ANIMATING AMERICA: WARNER BROS. ANIMATION DURING THE DEPRESSION

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ABSTRACT

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During the 1930s the Depression shook the emotional and financial cores of many Americans, casting doubt on not only their futures but also their identities. As Americans sought to replace broken ideological foundations with something new and more stable, there were many entities willing to supply materials. Leveraging the power of film, Hollywood producers crafted narratives around an ethos of shared civic values that could be used to instruct readers, listeners or viewers on how to be the “ideal American.” The focus in movies was on the heroic and the blessed, not the marginalized and excluded. Warner Bros. animation, on the other hand, filled their cartoons with characters that did not fit the ideal and turned story-telling conventions inside out rather than simply transmitting the messages without question. They showed working class audiences as foregrounded characters rather than those who occupied the background of live-action films and pulled at the seams binding genres to their messages, giving viewers something to laugh at as well as to think about. In a time when all sorts of expectations were shaken and ideologies re-evaluated, Warner Bros. animation embraced Vittorio Hosle’s maxim that "in times of ideological uncertainty comedy may share the task of questioning…the basic conventions of the age." Rather than simply accepting and transmitting those narratives absolutely, Warner Bros. animation invited audiences to think twice about the messages in 1930s media.
For Michael, Jonathan, Alexander, and Katherine

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INTRODUCTION

A PIG WALKS INTO A BAR...

The town is Red Gulch: “where men are men – nine times out of ten.” The saloons come complete with rinky-tink piano and rinky-tink piano players. The stagecoach, the Deadwood, is “freewheeling” and being chased by dastardly bandits. The heroes and villains are marked out by the color of their hats. And the stagecoach’s passenger, the hero’s helpless girlfriend Honey, is in need of rescue.¹

For all intents and purposes the cartoon Ride Him, Bosko (WB, 1933) is a singing cowboy western. It takes all of its cues from that genre as the hero of the piece, Bosko, rides onto the screen on horseback and playing a guitar. The scenery is right out of any number of Westerns from the 1930s, complete with howling coyotes on the prairies and one-horse towns where the streets are lined with saloons and the air is filled with bullets. When the hero rides out to save his imperiled sweetheart, the excitement builds and the musical score picks up tempo.

However, when Bosko goes out to save Honey and the day, the camera pulls back from the scene to reveal that the sound effects were being generated by animators Hugh Harman and Rudy Ising. After a brief exchange – “How does it end?” “We don’t know” – the animators decide to go home, leaving Bosko without support.² The cartoon ends as Bosko, now bereft of sound effects, looks out at the audience as if to appeal for some assistance. Neither Bosko nor the audience receives a neat resolution of the story – and the same could be said for many Americans living through the identity crisis brought on by the Depression of the 1930s. Bosko is left with a

¹ Hugh Harman and Rudolph Ising, Ride Him, Bosko (Warner Bros., 1933).
² Ibid.
deflated horse as the girl he hoped to rescue is carried away beyond his reach, much as many Americans were left with deflated hopes as the lives and stability they once knew disappeared.

While the comedy of Bosko’s burlesque of Westerns could have stood on its own, what set this cartoon apart from many of other films was the way in which both Bosko and the audience were reminded that there was a world outside of the cartoon narrative. Rather than providing the expected resolution – that Bosko would save the day – directors Hugh Harmon and Rudolf Ising chose instead to pull a fast one on both Bosko and the audience. The unspoken message of “don’t expect things to be status quo” helped to further differentiate Warner Bros. animation from its competitors such as Disney. Warner Bros. animation embraced Vittorio Hosle’s maxim that "in times of ideological uncertainty comedy may share the task of questioning, together with the philosophers, the basic conventions of the age," and, in doing so, offered audiences alternatives to the images and narratives in mainstream Hollywood films during the 1930s. While Warner Bros. animators knew the rules of filmic convention, their willingness to subvert them allowed them the freedom to explore a much larger world than that within the narrow confines of conventional Hollywood storytelling.

Situating the Study

When the Depression set in during the early 1930s, many of the familiar mythologies and beliefs that shaped the image of the American way of life were betrayed. Questions of “on what now can we rely? In what can we now believe?” lay scattered across the 1930s landscape. Confidence, stability, prosperity and an unlimited capacity for growth gave way to fear,

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volatility, scarcity, and limits. Michael Parrish observes that, while the Great Depression was certainly not the first economic downturn in United States history, its effects reached across the social and class spectrum in an unprecedented fashion.\(^5\) Rather than largely affecting the working-class population, the Depression of the 1930s sliced through a cross-section of America and sent many citizens tumbling downward from their comfortable position in the social hierarchy. The middle-class dream of a comfortable retirement following a life of hard work and sacrifice vanished as life savings evaporated with closing banks. Families were left bereft of not only their homes but also their reliable (and suddenly disproven) homilies and platitudes. Writing in 1939, Frederick Lewis Allen recalled “Not everybody, of course, had believed in all of these things. Yet so many people had based upon one or more of them their personal conceptions of their status and function in society that the shock…was terrific.”\(^6\) As the American public cast about for reassurance, a time of transformation and a battle for control over the creation of not only an ideal America but the ideal American commenced.

As Americans sought to replace broken ideological foundations with something new and more stable, there were many sources willing to supply materials. Mass media provided narratives of shared civic values that could be used to instruct readers, listeners or viewers on how to be the “ideal American.” Many historians such as Allen, James McGovern, and Andrew Bergman describe the mass media of the 1930s as predominately conservative not only in the celebrity images presented, but also the subject matter used. According to Allen, the national media was largely devoted to the preservation of conservative ideals: newspaper and magazines made their editorial choices in a bid to please advertisers and generate revenues, radio had both

\(^6\) Allen, *Since Yesterday*, 125.
the concerns of a news agency and the need to draw advertising dollars and thus clung to the middle-of-the-road, and the movie industry, in no hurry to take economic chances, turned to the idealized past for story material and left controversy to the writers of the period. James McGovern writes that, by 1935, Hollywood studios “were featuring positive interpretations of American life and applauding the nation’s institutions, traditions, and opportunities” and this mode of playing it safe paid off in box office receipts. Bergman clarifies further: “movie attendance still averaged an astonishing sixty to seventy-five million persons per week…a powerful testimonial to the sway movies held over the national imagination.” Audiences wanted the validation of their traditional way of life that Hollywood provided.

When one referred to Hollywood in the 1930s, one was really talking about the major studios and the men who owned and ran them. Hollywood clout was concentrated in a small number of studios – the big five (Paramount, Metro Goldwyn Mayer, Fox, RKO, and Warner Bros.) and the little three (Universal, United Artists, and Columbia) – which were controlled by a handful of studio heads. While the radio industry was largely centered in New York and Chicago, visual mass media of the 1930s operated from Hollywood, California and the enclave soon became an industry producing not only dreams, but products that relied on quick connections and a readily accessible visual vocabulary. Filmmakers appropriated story materials, characters, images, and even celebrities from the worlds of literature, advertising, movies, and

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9 Andrew Bergman, *We're in the Money: Depression America and Its Films* (Ivan R. Dee, Publisher, 2007), xii.
10 In addition to the Big Five and the Little Three, three other studios produced live-action films at this time. Essanay Studios, Monogram Pictures/Allied Artists Picture Corp, and Republic Pictures were known as “poverty row” studios and produced many of the serials and B movies that filled in movie programs during the 1930s and 1940s.
radio, and in doing so created a cultural lexicon that could be used to not only entertain, but to also create an ideal American identity and, by extension, to mold citizens and consumers. While film making might be considered an art first and a business second, the emphasis was often reversed. Money fueled the Hollywood dream machine and, to keep the money coming in, film makers used genre conventions to their advantage.

When Americans went to the movies looking for entertainment, a well-earned rest from work, or an escape from the stresses outside the movie theater, they could depend on seeing familiar stories. Westerns, gangster pictures, comedies, romances, musicals, and historical dramas filled movie screens during the 1930s and came in a variety of forms – features, short subjects, or serials. These narratives were populated with dashing heroes and beautiful damsels – predominantly white – and menacing villains, who were most often not. The stories emphasized determination, bravery, and triumph against all odds. According to William H. Young, “the majority of commercial films portray[ed] an innocent world where no mention [was] made” of the events of the 1930s. The narratives that flooded Hollywood relied on mythology, history, and in some cases, fairy tales, to keep their industry alive during the Depression.

Although there was diversity among the different genres, Hollywood films shared one storytelling characteristic: success was available to those who played according to the rules and fit the mold of the ideal American. Audiences had to look in the backgrounds of live-action films to see people of color, immigrants, or members of the working class as these were seldom, if ever, given starring roles. In his study of Depression-era advertising, Roland Marchand observes

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11 Many white actors appeared in yellow- or brown-face during this time due to the racial prejudice against actors of color.
12 William H. Young and Nancy K. Young, The 1930s (Greenwood Publishing Group, 2002), 204.
that “people did not usually want ads to reflect themselves, their immediate social relationships, or their broader society exactly” and this standard also applied to the movies. The headliners typically fit the American ideal of being white and middle class, if not affluent. For many audience members, the movie ideal was not a part of real life, as social issues such as racism and poverty, while rampant in real life, were absent in the movies.

Warner Bros. animation provided a different viewpoint. Rather than focusing on the American ideal as defined in live-action film, Warner Bros. animation directors moved background characters to the foreground. Their cartoons were largely populated by the working classes, rural dwellers, and characters from a variety of ethnicities and the settings they portrayed would be familiar to audiences in small-town and neighborhood theaters. In doing so, Warner Bros. cartoons presented an alternative narrative: there was more than one way to be an American.

Cartoons were perceived by studio producers as (mostly) harmless, devoid of any serious meaning or critique, and based on silly puns and visual gags rather than the biting satire of early Marx Bros. slapstick or the sexually loaded asides of Mae West. Cartoons with a whiff of indecency or immodesty (Betty Boop and her abbreviated skirt) or that burlesqued religion (the black heaven in Warner Bros.’ *Clean Pastures* (1934)) attracted attention from the Motion Picture Production Code office. However, they could be funny in much the same way as the vaudeville, silent, and early sound film comedies – they could be edgy, witty, sly, and sharp, but under the cover of being a “mere cartoon.” As Donald Crafton remarks "cartoons tuck their meaning behind catchy tunes, hilarious slapstick, funny ‘toon characters and wacky world of

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entertainment, but... they are satires, not farces.\textsuperscript{15} In many ways they function as a court jester, able to point out the absurdities and contradictions of many of the myths and ideals that shaped American life, and able to get away with it because they were considered by producers and studio heads as little more than children’s entertainment.\textsuperscript{16}

The short subject animation produced by the Warner Bros. studio during the 1930s played a peculiar role in the quest for a new American identity. While other studios of the period utilized their six or seven minutes in the theatrical program to promote their characters or engage in formal artistic experimentation, Warner Bros. animation took a different approach. For these directors animation was both like the movies and unlike the movies. Warner Bros. cultivated stars and parodied celebrities. It shared Hollywood conventions and yet mocked the Hollywood machine. It was on the screen and yet broke the fourth wall between audience and characters. Animation demonstrated many of the ideals held by social conservatives – that hard work and self-denial would bring success – but also embraced those often excluded from national narratives – immigrants, people of color, and the working class.

In speaking about 1930s newsreels, Raymond Fielding observes that “journalism, like ice sculpture, yields products of transient value. The news fades, the ice melts, and so does our memory of each of them.”\textsuperscript{17} The same could be said of the Warner Bros.’ animated short subjects from the 1930s and it is this transient quality that makes Warner Bros. cartoons such a fascinating cultural record. The advertising for many Depression-era films claim to that the


\textsuperscript{16} “Hollywood Censors Its Animated Cartoons.” Producer Leon Schlesinger was quoted in the article saying “We cannot forget that while the cartoon today is excellent entertainment for young and old, it is primarily the favorite motion picture fare of children. Hence we always must keep their best interests at heart by making our product proper for their impressionable minds.”

movies were history in the making or events of the year and their directors and stars were heroic figures that would remain in the memory “until the end of time.” This conceit was not necessarily shared by their animation brethren. While several Warner Bros. animation directors and writers have been quoted as saying that these cartoons were made for general audiences, it is almost a certainty that these cartoons were never intended to leave a historical or cultural record for subsequent generations. Martha Sigall, an ink and paint staffer at Warner Bros. animation during the 1930s recalled, “Cartoons were very contemporary and, at times, reflected whatever was going on in the world... The prime purpose of these creative people was to earn a livelihood, to support their families. The more popular their cartoons, the faster they would advance in their craft.”18 It was the concern about being timely versus being timeless that allowed Warner Bros. cartoons – particularly those from the 1930s – to tell “the stories of modern society behind the animated visage.”19 By appropriating and manipulating contemporary sources such as genre films, dominant national narratives, and images of the ideal American, Warner Bros. animators crafted cartoons that responded to the concerns and anxieties about the uncertainty of life in the 1930s.

For all their focus on the slightly manic, it is a mistake to assume that Warner Bros. animation and animators did not take themselves seriously. While there was a great deal of horseplay in the workplace, both animated characters and their creators were keenly aware of the world around them. This awareness demarcated the line between Warner Bros. and their largest cartoon competitor, the Walt Disney Studios. While the Disney approach privileged art and technical achievement, Warner Bros.’ approach was significantly less reverent. Warner Bros.

18 Martha Sigall, Living Life Inside the Lines: Tales from the Golden Age of Animation, 1st ed. (Jackson, [Miss.]: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 220–221.
animators drew from anything around them – current events, jingles, celebrity images, and company trademarks – and in doing so helped to reinforce the national culture that developed as audiences came to share a common cultural vocabulary. As images and songs became ubiquitous rather than novel, animators were freed from the constraints of lengthy exposition and were able to stay current with cultural and social trends that changed at the speed of a movie theater program. As such, Warner Bros. animation not only kept pace with the shifts in popular culture, but also formed “relationships” with their audiences and contributed to the development of a new American identity.

A Way Station or a Destination? Media and 1930s Scholarship

While there are a number of historians who focus on the 1930s, for many in cultural studies, the 1930s represents a way station between two world wars as opposed to a final destination. The decade is often a single chapter in a study of radio or film. In those texts that do focus on radio, film, and print in the 1930s, New Deal initiatives such as the Works Progress Administration and the Federal Theater Project receive the most emphasis. When animation is discussed in surveys of the 1930s, it is typically in relation to Disney products such as Mickey Mouse or Snow White. It seems that, for some scholars, Disney represents the only animation studio of note in the period.

However, there were five other studios regularly producing animated shorts for theatrical release. With hundreds of cartoons being produced and released in the 1930s, this paucity of critical attention could indicate a lack of interest in the subject or even a perception that animation is not worthy of study as either a historical or cultural record. Yet this lack of attention is a mistake. Many animators drew on the world around them for materials – music, imagery,
and catchphrases – creating unintentional time capsules. Most did not expect their work to be relevant, much less accessible, for more than six months following their initial release as many cartoons were withdrawn from circulation due to a concluded run or, in some cases, film deterioration. This focus on meeting immediate needs, such as staying on a production schedule, rather than crafting a specific historical record frees the medium from some of the self-consciousness that plagues other media and other authors. There was no historical legacy or political reputation to preserve or protect – there was only the next cartoon deadline. By ignoring or underestimating animation’s potential as a primary source, many scholars neglect a medium that could make significant contributions to history and cultural studies.

There are still many corners unexplored, particularly how animation both contributed to and challenged national identity in the 1930s. This thesis straddles the two fields, drawing on the context and methodologies of history while also relying on areas of cultural studies such as representation and reception as explored by film scholars such as Eric Smoodin, Paul Wells, and Daniel Goldmark. As a cultural history, *Animating America* joins a field of scholarship that examines not only the dominant narratives of the 1930s but also the counter narratives and alternative identities in Depression-era America.

Several cultural scholars, such as Michele Hilmes, Michael Denning, Roland Marchand, and Robert Sklar, challenge the idea of the uncontested image of the ideal American and the universally accessible and applicable dominant narratives. For these scholars, the conventional approaches to 1930s scholarship are complicated by not only what they idealize but also what and who they marginalize and whom they exclude. They examine resistance to the accepted uses of media and expose the ways in which communities coalesced and identities formed in opposition to the conventional discourses codified in genre films, popular music, and advertising
materials. In doing so, these scholars open the field of 1930s study for examination of many types of media.

In *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940*, Roland Marchand argues that the image of the ideal American was codified and transmitted through print and radio advertising as well as other forms of media. Marchand describes the ways in which American consumers were conditioned and inculcated with not only the American dream but also how to be the ideal American. He also observes that those who did not fit the image of the American ideal were typically absent from advertising unless they were to be used as a caricature background character or cautionary tale. Marchand lays out the psychology of advertising: consumers were assumed by advertising executives to be simple and easily led; in other words, they needed instruction – instruction on how to buy the right products and instruction on how to be the right kind of people.\(^{20}\) Packaging of the American ideal – as a product to be purchased and consumed – was certainly in keeping with the Hollywood approach to media during the 1930s. Warner Bros. animation took everything that advertising marked out as objectionable or undesirable and put it front and center in their animation. In many senses, Warner Bros. animation relied on this “fun house mirror” that Marchand refers to when he describes how advertising provided a distorted reflection of the world around it. It was not a reflection of reality.

In *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*, Michael Denning positions the 1930s as a period of rapid change propelled by an upswell of discontent with hegemony. He argues that during the 1930s many artists and writers learned to

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\(^{20}\) Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, 65. Marchand quotes an advertising executive for the firm Ruthrauff and Ryan who observed that “After all, men and women in the mass are apt to have incredible shallow brain-pans. In infancy they are attracted by bright colors, glitter, and noise. And in adulthood they retain a surprisingly similar set of basic reactions.”
communicate with their audiences in the vernacular – taking on a “distinctly plebian accent” that provided an alternative to the language of high culture.\textsuperscript{21} Many of the writers and directors that Warner Bros. animation not only spoke the vernacular but came from the same working-class backgrounds as those that Denning describes as leading the cultural revolution of the 1930s. Rather than this form of media coming down from high culture to low culture, animation’s low culture pedigree was founded in the funny papers and comic books. These humble beginnings – for the cartoon stars as well as their creators – help to make animation and its humor accessible to audiences from all walks of life. Warner Bros. animation embodies Denning’s argument through its embrace and open display of its lower-class origins.

In her book, \textit{Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952}, Michele Hilmes states that, in the 1930s, radio programming helped to create communal identities. These communities grew through the development of a common cultural vocabulary. For Hilmes, the radio performances broadcast during the 1930s helped to form a community of the air – what Benedict Anderson would term an imagined community – where members are bound together not by geography but ideas. Within these communities members develop their own language. While Hilmes' study focuses primarily on transmission into private homes, her theories could be extended to the neighborhood theaters, which for many functioned as a home away from home. Her examination of how that vocabulary aided in the construction of community dovetails with animation scholar Daniel Goldmark's discussion of how cultural appropriation from one form of media to another further cements that common cultural vocabulary and sense of common identity. When animators drew on advertising imagery, song lyrics, and familiar tropes to build

\footnote{\textsuperscript{21} Michael Denning, \textit{The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century} (Verso, 1998), xx.}
their cartoons, they used the common cultural vocabulary of the time to speak the language of their viewers and to reinforce the sense of community between those in the theater seats.

In Robert Sklar's *Movie-Made America* the 1930s are not the primary focus, but rather part of a much more broad historical narrative. Robert Sklar gives a great deal of history of the film industry as pertains to FDR's administration, the development of the national recovery Association, and how relations between independent theater owners and operators in the studios were complicated by Hollywood's pursuit of profits. While Margaret Farrand Thorp sees the relationship between theater owners and Hollywood studios as not only mutually beneficial but also unambiguously friendly, Sklar makes a point of highlighting resistance against Hollywood practices from those who owned neighborhood theaters. Of the many points of conflicts discussed Sklar focuses on the studio practice of block booking and the independent theater owners' decision to show double features. In addition to this discussion of the complex relationships between Hollywood and the neighborhood theater owner, he also discusses how cultural myths became embedded in the movies from the 1930s. While Sklar's examples – Frank Capra's films and Walt Disney's cartoons – do not directly address Warner Bros. animation, many of his comments regarding the function of humor and fantasy in 1930s society are quite relevant. On the one hand, he posits that animation could be interpreted as supporting and perpetuating the status quo continuing to support the dominant narratives of the time. On the other hand, Sklar observes there is something about the way in which "these fantasies do not create myths so much as expose them." Animation walked the line between being both a part of Hollywood and also slightly removed from it even as local theater owners walked the line between perpetuating dominant narratives and preserving local and neighborhood identities.

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Animation and history do not often intersect as scholarly fields, although there have been several studies published in recent years that begin to bridge that gap. Scholars such as Eric Smoodin, Kevin Sandler, and Daniel Goldmark have laid the foundations for animation studies. While much of this work has been conducted largely within the vacuum of the studio space or within the confines of theory, there has been a recent trend toward historical contextualization and textual analysis of animation. Some scholars such as Eric Smoodin emphasize the ways in which Warner Bros. animation could be used to shape public opinion in support of political or commercial interests, particularly in context of World War II, but others, such as Daniel Goldmark and Kevin Sandler, focus on animation’s ability to reflect and comment on cultural currents. While these cultural currents often sync with and reinforce the dominant narratives of the period in which these cartoons are produced, Goldmark and Sandler draw attention to multiple cases where animated commentaries draw out subnarratives or even counternarratives within a society. More recent collections such as Reading the Rabbit: Explorations in Warner Bros. Animation (Kevin Sandler, ed., Rutgers University Press, 1998) and Funny Pictures: Animation and Comedy in Studio-Era Hollywood (Daniel Goldmark and Charlie Keil, ed., University of California Press, 2011) open the door for more nuanced readings of Warner Bros. animation and particularly within their historical contexts. Rather than focusing on the creators, as Barrier did, or the film studies applications, as Wells did, contributors such as Goldmark, Donald Crafton, and Michael Frierson examine themes and trends in animation through a variety of scholarly lenses. This multi-disciplinary approach gives animation the opportunity to demonstrate its value and potential. While these pieces are of value, there is still a great deal of territory yet to cover, particularly in the area of intertextual relationships with historically concurrent media.
Where Smoodin analyses animation as a product, Goldmark and Sandler regard it as a text and it is in the latter mold that this study is cast. My contention is that there are two threads of scholarship running through the field of animation studies: studying animation as a shaping force employed by larger interests or viewing animation as a reflective surface held up to society as a whole. While both perspectives are necessary to provide a well-rounded study of animation as both cultural product and historical document, I gravitate toward the work of Kevin Sandler and Daniel Goldmark. While both scholars acknowledge the role that economic realities play in cultural production – that cartoons needed to sell – their studies emphasize animation’s ability to walk a line between satisfying a studio and commenting on the contradictions and complications of the world at large.

In *Animating Culture: Hollywood Cartoons from the Sound Era*, Eric Smoodin draws on his film studies background to provide a vocabulary for his examination of cartoons from the 1930s and 1940s, but he also examines animation in relation to politics and commerce. The multi-faceted approach opens the field to scholars from a number of areas and is one of the most useful examples of animation as a historical and cultural document beyond the confines of film and media studies. Smoodin argues that animation was used to reinforce a studio’s brand or express their commitment to the war effort and goes so far as to assert that studio animation was designed to support social control and emphasizes reception studies in his approach.23 However, this assertion falls short when applied to all studios across the board. While the work produced by the Walt Disney Studios was largely consolidated under the vision of a single person – Walt Disney – the same could not be said for the work produced by Schlesinger Studios for Warner Bros. In the case of Warner Bros. animation, each director established his own style and

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approach. While there were similarities that bound these cartoons together such as characters and
a studio-specific aesthetic, each was marked by the storytelling, timing, and gags as the work of
individual directors. This refusal to adhere to an all-encompassing singular vision also aided
directors in their efforts to experiment with their craft. As Warner Bros. animation director Bob
Clampett recalled in a 1975 interview, “Leon Schlesinger was not a cartoonist or a writer and
thank God he knew it and that’s why he left us to try out our own ideas. Now if we’d been at
Disney, we couldn’t have done that, you see.”24 While economic survival drove the rate of
production at the studio and shaped some of the storylines, Warner Bros. animators enjoyed a
flexibility and freedom that their Disney counterparts did not.

Part of that experimentation was expressed in the blending of cultural elements from
multiple sources. Goldmark’s book Tunes for ‘toons: Music and Hollywood Cartoon is an in-
depth study of the ways through which music helped to shape cartoons from the 1930s to the
1960s. Goldmark devotes a significant amount of the book to Warner Bros. animation and, in
doing so, examines the intertextual relationships between contemporary and classical music and
cartoon narratives. However, he also examines the connections between musical phrases and the
images on the screen and how these pieces relied on audiences’ access to the common cultural
vocabulary of the 1930s. These cultural lexicons, filled with images, musical phrases, catch
phrases, helped to stock the Warner Bros. animation department for gag materials that were
timely and likely to catch audiences’ attention. As the cultural vocabulary was constantly
evolving – new entries coming in and old entries cycling out – it meant that animators could not
have a singular success and then repeat it without variation. The work at Warner Bros. animation
evolved out of necessity.

While some aspects of Warner Bros. animation required frequent reinvention, character types and stereotypes were mainstays. Many animators fell back on the vaudeville convention of stereotypes where “exaggerated costumes, facial characteristics, phrases, and accents are meant to reflect general personality traits viewed as emblematic of a particular class, ethnic group, or gender.”25 All of these attributes had the same aim: to make an audience react and, hopefully, with laughter. However, sometimes the laughter could be self-conscious or even uncomfortable. One such example is in Michael Frierson’s essay “The Image of the Hillbilly in Warner Bros. Cartoons of the Thirties,” in which the hillbilly stereotype is tied to Depression-era discontent and the desire to scapegoat those who do not fit the rubric of normalcy.26 This connection between those characters that do not fit within the bounds of the dominant narratives of the 1930s and alternative identities recurs frequently in many of the cartoons produced by Warner Bros. studios during the Depression.

In *Funny Pictures: Animation and Comedy in Studio-Era Hollywood*, editors Daniel Goldmark and Charlie Keil identify animation’s inheritance from slapstick and claim that parody and satire endowed the form with the seemingly simple ability to solicit a laugh. However, they also argue that animators had a nuanced understanding of the function of humor in society. Humor was not only about entertainment – it was also a pressure valve and palliative – and animated humor could both acknowledge and comment on the despair and anxieties of Depression. According to Crafton, Goldmark, and the other contributors, animation could do and say things that live action films could not simply by virtue of their form and the way in which many audiences (and studio heads and scholars) tended to dismiss them as unsophisticated and

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largely the domain of children. As animation historian Steve Schneider wrote, "animated cartoons combined all the ingredients that virtually guaranteed there never being taken seriously: their pipsqueak language, their genre (comedy, forever ignoble), and their alleged target audience – children." However, as a storytelling medium, animation has no equal. Its malleability is its greatest strength and this malleability allowed Warner Bros. cartoons to play the court jester, commenting on the world around them even as they poked fun at its conventions.

**Porky, Emily, and Egghead at Termite Terrace**

Warner Bros. animation debuted with the introduction of Bosko the Talk-ink Kid in *Sinkin’ in the Bathtub* (WB, 1930). Bosko set the stage for many Warner Bros. cartoon stars to follow. Over the years, several others stepped in as characters left the studio (as Bosko did in 1933 with the departure of his creators, Hugh Harmon and Rudolph Ising, from Leon Schlesinger’s employ) or fell out of fashion (such as Bosko’s replacement, Buddy). One of Warner Bros. most durable and recognizable cartoon stars, Porky Pig, first appeared in 1935; others, such as Egghead, evolved into other characters such as Elmer Fudd over the course of several years and many cartoons. Emily the Chicken, one of the few female lead characters of the 1930s, appeared in three cartoons before being retired from the cartoon roster. Each of these characters played significant roles in the cartoons in this study and were, in many ways, the ultimate in recyclable characters. Porky Pig, for example, was something of a blank slate and his age and physique were subject to change based on the director and the plot. Depending on the cartoon, Porky could be a grizzled adult, as in *Golddiggers of ’49* (WB, 1936), or a small boy, as

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28 Egghead debuted in *Egghead Rides Again* (WB, 1937).
29 Emily appeared in *Let It Be Me* (WB, 1936), *Boulevardier from the Bronx* (WB, 1936), and *A Star is Hatched* (WB, 1938).
in *The Film Fan* (WB, 1939). Egghead was a more consistent character but, like Bosko and Buddy before him, was still subject to the whims of the director and the needs of the story. If Egghead, Bosko, or Buddy needed to be Pilgrims, cowboys, or theater owners, they played those roles. Emily was the only true constant, playing the same role – small town dreamer – regardless of the plotline. Her personality became fixed early in her development and it may be this static quality that led to her eventual retirement to the Old Cartoons Home. A lack of defining traits made Porky and his animated brethren much better mannequins on which to hang characteristics.

What we think of as Warner Bros. animation began as a distribution agreement between Leon Schlesinger Productions and the Warner Bros. studio. Warner Bros. contracted with Schlesinger in the hopes of developing a cartoon series that could compete with Walt Disney’s Silly Symphonies and his star, Mickey Mouse. Schlesinger’s answer to Mickey was Bosko, a round-faced character whose age, species, and ethnicity was up for debate. Bosko put Schlesinger and Warner Bros animation in the public eye and laid the foundation for cartoon stars that followed. Leon Schlesinger Productions continued to develop animation for Warner Bros. during the 1930s, although Warner Bros. moved the enterprise onto the studio lot in 1936. Many veteran animators, directors, and other staff describe the building into which they were moved as “termite terrace,” a ramshackle structure infested with insect life. Warner Bros. animator Nelson Demorest recalled that, at Schlesinger studio, “you’d see beetles or cockroaches with signs pasted to them, walking across the floor, and big flies towing streamers.”

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30 There is some speculation among fans that Emily may have been brought out of retirement and redressed as Prissy for Foghorn Leghorn cartoons starting in the 1940s.
32 Ibid., 156.
33 Ibid., 607 n.35.
animator recalled that it seemed that they could hear termites in the walls even as they worked and it was not long before Termite Terrace became the building’s official nickname.\textsuperscript{36} The nickname remains a metonym for Warner Bros. animation from the period, emphasizing humble origins and an unlikely source for artistic and storytelling brilliance.

Warner Bros. animation followed the Disney model of supporting two cartoon series and developed Looney Tunes and Merrie Melodies.\textsuperscript{37} Where Looney Tunes were largely character-driven, the Merrie Melodies focused more on music as a narrative device. Of the two series, Merrie Melodies was considered the premier series. The Merrie Melodies series was developed as competition for Disney’s Silly Symphonies, but one of the chief differences was the choice of music. Merrie Melodies relied on the music from the Warner Bros. music library versus Disney’s user of classical, public domain, or original music. This access was made possible by a section of the Schlesinger/Warner Bros. contract in which Schlesinger agreed that each of the Merrie Melodies would contain “a verse and a chorus” of a selection from the Warner Bros. music library. In the 1930s Warner Bros. acquired the libraries of several Tin Pan Alley era sheet music firms and they were eager to capitalize on their investment. What resulted were, in essence, primitive music videos that emphasized visual gags and puns to move their thin narratives forward. However, as this series also represented Warner Bros. music, it was important that the cartoons’ quality reflected the studio’s investment of resources, both monetary and musical. This emphasis on Merrie Melodies’ development worked to Looney Tunes’ advantage as the animators and writers on their units were free from the “verse and chorus” requirement that bound Merrie Melodies’ directors. Where Merrie Melodies directors focused on the music until

\textsuperscript{36} Musilli, “The Boys from Termite Terrace.”
\textsuperscript{37} Other studios, such as MGM, developed their own series in the Silly Symphonies mold. MGM produced the series Happy Harmonies during the 1930s.
the earlier 1940s, Looney Tunes directors sought the next big star and experimented with their craft.

In many ways Looney Tunes benefited from being the “lesser” of the two series. Where Merrie Melodies received more resources and thus carried the burden of higher expectations, those staffers working on Looney Tunes focused on innovation and anarchic comedy. This environment, which already ran fast and loose, nurtured many of the artists, writers, and directors who became inextricably linked to Warner Bros. animation.38

For the sake of clarity, I will refer to the cartoons in this study and the animators who created them by their Warner Bros. affiliation rather than by their Schlesinger affiliation.

**Limitations**

As a historical document, animation opens a number of possibilities to the researcher. Chief among them is the question of approach – should these artifacts be studied as art, as commodities, or should they be examined and read as cultural texts? In this study I touch on many aspects, but chief among them is the practice of exclusion, where those who do not fit within the established norms for a dominant group are not given equal representation. While I tend to focus on class representations, I am aware that there are many different interpretations and this is meant to be one in an ever-expanding field. For example, these materials could also benefit from other textual analyses along the axis of gender studies or ethnic or racial studies, just to provide a few examples. As a result, I believe that it is prudent to examine animation not only as film and not only as an artifact, but also with the understanding that, although they were meant to be funny and meant to entertain, they carried messages that often inverted the dominant

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power structures simply by virtue of showing those places and those people often excluded from the stories on screen and in other media.

When it comes to cultural studies, Roland Marchand’s approach is important for keeping media and its representations in proper perspective. Rather than simply taking cartoons, music, or novels at face value, he admonishes his readers to remember that cultural products can only be taken as “fun-house mirror reflections of reality.” Over the course of this study I watched over two hundred cartoons to gain an understanding of each of the Warner Bros. animation directors’ unique approach to both art and storytelling. During this time I narrowed my field of study to thirty-nine cartoons that fall under the genre category and thirteen in which theaters and their audiences are featured. However, there are several cartoons that were not included in the final study, such as *The Organ Grinder* (1933), that are also excellent examples of the Warner Bros. approach to life in working class areas and the people who lived, worked, and played in those spaces. While I do not make the mistake of viewing any of these cartoons as purely documentary in purpose, they do offer a glimpse into the 1930s. Marchand keeps the door open for social and cultural products to be examined as cultural documents that give a “basis for plausible inference about popular attitudes and values.” It is for this reason that a broad initial survey of the materials provided much of the underlying structure of the study as it now exists. While the image they offer is not and cannot be an exact reflection of their time, pairing these cartoons with their real-life and live-action counterparts as well as their contextual origins allows for as accurate a view into the fun-house mirror as we are likely to have.

Not every event during a period has great emotional resonance for everyone. Many of those who sat in theater seats were people are simply occupied with the business of living:

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40 Ibid., xx.
working, socializing, and consuming entertainment in all its forms. These were not the great names of history – they were the masses. It is one facet of their story that I want to explore. The cartoon characters were recognizable to audiences as the people who lived next door or worked at a bank or a grocery store or a detective agency just like their viewers. They were not figures of great historical significance and, as a result, their stories are often lost. However, these stories can be recovered – excavated, after a fashion – and the examination of media can provide a starting point toward creating a much richer picture of life in the 1930s.

Coming Attractions

In chapter one I look at the function of genre in 1930s society and examine the use of genre in both live action and animated films from the period. In the 1930s, genre films helped to preserve and perpetuate familiar American cultural myths and narratives. These genres were bound by the assertion that the ideal American – stalwart, resourceful, and eternally optimistic – was no myth and the glories of earlier days could be reclaimed. The dominant narratives of American life – individual opportunity, unlimited success, and the promise of new frontiers to conquer – were preserved in these stories even as the Depression called many of these narratives into question.

Genre films were reliable revenue generators, filled with proven plot devices and recyclable characters that became a Hollywood mainstay during the Depression. Animation took these same elements and stretched, squashed, and remixed them into something familiar but slightly off-kilter. Warner Bros. animators created cartoons that both distilled genres down to their fundamental elements, allowing a plot to play out in six to eight minutes, and layered social commentaries and counter-narratives into dialogue and visual gags. While many of the live-
action genre films of the time clung to a dependable formula, Warner Bros animation experimented and explored the boundaries of their medium. Titles, settings, and costumes might mark out a cartoon as belonging to a specific genre, but other aspects informed audiences that the contents might have shifted during shipment. From animation’s perspective, everything from Pilgrims to cowboys could be played for comedy, but the comedy sometimes contained pointed observations that shifted it from screwball to satire. Such commentaries invited audiences to consider alternative narratives.

Warner Bros. animation directors, artists, and writers became masters of decompiling genre conventions and reconfiguring them into something recognizable but slyly observant. They took a similar approach to complicating the Hollywood model of the ideal American and demonstrating an understanding and acknowledgement that there are those movie goers who do not necessarily fit the mold. Rather than chastise or try to correct, as was the practice in many conventional Hollywood films of the 1930s, Warner Bros. animation interacted with audiences and even claimed seats alongside ticket holders. Instead of claiming to be the ideal, Warner Bros. characters were positioned as working class, immigrants, and the imperfect – Hollywood figures to which audiences could relate.

In chapter two I examine how Warner Bros. cartoons inform us about theaters, audiences, and how animated characters interacted with audiences in the 1930s. Warner Bros. cartoons populated their cartoon reality with working class audiences in their neighborhood theaters. If the picture palace or upscale neighborhood theater was the ideal, the theater with the homemade screen and patched curtains was far from the ideal. The “temple of daydreams” could not be
reconciled with a theater whose stage opened out onto a back alley full of loaded clotheslines.\(^{41}\) By showing low-rent theaters and the people who frequented them as opposed to adhering to the live-action standard and showing only the well-to-do and the comfortably middle class, animation provided a different view into the theater seats – a view that would be recognizable to the majority of audiences during the 1930s. Warner Bros. animation showed Americans who were often marginalized or excluded rather than simply focusing on the ideal American and the picture palace.

What set animation further apart from live action film was the way characters broke through not only barriers of the film frame to communicate with audiences, but also mingled with them in the physical confines of the theater. Animated characters singled out the “guy in the third row,” speaking to him directly, and this form of address was only the first step in merging cartoon reality and real space.\(^{42}\) In the later 1930s, some characters even exited the frame to take up seats in the back of the theater with the viewers.\(^{43}\) These characters literally identified themselves as members of the audience – a strong statement in an environment where film was meant to socialize audiences, not socialize with them. While these cartoons were shown in theaters of all types during the 1930s, the characters aligned more closely with the working class than the middle- and upper middle class.

Animation poked fun at nearly everything, from historical figures to contemporary trends. However, not all jabs were necessarily in jest. There are several points at which the spoofs conceal a commentary that is razor sharp. It might be hidden in a colorful cartoon sheath, but the observations tucked underneath come to a fine point and poke holes in many of the


\(^{42}\) Frank Tashlin, *The Case of the Stuttering Pig* (Warner Bros., 1937).

\(^{43}\) Fred (Tex) Avery, *Cinderella Meets Fella* (Warner Bros., 1938).
dominant narratives that influenced the culture of the period. Warner Bros. animators took aim at these myths, assertions, and expectations and pressed them into service for their own purposes, turning to comedy that which had been created for another intention. As a result, animation provided alternative perspectives to the images and messages transmitted by Hollywood.
CHAPTER ONE

HOLLYWOOD NARRATIVES AND ANIMATED ALTERNATIVES:
GENRE IN WARNER BROS. ANIMATION

In chapter one I examine animation’s use of film genre conventions to provide audiences with alternatives to the dominant American narratives transmitted in and perpetuated by live-action Hollywood films. Many of the genre films of the 1930s relied heavily on narratives that celebrated, even reified, American ingenuity, stamina, willpower, and emphasized perpetual progress. Warner Bros. animation, on the other hand, marshaled comedy and animation to create thirty-nine cartoons that questioned history, challenged the assurances of the “back to the earth” genre, played with gangsters, and critiqued both the image of the cowboy as a model of masculinity and the relationship between cowboys and Indians in the days of the pioneers.44

In the 1920s the American way of life had been largely shaped by a belief in the recognition of merit, unlimited potential for success, and class mobility. However, as the Great Depression set in, many of the beliefs about the American way could no longer be taken for granted. As Frederick Lewis Allen wrote in 1939, while not all Americans accepted these principles without question, enough were affected that it was devastating to see those beliefs “[go] to smash.”45 Many longed for some kind of direction; as one young man stated in 1932, “If someone came along with a line of stuff in which I could really believe, I’d follow him pretty much anywhere.”46 Americans looked for a restoration of confidence in their way of life and

44 For a complete list of genre cartoons examined for this study, please refer to Appendices A and B.  
45 Allen, Since Yesterday, 125.  
46 Ibid., 127.
Hollywood was all too willing to provide. Movies embodied and reinforced values and narratives that reassured audiences those old-fashioned values were still valid.\footnote{Robin Wood, “Ideology, Genre, Auteur,” in \textit{Film Genre Reader III}, 3rd ed. (University of Texas Press, 2003), 61.}

Several ideological themes were woven through American life in the 1930s and codified in schoolbooks, media, societal norms, and national discourses. Among these were an unerring faith in capitalism, the value of the Protestant work ethic, the importance of marriage and family, the dual character of nature as a place of bounty and harvest and a frontier still to be tamed, and a belief in technology and progress. These narratives, often originating in American history and mythology and married to images of a heroic American past, were also considered to be the measure against which individual success was gauged. If someone failed on these counts, the fault was theirs alone and the unfortunate would be judged accordingly, turning “social evil into personal evil.”\footnote{Bergman, \textit{We’re in the Money}, xvi.} According to Robin Wood, the resulting contradictory narratives could be distilled to “the more oppressed you are, the happier you are” and America is “a land where everyone is or can be happy.” These contradictions complicated relations between socio-economic classes, native-born and the newly arrived, and different generations.\footnote{Wood, “Ideology, Genre, Auteur,” 61–62.}

Economic security was threatened, if not obliterated, by circumstances often beyond one’s control and as a result much of the faith in capitalism, progress, or limitless opportunity burned away as people struggled to regain some sense of normalcy.

With the wreck of the Depression visible in neighborhoods and homes, the movie theater provided one thing the outside world could not: escapism. Movies captured the national imagination during the 1930s even though it seemed that, with the high levels of unemployment,
many patrons could scarcely afford to be in theater seats. However, this obstacle seemed a matter of little concern based on ticket sales. Writing in 1939, Margaret Farrand Thorp observed:

> From the industry’s point of view the fundamental fact about the eighty-five million weekly movie-goers is that their number is not nearly large enough. For one thing a great many of them are repeaters, people who go to the movies twice a week, three times, even five.

In the darkness of the theater, often shoulder to shoulder with the underpaid and the underemployed, audiences could lose themselves in the world on the screen. The homes were comfortable, the players well-scrubbed and well-fed, and the optimism that underpinned the American can-do spirit was readily in evidence. Audiences were invited to dream, but often with the caveat that the dream may not come true for them. On the movie screen anything was possible and audiences still filtered into theater seats, regardless of the economic pressures outside.

While movies had been pressed out of genre dies since the early 1900s, these genres took on a new significance in a country whose ideological foundations had been shaken by the seismic event known as the Great Depression. Many movies from the 1930s capitalized on the power of nostalgia, which, according to Susan Stewart, "creates a narrative of the past [that has] the whiff of authenticity." The idealized past was preferable to a nerve-wrecking present for many viewers and genre films – formulaic, inexpensive to produce, and abundant – flooded the market to fulfill this desire. Genre films were the workhorse of the movie industry and Hollywood studios generated hundreds of them during the 1930s. These films were brief,

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50 Bergman, *We’re in the Money*, xi.
54 Smith, *Redeeming the Time*, 930.
entertaining, and plentiful – not unlike the animated shorts that also became a genre mainstay in their own right.

Warner Bros. animation directors such as Frank Tashlin, Isadore “Friz” Freleng, Bob Clampett, and Fred “Tex” Avery made cartoons that fit neatly within the framework of the most popular film genres of the 1930s, but often showed the opposite of the conventional interpretation of the genre. These directors knew the genres so well that they could disassemble them and reassemble them in any configuration they wished. By understanding the conventions of various genres, they also understood how best to exploit these conventions for their own cultural products. Where a historical drama might feature a familiar narrative such as “The Courtship of Captain Miles Standish” and stay close to its original story, animation directors such as Freleng might instead stretch the tale, inserting anachronisms such as the Cleveland Indians into the siege of Plymouth. The Hardship of Miles Standish (1940, WB) illustrates an understanding of the genre style and blends it with a fair amount of cultural appropriation for comedic effect. However, genre conventions are complicated by Freleng’s use of a story teller who confuses details and embellishes the tale. Historical dramas are presented as “true,” if dramatized for the benefit of audiences, and Freleng’s storyteller – a grandfather correcting a radio play for the benefit of his grandson – claims the same authority. However, when he further attempts to secure his claim by inviting some kind of divine retribution if he has not been accurate, he is revealed as a fraud. He blusters “And if that ain’t the truth, I hope lightning strikes me!”  

It does just that, at which point Grandfather softens his stance to “Anyhow, that’s the way I heard it!”  

55 Friz Freleng, The Hardship of Miles Standish (Warner Bros., 1940).
56 Ibid.

This skepticism about authority underpins most of the cartoons in the Looney
Tunes series and invites audiences to think again about those cultural conventions that were presented as intrinsic to the American way.

**Genres and the Cartoons that Love Them**

Writing in *American History and Contemporary Hollywood Film*, authors Trevor McCrisken and Andrew Pepper observe that there were (and are) two types of films – challenging or gratifying – and seldom do the two types intersect. In the 1930s there were few films that challenged audience expectations. While there were a few examples of topical films, such as *City Lights* (1931, United Artists), *I Am A Fugitive From a Chain Gang* (1932, Warner Bros.), *Hallelujah, I’m a Bum* (1933, United Artists) or *Modern Times* (1936, United Artists), most of the stories that lit up screens in the 1930s were gratifying stories of heroism and individual achievement – films that helped to preserve and perpetuate cultural myths and narratives. Film scholar Thomas Sobchak describes “the basic principle of the genre film is the restoration of order… The genre film, like all classical art, is basically conservative, both aesthetically and politically” and Hollywood directors and studios adhered to that principle.

The Warner Bros. animation department, focused on making cartoons cheap, fast, and plentiful, was not likewise bound by conservatism. As Chuck Jones observed, “We were grotesquely young, our eyes wide and unembarrassed by knowledge, wisdom, or theory, and

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60 In addition to a cartoon’s brief theatrical run (often no more than six months after initial release), the lifespan of the film stock used in their production could prove just as brief. Nitrate film stock, which was the industry standard until 1950s, was highly flammable and has proven more susceptible to the ravages of time than its celluloid counterpart. Any films produced on this nitrate stock must now be conserved in climate-controlled vaults.
hopelessly uncluttered by tradition or precedent. We lived and worked in an atmosphere of no restriction. Anything was possible, everything probable."  

During the 1930s, animators were a rare and precious commodity and, as a result, they were given a good deal of latitude and few limits. Furthermore, the competition between studios to foster (or steal) talent was fierce and producers harbored few qualms over hiring animators and staff away from other studios. A portion of the Warner Bros. staff was built on this basis – animation directors Friz Freleng and Ubbe Iwerks and music director Carl Stalling all started their careers with Disney. This awareness of their own value encouraged some animators to push the boundaries. As a result, many of the cartoons developed during this time reflected the somewhat manic energy that filled the Warner Bros. animation department as well as the anything but conservative mindset of many of the directors.

Genre films contain much more than conservatism and cultural mores. Author Thomas Schatz describes genre films as constituting a “tacit contract” between Hollywood studio and moviegoers:

> From the audience’s viewpoint, this contract represents a distinct cluster of narrative, thematic, and iconographic patterns that have been refined through exposure and familiarity into systems of reasonably well-defined expectations…the genre film [thus becomes] a form of cultural ritual and…contemporary myth.

Audiences came to rely on genre films for reminders of the many ideologies that underpinned American life. The dominant American narratives were neatly encapsulated in various genres. In

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62 Barrier, *Hollywood Cartoons*, 324. Animator Nelson Demorest said of his time at Schlesinger Studio “You could drink, or come in at any hour you wanted…They were on us every minute, to keep working – but they wouldn’t fire you.”


64 Thomas Schatz, “The Structural Influence: New Directions in Film Genre Study,” in *Film Genre Reader III*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), 94.
gangster pictures, capitalism and a strong work ethic could lead to success and wealth but a 
downfall awaited those who became consumed by alcohol, greed, or women. “Back to the earth” 
films lauded the simplicity of rural life with its honest day’s toil and a burgeoning family to 
continue on the work. Westerns featured self-made men who pitted themselves against the 
wilderness and, through their independence, grit, and strength, emerged as masters of all they 
surveyed. Historical dramas and biopics enshrined America’s heroic past and gave audiences 
role models to idolize, even if in some cases what was being shown was a past that never was. 
These genres shared a unifying theme: the ideal American, stalwart, resourceful, and eternally 
optimistic, was no myth and the glories of earlier days could be reclaimed.

Animation did not conform to the expectation that genres provided comfort and 
reassurance, acting as conservative influences in society. Film historian Robert Sklar observed 
that “Hollywood’s contribution to American culture was essentially one of affirmation.”
 Affirmation did not rank highly on the list of priorities among Warner Bros. animators of the 
mid- to late 1930s. Instead they played any and all genres not merely as comedy, but also as fair 
game for social commentary. Daniel Goldmark observes that, while the studio system demanded 
conformity and uniformity of product, comedy “provided a degree of license that many 
animators pushed to an extreme” and those extremes often included comment on topics such as 
the Depression, politics, and the stars and fads of other media. They poked fun at nearly 
everything, from historical figures to contemporary trends. As a result, animation provided an 
alternative perspective to the messages showing in live-action genre films. Animation historian 
Paul Wells remarks:

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65 Sklar, Movie-Made America, 196–197.
66 Charlie Keil and Daniel Goldmark, eds., “What Makes These Pictures So Funny?,” in Funny Pictures: 
The animated film enables the film-maker(s) to be more expressive and thus more subversive than is readily acknowledged. Almost consciously, animators, in being aware that they, and their works, are marginalized and/or consigned to innocent, inappropriate or accidental audiences, use this apparently unguarded space to create films with surface pleasures and hidden depths.67

The resulting product could both skim the surface of a genre, taking what it wished, and then insert some of its own wild takes and snickering, satirical commentaries into a field that did not often welcome change.

The appeal of genres for both live-action and animated films was multi-faceted. First, genres were an integral part of Hollywood film production. In the 1930s genre films were based on a long-used formula; the plots, the characters, and the settings were largely established and invited little evolution or variation. They provided the narrative backbones and marketing categories for the majority of films from the earliest days of the industry. While studios might release one or two prestige pictures per year, genre films were churned out by the hundreds during the Depression.

Animated shorts were produced at roughly the same frantic pace. In a New York Times article dated 13 February 1938, critic Bosley Crowther wrote “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.”68 The animation industry had at least eight studios producing shorts and so it was up to Warner Bros. animators to develop a style that would be unique to their studio while still allowing the studio to claim its portion of market share.69 This style was not only grounded in a distinctive visual aesthetic but

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69 Warner Bros., Disney, Fleischer, MGM, Lantz, Terrytoons, Mintz, and Van Beuren were the major animation studios in the 1930s.
also in allusions to what Steve Scheneider described as “people, places, events, and ideas outside the context of the narrative world established in the short.”

Where studios such as Disney focused on the artistic and technical development of their product, turning inward toward a fantasy world, Warner Bros. allowed their cartoon characters to interact with and comment on the events and trends of the day. Two such examples appear in *Holiday Highlights* (WB, 1940). As the cartoon proceeds through a year’s worth of holidays, June and graduation season receives a featured spot in the program. During the solemn ceremony, the presenter declares that a graduate that he is “now equipped to take your place in society. Good luck!” Upon leaving the auditorium, the graduate immediately queues up in the breadline. When the cartoon pauses for Thanksgiving, two dates are given: one for Democrats and one for Republicans. This split was a result of a 1939 Presidential declaration that shifted the observance of Thanksgiving back one week in the hopes of giving retailers and the economy a boost. Rather than ignoring the world around them, Warner Bros. animators made a point of commenting on the world outside of the movie theater. The inclusion of current events and topics kept these cartoons fresh and engaging, which was a major selling point as well as an economic necessity in a wide field of competition.

Second, they made economic sense. T.H. Watkins writes that by 1936 “any remaining desire on the part of the studios to approximate the world as it was had long ago succumbed to more immediate concerns”, such as revenue, stability, and “circumstances [that] did not encourage the taking of chances.” Studios relied on genre films because they were dependable money makers and involved very few risks. Studios and audiences knew what they were getting...

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70 Schneider, *That’s All Folks!*, 149.
with a western or a war movie or a musical. The audiences in neighborhood theaters and small-town movies houses wanted their glamour and their excitement “thick and obvious;” many viewers were not interested in costume pictures or anything “subtle, exotic, or unexpected,” preferring instead the time-honored and the thrilling, and genre films delivered on these desires. The most popular genres were, according to Margaret Farrand Thorp’s 1939 study of film in the 1930s, Westerns, mysteries, horror, and literary adaptations, each of which offered an element of the familiar as well as the much-sought thrill.

Like live action genre films, animated shorts were also developed under tight budgetary constraints. For the Warner Bros. studio, cartoons were cheap labs in which to experiment as production costs for most animated shorts were minimal in comparison to other types of films. As an example, in 1933 Warner Bros. paid Leon Schlesinger $7500 per cartoon; when color entered the production process, Warner Bros. increased their per cartoon payout to $9250. By contrast Disney spent $5000 per cartoon in the early 1930s, but that amount increased to almost $70,000 per cartoon produced by the late 1930s. The live-action film King Kong (1933, RKO) had a budget of $675,000. According to animation historian Steve Schneider, at Warner Bros. animation “retakes of scenes were never possible; once a piece of action had been photographed, it HAD to be used… Warner's money people progressively whittled [cartoon length] down to the absolute minimum that the exhibitors would accept.” To further save on budgets, footage was often recycled. Some background elements and sight gags appeared in multiple cartoons such as

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73 Thorp, America at the Movies, 13.
74 Barrier, Hollywood Cartoons, 326–327.
76 King Kong, Adventure, Fantasy, Horror, 1933.
77 Schneider, That’s All Folks!, 32.
the Mexicali lobster rhumba that appears in How Do I Know It’s Sunday? (1934, WB), Mr. and Mrs. Is the Name (1935, WB), and Speaking of the Weather (1937, WB).

Cartoons were not only short on running time – typically running between six and eight minutes – at Warner Bros. they were also short on development and production time. Daniel Goldmark writes that “animation fit well within the studio system’s logic of reducing risk through employment of the most reliable procedures available.” The “assembly-line setup of the shop required the directors to finish a new cartoon about every five weeks” and, as a result there were not sufficient resources to redraw and reshoot sequences. It also forced many directors to become very precise with the timing of gags and plot points. Some directors, such as Friz Freleng, used sheet music to help manage the timing in his work, with storyboards matching animation with measures. With production schedules that demanded fast turnaround from story meeting to debut, animators relied on genre for the framework of their cartoons and, using this foundation, they experimented with characters, dialogue, and visual and aural gags. Ideas that might never make it on screen in other film departments stood a much better chance in the animation department. If “anything was possible, nothing improbable,” then the court jester might stand a chance at being able to speak his mind.

Warner Bros. animators “scooped up ideas from films of all kind,” exploring not only genre films such as westerns and gangster films but also silent comedy and slapstick. Some genres that were popular early in the 1930s, such as slapstick as interpreted by the Marx Brothers, tweaked the dominant narratives, inserting sly social commentaries. However, these genres cycled out of fashion as others such as Westerns, war films, and “back to the earth” yarns

79 Schneider, That’s All Folks!, 30.
80 Musilli, “The Boys from Termite Terrace.”
81 Barrier, Hollywood Cartoons, 335.
– all genres that generally reinforced dominant narratives – came into prominence in the mid- to late 1930s. Those newer genres relied on similar underlying structures of storytelling and the message at the heart of these films remained the same: if you are in the right place at the right time, success can be yours. Strive, but not with too much ambition. If proxies on the screen could make it, then viewers had hope for similar success. In contrast, many Warner Bros. cartoons emphasized a very different world on screen that might be seen in other films. For example, one recurrent Warner Bros character was Emily the Chicken, who appeared in a number of small-town, “back to the earth” genre cartoons. While Emily was not dissimilar from filmic country girls looking to escape to the city, she is too sweet, naïve, and eager and she did not find success and fame. She found a cold street corner and needed rescue from the consequences of her ambition.

Starting in the mid-1930s, Warner Bros. animation directors began to take increasing liberties with established genre conventions and the cultural products of period. This change was precipitated by several factors: the promotion of several animators to directors (Freleng [1934], Avery [1935], Tashlin [1936], and Clampett [1937]), the gradual relaxation of the “one verse, one chorus” requirement on the Merrie Melodies series, and the exponential increase in cultural appropriation. Furthermore, the directors and staff in Warner Bros. animation department had established a record of successes. Looney Tunes functioned as an animation incubator, testing out characters for star potential. If a character sparked with audiences, animators took notice and centered plots on these newly minted stars. By 1936 a new star was born – Porky Pig. He was shortly joined by other, less luminous but long-lasting company: Egghead, who would be rechristened Elmer Fudd by the end of the decade.
The power of stars and the images they represented both in genre films and as part of the
dominant narrative at large cannot be underestimated. While audiences came to depend on the
genre formula, they also formed a special connection with stars, with many viewing stars as role
models, heroes, and friends. Many famous faces became closely associated with their on-screen
personas – gangster, cowboys, ingénue – and this tie between star and genre helped to firmly
plant their ideals into the minds of audiences. Different actors represented different things.

Warner Bros. animators took advantage of this kind of star/genre association, but altered
it. Rather than simply placing the same character in the same type of roles repeatedly, animators
slipped the different genre characteristics onto the same star. Porky Pig, for example, could be
shaped into almost anything: adult, child, fat, thin, cowboy, band leader, Pilgrim. In many ways
Porky was the inverse of the genre star – rather than being primarily associated with a specific
role, he could be all of them or none of them as it suited the animators. His malleability was one
of his greatest assets and freed animators to explore Porky’s limits as a character. Egghead, on
the other hand, might have worn different costumes but was the same character regardless of
genre. Again, the refusal to tie characters to specific genres allowed animators to experiment and
left them at liberty from the strict constraints of genre convention.

Using the genre formula of simple, recognizable plots, sets, and characters, typically
considered to be some of the most conservative elements in the film industry, animators
disrupted the status quo, employing parody and burlesque and generally creating mayhem.
Historian Robert Sklar observed that “[e]ven satirical movies like the screwball comedies, or
socially aware films like *The Grapes of Wrath*, were carefully constructed to stay within the
bounds of essential American cultural and political myths.”82 Warner Bros. animators, on the

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other hand, called into question the accepted representations of various historical events, character styles, and stereotypes. By providing an alternative point of view, animation functioned as a court jester – designed to make people laugh, but still able to get away with pointing out the truth of a situation. As in *The Hardship of Miles Standish*, genre might dictate the bare bones of the narrative, but animation embraced the option of calling historical “truth” – or anything else – into question. This function was useful in that it prevented the dominant narrative from being the only narrative available to audiences.

**Taking the Mickey (But Not the Mouse): Animated Genres**

**Genre: Western**

After a successful run in the early 1930s and a brief decline in popularity, the cowboy rode back onto movie screens in the mid-1930s and lingered there through the remainder of the decade.\(^{83}\) Like many genres, the western cycled in and out of fashion and, in the wake of the Dust Bowl and the subsequent westward migration, its time came again. With many Americans looking for their fortunes in California and other points on the West Coast, it seemed that the frontier was again opened for pioneers – this time in Fords rather than in Conestogas – to find a new place to settle.

With stars like Gary Cooper, Gene Autry, Hopalong Cassidy, and John Wayne, Westerns helped to exemplify the masculine ideal of the strong, silent, principled type. As Andrew Bergman observed, the moral backbone of the Western hero was a “rigorous code which in itself brought civilization closer” and with film cycles such as Paramount’s *The Texas Rangers* (1936), *The Plainsman* (1936), *Wells Fargo* (1937), and *The Texans* (1938), audiences could expect that

\(^{83}\) Bergman, *We’re in the Money*, 83.
the forces of order would win out over the forces of chaos on the frontier. There was little room for moral ambiguities or identity anxieties when Westerns promised “civilization and benevolence from a white horse.”

In westerns the iconic figures functioned as avatars for many of the dominant narratives of American life. Cowboys represented law and order in the wilderness as well as self-reliance and masculinity, while Native Americans completed the other half of that dichotomy and were representative of lawlessness, chaos and savagery. Cowboys were often endowed with a code of honor that the trustworthy frontiersman drew upon as his guide. Other characters such as pioneers and stagecoach drivers were enmeshed in narratives about the domestication and settling of the wilderness through honest toil and determination.

These narratives blended capitalism, the Protestant work ethic, and the premise of nature as a space to be civilized, helping to establish the narrative frameworks that supported the dressings of the western genre. This genre offered a reminder that capitalism was not the enemy and the work ethic was the foundation of a strong character. It also invoked the ideals of manifest destiny: America was a land waiting to be taken by those bold enough to act. It polarized the world between those who deserved success – often those portrayed as cowboys or pioneers – and those who did not. Westerns were also replete with racial themes and overtones, situating anyone who was not white as the other or the enemy. Cowboys and Indians, ranches, the frontier, and self-discovery combined to recreate mythologies of the taming of the West. Westerns capitalized on nostalgia for a more simple time and a world where the basic struggles of life could be distilled between good and evil, civilization and wilderness.

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84 Ibid., 88.
85 Ibid.
These binaries made the Western an excellent fit for animation directors looking for genres in which to experiment. During the 1930s Warner Bros.’ animation department released twelve cartoons in the Western genre, with two dating to the early 1930s and ten between 1935 and 1939. The earliest example, Crosby, Columbo, and Vallee (1932, WB), was part of the Merrie Melodies series and, as a result, functioned more as a music video than a narrative. What qualified this cartoon as a Western was the persistent imagery of Native Americans and the way in which they were at odds with the civilizing effects of radio. The squaws wanted their radios while the warriors wanted to return to their own world without the interference of technology. Bosko and Buddy each took a turn in the saddle in Ride Him, Bosko (1933) and Buddy’s Pony Express (1935), but neither rivaled Porky Pig’s five-picture tenure as Western hero. However, where Porky played straight man, Egghead brought his own comedic spin to the image of the cowboy. Where Porky was well-meaning, earnest, and a likely candidate for fulfilling the potential of a male in the West, Egghead’s bombastic personality ensured that he would be a magnet for mishaps and missteps, leaving him just beyond attainment of his masculine goals.

While several directors sent their characters into the West, Friz Freleng and Tex Avery made perhaps the most effective use of the space and the icons of the genre. Two 1937 releases, Sweet Sioux and Egghead Rides Again, provide some of the best examples of taking genres apart and remixing them into a form both recognizable and yet novel. For example, in the Merrie Melodie Sweet Sioux there is no real plot, but director Freleng used the Western genre conventions to their fullest, working with the iconography of the Western while also incorporating many contemporary visual and aural icons. Although Sweet Sioux is a brief seven minutes and fifty seconds, Freleng packed the cartoon with Native Americans, sports imagery,

86 Hugh Harman and Rudolph Ising, Crosby, Columbo, and Vallee (Warner Bros., 1932).
celebrity cameos, whooping, teepees, face paint, and wagons. Where films in the Western genre would typically relegate Native Americans to either a background role or to the role of the villain, Freleng makes them the main characters in this cartoon. Of particular interest is the battle scene between a tribe of Native Americans and a lone white trader. Freleng depicts the conflict in sports terms, with a bench full of reserve players on the sidelines and a large cheering section. The engagements are also announced by the sound of a whistle, not unlike that of a football official. The battle is presented almost exclusively from the Native American perspective rather than the white perspective, thus inverting the typical view offered in Western films. The appearance of non-white leading characters was very uncommon in Hollywood in the 1930s and this discontinuity with accepted norms pairs well with the juxtaposition of anachronistic elements and enshrined mythologies. Rather than embracing the idea that “civilization and benevolence come from a white horse” or, more correctly, from a white man on a white horse, this cartoon suggests that they did not have exclusive rights to that claim. *Sweet Sioux* positions Native Americans as possessing a civilization all their own.

Westerns were also deeply entwined with the representation of masculinity and *Egghead Rides Again* would have been no exception to this – were it not for its conclusion. Egghead is a city boy who harbors dreams of becoming a cowboy, so he answers an ad for a cowpuncher at the Bar None Ranch in Wahoo, Wyoming. At first, the ranch is all he hoped for, with horses, cows, cowboys, and wide open prairies that seem to assert that the country makes you a man. Egghead is subjected to the equivalent of a ranch job interview where his aptitude tests include shooting straight, branding livestock, and rounding up wayward calves. However, he fails on every count, even to the point of being hogtied by the object of his chase. The head rancher hires

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him, but not for the job Egghead longs for – he is saddled with the unenviable task of ranch sanitation officer. What sets this cartoon apart from other films in the Western genre is that, not only is the relationship between Western life and masculinity openly acknowledged, but Egghead fails in his quest to become “a man” and is ignominiously relegated to clean up on the ranch as he mutters “Egghead sweeps again.” He is left with disappointment and compromise, not the fulfillment of the Western masculine ideal, and thus denies the premise that there is only one way to be a man in the West.

*Sweet Sioux* and *Egghead Rides Again* challenged many of the stated and unstated ideologies of the western genre: dominant narratives of white masculinity conquering and civilizing the frontier. Freleng’s use of Native American main characters – if not the entire company – situates *Sweet Sioux* in contrast to other films of the Western genre and the more typical white main character. The masculine ideal is challenged by Egghead’s failure to succeed in his attempt to become a man. His shortcomings place him in an uncomfortable position – while he may be a white man in body, his inadequacies mark him out as less than an ideal man. However, because this is a cartoon, Egghead’s disappointment fuels his comedic appeal. Most Westerns end on a celebratory note – animation was under no such obligation.

**Genre: “Back to the Earth”**

“Back to the earth” films lauded the Jeffersonian agricultural paradise as opposed to the artifice of city lights and a fast pace of life. Where many movies of the 1930s emphasized the success to be found in cities, this genre reversed the trend. In “back to the earth” movies city dwellers could shed their tired lives and become rejuvenated by the homespun wisdom and

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wholesome lifestyle of farm and country folk. Success was just a barn-raising away; so long as one embraced the value of work, lofty achievements would not be far behind. If someone longed for security, the small town life might fulfill that wish.

This genre was more narrative than iconographic in nature, although there was certainly enough iconography to firmly establish character types. Wise farmer’s wives, cranky old-timers, prim schoolmarm, stoic blacksmiths, and other colorful stereotypes filled these movies, typically in supporting roles, and they helped to guide the hapless newcomers through their transition from city life to country living. However, this genre was best known for the narrative traditions it brought to the screen during the early to mid-1930s.

The “back to the earth” genre drew on a different type of Hollywood star than the average glitz and glamour actor or actress. It wouldn’t do if the stars were too pretty to be believable as authentically small-town, so stars of a plainer visage were required. Actors like Marie Dressler, Will Rogers, Wallace Beery, and Janet Gaynor fulfilled the requirements as they were seen as “doughty, homespun, [and] commonsensical” rather than wealthy and disconnected from those in the theater seats. Movies such as The Life of Jimmy Dolan (Warner Bros., 1933) and Our Daily Bread (United Artists, 1934) lauded the idea of getting in touch with Jeffersonian, agrarian drives and the hope that the land would heal those damaged during the Depression. However, Our Daily Bread and its message of collectivism and communal work alarmed many in mainstream Hollywood. They preferred their country and their success to be all-American, without the possible taint of socialism or communism.

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89 Bergman, We’re in the Money, 97.
90 Ibid., 71.
91 Ibid., 74–78.
The “back to the earth” films denied the realities faced by many of those who lived on farms and in small towns. Where the films were filled with characters who found fulfillment in the land, the real-world circumstances for many farmers was anything but fulfilling. In 1934 and 1935 “the worst drought in 70 years” gripped the Midwest and per capita farm income still fell short of the incomes of other businesses by 60% by the end of the decade. Historian Michael Parrish observed that the 1930s brought “disaster to the rural poor.” While the movies held up the country as a place of simple pleasures and healing, this did not match with the lived experience of many farmers and their families who found privation, pain, and loss instead of satisfaction.

The “back to the earth” genre debuted in Warner Bros cartoons beginning with *Let It Be Me* (1936). 1936 was a peak year for this genre at Termite Terrace with the release of five “back to the earth” cartoons, but its novelty quickly faded and this genre soon evolved in the hands of animators Frank Tashlin and Friz Freleng. Where Tashlin used secondary characters such as Streamline the Dog to comment on current events and thus break the idyll of contented farm life, Freleng showed a different side of the small town, featuring Emily the Chicken, a character who longed for escape and, when her dreams were crushed, refused to support the dreams of the next generation.

Emily the Chicken was a stand-out in the Warner Bros. cartoon stable due in no small part to her gender. The default gender for stars in Warner Bros. animation was male, but Emily proved popular enough that director Friz Freleng brought her back for two sequel cartoons following her debut. From her first appearance in *Let It Be Me* (1936), Emily embodied the

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93 Ibid., 304.
94 For more information on the WB cartoons in this genre, refer to Appendix B.
95 Janet Gaynor was a possible inspiration for Emily as she might flirt with dreams (and newspaper men) of the big city, but returns home chastened and recommitted to her small-town life.
country dreamer, and she sought to connect to her aspirations of fame and fortune at every opportunity. In her screen debut she seeks her fame and fortune following a radio celebrity from her home in the country to the big city. The crooner, singing for the Poultry Broadcasting Corporation (PBC), collects female admirers who are more than happy to fight over him. Emily’s beau, Clem, stands little chance of keeping her affections once Mr. Bingo, a radio star, offers Emily a ride to the city. Bingo sees her only as a chick to play with as he takes her out to fancy restaurants and tries to get her intoxicated. He dumps her as soon as he finds someone more attractive and Emily is left to support herself by selling violets on the side of the street in the cold of winter. She is rescued by the faithful Clem and, after they embrace, they return to the farm to raise a brood of chicks. When one of their chicks begins to croon in the manner of Mr. Bingo, he is swiftly reprimanded. Dreams of the city were not welcome in the Chicken home.

This narrative is somewhat retread in 1938’s *A Star is Hatched*, although in this instance it is Hollywood, not radio, that lures Emily from the farm. As before, this time the visual gags telegraph to the audience that the big city life is not always as it seems. In a memorable scene where background characters go on a tour of stars’ homes, the tourists see only the glamorous fronts of the homes, while the movie audience sees that the fronts are exactly that – large set pieces designed to conceal ramshackle clapboard houses. The implication that Hollywood itself is an illusion is interesting in that it reinforces the “back to the earth” premise of the farm as a more “authentic” place. In the movies – often idealized as “more real than real” – even the authenticity of country living is called into question when the country portrayed on the screen is little more than a sound stage. However, when Emily’s dreams are rejected by both city and country, she is left with few options. Once home and secured within the bonds of matrimony and

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96 Isadore (Friz) Freleng, *Let It Be Me* (Warner Bros., 1936).
97 Ibid.
family life, she is the first to squash the Hollywood aspirations of her daughter when she puts on airs of a young Katherine Hepburn. Emily learned this the hard way and was unwilling to launch her own child into such vicissitudes.

Emily finds herself at the mercy of an unsympathetic city each time she steps out the door to find her fame and fortune. Her willingness to step outside of the known is not only unrewarded, but frequently punished, as seen in both *Let It Be Me* and *A Star Is Hatched*. As a result Emily embodies many of the contradictions of the “back to the earth” genre. While she is safe on the farm, it cannot contain her. She wants more – stardom, celebrity – but she overreaches, gets hurt, and is rescued and returned to her place in Podunk Central. However, the question “if the farm’s so great, why does she want more?” remains unresolved. This lack of fulfillment again belies the premise of the “back to the earth” genre. Rather than being a place of safety and security, the country is instead the place from which Emily longs to escape. If Emily were truly living the dream, then there should be little else that she could desire.

On the surface *Porky’s Spring Planting* (Tashlin, 1938) appeared to be a fairly run-of-the-mill example of Warner Bros. cartoons from the period. As a spoof of the “back to the land” genre, this cartoon capitalized not only on the characteristics of the genre but also on Porky’s “country boy” background which situated him as a hard working pig of the land. He was unabashedly committed to his work; Streamline, on the other hand, is looking forward to being “able to sleep all day when [he] get [his] Social Security.” Porky saves his garden through
compromise with a band of marauding chickens while Streamline jealously guards his stockpile of bones, declaring that there will be “none of this share-the-wealth business for [him].” Again, this engagement with contemporary events drew attention to the fact that these characters were aware of the world outside the narrative bonds of the cartoon. As a jovial but industrious character, Porky exemplified the American ideal: happy, busy, and looking for ways to improve his lot in life. He is in control of his destiny or, at least for the duration of this cartoon, in control of his plow, and seems to embrace the self-determination inherent in the “back to the earth” genre. However, Streamline the dog, his erstwhile pet/antagonist, refuses to engage. He requires persuasion to do his part, whether that comes through coaxing or mild intimidation, and when he does finally get to work, it is with a sullen aside to the audience. Rather than cheerfully working the land, as was so often the image presented in the “back to the earth” genre, Streamline resists and plays against type.

Porky and Streamline played on a popular convention of comedy – the straight man and the wisecracker. However, given the genre in which they appeared, the representation is even more complex. If audiences chose to identify with a character, they had a choice of proxies: Porky or Streamline. According to the conventions of the “back to the earth” genre, Porky was the ideal and, therefore, the character with which audiences should want to identify. However, Streamline was the character with which audiences could relate. He was not unambiguously cheerful, as country folk were often portrayed to be. If anything, his tart commentaries helped to propel the cartoon along and give audiences something to chuckle about beyond Porky’s bland good humor. While Share the Wealth, developed by presidential candidate Huey Long, was designed to appeal to those who felt left behind by the New Deal, there were still many,

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embodied by Streamline, who preferred to rely on their own strength – unless the government was offering assistance. The much anticipated – and often misunderstood – Social Security program did not deliver the easy living Streamline might have expected, but the promise of assistance after the losses inflicted by the Depression gave many Americans hope. With Streamline as a proxy, many Americans could hear their hopes and their fears echoing back from the movie screen – something that ran counter to the wholesome, innocent world of the “back to the earth” genre. The farm and small town were supposed to be places of safety and tranquility – not anxiety.

The “back to the earth” genre tapped into several American narratives but left reality firmly at the theater door. While the themes therein spoke of hope and simplicity, the genre fell out of favor in the mid-1930s just as Warner Bros. animation began to put it to their own uses. Rather than simply accepting and transmitting the genre’s message unalloyed, Warner Bros. animation directors took the message and turned it upside down, revealing that all might not be as it seemed on the surface of the farm. With Emily and Streamline revealing the anxiety and discontent that lurked in the country, the call to go “back to the earth” rang somewhat hollow.

**Genre: Gangsters**

In the 1930s, the movie gangster was the epitome of the self-made man. Rather than relying on an economy gutted by the Depression, gangsters represented "individual success on one's own terms" and in movies such as *Little Caesar* (1931), *The Public Enemy* (1931), and *The Roaring Twenties* (1939), Edward G. Robinson, James Cagney, and Humphrey Bogart built on the cultural mystique of the gangster to create a durable film genre on par with cowboys in
westerns and heroic historical figures in period dramas. For many, these characters provided inspiration; as historian Andrew Bergman observed, the way to tell a success story in 1931 was “to be Little Caesar. He lived clean, and didn’t mess around with girls, and didn’t drink. He just did it by blowing people’s heads off.” However, gangsters also proved problematic for many censorship boards who chafed against films where tough guys showed “disrespect for law enforcement" and for "glorification of the gangster or outlaw." As far as censorship boards were concerned, filmmakers could either tone down or utterly villainize the gangster to make him safe for public consumption. The mantra "crime does not pay!" was supposed to stifle any of the enduring appeal of the gangster lifestyle, although its effectiveness was questionable.

Gangsters were rebellious outsiders prior to 1934 but, after the implementation of the 1934 Motion Picture Production Code, gangster films became cautionary tales about rebelling against the forces of order. As the 1930s wore on, gangsters shifted from hero to villain and by 1937 the forces of law and order slipped back into the role of preserving control. Rather than placing the primary emphasis on the mobster, films focused on the law enforcers trying to defeat them and to this end the G-man genre was born.

The gangster genre did not receive much attention from Warner Bros. animation until 1936, by which point the genre had been largely supplanted by westerns and g-man films. However, once Warner Bros. animation grasped the idea, directors drew on all elements of the genre, right down to spoofing movie titles and stars by name, voice, and appearance. Director Tex Avery’s *Thugs with Dirty Mugs* (1939), played to the genre conventions of “crime doesn’t

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pay” and relied on the persona of Edward G. Robinson in his gangster characters to identify these cartoons as belonging to the gangster genre.

This cartoon is highly representative of Avery’s work at Warner Bros. at this point in his career. The pacing and plot moved very quickly but was still full of sight gags, asides to the audience, and action. However, it was the asides to the audience that are a particular specialty of Avery at this time. A notable example of this practice occurred in *Thugs with Dirty Mugs* when the main character, a parody of Edward G. Robinson, turns to address the audience and points out that he “sounds just like Eddie Robinson.”102 The fact that the character was not only a parody but is also aware of and commenting on this status had no live-action counterpart in the gangster genre. This self-awareness invites comment and participation from the audience, a practice that fell out of favor in theaters with the transition from silent films to sound motion pictures. Rather than simply seeing the characters as something from a completely different world, the boundaries between those worlds could be breached, creating a movie-going experience that hearkened back to earlier years and a more interactive community.

*Porky’s Double Trouble* (1937) challenges both some of the expectations of the genre and also the 1934 Motion Picture Production code. According to the code crime and criminals were not to be appealing – the idea that “crime doesn’t pay” was to be paramount in any gangster picture. In this short, the villain, recently escaped from prison, is a look-alike for bank employee Porky Pig. He lures Porky to his hide out and assumes his identity and his job. However, when he also attempts to take up with Porky’s girlfriend, Petunia, he goes a step too far. When he is caught by police, it is Porky’s girlfriend who identifies him as the villain by kissing both gangster and good guy to determine who was who. While the villain of the piece is detained by

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police, the female lead makes clear that she prefers the bad guy to the straight-laced Porky Pig. Petunia’s declaration hearkens back to Mae West, an actress known for her own refusal to adhere to sexual and gender conventions. In this case the rebellious element was not the gangster, but rather the woman, and women who rebelled in 1930s films were, according to the Motion Picture Production Code, “bad.”

When live action film shifted focus from gangsters to G-men in the mid-1930s, Warner Bros. continued to build on and develop the gangster character. While the gangster narratives and icons helped to provide the scaffolding on which to build their own stories, the latitude taken by the animators allowed gangsters a chance to shake off some of the less flattering attributes and assume their “place in society,” even if that society was an animated one. Furthermore, the use of familiar genres meant that time normally spent in plot development was elided, allowing Tex Avery the opportunity to focus on the animation characteristics that would define his style. Rapid fire gags, wild takes, and asides to the audience kept Avery’s work fresh and engaging, inviting audiences to participate in a dialogue rather than simply receiving the message that “crime does not pay.” Again, the invitation to that dialogue recalls an earlier period in movie-going history and a more community based sensibility rather than the use of films to assert moral authority.

**Genres: Historical Drama/Biographical Movie ("biopic")**

During the Depression Hollywood thought that Americans needed a reminder of what made their country great. Several studios sought to appeal to a nationalistic spark within viewers who, disappointed by the perceived failures of capitalism and thus the American Dream, were questioning their way of life. Robert McElvaine observes that "many contemporaries were convinced that film was the most powerful medium of the time. Immediately after the stock
market crash, for instance, New York Mayor Jimmy Walker asked movie operators to 'show pictures which will reinstate courage and hope in the hearts of the people.'\textsuperscript{103} Rather than dwelling on failures, Hollywood plumbed history for examples of America’s strength and promise and, as Robert Sklar writes, gave “new energy to old-fashioned themes.”\textsuperscript{104} Several other genres could be considered as either subsections or close relatives of the historical drama – among them war films and westerns – but history provided enough material to keep Hollywood studios occupied. Some of the most frequently used periods and themes emphasized American myths, legends and historical events prior to 1900. The situating of plots in another century freed many of the filmmakers from the dangers of being too close to current events. The pilgrims, the Revolutionary War, the Gold Rush, and the settlement of the frontier were safe topics that could inspire confidence and awaken patriotic pride rather than recrimination.

In the early to mid-1930s many historical dramas relied heavily on archetypes – founding fathers, pioneers, Forty-Niners, colonists, cowboys – and clear hero/villain dichotomies. However, Warner Bros. animation began to change in the late 1930s and early 1940s to focus on origin myths. The cartoons produced generally followed the movie industry trends and the shifts in historical drama source material was no different. (See Appendix B for a cartoon listing according to genre) This genre was devoted to a celebration of a heroic past, even though that past was often fictionalized for best effect – this was entertainment, not education. Although inspirational figures were not always American by birth, they were American by spirit and were often portrayed as having those stalwart and heroic characteristics that would have ensured them success within the terms of the American capitalist ideology. Historical dramas drew upon


\textsuperscript{104} Sklar, \textit{Movie-Made America}, 175.
America’s heroic past and reclaimed its ideals, particularly in light of the rising tide of war in Europe. Reminding audiences of their historical heritage took on a new importance and identifying the origins of the American identity never seemed more critical.

The people, places, and events of the colonial period supplied a wealth of myths on which to base animated plots. However, while some stars were associated with specific genres, this was not necessarily the case with the historical drama genre. This opened the field for celebrity parody, meaning that anyone’s persona could be co-opted for cartoons. Warner Bros. animators also raided the cultural pantry for elements of past and present, introducing Depression-era sight gags into colonial settings. These practices served to not only make use of the scaffolding of the historical drama genre but also the common cultural vocabulary of the time.

1938’s *Johnny Smith and Poker-Huntas* is an excellent example of the marriage of historical elements and contemporary culture. The film’s dedication is addressed to “the 7,500,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 people whose ancestors came over on The Mayflower.” This cartoon pokes fun at the efforts of many Americans to legitimize their claim to being “authentic Americans.” The main character, Captain Johnny Smith, also tries to establish his historical importance: “I’ll be in history books because I came over on the Mayflower.”105 This statement is in keeping with the historical narratives that filled schoolbooks, playing on a “fact” that even schoolchildren would know.

There are many nods to the 1930s in this cartoon. When Smith sights land, he also sees a flashing neon sign that reads “America – free parking” while another sign announces “FHA Loans.” A title card is interjected into the midst of a chase scene: “Due to the length of our

105 Fred (Tex) Avery, *Johnny Smith and Poker-huntas* (Warner Bros., 1938). Egghead was the forerunner of Elmer Fudd.
program it will be necessary to cut short this thrilling chase between Capt. Johnny Smith and the Indians. – The Management” followed closely by another title card that asks “Is that O.K. with you, Mr. Smith?” – a deferential comment on Smith’s historical importance. Once captured, Smith is “treated” to a performance from the Native American jeering section who chants “give ‘em the axe!” 106 Finally, Poker-huntas listens to Walter Winchell on the radio and, upon hearing that Johnny Smith’s demise is imminent, she runs to his rescue. They make good their escape and the cartoon closes with a homey scene with Johnny, Poker-huntas and their happy brood. 107

Smith’s marriage and children with Poker-huntus signify that he is here to stay and further indicates that, through his progeny, he is a part of the American fabric.

While stereotypes are liberally used in this cartoon, Native Americans also have the opportunity to speak for themselves. 108 The most startling example occurs as Captain Smith protests his execution by saying “You guys can’t do this to me because I came over…” His rebuttal is cut short as the Native Americans surrounding him finish his sentence: “On the Mayflower, yeah.” The Native American Chief then delivers the most surprising line of dialogue – “Gee that stuff gets me.” Rather than showing deference, as demonstrated in the manager’s note, the chief comments on the absurdity of Smith’s repeated declarations. Where Smith has been granted a space in the historical record, many natives have been silenced.

Again, as in the case of *Sweet Sioux*, the Native Americans are not relegated to the fringes of the film. The native settlement is presented as a suburban neighborhood filled with teepees adorned with signs. They are an integral and highly visible part of the short, which runs

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106 In this case the “axe” was the Stanford axe, a part of the Stanford sports tradition that was adopted into popular culture and media.
107 Avery, *Johnny Smith and Poker-huntas*.
108 This cartoon blends multiple Indian stereotypes – papooses, riding on mules, Mohawks, and a scenic overlook that would likely fit better in the Southwest than the Northeast – to eliminate the amount of time necessary for exposition.
counter to the treatment of non-white characters in many of the live action films of the 1930s.109 This representation also runs counter to the conventions of history texts. Native peoples were often mentioned as either a footnote or an obstacle to Anglo-American progress rather than as a people and culture in their own right. To grant Native Americans a voice that did not hew to stereotypes, much less in a cartoon, was unusual during the 1930s.

Westward expansion continued to be a popular theme in Warner Bros animation and the Looney Tune *Injun Trouble* (1938) certainly bears this out. Directed by Robert Clampett and starring Porky Pig, *Injun Trouble* makes some surprising comments regarding the push to settle the United States. In this short Porky is a fearless scout, guarding a wagon train as it plunges ahead to the West. When he scouts ahead, he finds that they are headed into territory claimed by Injun Joe. The boundary line is marked by a sign that states “Paleface keep off lawn.” Slinking into the territory, Porky and his trusty steed find the burnt-out remains of a wagon train. They also encounter a survivor of the attack and the great Injun Joe; while Joe was ultimately subdued there was still an acknowledgement – however joking – that the land belonged to him and his people. This acknowledgement would suggest that Native Americans had a prior claim on the West – again, an idea that runs counter to the dominant narratives of racial superiority that infused the movie industry and American culture.

By appropriating and repurposing cultural icons and historical narratives, WB animation directors used established cultural components to challenge not only genre conventions but also conventional representations of historical narratives beyond the movie screen. Rather than placing themselves on an artistic pedestal, these cartoons considered the view from the theater seats and, in doing so, crafted animation that provided an alternative perspective of the American

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ideal. Using these references not only helped with the “show, don’t tell” motif at WB but also provided new connections and interpretations for many of the cultural elements that animation appropriated. In creating these new connections, WB animation provided an example of cultural remixing, reconfiguring a number of media elements to craft something new and contributing to another view of genres and the dominant American narratives of the 1930s.

The intertextual relationships between mass media in the 1930s flooded the common cultural vocabulary with entries in many forms – verbal, musical, and visual. While some media took advantage of this ever-changing collection to create connections between films, music, radio, print and audience, animators found ways to subtly counteract and even reject many of the messages of an increasingly conservative studio system. It is ironic, then, that animation utilized an inherently conservative storytelling form to introduce new ideas to audiences. While genre had many characteristics that were immutable, there were also many that could be manipulated. This versatility served to cement the use of genre as a mainstay for animation and provided animated alternatives that challenged the dominant narratives of the 1930s. Whether the characters were as familiar as Captain John Smith or as obscure as Emily the Chicken, animation used genre to its advantage, bursting many of the bounds of conservatism inherent in that particular form.
CHAPTER TWO
LOOKING FOR THE IDEAL AMERICAN:
THEATERS, AUDIENCES, AND ANIMATION DURING THE DEPRESSION

Hollywood’s ideal of white, middle class, native born or fully assimilated immigrants synched up neatly with the messages transmitted in 1930s dominant narratives and mass media as a whole. However, animation hailed a different sort of American through representations of people of color, the working class, and the spaces that were anything but middle class such as back alleys, cramped inner city apartment buildings, and neighborhood movie theaters. From 1929 to 1939, Warner Bros. animation produced thirteen cartoons that focused specifically on theaters and those who occupied them.¹¹⁰ In chapter two I examine animation’s challenge to Hollywood representations of the American movie audiences. I also examine the animated practice of breaking the fourth wall to address audiences and how it differed from the same practice in live-action films.

In the 1930s the normative American was white, middle-class, and native-born – or at least this was the ideal according to Hollywood. However, the American populace was significantly more diverse and, while many saw this diversity as a source of strength and a validation of the myth of the American melting pot, there were many others who believed that the influx of new bloodlines and practices diluted the image of the ideal American. Wendy Wall observes that this anxiety emerged during a period of decreased immigration but increased internal migration and the shifting population fueled concerns that there were “not enough white

¹¹⁰ For further information, please refer to Appendix C.
As a result there were calls from various sectors to increase acculturation, essentially “making more Americans, but faster.”

Hollywood films transmitted American narratives through genre films and they also defined the ideal American – who they were, what they did, and where they were entertained. Theaters and their programs of music, news, cartoons, and feature films allowed a night at the movies to be a night at the “centers of communication and cultural diffusion.” For Hollywood the targets of the campaign for conformity -- the recently arrived immigrants and their children, the 'hyphenated Americans' -- related in a more confused and ambiguous way to the dominant social order. They sought success, comfort, status, on the same terms as other Americans; many newcomers were quite willing to adhere to American standards because they marked the path to the American rewards they had come for. Yet they were told in painfully explicit ways, from discrimination and restrictive legislation to Klan violence, that their character and traits, their religions, languages, dress styles, complexions, features cuisines, mores and habits were barriers to full admission into American life. And the fact that they had provided the original audience for movies and the dynamic leaders of the motion-picture business was also held against them.

Films were meant to “educate, entertain, and enlighten” according to Cass Warner Spelling, granddaughter of Jack Warner, and reformers saw movie houses as massive education zones that could be harnessed for their own ostensibly noble purposes. For example, movies could teach not only immigrants what it meant to be Americans, but could also instruct working-class audiences about their place in society and how it was not always to their advantage to try to shift out of that position. Film scholar Dana Poland argues that the movie theaters were a moral

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112 Ibid., 23.
113 *Sklar, Movie-Made America*, 18.
114 Ibid., 90.
training ground where immigrants and lower classes learned “how to be a proper American.”

Historian Robert Sklar agrees: "Hollywood directed its enormous powers of persuasion to preserving the basic moral, social and economic tenants [sic] of traditional American culture."

When movie audiences appeared in live-action films, it was often in either archival or stock footage. Most studios had amassed or acquired large libraries of stock footage and this footage helped to minimize the costs of production. The audiences shown were rather generic in that they could be at a stage production as easily as at a movie – their dress and behavior marks them out as genteel and out for an afternoon or evening of sophisticated entertainment. On the other hand, if second-run houses or matinees were shown on film, the audiences were often comprised of children, not adults. The children were portrayed as rambunctious and unruly and the theater would be reduced to a state of chaos in its efforts to entertain the rowdy and unkempt patrons. The juxtaposition of well-mannered patrons and uncivilized attendees illustrated who qualified as the ideal and those who did not.

Warner Bros. cartoons eschewed the well-heeled movie patron and their picture palace and instead populated their cartoon reality with working class audiences and characters and showed them in their neighborhood theaters. By showing the working classes, rural populations, and inner city dwellers, Warner Bros. animation provided an alternative to the American ideal feature in live-action film. In live-action films, where white middle class America was held up as the norm, other classes, races or ethnicities were not welcome unless they submitted to caricature, parody, or a background role. Where Hollywood relegated those who did not exemplify the WASP ideal to secondary roles such as comic relief or faithful sidekick, Warner

116 Dana B. Polan, Scenes of Instruction: The Beginnings of the U.S. Study of Film (University of California Press, 2007), 150.
117 Sklar, Movie-Made America, 175.
118 Ibid., 125.
Bros. animation brought these figures to the fore. While comic relief was often the goal – these were cartoons, after all, not Shakespearean tragedy – those actors and images typically shunted to the sidelines in live action films were placed front and center in animation. Warner Bros. animation spoke in the vernacular of the time, not in the cultivated tones of upper and middle class America.

If the picture palace or upscale neighborhood theater was the ideal, the theater with the homemade screen and patched curtains fell far short. The “temple of daydreams” could not be reconciled with a theater whose stage opened out onto a back alley full of loaded clotheslines. By showing low-rent theaters and the people who frequented them as opposed to adhering to the live-action standard and showing only the well-to-do and the comfortably middle class, animation provided a different view into the theater seats – a view that would be recognizable to the majority of audiences during the 1930s. This blending of realism and fantasy in the service of comedy became a Warner Bros. animation trademark.

There was not much talking going on in theaters of the 1930s unless the voices came from the screen. Theaters evolved along with movies, going from showing silent films, where the audience would read the title cards aloud, sing out with the group songs, generate both running narratives and punctuate the film with commentaries, to showing talkies where viewers wanted to hear the actors, not each other. Sklar described the shift as one in which “silent films made audiences talk and talking films made audiences silent.”

Short subject films with narration, such as travelogues and newsreels, filled the aural space once occupied by audience voices. The narrators of these shorts were most often male and patrician, adopting a tone not unlike that used in radio advertisements of the 1920s and 1930s. This was not dissimilar from the tone of many

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radio or print advertisements of the time that featured a male doctor or other authority figure and was in keeping with the “instructional” capabilities of film. A few comedy shorts challenged this practice; for example, Robert Benchley’s “How to” series utilized direct address as the narrator of the shorts addressed both the actor and the audience. However, the voices that rang out in theaters belonged to the actors, as opposed to days past when audiences made their contribution.

As theater audiences lapsed into silence and the films did the majority of the talking, many films of the 1930s delivered reassuring messages about American ideals and institutions. Studio heads and marketing departments considered spectators to be passive recipients of movie messages, not unlike empty vessels waiting to be filled. In contrast, Warner Bros.’ cartoon directors and writers acknowledged that audiences did not simply sit back and absorb the messages without comment or question. Recent scholarship in the field of reception studies confirms what Warner Bros. animators knew in the 1930s: “viewers [were] not quite so passive and movies [were] not nearly so powerful, at least in terms of influence,” as Hollywood might have liked.\textsuperscript{121}

Warner Bros. animators came from the same stock as many of the audiences that watched their cartoons. The average Schlesinger Studios employee

\begin{quote}

graduated from a local high school where he did a few desultory cartoons for the weekly, and was president of the Art Club in his Senior year – his lone achievement in four years….After graduation he worked in a gas station for a year, then as a show-card writers until a friend got him a job at Universal as an opaquer, where he stayed until he came here.\textsuperscript{122}
\end{quote}

Many of the Warner Bros. animators came from either newspapers or commercial art backgrounds, such as Friz Freleng’s stint in advertising and in the creation of film cards, and


\textsuperscript{122} Barrier, \textit{Hollywood Cartoons}, 353. This description appeared in the employee newsletter \textit{Exposure Sheet}. 

advanced study was something typically associated with other studios such as Disney. Rather than cultivating art degrees, the Warner Bros. animators and directors cultivated their own irreverent senses of humor and sought new ways to amuse themselves while remaining gainfully employed. In an interview with John Canemaker, Friz Freleng recalled that “the cartoons that we designed were never designed, in our minds, for children. All our audiences were adults, really. We never had children in mind when we made [them], we made them for ourselves.” As they amused themselves with their less-than-lofty, working class senses of humor, they amused others.

Where live-action film showed middle- and upper-class audience members, animation showed the neighborhood theater with its working-class audience. Live-action narrators would carry on a one-sided conversation; animated narrators and characters addressed the audience directly and, in some cases, by seat assignment. What further set animation apart from live action film was the way characters broke through not only barriers of the film frame to communicate with audiences, but also to mingle with them in the physical confines of the theater. In doing so, animators created characters who literally identified themselves as members of the audience – a strong statement in an environment where mainstream Hollywood films were meant to socialize audiences, not socialize with them.

Theaters

Theaters tended to reflect the neighborhoods in which they were found; the more affluent the neighborhood, the more opulent the theater and, conversely, the less prosperous the

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123 Ibid., 46. Some, like Chuck Jones, pursued advanced training. Jones, for example, studied at the Chouinard School of Art, which would evolve into the California Institute of the Arts in the 1960s.
124 Musilli, “The Boys from Termite Terrace.”
neighborhood, the more humble the theater. According to Harold Franklin’s classification system, circa 1928, there were five categories:

“The Super” or picture palace, which was rare and provided the most elaborate environment; “De Luxe First Run,” which usually served a metropolis and provided live “stage performances” as well as the feature; “Neighborhood Theatres,” whose stature was largely determined by the neighborhood in which it was built; the “Vaudeville Picture Houses” where vaudeville ran in tandem with film; and, finally, the “Double Feature Houses,” which showed “two successive feature-length pictures.”\(^{125}\)

There were also those movie houses that specialized in showing second or even third run films – those that had already been seen in their initial release and were still on the market rather than being recalled to the studio – giving audiences the opportunity to revisit films past their first run.

Some neighborhoods and small towns used multi-function facilities so as to support local dramatic societies, community meetings, and traveling theater productions as well as to show films. While many theaters functioned solely as either live entertainment or movie houses, there were enough vaudeville venues under conversion to movie theaters that a stage show could occasionally be slipped into the program. Gutting these theaters was impractical – the costs of refitting these spaces for sound was already enough to so high as to be a burden for many theater owners – and so many owners and operators put the spaces to whatever use best fit the needs of the community as well as continuing to turn a profit.\(^{126}\)

Rather than simply adhere to the Hollywood status quo – the picture palace or upscale neighborhood theater – Warner Bros. animators took a contrary approach. The theaters shown in Warner Bros. cartoons utilized what was on hand in terms of both fixtures and personnel –

\(^{125}\) Harold Franklin, “Theatre Management,” *Society of Motion Picture Engineers* 33 (April 1928) p. 126 qtd. in Richard Koszarski, *An Evening’s Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Feature Picture, 1915-1928* (New York: Scribner, 1990), 9. First-run theaters showed films as they debuted; second-run theaters, which are still common, showed films after the first flush of profitability was gone. Films could then be passed on to third-, fourth-, and fifth- run theaters.

patched curtains, owner/manager taking multiple roles, and worn but serviceable seats – and made them work. In the 1930s, most theaters were independently owned as opposed to studio-owned and Warner Bros. animation reflected that reality. Rather than perpetuating the image of the studio-owned theater with a fine décor and a large staff, the theaters that served as settings for Warner Bros. cartoons were far more modest. There were several characteristics that indicated what kind of a theater was being shown and these proved largely consistent despite cartoon production over a six year time span (1933-1939) and work from three different directors. Each of these theaters had shabby curtains and makeshift movie screens, and marquees announcing double or multiple features. The theaters shown seldom had balconies – most of the space was devoted to orchestra-level seating. Theaters were fitted with the “mighty Wurlitzer” organ and, while the movies were talkies, these vestiges of the silent era were used to lead group sing-a-longs. Owners – often the title character in the earlier cartoons in this study – fulfilled multiple roles: announcer, group sing director, projectionist, ticket booth attendant. Regardless of the staffing displayed, the theaters and the audiences in those theater seats marked these locations out as independent theaters located in working-class neighborhoods and small towns.

Bosko, Warner’s earliest animated star, spent most of his tenure at Warner Bros. in small towns and a fair amount of that time in theaters. Bosko’s creators, animators Hugh Harman and Rudolph Ising, capitalized on his malleability and, in addition to using him as the featured player in a number of genre-based cartoons from 1930 to 1934, placed him front and center as a theater performer on a number of occasions. Two of the performances occurred within six months of each other in 1933 (Bosko in Person debuted on 11 April 1933 while Bosko’s Picture Show

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127 Hugh Harman and Rudolph Ising, *Bosko’s Picture Show* (Warner Bros., 1933). In *Bosko’s Picture Show* and other cartoons set in theaters, the Wurlitzer organ was often labeled as the Furlitzer organ. It also appears as the Furtilizer organ.

bowed on 23 September 1933) and provide a glimpse into the flexibility of function in neighborhood and small-town theaters. Their paired debut in 1933 also indicates that vaudeville performances were still a part of Depression-era entertainment at that time, although its day was fast drawing to a close.

*Bosko in Person* (1933) established many of the conventions of 1930s animation/audience interactions. This cartoon is set in a vaudeville theater, as indicated by the asbestos curtain and the occasionally-glimpsed orchestra pit. Bosko and his girlfriend, Honey, put on a vaudeville variety program complete with musical numbers and celebrity impressions of actors like Maurice Chevalier, Jimmy Durante, and Greta Garbo. Their number closes with a mention of the repeal of Prohibition with FDR shown waving a mug of beer in celebration. Bosko and Honey’s vaudeville program is targeted directly at the audience in the theater, as opposed to an animated audience onscreen, and their performance is not contained within a cartoon world narrative. Without going so far as to break the fourth wall, Bosko and Honey make it clear that they are putting on a show; again, they are demonstrating awareness of a world outside their animated narrative.\(^{129}\) This practice was more akin to earlier forms of entertainment such as vaudeville which openly acknowledged that there was a world beyond the edge of the stage as opposed to legitimate theater and live-action film, where the footlights or the film frame created boundaries.

In *Bosko’s Picture Show* (1933) the theater bears some of the hallmarks of a small-town or less affluent neighborhood theater such as tattered and patched curtains which no upscale theater would have displayed. Beyond the curtains and stage we do not see much of the theater,

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\(^{129}\) In her book *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York*, Kathy Peiss describes a nickelodeon program circa 1910 that sounds very similar to the format of *Bosko in Person*: “Nickelodeon programs often featured vaudeville skits and sentimental or patriotic songs with illustrative slides through against the screen, during which the audience was encouraged to sing along” (p. 149).
although the presence of the “Furtilizer” organ indicates that this theater started life as a vaudeville or silent film house. Several other cues support this premise: Bosko leads the group sing both with the audience in his theater and those watching in the theater seats and he provides a running narration of the film as a supplement to a very simple “talking” soundtrack. Honey’s plea “Is there a Boy Scout in the audience?” solicits the type of audience response that would have been expected in a vaudeville theater. Bosko plays to those in the theater with him as well as those watching, continuing the silent film era practice of encouraging audience interaction.

In smaller towns and in working-class neighborhoods, theaters often fulfilled a multitude of functions. Many neighborhood theaters began operations as live theater houses but were converted over time to accommodate films as well as stage performances, retaining many of their fixtures such as the aforementioned Wurlitzer organ and the orchestra pit. As community anchors, theaters continued to function as gathering places for neighbors and coworkers and many theater owners bore this in mind as films were selected and the weekly programs were arranged. In her book *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939*, Lizabeth Cohen writes “the theater manager, who was often the owner and usually lived in the community, tailored the film selections to local tastes and changed them every day or two to accommodate neighborhood people who attended frequently.” These close connections were often carefully nurtured by independent theater owners as they selected the programs that would best appeal to their clientele and when that control was threatened, owners found new ways to assert their autonomy. In Warner Bros. cartoons, theater owners also asserted this autonomy, shaping their programs to fit their audiences.

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130 Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, 123.
Where neighborhood theaters were run like mom-and-pop homegrown businesses, studio-owned theaters “operated like a corporation, with a bureaucratic hierarchy within each theater and throughout the chain.”\(^{131}\) According to Cohen, “In every way possible, the new Foxes, Paramounts, and Roxies sought to expunge the working-class, neighborhood character from the movie going experience to make it more respectable in the eyes of the middle class.”\(^{132}\) In the early 1930s Hollywood embraced blockbooking, a practice that forced independent theater owners to commit to purchasing an entire "block" of films as opposed to be able to pick and choose from the studio catalog. However, independent theater owners adopted a strategy that made use of the less desirable films they were forced to buy: the practice of exhibiting double features. A ticket bought admission to two films for the price of one as well as an entire program of entertainment, as illustrated in both *Buddy’s Theater* (1935) and *She Was An Acrobat’s Daughter* (1937). In charting their own course rather than acquiescing to studio demands, theater owners secured their theaters as space for the community rather than for exclusive benefit of the studios.

The theater was not only a place for leisure, but also a place to associate with neighbors, family, and friends. It was, in many respects, a kind of community center and while that might encourage attendance, it also meant that some audience members might stay for the next show rather than exiting after the feature and allowing fresh customers access to those seats. Some theater owners encouraged this sort of lingering with the offer of double features. In *Buddy’s Theater*, the marquee advertised double features while an interstitial card promised “15 features for 15 cents” to those who accepted the invitation to “spend a weekend with us.”\(^{133}\) The theater

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\(^{131}\) Ibid., 124.

\(^{132}\) Ibid., 125.

\(^{133}\) Hardaway, *Buddy’s Theatre*. 
in *She Was an Acrobat’s Daughter* (1937) also offered “15 features [for] 15 cents” and both theaters completed their programs with “rejected shorts.”

A movie program was more than just the feature film. While there were variations between different theaters, movie patrons could rely on a certain level of similarity from location to location. According to Page Smith, “the order of the service was as well established as that of a church:” first, the short subject package with newsreel, cartoon, and coming attractions, second, a sing-along led from the bench of a organ that “rose pneumatically from the orchestra pit, [as] the words of popular songs or old-time favorites were flashed on the silver screen.” The audience then sang together before lapsing into silence during the feature. The order of the program might not vary much from theater to theater, but contents were adapted to accommodate different theaters and different audiences. While studios limited many options during the 1930s through blockbooking, independent theater owners used their familiarity with local interests to their best advantage. They recognized that “the spirit of the community carried over into the local movie hall” and while “workers may have savored the exotic on the screen…they preferred to encounter it in familiar company.” Sometimes that company was as familiar to them as those with whom they might share a pew on Sunday and many scholars have argued that, for many Americans, movies and religion were not far apart in the hearts of moviegoers. As Smith observed, “the moviegoers went to the movies in the same spirit (though in far greater numbers) than the faithful went to church.”

*Buddy’s Theater* took its program cues from the church of cinema. Buddy’s theater at first appears to be a step up from Bosko’s movie house although it is still a neighborhood theater.

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134 Isadore (Friz) Freleng, *She Was An Acrobat’s Daughter* (Warner Bros., 1937); Hardaway, *Buddy’s Theatre*.
137 Smith, *Redeeming the Time*, 922.
In this instance the interior is attractive and well-appointed. While not plush, the theater has a good seating capacity and those seats are filled. However, the theater shows its less refined face when the movie screen is revealed to be a large white sheet hanging on a laundry line in a back alley. Other indicators that this is a neighborhood or double feature house as opposed to a picture palace appear on the marquee outside the theater, which announces a triple feature, and the ticket prices listed: “Adults, 25 cents, Kids, 15 cents.”\textsuperscript{138} The advertisements continue once the viewers are in their seats. After the newsreel and the coming attractions run two interstitial cards appear before the feature. They read “Fri, Sat, Sun – 15 features, 15 cents. Come spend a quiet week end with us. Also, double feature preview – “8 girls in a boat” with “The Thin Man.”\textsuperscript{139} Buddy's theater was also very much following the practices of other neighborhood theaters of the time.

One real-world example of the multi-feature showing took place in Cody, Wyoming, where, according to Margaret Farrand Thorp, one exhibitor was "reported to have offered his patrons seven pictures for the price of one, an all-day performance starting at two-thirty and running until ten-forty in the evening. People came from all over the country, brought their supper, and stayed until ten-forty."\textsuperscript{140} As for the double feature preview of "eight girls in a boat" with "The Thin Man," this example of both innuendo and real-world reference allowed this visual gag to resonate with audiences on a number of levels. The suggestive wordplay is a wink and a nod to the adults in the general audience, signaling that the cartoon, while ostensibly marketed as being for the benefit of children, was not necessarily mere child’s play.

\textsuperscript{138} Hardaway, \textit{Buddy’s Theatre}.
\textsuperscript{139} Ibid. In the case of Buddy, the animated audience is visible and the characters are human, a trait that would disappear with Buddy. It seemed that the directors matched the supporting cast to the main character. If it was Buddy, a human, the supporting cast was human. If it was Bosko or Porky, the supporting cast was animal. From an animation history perspective, the Buddy era at Warner Bros. was not the studio’s finest period. However, Buddy was shelved in 1936 and Porky Pig emerged as a much more appealing (and durable) star.
\textsuperscript{140} Thorp, \textit{America at the Movies}, 167.
Buddy tries to breech the boundary between his auditorium and the movie screen in an effort to rescue the film’s heroine from a raging gorilla. His attempt to enter the screen is thwarted and the cartoon ends with an embarrassed Buddy poking his head up through the ruined movie screen. All this plays out in front of his paying customers, who seem utterly nonplussed. While Buddy’s attempt to break into the movies is a failure, he sets the stage for other animated characters to break the fourth wall – and the practice would become a standard feature in Warner Bros animation.\(^{141}\) This early attempt at breaking the fourth wall – film characters interacting with the audience directly as opposed to communicating only with those other character onscreen – recalled the interaction between audiences and stage/screen during the vaudeville and silent film eras. At that time the audience participation was expected as part of the experience of going to the theater.

Buddy – theater owner, operator, ticket seller, and announcer – fills the multiple roles occupied by many of his real-life counterparts. However, equally important is the animated reminder that the studio way was not the only way to see a movie. Independent theater owners – often those who served smaller markets – considered their audiences as well as their revenues and put the studio catalog and block booking to their own uses.

Most live-action films showed first run theaters or picture palaces, not neighborhood or subsequent run houses. However, the theaters shown in animation did not adhere to the live-action standard and these cartoons were shown on the same bill as the WASPy, upscale images of nicer theaters. By consistently using environments that were less glamorous and less exclusive, WB animation focused on those environments and audiences typically shifted to the background or ignored all together. Warner Bros. animation directors also filled their cartoons

\(^{141}\) Hardaway, *Buddy’s Theatre*. 
with the details that marked the settings as working-class or small-town, independently owned theaters. Showing tattered and patched stage curtains, advertising for multiple features, and other identifying features helped to establish the provenance of the settings – but showing audiences helped to cement this image. While live-action films showed the ideal American, Warner Bros cartoons referred again to neighborhood theaters and their attendees, proving an alternative to the WASP image.

Audiences

According to research conducted by Robert and Helen Lynd for the 1925 Middletown study, the attendance numbers in the sample area were staggering: “about two and three-fourths times the city’s entire population” occupied theater seats “during a typical month.” 142 The 1935 follow-up study showed similar numbers, but also gave additional information on the types of theaters in the area: “Three of the seven theaters [in Middletown] are ‘first-run’ houses (two of them catering more to the ‘white-collar’ trade, and the other to the working class and farmers), three are ‘second-run,’ and the seventh follows a mixed policy.” 143 Paul Cressey, researcher for the Payne Fund, wrote that “while some of the cheaper neighborhood theaters [drew] from only a radius apparently of 2 or 3 city blocks, the larger theaters [drew] from distances of 12, 15, and even 18 city blocks.” 144

142 Robert Staughton Lynd, Middletown; a Study in American Culture (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1956), 263–264. The city in this case was Muncie, Indiana, the location of both the original Middletown study and its follow-up.
Attendance was astonishing, yet it was not the picture palace or even de luxe first run that dominated the landscape; the neighborhood theater was an extension of the neighborhood streets and communities coalesced there, sharing the theater experience with families, coworkers, fellow congregants, and friends. Warner Bros. animation put the neighborhood theaters on display, from the audience shuffling seats and participating in the group sing to the child loudly asking questions in the middle of the film. The audiences in Warner Bros. cartoons were, largely, lower middle class or working class or a blend of the two groups. Women appeared without hats, men’s suits appeared to be well-worn, and children attended unaccompanied. There was also a great deal of interaction between audience members as they changed seats, wrestled with disruptive children, and sang together. This sort of interaction and community bonding again hearkens back to an earlier era of entertainment, one that was quite often dismissed as working class in appeal and manners. In contrast with the refinement of the opera or the concert hall, movies were not viewed as upscale or high class.

The owners and operators of picture palaces strove to invest motion pictures with the same sort of cultural currency as live theater or opera and the expectations of behavior were much the same as those for a Broadway production or night at the Metropolitan Opera. Information on proper theater etiquette and attire helped to fit audiences into the mold of the middle- to upper-class patron of the arts. Patrons in neighborhood theaters inverted the upper-class picture palace ideal where the entertainment on the screen was what everyone went to see and people in the seats should be quiet and on their best behavior. Audience members actively engaged with each other rather than remaining isolated from one another in a darkened cinema. The action on the screen sometimes competed with, sometimes complimented the action in the

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145 For animated evidence of audience composition in the neighborhood and subsequent run houses, please also see The Film Fan (Warner Bros., Clampett, 1939).
theater. While the movie program remained predictable – newsreel, specialty short subject, group sing-a-long, and feature film – the interactions between viewers were often just as interesting as what played out on the screen.

Where Bosko’s played master of ceremonies for both the animated audience and the live spectators, Buddy’s Theatre allowed live audiences to see their animated counterparts. She Was An Acrobat’s Daughter (1937) takes this idea a step further as it focuses on the action within the animated theater itself rather than the action on the screen. This cartoon shows a night at the neighborhood theater in detail and, for ticket-holders, that experience begins long before they reach their seats. The theater marquee provides the first evidence that this is an independently-owned neighborhood movie house. As was seen in Buddy’s Theater, the marquee advertises “15 features, 15 cents,” as well as the main attractions – “36 Hours to Kill” with “His Brother’s Wife” – and promises “always two features.” Additionally, the theater front is not elaborate. While there is liberal use of electrified signage, the building and entry way are very simple and could appear in almost any 1930s American town large enough to support a neighborhood theater, thus allowing animated theaters to stand in for their live-action counterparts.

The theater in She Was An Acrobat’s Daughter is abuzz with activity from the moment the audience arrives to take their seats. As a few members of the audience venture out to change places, the room soon erupts in an increasingly frenetic round of musical chairs as they jockey for position in the hopes of finding a better vantage point. Just as in a real theater, not all spectators stay in their seats. For example a hippo squeezes past several other viewers in an effort to exit a row and then again as he returned to his seat, irritating those he has inconvenienced. Another example of audience interaction (and annoyance) is that of an

146 Freleng, She Was An Acrobat’s Daughter.
obnoxious little duck who pesters his father, irritating him and other audience members, who gang up and scare him. Even in Warner Bros animation children were an integral part of movie audiences, but they were still children and acted as such.\textsuperscript{147}

By showing the diversity within the audience, director Freleng continued in the tradition of showing moviegoers that defied the image of the ideal American. The movie patrons in \textit{She Was An Acrobat’s Daughter} do not conform to either the prescribed image of acceptable attire or to the mandated behavior for theater attendance. Rather than approaching the experience with the same decorum as those attending a Metropolitan Opera performance, this group subscribed to a much older set of social norms: “Unlike the middle-class theater audiences, the working-class crowd audibly interacted with the screen and each other, commenting on the action, explaining the plot, and vocally accompanying the piano player [or organist].”\textsuperscript{148} Freleng preserved this “wacky rowdyism” and, as he played it up in \textit{She Was An Acrobat’s Daughter}, he reminded viewers of all sorts that there was more to the theater experience than sitting quietly and watching the pictures go by.\textsuperscript{149}

In their cartoons Warner Bros. animators and writers mirrored the ways in which interaction built and reinforced community bonds in theaters frequented by lower middle class and working class patrons. Independent theater operators used their awareness of audience/community interests to shape programs that would be the most appealing and, thus, the most lucrative rather than simply taking chances with the blind booking options offered by many Hollywood studios. For those owners/operators forced into buying film packages – securing the most prestigious by agreeing to accept the less attractive offerings – one of the most effective

\textsuperscript{147} Lynd, \textit{Middletown in Transition; a Study in Cultural Conflicts}, 261–262.
means to burn through the undesirable films was to show multiple features during a single show. Again, this propensity was reflected in Warner Bros. animation, as advertisements for multiple feature showings appeared frequently in theater cartoon backgrounds. These multiple feature showings were often advertised with the suggestion that families plan to spend an entire day at the theater – another idea that would be roundly rejected in a picture palace or first run theater. Warner Bros. animation joined these practices into the plotlines for many of their cartoons during the 1930s and, in doing so, emphasized the development of communities and a culture rather than continually reifying the dominant culture exemplified in Hollywood films.

**Cartoon/Audience Interaction**

Sometimes cartoon characters joined the audience by taking up seats in the back rows. This practice was a specialty of Warner Bros. director Fred “Tex” Avery, who delighted in challenging the boundaries between audience and screen as “the boundary between cartoon reality and ‘real’ reality” was meant to be manipulated. As animation historian John Canemaker remarks, “Avery created a constant awareness of the audience with such devices as signs commenting on the action or frame lines being broken through or characters walking out and reading their credits or members of the ‘real’ audience getting up and interacting with the characters on the screen.” As the 1930s wore on, he took the practice of characters engaging with the world outside the animated narrative to wilder and wilder extremes, a practice that allowed him to find new ways to grab audience attention. Breaking the fourth wall placed characters in dialogue with audiences rather than relying on either one-sided, omnipresent address such as narration or dialogue with other characters within the film frame.

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151 Musilli, “The Boys from Termite Terrace.”
The breaking of the fourth wall allowed the animated characters to interact with the theater audience. In *Cinderella Meets Fella* (1938) this practice evolves, allowing characters to shift between screen and audience. For example, Cinderella leaves a note for her Prince Charming – “Dear Princy: Got tired of waiting, went to a Warner Bros. Show. Lovingly, Cinderella” – before she “exits” the film and becomes part of the audience, settling into the fifth row. There was no boundary between animated characters and live audience; their space was ours and our space was, as demonstrated in cartoons such as *Cinderella Meets Fella*, theirs. This further violated the delineation between the stage and the audience, reclaiming a vaudeville sensibility that encouraged call and response and commentary as opposed to “legitimate” theater where the performers and the spectators each knew and maintained their place. The violation of acceptable theater behavior was a matter of class – those who adhered to the guidelines of middle class conduct and those who did not. Warner Bros. animated characters often did not acknowledge those rules of conduct and, instead, crafted their own terms of engagement.

Cartoons featuring working class and small town characters ran counter to the American ideal which was white, middle class, and headed toward suburbia. The characters presented in most live-action film were middle- to upper-middle to upper class and enjoyed prosperity and comfort while the animated characters that populated Warner Bros. cartoons were typically background people in movies. However, WB characters were much the same as those people sitting in the theater seats in neighborhood and subsequent run theaters. Audiences as represented in WB cartoons were not upper-class people. They were commoners but animation spoke their language and didn’t patronize. The cartoons spoke in the vernacular of the Michael Denning’s Americans – the working class, immigrants, urban dwellers, and small-town people – and offered
audiences an alternative to the Hollywood ideal that might be not only more familiar but also more reflective of their lived experience.\textsuperscript{152}

While live action film delivered many standardized narratives and often did so in patriarchal, authoritarian tones, animators sought different means through which to connect with audiences. Sometimes these connections could be as simple as a character winking in an aside to the audience, pulling spectators into a kind of association that was seldom encouraged by live action film. Animation took this a step further. Sometimes these interactions advanced beyond a wink and audiences might see animated characters entering their space with the implication that they might be mingling in with them. This kind of address and the use of animated silhouettes of audience members helped to blur the line between screen and seats.

Animation’s approach to audiences differed in that, rather than simply addressing the audience in a monologue, a form of exchange developed between viewers and screen. Animated characters would talk to audience members in specific seats or rows and the reaction to this address generated the interaction between audience and screen. This space also proved permeable as animated characters passed between their cartoon sets and into the theater seats to mingle with the audience. As the media infiltrated public spaces and cartoon characters took their seats alongside the ticketholders, audiences could see themselves reflected on the screen in a way that live-action film did not – or could not – deliver.

In Warner Bros. cartoons, characters that broke the fourth wall typically exhibited a heightened awareness of both their circumstances and their status as actors. They often know what they are and this self-awareness sets them apart from the other characters in their cartoon and allows audiences to connect in a way that they might not to other characters whose

\textsuperscript{152} Denning, \textit{The Cultural Front}, xx.
awareness is contained within the narrative. For those characters that were more self-aware there was a space beyond the boundaries of the film frame – a space occupied by the audience – and this awareness was present from the earliest days at Warner Bros. animation. An early example of this approach occurs in Merrie Melodie *Red Headed Baby* (WB, 1931) in which the titular character turns to the audience and pleads “Is there a doctor in the audience?” in the hopes that her injured paramour can be restored.¹⁵³ Rather than looking for a solution within the boundaries of the frame, this character seeks assistance from outside the narrative confines of her cartoon.

There are several early examples of addressing theater audiences, such as the cartoons *Bosko in Person* and *Bosko’s Picture Show*, but neither reaches the same level of interaction that developed in the cartoons directed by Frank Tashlin or Tex Avery during the late 1930s. Tashlin and Avery married genre conventions and audience address and invited audiences to talk back to the screen. By the mid-1930s talking during movies, which was once acceptable behavior, became the epitome of poor manners as audiences often demanded to hear the actors on the screen and not each other.¹⁵⁴ However, shorts like *The Case of the Stuttering Pig* and *Thugs with Dirty Mugs* did more than simply invite audience members to respond – they called them out directly and hearkened back to the class conflict between vaudeville and legitimate theater, where one was the entertainment of the lower classes and the other was the entertainment of the more refined upper classes. Warner Bros. animated characters invited audiences to misbehave and breach the code of acceptable middle-class theater behavior.

*The Case of the Stuttering Pig* opens as a fairly conventional Porky Pig cartoon. Porky Pig and his brothers and sister are informed of the death of their uncle, Solomon Swine, and their resulting good fortune. However the executor of the estate, Lawyer Goodwill, conspires to take

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the inheritance for himself. Falling back on a formula borrowed from Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, Lawyer Goodwill transforms himself into a hideous monster so that he can escape detection and claim the fortune. Looking into the audience, he explains his plan, then informs them that there’s nothing they can do because they’re all “big softies.”  

He singles out an audience member – “Hey you in the third row!” – and taunts him as well with the accusation that he is also a “big softie….And if that guy in the third row comes up, I’ll fix him, too. You big creampuff!”  

As the villain corners Porky and his siblings, a theater seat flies into frame and knocks the villain into the stocks. When the pigs ask “Who did that?” the hero replies “Me! I’m the guy in the thoid [third] row, you big sour puss!”  

While the participating audience member was an animated plant, Lawyer Goodwill addressed the audience as a whole. In doing so he again called up a silent film convention where “comments were made most openly in neighborhood and small-town theaters.”  

Director Frank Tashlin relied on the genre conventions of mystery films to form the basis of his plot, but then took a page out of Tex Avery’s book by blending genre and breaking the fourth wall. In doing so, he added yet another twist on Hollywood tradition – if the movies talked to audiences, it was seldom with the expectation that audiences would talk back. Lawyer Goodwill communicated with every expectation of a response and encouraged audiences to speak up and talk back to the screen. Through their characters, WB directors encouraged audience participation.  

*Thugs with Dirty Mugs* (1939) expands on the audience engagement of *The Case of the Stuttering Pig* (1937). In this cartoon, a hybrid of the gangster and g-man genres, characters speak to the audience as a whole, to specific members of the audience, and to silhouetted and

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155 Tashlin, *The Case of the Stuttering Pig.*  
156 Ibid.  
157 Ibid.  
animated spectators who contribute to the story by informing the police.\textsuperscript{159} While a good portion of the action occurs within the confines of the three walls of stage left, back wall, and stage right, several of the characters do more than simply break the fourth wall. They tear it down, creating an environment within which the players on the screen and the viewers in the theater seats are integrated parts of a greater whole.

In many of the Warner Bros. cartoons from the late 1930s there was more to the interaction than just talk. Seats that flew out of the audience space and into the cartoon or characters that climbed down out of the frame were things that live-action film just could not do. These cartoons required a suspension of disbelief and, because they were seen as the stuff of fantasy and child’s play, Warner Bros. animators were able to get away with it.

A strict delineation between audience space and performer space was a carry-over from legitimate theater, which came complete with its own class messages. However, breaking the wall between audience and stage harkened back to an older tradition – vaudeville – and, in doing so, reclaimed the spirit of those theaters and their audiences. These forms of entertainment were not designed for the upper crust. They were the brown bread of the mass media, made for the groundlings, and cartoons took that vaudeville inheritance and used it to reach into the audiences, literally taking up seats with the viewers.

The differences between live-action film and animation were, in many ways, emblematic of the differences between classes in Depression-era America. Where live-action film showed middle- and upper-class audience members, animation showed the neighborhood theater with its working class audience. Live-action narrators would carry on a one-sided conversation; animated narrators and characters addressed the audience directly and, in some cases, by seat assignment.

\textsuperscript{159} Avery, \textit{Thugs with Dirty Mugs}. 
Movies preserved the boundary between the fantasy land of film and the movie theater, while animation made that boundary permeable, allowing cartoon characters to cross-over and become part of the audience. Live action film established the guidelines for achievement of the American Dream and entry into the sphere of official culture, where their story was the story of every successful American. Animation encouraged audiences to make culture meaningful to them and their families, neighbors, and friends and stood ready to assist in this communal experience, even to the point of climbing down out of the frame to join in. Warner Bros. cartoons spoke in a language that invoked vaudeville, not high art, and the representations therein. These rougher forms were often depreciated as the image of the American ideal was quantified as white, middle class, and sophisticated. However, in WB cartoons of the 1930s, the ideal was something else all together. In the world depicted in Warner Bros. animation, movie goers – and Americans – belonged to a multitude of classes, ethnicities, and races. They could be working class or middle class or even upper class, native or foreign born. Within the confines of the animated theater, points of origin were less important than the community that evolved long before the lights went down and the movie started and lingered after. Those audiences were bonded not only by sharing the experience of going to the movies, but also through talking back to the screen, warning potential victims, chastising villains, and generally breaching the 1930s middle class expectations of refinement.
CONCLUSION

The 1920s rode on a post-war tide of confidence in America’s role as a leader and an example of progress, but the financial and emotional chaos of the 1930s called all of these beliefs into question. As Americans sought to reclaim not only a sense of normalcy but a sense of identity, those who produced films, radio programming, and advertising were more than willing to not only remind them of America’s heroic past but also the potential for a better, more prosperous tomorrow. The Depression trampled expectations of stability, prosperity, and progress, but in the world of motion pictures people were clean, well-fed, well-housed, and well-to-do. However, the images also idealized those who were white and middle-class or upper class. In a melting-pot nation, whiteness was a valuable commodity and movies often served to remind audiences that it was what they were not. Furthermore, genre films reinforced the dominant narratives of American history and American life. Audiences learned not only history and core American beliefs, but also learned about gender roles and class behavior. The focus in movies was on the heroic and the blessed, not the marginalized and excluded.

Warner Bros. animation, on the other hand, filled their cartoons with characters that did not fit the ideal and turned genre conventions inside out rather than simply transmitting the messages without question. Relying on the value of comedy and the role of cartoons as jesters, Warner Bros. animation directors could do or say almost anything – so long as it did not run afoul of the Motion Picture Production Code. The value of comedy cannot be underestimated and, during the 1930s the need for laughs kept many Hollywood studios – both animation and live-action – in business. Many live-action comedians were pushed toward the more acceptable form of screwball comedy: “a comedic technique…[that served as] a means of unifying what
was splintered and divided…[such as] social classes and broken marriages.”160 Andrew Bergman writes that “if early thirties comedy was explosive, screwball comedy was implosive: it worked to pull things together.”161 Warner Bros. animation kept the early thirties approach to comedy alive through their use of those images and ideas that did not cleave to the romanticized status quo.

Animation showed working class audiences as foregrounded characters rather than those who occupied the background of live-action films and pulled at the seams binding genres to their messages, giving viewers something to laugh at as well as to consider. Warner Bros. animation owed a great deal to the vaudeville acts and silent and slapstick films that came before it and continued this legacy by giving audiences not only an alternative to the dominant narratives and ideal images of the 1930s, but also in pointing out that not all “ideals” are as worthy as they might appear.

Where genre films functioned to preserve the status quo, animation reveled in being experimental and in blending elements from the contemporary cultural milieu into genre conventions to make something new. If genre films were all about conservatism, animation was just the opposite. They specialized in mayhem and often contained commentaries that did not exactly highlight America’s dominant narratives as the preferred options. Egghead’s disappointed attempts to become “a man,” Emily’s farmyard dreams and troubles, and Porky Pig’s recalcitrant dog Streamline lie beyond the borders of genre convention and encouraged audiences to look over the fence. They provided an alternative to the dominant narratives and poked fun at many of the sacred cows of the 1930s.

160 Bergman, We’re in the Money, 133.
161 Ibid., 134.
If Hollywood films enshrined American narratives, they also defined the ideal American—who they were, what they did, and where they were entertained. They “educated” audiences, talking to them in such a way that was more patrician than personable and demonstrating not only the proper way to live but also the type of person that audiences should strive to be. Hollywood films also helped to identify the ideal venue in which to be both educated and entertained. Picture palaces—sparkling, lavishly appointed, and decidedly high-brow—appeared often in film; conversely, neighborhood theaters were shown as places filled with chaos, disorder, and unruly children—decidedly unsophisticated places to see and be seen. However, Warner Bros. animation demonstrated that there was another option as opposed to the one ideology fits all approach espoused in many Hollywood films of the period. If the ideal American was white and middle class, then Warner Bros. cartoons and their creators challenged this idea, showcasing characters who not always white and were seldom of the middle class. Rather than transmitting the message that change and conformity would inevitably lead to success, animation encouraged audiences to consider alternatives, showing working class audiences in the theater seats and sending cartoon characters beyond the confines of the film frame into the seats to mingle with viewers, thus reinforcing the idea that many of these characters were “just like us” rather than the picture of ease, comfort, and fantasy.

If the 1920s were fueled by enthusiasm, growth, and confidence, then the 1930s ground forward on desperation, fear, and hope and many of the messages of the decade emphasized a singular vision of what it meant to be an American and how one obtained that goal. Warner Bros. animation, on the other hand, could both reinforce these ideals and offer alternative images of American life. The WB cartoons produced during the 1930s recognized and featured an America beyond the middle class, white, native born ideal buoyed by national narratives of individual
success and inherited greatness. In their cartoons, Warner Bros. animation directors, artists, and writers complicated national narratives by bringing often-sidelined characters – people of color, the working class, and those from rural areas – to the forefront of their cartoons. Nowhere was this more pronounced than in the genre-based and theater-based cartoons of the period. By deconstructing and recompositing the elements of mainstream Hollywood films, Warner Bros. animators created cartoons that both reveled in fantasy and acknowledged the existence of a world beyond the Hollywood ideal.

The Warner Bros. animators of the 1930s reflected and skewed the world around them. Absurdity often has a basis in reality and through the judicious application of parody, satire, and wry, self-aware commentaries WB cartoons could extract laughter even from watching as a cartoon character takes their place in a breadline that allowed audiences a pressure release. Comedy works best when grounded in truth and, as Crafton, Goldmark, and Sandler each remark, Warner Bros. animation directors, artists, and writers were masterful at examining the mass media, politics, and current events around them and crafting entertainment and a brand on which audiences could depend. The rest of the world might be unstable and uncertain, but audiences could depend on Warner Bros. cartoons to make them laugh by upending a disrupted world further, taking it to its comedic extremes.

This thesis would benefit from a more extensive exploration of archived interviews from Warner Bros. animators, directors, and staff. The archives are now one of the few places to locate such materials as most, if not all, of those involved with Warner Bros. animation during the 1930s and 1940s are now deceased. Many current animation scholars entered the field starting in the 1970s, when most of those original animators were still alive, if elderly, and there was a tremendous effort to gather memories. As a result there is a wealth of information at the
Canemaker Archive in New York and the ASIFA archive in Los Angeles as well as resources at UCLA that could greatly enhance an expanded version of this study.

In this thesis I have examined only one facet of the relationship between 1930s mass media and Warner Bros. animation. While film was one of the most influential forms, it was not alone in the field. Radio, print, advertising, and even sheet music could be examined in the context of their relationship with animation. As animation is a visual medium, the connections to film might be the most apparent. However, Warner Bros. animation went far beyond simply spoofing those films and genres with which it shared a theater program. It is also a wealth of visual gags based on advertising imagery, musical gags based on contemporary and traditional tunes, and commentaries on current events such as politics, sports, and trends and these areas would be greatly enriched by additional research.

While the 1930s was a chaotic, painful time for many, it was also a time of rebirth and reinvention for many of the American people. Although conservatism was a strong societal current, other narratives and perspectives challenged the dominant narratives and mythologies that underpinned the American way of life. That is not to say that all Americans or even most Americans wanted a radical reinvention of their ideology – many wanted nothing more than a restoration of the lives they knew before the Depression crashed over the United States in the early 1930s. However, there were those who sought the opportunity to rediscover who they were and how they fit in the United States that emerged as the Depression receded. Warner Bros animation provided audiences with alternatives to the dominant narratives and the images of the ideal American in 1930s mass media, teaching audiences how to break the middle-class theater rules and to question received historical narratives rather than simply accept them. In doing so, they demonstrated that cartoons had more to offer than just a few laughs.
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———. *The Case of the Stuttering Pig*. Warner Bros., 1937.


## APPENDIX A:

**FILMOGRAPHY – WARNER BROS. GENRE CARTOONS, 1930-1940**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Director</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Series</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>Harman/Ising</td>
<td>Dumb Patrol</td>
<td>LT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>Harman/Ising</td>
<td>Bosko the Doughboy</td>
<td>LT</td>
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<tr>
<td>1932</td>
<td>Harman/Ising</td>
<td>Crosby, Columbo, and Vallee</td>
<td>MM</td>
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<tr>
<td>1933</td>
<td>Harman/Ising</td>
<td>Ride Him, Bosko</td>
<td>LT</td>
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<tr>
<td>1933</td>
<td>Harman/Ising</td>
<td>Beau Bosko</td>
<td>LT</td>
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<td>Ben Hardaway</td>
<td>Buddy's Pony Express</td>
<td>LT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>Ben Hardaway</td>
<td>Buddy of the Legion</td>
<td>LT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1936</td>
<td>Fred &quot;Tex&quot; Avery</td>
<td>Gold Diggers of '49</td>
<td>LT</td>
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<td>1936</td>
<td>Jack King</td>
<td>Boom Boom</td>
<td>LT</td>
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<td>Page Miss Glory</td>
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<td>Friz Freleng</td>
<td>I'm A Big Shot Now</td>
<td>MM</td>
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<td>1936</td>
<td>Friz Freleng</td>
<td>Let it Be Me</td>
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<td>Jack King</td>
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<td>LT</td>
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<td>1936</td>
<td>Fred &quot;Tex&quot; Avery</td>
<td>Porky the Rain-maker</td>
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<td>Frank Tashlin</td>
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<td>Egghead Rides Again</td>
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<td>Fred &quot;Tex&quot; Avery</td>
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<td>1937</td>
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<td>1937</td>
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<td>Friz Freleng</td>
<td>My Little Buckaroo</td>
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<td>Porky's Spring Planting</td>
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<td>Fred &quot;Tex&quot; Avery</td>
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<td>1939</td>
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<td>Kristopher Kolumbus, Jr.</td>
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**“Back to the Earth”**

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**Gangster**

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**Mystery**

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