first describes print culture, in what he terms its “classic definition,” as “the profound transformations that the discovery and then the extended use of the new technique for the reproduction of texts brought to all domains of life, public and private, spiritual and material.” With cheaper printing costs and a greater portability, “such new means of communication... modified practices of devotion, of entertainment, of information, and of knowledge, and they redefined men’s and women’s relations with the sacred, with power, and with their community.”⁴ By foregrounding the transformations of existing practices that print culture generated, Chartier offers a dynamic sense of how a wider culture is responsive and open to change. While animation cultures do not have quite such far-reaching implications, they can nevertheless offer a similarly rich diversity of effects. As well as taking on different forms in different places and times, animation cultures – and the ways that they become attached to changing experiences and values – are multifaceted.

One way that this can become obscured is by focusing on facets of animation culture that resonate with a contemporary sense of animation or that relate mainly to well-documented areas of its history. Chartier identifies a similar problem in his description of print culture. He writes, “All too long this culture has been reduced to reading alone, and to a form of reading that is common today or was practiced by the scholars in medieval and early modern culture.”⁵ Rather than relating print culture to these practices, Chartier argues for an expansion of its meanings to include “festive, ritual, cultic, civic,

and pedagogic uses” (1). Chartier’s approach to print culture brings to light aspects of historical experience that might seem, at first glance, to be marginal but which were still deeply significant. This approach is instructive in its attention to multiplicity rather than emphasising singular forms or effects. The richness of animation history and the cultures that formed around motion’s aesthetic expressions, within and beyond the cinema, call for a similar attentiveness to multiplicity.

There have been many different animation cultures, each with their own ways of understanding, creating and using animation. Every animation culture has different emphases, with certain features standing out as particularly prominent or characteristic. The Fleischer Studios in the 1930s, for example, had a distinctive animation culture which not only foregrounded the production of popular animated entertainment but also included exhibition strategies, an in-house newsletter, technological experimentation and extensions of animated characters into other media. Animation cultures also take shape in certain locations, such as the vivid entwinement of animation, art and advertising in Germany during the Weimar Republic, explored in Michael Cowan’s work.⁶ While animation cultures can be seen as part of a larger history of animation, as well as other fields including film, art and advertising, examining the particularities of different animation cultures can offer new perspectives on the diverse artistic, social and expressive potentials of animation itself.

“New York is NOT America”

In New York in the late 1930s and early 1940s, a particularly vibrant animation culture had emerged. This was, in many respects, enabled by New York’s place not only as an enormous urban centre, but also as a complex web of commerce, art, industry and entertainment with a vitalizing internationalism. While New York’s animation culture was by no means isolated, it was hardly a typical or representative example of larger trends. Instead, New York offered an intensified and expansive animation culture. This was partly due to the city’s distinctive qualities, a topic that was well-recognized

at the time. For example, an article in the trade journal *Department Store Buyer* stated bluntly in its title: “New York is NOT America.”⁷ The article warned retailers not to copy the shop windows that were appearing in New York as they relied upon conditions that were specific to a massive metropolitan area. Examples of this included the animated shop windows at Lord & Taylor’s department store (discussed in Chapter Two), which were a major success partly due to the steady stream of pedestrians strolling along Fifth Avenue.

The admonition about New York not being representative of the United States was, of course, true far beyond the specific example of eye-catching advertising displays. In 1939, New York City was one of the largest cities in the world, with a population of over seven million spread across its five boroughs: Brooklyn, the Bronx, Queens, Richmond (named Staten Island since 1975) and Manhattan.⁸ It was both “America’s greatest commercial center” and its “major industrial city.”⁹ New York also faced extraordinary levels of poverty. In the late 1930s, almost ten percent of New York’s residential areas were made up “of slums or blighted districts,” with more than half of these “condemned as unfit for human habitation” (424). Accounts from the time highlighted the disproportionate impact that the Depression had upon certain communities within New York; the situation in Harlem was particularly distressing, with the newly created Federal Emergency Relief Administration finding “a majority of Harlem’s population on the verge of starvation, as a result of the depression and of an intensified discrimination” that was deeply damaging to employment and educational opportunities (142). The Depression had hit New York hard and by 1933 almost half of its factory workers had lost their jobs.¹⁰ Recovery was sluggish and the 1937 recession “reversed four years of slow but steady improvements in the economy” (58). The effects of the difficult economic situation would last for years: “Despite gradual improvements in the economy after 1938, unemployment remained a heavy burden in the early 1940s” (60).

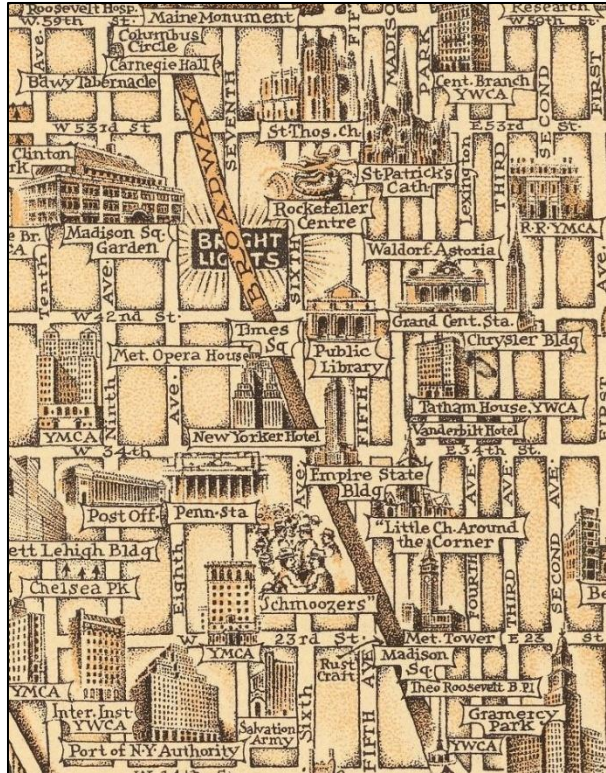


Figure 1.1. Detail from Ernest Dudley Chase, "A pictorial map of that portion of New York City known as Manhattan," 1939. David Rumsey Historical Map Collection.

These economic hardships did not diminish New York's status as a globally recognized centre of retail, culture and entertainment. The city's retail trade was by far the largest in the United States. Much of this activity took place in the "the shopping mecca of the entire metropolitan district": the retail area of midtown Manhattan situated between Third and Eighth Avenue [Figure 1.1].¹¹ The significance of this area was partly due it being a transportation hub, both for those who lived in the greater New York area and for the masses of tourists arriving at Penn Station or Grand Central Station. This part of Manhattan contained sites such as Fifth Avenue, Times Square and the Museum of Modern Art, offering a densely packed assemblage of venues for shopping, entertainment and art. It is hardly surprising that the dynamic expressions of New York's animation culture, dependent as they were upon commercial and artistic activities, were largely centred around this area of New York.

Just as “New York is NOT America,” Manhattan – and particularly the retail centre in midtown Manhattan – was hardly representative of New York more widely. The distinctive qualities of the area had become even more pronounced with the construction of the Rockefeller Center complex in the 1930s: “Covering twelve land acres in the fashionable mid-town shopping district, the project includes a vast skyscraper office center, a shopping center, an exhibition center, and a radio and amusement center.”¹² Described at the time as “expressive of New York,” Rockefeller Center was “an organization of amazing complexity, a city in miniature, where a tenant need not leave the premises in order to see the latest first-run movies, or buy a complete outfit of clothing, or study the newest manifestations of art and science, or engage passage to foreign countries with visas to match.”¹³ A number of the figures who were central to New York’s animation culture had offices in Rockefeller Center, including the most prominent designer of animated signs, Douglas Leigh, the person running the marketing and advertising of Disney’s tie-ins, Kay Kamen, and America’s most well-known industrial designer, Norman Bel Geddes. Rockefeller Center also contained two of New York’s largest exhibition spaces, Radio City Music Hall (seating 6200) and the Center Theatre (seating 3700); their regular screenings of films included the first two features produced by Disney, *Snow White* and *Pinocchio*. With its grand status as a meeting point for business, entertainment and culture, Rockefeller Center was a microcosm of the area surrounding it in midtown Manhattan.

The concentrated world of commerce and entertainment in Rockefeller Center would be joined by an even more elaborate site when the New York World’s Fair opened its gates in Flushing Meadows, Queens. The Fair was another miniature world of commerce, entertainment, culture and art within New York. The Fair was distinctive in many ways, as Chapter Three explores, and one of its characteristic features was the promotion of massive corporate exhibits that displayed new technologies and machine age spectacles. Terry Smith writes that “unlike previous fairs, no pride of place was given to foreign exhibits, their pavilions clustering in the far-flung precincts of the Federal Building.”¹⁴ Instead, “like no

fair before or since,” the New York World’s Fair was “the province of a new breed of industrial designers.” This included Norman Bel Geddes, Walter Dorwin Teague, Henry Dreyfuss, Donald Deskey and Egmont Arens, who designed exhibits for large corporations and major exhibitors. These designers used animation extensively in their exhibits, creating a dynamic vision of modern life that resonated with the fantasies of the Fair’s sponsors and its corporate backers.

While the Fair, Rockefeller Center and the retail area of midtown Manhattan were all distinctive in many respects, one quality that they shared with the wider New York area was internationalism. In *Cue* magazine’s 1940 guide to New York, George W. Seaton rather bluntly described the city’s diverse population: “The most common complaint against New York, that it is not an ‘American’ city, is very true from the point of view of the visitor from other parts of the United States. But this is what gives the city its peculiar quality. You can take a trip abroad without ever leaving the three-hundred-odd square miles of the metropolis.”¹⁵ From Italy to Russia to Syria to China, “the essence of these countries, transplanted though they may be, is there for your admiration.” Institutional and commercial forces in New York also embraced a sense of internationalism, though one that was carefully targeted to specific groups of people. For example, the “sort-of-success” that Rockefeller Center’s La Maison Française and British Empire Building had with attracting European businesses as tenants influenced the construction of the International Building, which aimed to draw in “international trading firms.”¹⁶ A similar mixture of an international outlook mingled with commercial interests shaped the planning of the World’s Fair. Reflecting this outward-looking quality, most of the key figures in New York’s animation culture at this time had arrived from Europe and other parts of the United States, drawn to the city’s cultural and commercial opportunities.

Manhattan was a beacon for entertainment and culture, with the *WPA Guide to New York City* reporting that in the late 1930s there were “40 to 50 legitimate theaters,” “73 art galleries,” “29 museums” and “218 motion-picture houses.”¹⁷ In these cinemas, New Yorkers and tourists would have

had the chance to choose from an array of Hollywood productions, from prestige pictures and star vehicles to genre films such as the musical and the Western. As Susan Ohmer writes, “In popular memory, 1939 stands as a banner year in Hollywood. The last year of the decade marked the release of such enduring films as *Gone with the Wind*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *Stagecoach*, *Young Mr. Lincoln*, and *Ninotchka*. The year is so celebrated that the U.S. post office has issued a series of commemorative stamps to recognize its importance.”¹⁸ Although Hollywood was producing artistically and commercially successful films, the industry was also facing significant challenges: “Financially, however, the year was anything but stellar, and 1940 was even worse. Antitrust investigations in Washington, a sharp drop in domestic box office receipts, and the loss of foreign markets due to the war in Europe all combined to put financial pressure on the studios.”

Within New York, there were burgeoning alternatives to Hollywood’s dominance. *New York Panorama*, a guidebook produced by the Federal Writers’ Project, noted that “The comparatively discriminating tastes of New York fans have led to a marginal revolt against Hollywood on the adjacent fronts of exhibition and production.”¹⁹ Experimental and documentary films were having an im-

pact, and New York was also a “mecca of the serious film student” with institutions such as the New York Public Library and the Museum of Modern Art offering educational resources for the study of cinema (288). In addition to the raft of Hollywood productions being shown in cinemas, foreign films such as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) and *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) were being screened in venues associated with “the little cinema movement,” which also provided a place where “esthetes rediscovered Charlie Chaplin, canonized Krazy Kat and well-nigh deified Mickey Mouse” (287).

In the wider context of mainstream cinema, animated films were thriving in popular appeal and critical estimation. Outside of the few feature-length animated films produced during this time, animated films were almost exclusively shown as supporting acts on film programmes that included features and newsreels. Animated films exhibited in this manner were sold to exhibitors as part of

packages set up by the major studios. Referring to an article about the state of the animated film industry in 1938, written by Bosley Crowther for the *New York Times*, Ohmer describes how “Each major served as exclusive distributor for one cartoon producer’s output, and these films both enhanced the distributor’s prestige with exhibitors and gained attention for its live-action releases.”²⁰ Elaborating on the scale of production for animated films, Crowther explained that although Disney was the most well-known studio, “at least five other studios are regularly turning out as many, if not more, releases per year as the Disney organization.”²¹ Among these releases, Popeye and Betty Boop were being produced by the Fleischer brothers for Paramount, Porky Pig and Bugs Bunny were appearing in Leon Schlesinger’s Merrie Melodies and Looney Tunes series for Warner Bros., and other studios including Universal, MGM and Columbia were producing a steady stream of animated shorts. Summing up the industry, Crowther writes “In all (and in short), somewhere between 175 and 200 animated cartoons are produced in the business in a year, and there is hardly a theater in the country which doesn’t carry at least one on every bill. Contrary to reasonable supposition, this type of subject is quite as popular with grown-ups as it is with kids.”

In this period, animation studios were facing financial pressures like the major Hollywood studios, with the added problems of labour disputes and uncertain distribution deals.²² Nevertheless, there had been some astonishing successes. In particular, *Snow White’s* enormous popular and critical appeal had reverberated throughout the industry, with Crowther noting that that the “film industry” was now “regarding the lowly animated cartoon not only as a medium possessing vast artistic potentialities but (much more important!) as a mine of comparatively lightly worked ore.”²³ The marvellous studio-produced animated films were part of a particularly vibrant period in the history of animated film, contributing to a cultural sensibility that valued animation’s commercial and artistic possibilities. However, New York’s most prominent animations often existed outside of the cinema, tied in with the life of the city in shop windows, billboards, exhibits and galleries. And even within the space

of the cinema, animated films were going beyond their role as supporting elements within a film programme – they were being exhibited as features and main attractions, becoming entwined with new exhibition practices. The liveliness of New York’s animation culture drew upon the growing stature of animated film and animation beyond the cinema, further buttressed by New York’s economic and retail power, its internationalism and its prominence in entertainment and culture.

Themes of Animation

There was not a unified vision underlying the ideas and forms of animation that were circulating in New York at this time. Instead, a set of recurring and often interconnected themes were central to New York’s animation culture: animation’s capacity to transform existing media and arts by investing them with motion; explorations of the aesthetic potentials of movement; and attempts to understand “the inherent value of Motion” for different artistic and cultural contexts.²⁴ While these three themes are explored throughout the book, I want to first offer a brief outline of some of the ways they were taken up in New York’s animation culture.

The first theme of how animation was used to transform arts and media was evident through the work of filmmakers, artists, designers and educators who experimented with the effects of animating static forms such as paintings, sculptures, displays and objects. This became a source of creative inspiration across different cultural fields, with articles and commentaries in the popular press marvelling at the new arts and media that were being generated by animated motion. Gallery directors, shop owners and exhibitors joined the chorus that was celebrating motion; they began to encourage the creation of new kinds of animation. Partly because these activities of animation crossed between cultural fields, there was also a sense that animation was entwining different artistic and media forms. For example, as Chapter Two explores, new technologies could create visual spectacles of animated advertising that combined aspects of cinema, theatre, television and radio. These effects of animation

were intermedial, a term which refers to “those phenomena that (as indicated by the prefix *inter*) in some way take place *between* media.”²⁵ Intermediality could be generated by the disruptive or transformative potentials of animation, breaking down borders between established media or creating hybrid forms.

One example of motion’s transformative power in this period was discussed in *Vogue*, which recounted Salvador Dalí’s prophecy of “the first mobile jewels for evening – jewels that breathe, that become convulsed, that creep like ancient lizards; that are scintillating, terribly sensual, and swollen with sleep.”²⁶ In order to achieve these wondrous effects, Dalí described how the jewels “will be fitted with an adequate mechanism” and “wound up like a watch.” The article included an editor’s note and annotations to Dalí’s sketches in an apparent effort to help clear up any confusion caused by his “Delphic language,” but some readers remained understandably suspicious of the whole idea. Geoffrey T. Hellman, writing in the *New Yorker*, noted that his “first instinct was to dismiss the entire article as part of the surrealist movement and as having no bearing on life,” but “after seeing the Editor’s Note... I began to suspect that *Vogue* really *means* that jewels ought to wriggle.”²⁷ While this was both an extension of Surrealism’s longstanding interest in animism and Dalí’s engagement with commercial art in New York at this time – which included designing both a department store window and the “Dream of Venus” exhibit at the World’s Fair – the prophecy was also an example of a wider interest in animation’s transformative possibilities.²⁸ Dalí described the impact of motion, writing in all capital letters: “Mobile jewels will be to immobile jewels just what talkies are to the silent cinema.”²⁹ Like the ruptures and changes caused by the introduction of sound in cinema, introducing movement to pieces of jewellery could significantly alter their identity. Although these mobile jewels were more imaginary than real, many other objects and forms were actually being transformed through motion.

The second theme noted earlier, regarding the exploration of animation’s distinctive aesthetic and expressive potentials, was similarly vital to New York’s animation culture. Different uses of

animation – beyond its established associations with storytelling, humour or fantasy – were being explored. Giving animated life to non-human “characters,” from cartoon animals to geometric shapes to industrial machinery, was one key effect of animation aesthetics, used to create dramatic expression with objects and things performing as if they were actors. More subtle effects of animation were also being developed and discussed. This included relationships between animation and other arts; for example, the temporal unfolding of music or the composition of paintings could provide models for animators to follow. Animation’s capacity to show mutability was explored as well, from the metamorphosis of figures to fluid changes in colour to visions of the dynamic flux of modernity. This scope of animation aesthetics had been developing over the course of decades, and New York witnessed a vivid extension of the manifold uses of animation aesthetics both on and beyond the cinema screen.

At the root of all this there was, of course, animation itself. The third theme – how animation was understood at the time – was extraordinarily diverse. Offering an array of different effects and values, animation could accentuate entertainment or spectacle, it could be used as a tool for instruction or demonstration, or it could become a form of artistic or spiritually uplifting expression. No single principle underpinned these uses of animation. This may be partly due to the range of animation’s applications that come to light by focusing on a specific milieu rather than the more cohesive framework of a particular animator or production company. But animation’s diversity also has to do with the multifaceted quality of motion itself: animation can be animistic or automated, free-flowing or carefully composed, dramatic or mathematical, realistic or spectacular. The ways that these and other qualities could be found within animation – or even combined together – became a topic of considerable intellectual, creative and culture interest. The conversations that circulated around animation were rich and varied; mainstream newspapers and magazines joined theoreticians and artists in discussions of animation’s possibilities. Moreover, the wide-ranging uses of the term “animation” to characterize

different kinds of moving images – sometimes in surprising ways – indicates the extent to which an idea of animation could appear in seemingly unlikely places.

Expanded and Micro Histories

Among those who were making animated films in New York, there was a burgeoning sense that new possibilities for animation were emerging. Mary Ellen Bute, whose work will be explored in more detail in Chapter Four, was an exemplary artist in this regard. Working with the cinematographer and producer Ted Nemeth in New York, she had established Expanding Cinema, “a production company doing research, experimental and creative work in cinematography.”³⁰ In articles, interviews and advertisements, Bute would highlight how her animated films – which she began producing in 1934 – synchronized motion with light, sound and form to create an expanding sense of cinema’s potentials. Bute’s early films had been shown in different kinds of exhibition venues, including Radio City Music Hall and New York University’s School of Architecture. Seeking further avenues to show (and support) her work, she engaged with New York’s multifaceted culture of animation, approaching the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation in 1937, writing to the director of the motion picture division of the New York World’s Fair in 1938 and meeting with the director of programming for CBS television in 1940.³¹ While these various approaches were largely dead ends, it is telling that the possible sites for supporting or exhibiting her films were all engaged in novel ventures themselves: in 1939, the Guggenheim Foundation would open a new gallery in midtown Manhattan, the World’s Fair would open its gates and the CBS television station would begin broadcasting from the Chrysler Building. While “Expanding Cinema” referred to Bute’s approach to film aesthetics, it also resonated with an expanding place for animation within a changing visual culture.

Animation continues to be expansive. Digitally animated films have been enormously successful in the last few decades, regularly topping box office tallies and end of year “best film” lists. And digital

animation is ubiquitous in mainstream cinema, with computer generated imagery creating spectacular effects for the most popular contemporary films. Beyond cinema, digital animation plays a major role in the wider context of contemporary visual culture, including video games, phone screens, television advertisements and scientific visualizations. Animation is, as Suzanne Buchan writes, “pervasive in contemporary moving image culture.”³² This has led to novel forms and uses of animation which are, Buchan continues, “implemented in many ways in many disciplines and on multiple platforms... artists increasingly incorporate animation in installations and exhibitions, and it has myriad applications across a wide band of creative, scientific and professional practice and industrial implementation.” While digital technologies have opened up new spaces and uses of animation, the expansive potentials of animated motion are not new. In the nineteenth century, moving image technologies were refiguring culture. Spectacles such as the moving panorama, optical devices such as the zoetrope and visual technologies such as cinema were just a few of the many instances where motion offered new ways of showing and seeing the world. One effect of this was that established notions of art became immersed in a vitalized landscape, as Lynda Nead explains: “By 1900 art was part of a highly developed commercial entertainment world, organised around the logic of motion. The movement machines that often originated as amusements and spectacles within mass culture could also move across into the art gallery, transforming what looking at art meant and the concept of an aesthetic experience.”³³ The impact of animation at different times indicates its adaptability in different contexts and its capacity to alter established media.

The early twentieth century and the contemporary moment are just two of many historical periods in which animation played a significant role. While more limited in scale, animation had a similarly powerful impact in New York from 1939 to 1940. Focusing on this site of animation, I draw on the methods and implications of microhistory, a genre of history writing that foregrounds specific cultural events or formations as a way of drawing out their distinctive qualities and complexities. David

A. Bell explains that one of microhistory's most important contributions is to "put the problem of scale itself at the heart of the historical enterprise, making historians aware that they cannot take their organizing frameworks for granted but need to adjust their scale of observation to the problem at hand."³⁴ In order to understand the multiple factors at play in an animation culture, a limited historical scope is often necessary. Of course, an animation culture does not exist in a bubble, and throughout this book I discuss other facets of animation's history. Rigidly adhering to the limits of a single place in a brief historical period can distort our understanding, and this is something that I take into account in my aim to balance specificity with a wider perspective. That said, by concentrating on a specific cultural environment, I hope to illuminate the diverse potentials of animation that can be found within a seemingly narrow purview.

A limited scope allows for a greater attention to examples and implications that might escape notice in a more expansive history. John Brewer uses the trope of "refuge history" to explain this key aim of microhistory:

refuge history is close-up and on the small scale. Its emphasis is on a singular place rather than space, the careful delineation of particularities and details, a degree of enclosure. It depends upon the recognition that our understanding of what is seen depends on the incorporation of many points of view rather than the use of a single dominant perspective.³⁵

My examination of New York's animation culture offers a similarly sustained view on details and multiple perspectives. Paying close attention to a specific place and time also brings to light the productive possibilities that are created by what Brewer describes as "dynamic interconnections" (97). While Brewer is referring mainly to the interconnections between people, New York's animation culture was largely shaped by the interconnections between ideas, forms, places and creative practices. Rather than approaching this animation culture as something carefully planned, like a cultivated landscape, I approach it from the ground up – as a place of generative interactions and unpredictable liveliness. Instead of drawing sharp distinctions between different kinds of animation, such as art and advertising or displays and films, I explore how certain practices, ideas and values spanned this animation culture,

generating a hive of activity that connected separate spheres – from corporate exhibits to abstract art – through a shared fascination with animation. My emphasis on these interconnections illustrates how animation is open to different formations and able to fluidly cross between different contexts. Rather than notions of a single identity or place for animation, this microhistory shows how animation’s unfixed identity was productive for those who were developing, investigating and championing its potentials.

My emphasis on animation culture and my use of microhistory address the distinctive ways that animation history has unfolded. Esther Leslie writes,

Animation is too obviously manifold to set out upon a single line of development. It begins with shadow play or with thumb cinemas, with zoetropes or magic lanterns, with lightning sketches or cel animation, with hidden wheels and pulleys or with stop-motion photography. It starts and stops in many places. It is at one and the same time a beginning and a culmination.³⁶

Drawing on Leslie’s insight, we can see that the significance of a moment in animation’s history need not be absorbed by a large-scale or all-encompassing historical trajectory. Often, the most important or intriguing aspects of animation history are seemingly marginal practices. Rather than insignificant detours in a grand tour of animation, such practices can widen our understanding of animation’s possibilities or reveal underlying aesthetic potentials of motion. Setting aside wider perspectives – such as the dominance of a particular studio – can help reveal the dynamic variety that operates in the substratum of animation history.

Microhistory can also provide a productive alternative to historical narratives that privilege large-scale trends. Brad S. Gregory writes that this mode of historical writing can “suggest that developments such as industrialization and bureaucratization should be rethought as contingent and uneven.”³⁷ By focusing on “human interaction on the micro-scale,” microhistory “suggests hope for an undetermined future insofar as it finds contingency in the past.” This important value of microhistory informs my focus on the period between 1939 and 1940. By selecting these two years as the focal point of this book, I purposefully avoid other historical frameworks. For example, America’s entry into World War II would be one logical end point if my emphasis were the relation between animation culture and

American history. Similarly, if my concerns were focused on major trends in the production of animated films, the timeframe could begin with the release of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in 1937 and end with the Disney strike in 1941. While facets of American sociocultural history and the animation industry inform the discussion that follows, I do not approach these contexts as determining factors in New York's animation culture. Instead, I trace diverse forms of animation taken from a range of cultural fields, often with seemingly quite different interests and concerns. It is no coincidence, though, that these years coincide with the two seasons of the New York World's Fair. Not only did the Fair exhibit a staggering array of animation, it was also a major event within New York. As such, it offers a particularly useful timeframe, taken from the life of the city itself, from which to begin to explore New York's wider animation culture.

In order to illuminate the multifaceted scope of this animation culture, I investigate four central sites of animation: the city, the fair, the gallery and the cinema. Each site adapted animation to its own set of concerns and values. And, as we shall see, these concerns and values also crossed between places, establishing the larger network of animation culture in New York. I begin with a chapter, "The City," which explores how a wave of animated activity was creating vivid forms of dramatic and artistic advertising in two of the most prominent areas of New York's commercial culture: the shopping district on Fifth Avenue and the entertainment district around Times Square and Broadway. In these locations, advertising designers were embracing a new art of motion display, situating animation within the fabric of metropolitan life and exploring the impact of animated advertising. From debates over the acceptable use of motion in Fifth Avenue shop windows to publicity which heralded the intermedial qualities of animated billboards in Times Square, animated advertisements and displays became a major topic of creative and cultural interest.

Turning from the second chapter's focus on advertising and animation, the third chapter, "The Fair," examines the relationship between design and animation. New techniques of mechanized motion

and automated display were astonishing spectators in animated exhibits at the New York World's Fair, from a massive diorama that depicted New York City in action to animated murals and sculptures created by major contemporary artists. Such exhibits engaged with the broader aims of the Fair, which celebrated industry, technology, progress and dynamism. The two most popular exhibits, designed by Teague for Ford and Bel Geddes for General Motors, exemplified the turn towards motion as an exhibition technique – using intricate and complex devices to create animated spectacles of labour and transportation, their exhibits seized on animation to visualise a modern age of movement. Developing their interests in how design could incorporate a sense of motion, from streamlined products to dynamic architecture, exhibits offered an opportunity to expand their creative practice into new animated contexts. Situating Teague's and Bel Geddes's exhibits alongside other animated exhibits at the Fair, this chapter explores how animation became a vital means for imaginatively promoting and designing the "World of Tomorrow."

A much different approach to the potentials of animation was evident in the art institutions of New York's animation culture. Animation and other arts of motion were appearing in New York galleries in the late 1930s, with the recently founded Museum of Non-Objective Painting screening and collecting abstract animated films. The fourth chapter, "The Gallery," explores how animators in New York who were working outside of narrative and commercial filmmaking – including Norman McLaren, Dwinell Grant and Mary Ellen Bute – engaged with this institutional context for animated art. Many of the films that they produced at this time, including *Scherzo* (1939), *Spook Sport* (1940) and *Themis* (1940) were funded or exhibited by the director of the Museum, Hilla Rebay, who saw them as relating to her vision of non-objective art. This kind of institutional backing allowed animation to take on an unprecedented artistic value in New York's animation culture. At the same time, these animators also resisted or diverged from established artistic contexts, aiming to develop new arts of motion. This chapter explores the shared concerns amongst these animators – in their creative practice and their theoretical writings –

regarding the relationship between animation and other artistic forms, the aesthetic potentials of animated motion, and animation's ability to offer new expressions and sensations that were distinct from existing arts.

Shortly after the premiere of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, three animated feature films – *Gulliver's Travels*, *Pinocchio* and *Fantasia* – were released between 1939 and 1940. After decades of being almost exclusively a supporting act, animated films were suddenly becoming the main attraction in film programmes. The fifth chapter, "The Cinema," explores how this expanded place for animated film resonated with changing approaches to the status of animated film and its place in culture. Coinciding with their expanding place in cinemas, these films were marketed and exhibited in ways that expanded their place in culture. From gallery exhibitions of animated cels to window displays and museum exhibits, *Pinocchio* was situated in diverse sites within New York and presented as a work of art that entwined different media. *Fantasia* further developed this aim of expanding animation, with its exhibition linking it to the experience of attending a symphony concert through the development of new technologies of cinematic sound that first appeared in New York. Similar attempts to develop new paths for animated film were also appearing at the World's Fair, with promotional animated films using innovative technologies, forms and exhibition practices. Across the city and the Fair, animated film was expanding the cinematic experience.

References

- Barrier, Michael. *Hollywood Cartoons: American Animation in its Golden Age*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Bell, David A. "Total History and Microhistory: The French and Italian Paradigms." In *A Companion to Western Historical Thought*, edited by Lloyd Kramer and Sarah Maza. Blackwell: Malden, Mass., 2002.
- Brewer, John. "Microhistory and the Histories of Everyday Life." *Cultural and Social History* 7, no. 1 (2010): 87-109.
- Buchan, Suzanne. "Introduction: Pervasive Animation." In *Pervasive Animation*, edited by Suzanne Buchan, 1-21. New York: Routledge, 2013.
- Chartier, Roger. "General Introduction: Print Culture." In *The Culture of Print: Power and the Uses of Print in Early Modern Europe*, edited by Roger Chartier, translated by Lydia G. Cochrane, 1-10. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989.
- Cochrane, I. L., ed. *Display Animation, 1937: The Year Book of Motion Displays*. New York: Reeder-Morton Publications, 1937.
- Cochrane, I. L., ed. *Display Animation, 1938: The Year Book of Motion Displays*. New York: Reeder-Morton Publications, 1938.
- Cowan, Michael. "Taking it to the Street: Screening the Advertising Film in the Weimar Republic." *Screen* 54, no. 1. (December 2013): 463-79.
- Crowther, Bosley. "Cartoons on the Screen; A Momentary Consideration of Who Makes Them, How Many and Why." *New York Times*, February 13, 1938.
- "Dali Prophetises 'Mobile' Jewels," *Vogue*, January 1, 1939.
- "Ford's Titanic Animation." *Display*, August 1939.

Gregory, David S. "Is Small Beautiful? Microhistory and the History of Everyday Life." *History and Theory* 38, no. 1 (February 1999): 100-110.

Hagener, Malte. "Institutions of Film Culture: Festivals and Archives as Network Nodes." In *The Emergence of Film Culture: Knowledge Production, Institution Building and the Fate of the Avant-Garde in Europe, 1919-1945*, edited by Malte Hagener, 283-305. New York: Berghahn, 2014.

Hellman, Geoffrey T. "Oh, Where is My Wandering Brooch Tonight." *New Yorker*, July 1, 1939.

Ingalls, Robert P. *Herbert H. Lehman and New York's Little Deal*. New York: New York University, 1975.

Kachur, Lewis. *Displaying the Marvelous*. MIT Press: Cambridge, Mass., 2001.

Leslie, Esther. "Animation and History." In *Animating Film Theory*, edited by Karen Beckman, 25-36. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014.

McLaren, Norman. Archives. University of Stirling.

Nead, Lynda. *The Haunted Gallery: Painting, Photography, Film c. 1900*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007.

"New York is NOT America." *Department Store Buyer*, February 1940.

New York Panorama. New York: Random House, 1938.

New York World's Fair 1939 and 1940 Incorporated Records. New York Public Library.

Ohmer, Susan. *George Gallup in Hollywood*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006.

Okrent, Daniel. *Great Fortune: The Epic of Rockefeller Center*. New York: Penguin, 2003.

Rajewsky, Irina O. "Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation: A Literary Perspective on Intermediality." *Intermedialités*, no. 6 (Autumn 2005): 43-64.

Rebay, Hilla. Records. Guggenheim Archives, New York.

Seaton, George W. *Cue's Guide to New York City*. New York: Prentice-Hall, 1940.

Smith, Terry. *Making the Modern: Industry, Art, and Design in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.

The WPA Guide to New York City. New York: Pantheon Books, 1982. First published in 1939.

¹ *Display Animation, 1938: The Year Book of Motion Displays*, ed. I. L. Cochrane (New York: Reeder-Morton Publications, 1938), 7.

² "Ford's Titanic Animation," *Display*, August 1939, 229.

³ Malte Hagener, "Institutions of Film Culture: Festivals and Archives as Network Nodes," in *The Emergence of Film Culture: Knowledge Production, Institution Building and the Fate of the Avant-Garde in Europe, 1919-1945*, ed. Malte Hagener (New York: Berghahn, 2014), 283. See also Hagener's introduction, 1-17.

⁴ Roger Chartier, "General Introduction: Print Culture," in *The Culture of Print: Power and the Uses of Print in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Roger Chartier, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), 1.

⁵ Roger Chartier, "General Introduction: Print Culture," 2.

⁶ Michael Cowan, "Taking it to the Street: Screening the Advertising Film in the Weimar Republic," *Screen* 54, no. 1 (December 2013): 463-79.

⁷ "New York is NOT America," *Department Store Buyer*, February 1940, 23.

⁸ See George W. Seaton, *Cue's Guide to New York City* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1940).

⁹ *New York Panorama* (New York: Random House, 1938), 373.

¹⁰ Robert P. Ingalls, *Herbert H. Lehman and New York's Little Deal* (New York: New York University, 1975), 35.

¹¹ *New York Panorama*, 370.

¹² *The WPA Guide to New York City* (1939; repr., New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 333.

¹³ *New York Panorama*, 230.

¹⁴ Terry Smith, *Making the Modern: Industry, Art, and Design in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 409.

¹⁵ Seaton, *Cue's Guide to New York City*, 2.

¹⁶ Daniel Okrent, *Great Fortune: The Epic of Rockefeller Center* (New York: Penguin, 2003), 278.

¹⁷ *WPA Guide to New York City*, 53.

¹⁸ Susan Ohmer, *George Gallup in Hollywood* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 92.

¹⁹ *New York Panorama*, 287.

²⁰ Ohmer, *George Gallup in Hollywood*, 194.

²¹ Bosley Crowther, "Cartoons on the Screen; A Momentary Consideration of Who Makes Them, How Many and Why," *New York Times*, February 13, 1938.

²² For an account of the animation studios during this period, see Michael Barrier, *Hollywood Cartoons: American Animation in its Golden Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

²³ Crowther, "Cartoons on the Screen."

²⁴ *Display Animation, 1937: The Year Book of Motion Displays*, ed. I. L. Cochrane (New York: Reeder-Morton Publications, 1937), 8.

²⁵ Irina O. Rajewsky, "Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation: A Literary Perspective on Intermediality," *Intermedialités*, no. 6 (Autumn 2005): 46.

²⁶ "Dali Prophetesies 'Mobile' Jewels," *Vogue*, January 1, 1939, 88.

²⁷ Geoffrey T. Hellman, "Oh, Where is My Wandering Brooch Tonight," *New Yorker*, July 1, 1939, 34 and 36.

²⁸ Dalí's activities in New York were widely reported in the popular press at this time. For an account of these activities, see Lewis Kachur, *Displaying the Marvelous* (MIT Press: Cambridge, Mass., 2001), 104-163.

²⁹ "Dali Prophetesies 'Mobile' Jewels," 88.

³⁰ Mary Ellen Bute to Solomon R. Guggenheim, 9 August 1937, box 3048, folder 14, Hilla Rebay Records, A0010, Series 2, Administration, Guggenheim Archives.

³¹ Bute to Guggenheim; Mary Ellen Bute to Claude Collins, 8 June 1938, box 1980, folder 1, New York World's Fair 1939 and 1940 Incorporated Records, VIII.B.5 Motion Pictures, General Correspondence, New York Public Library; Norman McLaren to his parents, 6 November 1940, folder 1, Norman McLaren Archive, Correspondence, Archives and Special Collections, University of Stirling.

³² Suzanne Buchan, "Introduction: Pervasive Animation," in *Pervasive Animation*, ed. Suzanne Buchan, (New York: Routledge, 2013), 2.

³³ Lynda Nead, *The Haunted Gallery: Painting, Photography, Film c. 1900* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 17.

³⁴ David A. Bell, "Total History and Microhistory: The French and Italian Paradigms," in *A Companion to Western Historical Thought*, eds. Lloyd Kramer and Sarah Maza (Blackwell: Malden, Mass., 2002), 274.

³⁵ John Brewer, "Microhistory and the Histories of Everyday Life," *Cultural and Social History* 7, no. 1 (2010): 89.

³⁶ Esther Leslie, "Animation and History," in *Animating Film Theory*, ed. Karen Beckman (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 26.

³⁷ David S. Gregory, "Is Small Beautiful? Microhistory and the History of Everyday Life," *History and Theory* 38, no. 1 (February 1999): 101.

List of Figures

Figure 1.1. Detail from Ernest Dudley Chase, "A pictorial map of that portion of New York City known as Manhattan," 1939. David Rumsey Historical Map Collection

