

THE ANIMATED TRAMP

Charlie Chaplin's Influence on American Animation

By Nancy Beiman

SLIDE 1: Joe Grant trading card of Chaplin and Mickey Mouse

Charles Chaplin became an international star concurrently with the birth and development of the animated cartoon. His influence on the animation medium was immense and continues to this day. I will discuss how American character animators, past and present, have been inspired by Chaplin's work.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

(SLIDE 2) Jeffrey Vance described Chaplin as “the pioneer subject of today’s modern multimedia marketing and merchandising tactics”,¹ “**(SLIDE 3)**. Charlie Chaplin” comic strips began in 1915 and it was a short step from comic strips to animation. **(SLIDE 4)** One of two animated Chaplin series was produced by Otto Messmer and Pat Sullivan Studios in 1918-19.² Immediately after completing the Chaplin cartoons, **(SLIDE 5)** Otto Messmer created Felix the Cat who was, by 1925, the most popular animated character in America. Messmer, by his own admission, based Felix’s timing and distinctive pantomime acting on Chaplin’s.³ But no other animators of the time followed Messmer’s lead.

(SLIDE 6) Animator Shamus Culhane wrote that “Right through the transition from silent films to sound cartoons none of the producers of animation paid the slightest attention to... improvements in the quality of live action comedy. Trapped by the belief that animated cartoons should be a kind of moving comic strip, all the producers, (including Walt Disney) continued to turn out films that consisted of a loose story line that supported a group of slapstick gags which were often only vaguely related to the plot... The most astonishing thing is that Walt Disney took so long to decide to break the narrow confines of slapstick, because for several decades Chaplin, Lloyd and Keaton had demonstrated the superiority of good pantomime.”⁴

1 Jeffrey Vance, CHAPLIN: GENIUS OF THE CINEMA, p. 41

2 Internet Movie Database, Library of Congress release dates.

3 Canemaker, THE TWISTED TALE OF FELIX THE CAT, P. 38.

4 Shamus Culhane, TALKING ANIMALS AND OTHER PEOPLE, pgs. 157-58

(SLIDE 7) It was difficult to create subtle acting performances with the rubber-hose characters of the period. The situation changed forever when Walt Disney decided to make a feature length cartoon.

(SLIDE 8) WALT DISNEY STUDIOS

As a boy Walt Disney idolized Chaplin. He and a schoolmate performed skits in local theatres based on Chaplin films. Disney even filmed his Chaplin routine using a borrowed (later repossessed) camera.⁵

Disney's earliest animated films were cinematically advanced for the time but had slight stories and humor that did not develop from the character's personality. This changed with the spectacular success of Mickey Mouse in 1928. **(SLIDE 9)** Ub Iwerks, the designer and original animator of Mickey, claimed he had actually based Mickey's personality on that of Douglas Fairbanks,⁶ while Disney always acknowledged a debt to Charlie Chaplin.⁷ A 1935 Disney Studio character analysis by animator Fred Moore described Mickey as: "... the average young boy of no particular age... In some pictures he has a touch of Fred Astaire; in others, of Charlie Chaplin, and some of Douglas Fairbanks, but in all of these there should be some of the 'young boy'."⁸

(SLIDE 10) While "Personality" was the key to Mickey's popularity, Disney animators were still using graphic symbols and broad acting derived from comic strips to indicate characters' inner thoughts in the early 1930s. There was as yet no acting influence from live action comedies.

(SLIDE 11) CITY LIGHTS AND MICKEY MOUSE

CITY LIGHTS' production took place during the change from silent to sound film. Chaplin opted to use a musical track with sound effects added in post-- a method first developed in animated cartoons. He claimed that 'hardly any publicity had been given the picture' and spent over \$30,000 dollars of his own money renting the George M. Cohan theatre in New York and

5 Susanin, WALT BEFORE MICKEY, p. 9

6 Iwerks, THE HAND BEHIND THE MOUSE, p. 54-55

7 NEWS OF THE WORLD, October 21, 1934, p. 3

8 Character Analysis of Mickey Mouse, unpublished manuscript, Disney Studio, 1935

advertising the screening in New York papers.⁹ Mickey Mouse was also on the program. THE BIRTHDAY PARTY's engagement with CITY LIGHTS even merited mention in the NEW YORK TIMES.¹⁰ Chaplin insisted that a Mickey Mouse cartoon play with CITY LIGHTS "whenever possible... his own presentation will meet with greater acclaim after an audience has been amused by Mickey's antics."¹¹ There was no guarantee that a silent picture would still be accepted by the movie-going public.

Mickey Mouse enjoyed worldwide popularity by 1931 and was, after Chaplin, the most recognizable character in motion pictures. The cartoon was described erroneously in FILM DAILY as 'the first Disney subject in which dialogue is used' and "where Mickey does a Charlie Chaplin"¹² (a possible reference to the New York screening since there is no Chaplin caricature in the film. It is a typical Disney cartoon of the time (rated 'okay' by one reviewer.¹³) **(SLIDE 12)** Columbia Pictures, who distributed the Disney films, ran a trade ad in the Film Daily on Feb. 5 showing Mickey hobnobbing with United Artists stars Chaplin and Fairbanks. Columnist Louella Parsons claimed that Mickey had a 'bigger following than 9/10ths of the stars in Hollywood'¹⁴ **(SLIDE 13)** A contemporary postcard "ACCEPT NO SUBSTITUTES" hinted that Mickey may have surpassed his live action peers in popularity, It is interesting to see THE BIRTHDAY PARTY and view CITY LIGHTS directly afterward. Chaplin's soundtrack was influenced by animated cartoons' use of tightly synchronized music and sound effects, known then and now as "Mickey Mousing" the track.

CLIP 1: THE BIRTHDAY PARTY, 1931 00:00-1:54

CLIP 2: CITY LIGHTS: Whistling scene

9 Chaplin, p. 332

10 THE NEW YORK TIMES, "Pictures and Players", Feb. 6, 1931, p. 110.

11 Seattle Motion Picture Record, Feb. 28, 1931, quoted in Korkis, THE BOOK OF MOUSE, p.165

12 THE FILM DAILY, Feb. 8, 1931 page 9

13 THE FILM DAILY, Feb. 1, 1931, page 12

14 FILM DAILY, Feb. 8, 1931 page 4

Walt Disney had ambition for bigger things than short cartoons. **(SLIDE 14)** Life drawing classes taught by Don Graham of the Chouinard Art Institute, Los Angeles, began at the Disney studio in 1932 and were greatly expanded in 1934 when SNOW WHITE AND THE SEVEN DWARFS began preproduction.

This sparked a major technical improvement in Disney animation, especially in the acting. The animators learned to express character personality through attitude and movement, a skill that was essential for the creation of believable characters in a 70-minute long animated feature film.

(SLIDE 15) ACTION ANALYSIS CLASSES

In 1937 lectures on Action Analysis were officially added to the Disney art program, once again under the direction of Donald Graham. The object was to train newer animators in the more subtle acting techniques being developed for the feature picture. **(SLIDE 16)** At first the animators studied successful short films from their own studio, since no competitors were working at the same artistic level. Two lectures analyzed the work of Bill Tytla, one of the lead animators on the Seven Dwarfs. Tytla's superior draftsmanship and acting skills developed fully thanks to the by-now-mandatory art classes, allowing him to express emotion and character through animation more convincingly than was possible a few years earlier. Since so little animated reference was available, Graham began to analyze live action films, particularly comedies.

(SLIDE 17) Shamus Culhane, a regular attendee at these classes, wrote "Once a week, we had a session called "Action Analysis"...we would see a live action comedy, usually starring Charlie Chaplin or Buster Keaton...we would watch the film at regular speed and then see it frame by frame. The first time I attended one of these sessions I was in for a real eye-opener. Chaplin walked up to a door, took a key out of his pocket, put it in the lock, and walked in. At regular speed no one noticed anything unusual about the whole action; it looked perfectly normal. Then Don (Graham) slowed the film down and began to analyse the action. When Chaplin put his hand in his pocket; he didn't just stick it in; he first made a small action with his hand barely in the pocket, drew it out a little then plunged it in. He then wriggled his fingers, making his pants bulge. When the key was brought out, Chaplin turned it for a split second so that it caught the light, aimed it in a direct line with the lock, then inserted it. As Don went on with his analysis, I realized that what had looked like a simple movement was in reality as stylized as a ballet dance. I began to understand why Charlie Chaplin was considered the greatest pantomimist in the world".¹⁵

15 Culhane, pgs. 135-136.

(SLIDE 18) On March 29, 1937, Graham analyzed the battle between Eric Campbell and Charlie the cop in the Mutual film EASY STREET, stating

“It is the little things that Chaplin does, the way he handles everything—his club, the gas container in the lamp; the taking of the bully’s pulse, kissing the bully’s fist as it stops in front of his face, touching his hat,, the way he times the action—all these are things that distinguish Chaplin’s work ... from the general run of acting....Especially important in all of Chaplin’s stuff is the timing of everything; there is never just a series of actions one after another—the speed at which he does them varies. It is the timing, more than anything else, that gives his action the whip and snap it has...He works with very little—all he has is a club, a hat and the big bully, but with these three, he sustains interest.”¹⁶

And, here is Chaplin’s walk seen from an animator’s perspective:

CLIP 3: EASY STREET (*played under lecture*)

“Watch the variety of walks that Chaplin has. He changes the mood entirely with the change of walk. The minute he starts getting cocky he puts the feeling over by such details ... as the heels kicking up and snapping out. At other times there is more of a feeling of...a pendulum-like movement from the hip all the way down...Get the little wiggle all the way through as he walks out of the police station... When Chaplin ... puts over the feeling of nonchalance, his every action, his feet, shoulders, hips, express that one feeling. These principles... can (still) be used every day right here.”¹⁷

(SLIDE 19) The inspiration from Chaplin’s ONE A.M is very evident in a scene from THE COUNTRY COUSIN (1936) animated by Art Babbitt, who ‘idolized’ Chaplin. ¹⁸ As a result of his action analysis studies Babbitt developed the personality of Goofy and many later characters by first expressing it in the character’s walk.¹⁹ By 1936 Disney’s animators had completely dispensed with ‘stock’ poses and graphic symbols derived from comic strips and based animated performance on observation and caricature of live action, in this instance heavily influenced by the pantomime comedy of Charles Chaplin.

¹⁶ Action Analysis Class notes, March 29, 1937, unpublished Disney studio transcription.

¹⁷ Action Analysis Class notes, March 29, 1937, unpublished Disney studio transcription.

¹⁸ Borge Ring, email to author, January 2014.

¹⁹ Beiman, A CONVERSATION WITH ART BABBITT, 1979.

CLIP 4: COUNTRY COUSIN DRUNK SCENE 4:38-5:19

(SLIDE 20) Shamus Culhane used a Chaplin scene for inspiration in the 1939 SOCIETY DOG SHOW“...at one point, I remembered a little piece of Chaplin acting, where he was attempting to curry favor...and he hunched his shoulders up, crossed his hands in his lap and smiled a very artificially shy smile. I did the same with Pluto when he was trying to flirt with a little female dog. It was only after I had roughed out the action that I realized that it had stemmed from a Chaplin scene in the action analysis class...There was no indication of this kind of acting on the story-board or in Bill Roberts’ direction.”²⁰

CLIP 5: SOCIETY DOG SHOW 2:12-2:33

(SLIDE 21) In 1936 Chaplin once again requested that a Mickey Mouse cartoon play with his new feature, MODERN TIMES. **(SLIDE 22)** This was easily arranged since United Artists had distributed the Disney cartoons since 1932. Disney studio legend has it that copies of MICKEY’S POLO TEAM were actually spliced onto the head of every print of MODERN TIMES. **(SLIDE 23)** The cartoon is prominently featured in advertising and on theatre marquees from a variety of locations, in this case, Brighton, England.²¹.

(SLIDE 24) The NEW YORK TIMES review of MODERN TIMES mentions POLO TEAM;²² in some theatres, the Silly Symphony WHO KILLED COCK ROBIN? is also featured.²³ Both films feature celebrity caricatures by story artist Joe Grant, who had actually been a ‘stunt man’ in silent comedies as a child.²⁴

CLIP 6: MICKEY’S POLO TEAM 1:38-2:00

It was probably at this time that “Charlie Chaplin, so the story goes... admitted that he was jealous of animated cartoons because ‘their timing is perfect.’ And the reason the timing of

20 Culhane, pgs. 187-188.

21 Courtesy of Chaplin archive.

22 The NEW YORK TIMES, Feb. 1, 1936, p. 14

23 Hartford COURANT, Ballston Spa DAILY JOURNAL, April 7, 1936.

24 Canemaker, TWO GUYS NAMED JOE, p. 112

animated cartoons is perfect, figured Chaplin, is because ‘the characters never have to take the time to breathe.’²⁵

(SLIDE 25) Sydney Chaplin, possibly reacting to the Chaplin portrayal in MICKEY’S POLO TEAM, wrote to Charlie on June 4, 1936 stating “If there is any character in the world that should be the great attraction in (animated) cartoons today it is yours . . .you allow others to use it to play small parts in support of their own principal cartoon character. You would not support some second rate comedian your self (sic) would you? Why allow the cartoon character to do so?” Sydney then recommended that Chaplin revive the animated series of the Tramp to ‘perpetuate the character’.²⁶

Disney’s feature films used fewer ‘set pieces’ inspired by silent films as animated pantomime became an integral part of their structure. But Chaplin’s influence was also felt in the pacing and staging of the longer films.

(SLIDE 26) “Before we finished SNOW WHITE”, Walt Disney said in 1938, “I was talking to Charlie Chaplin about it, and he said, “Don’t be afraid to let your audience wait for a few things in your picture—don’t be afraid to let your tempo go slow here and there.’ Well, I thought he did it too much, because I used to get itchy from watching his pictures. But it’s the truth—they appreciate things more when you don’t fire them too fast.”²⁷

In a 1964 interview Disney said “Yes, Charlie was very kind to me. I learned a lot about storytelling from Charlie. . .he taught me that in the best comedy you’ve got to feel sorry for your main character. Before you laugh with him, you’ve got to shed a tear for him.”²⁸

(SLIDE 27) WARNER BROTHERS ANIMATION

Directors and writers at Warner Brothers, unlike their contemporaries at Disney’s, were free to interpret the characters’ personalities as they chose. The Warner studio was a sort of animated theatrical company where characters might play different roles. **(SLIDE 28)** Contemporary graphic art and popular culture strongly influenced the design and timing of Warner animation

25 Canemaker, CHUCK JONES AT THE MACDOWELL COLONY, PRINT magazine, August 4, 2010.

26 Sydney Chaplin to Charles Chaplin, unpublished letter, June 4, 1936.

27 Mike Barrier, THE ANIMATED MAN, p. 125

28 Jackson, p. 117

after 1940, both of which became more stylized and graphic **(SLIDE 29)** as Disney's animation style gravitated more toward live action realism.

(SLIDE 30) Warner story men observed Chaplin as he watched their cartoons. "Sid Marcus, who was a top story man (at Warner's), said that he was in a theatre many years ago, and sitting next to him was Charlie Chaplin. (Sid) was a Chaplin fan, so (he watched Chaplin) when a cartoon came on. At the right spots the audience would laugh—"Hah-ha-ha-ha"—all at the same time. He looked around and Chaplin was deadpan. And "Hah-ha-ha-ha"—the gag is over.

At one point, only Chaplin laughed. "Uh-HAH, HAH, HAH!" So Sid Marcus looked up at the screen. You know what it was? **(SLIDE 31)** A lousy little duck swimming across; down at center screen he turned around, looked at the audience, and went (stiffly) **(SLIDE 32)** 'QUACK. QUACK.'" **(SLIDE 33)** (Laughter) What prompted this guy to laugh at this thing...what was this thing inside of Chaplin?"²⁹

Warner animators had to learn to slow down, (as Chaplin instructed Walt Disney to do in SNOW WHITE) and use contrasts in design and action to develop the comedy.

(SLIDE 34) Chaplin influenced the work of all the Warner cartoon directors, but the Chuck Jones unit is particularly notable for its use of subtle pantomime comedy. Jones' team produced a 'silent' series (the ROADRUNNER AND COYOTE, 1948)**(SLIDE 35)** well into the sound era, and ONE FROGGY EVENING **(SLIDE 36)** (1956) a dialogue-free tale of greed and retribution that were admittedly influenced by the work of Chaplin and other silent comedians. This study will therefore focus on the Jones unit as a microcosm of the studio.

(SLIDE 37) Story man Mike Maltese, like most animators of his generation, was a fan of Chaplin from an early age. Born on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, he "was a movie fan when I was a kid. I lived in movie houses...I lived on Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin and Harold Lloyd and Chester Conklin and Harry Langdon; and oh, Charlie Chase, Billy Franey, and the rest of them. To me, they were an antidote."³⁰

(SLIDE 38) Director Chuck Jones literally grew up with the Chaplin studio. "We lived on Sunset Boulevard...Chaplin's studio was just two blocks down the street. That's why I got a pug nose. A lot of stuff was shot outdoors, and when I was six years old, I'd stand there (at the studio) with my nose pressed against the (fence.)" He was kind of a hero to us, and we loved his films."³¹

29 Michael Maltese, interview with Darrell van Citters, Cal Arts, 1977.

30 Ibid.

31 Furniss, p. 205.

Jones' directorial style is evident in his version of an anecdote³² about two stage writers who decided to test Chaplin: "Let's nail him with something very difficult in the way of comic business. Let's take about the biggest chestnut we can find," So they cornered Chaplin one day and said, "How would you make comic business out of a fat lady and a banana peel?" They thought he'd say he wouldn't bother with anything like that, but he said, "You can make comic business out of anything. Let's analyze it. First of all, decide about how much time you're going to spend. Let's say, half a minute on it. Second of all, you have to make everybody dislike her if she's going to get in trouble. **(SLIDE 39)** So you pick her up, say, on Fifth Avenue, walking along, and she has an umbrella or a nasty little dog or something that immediately says she's not socially acceptable. She pokes people with umbrellas or her dog snaps at people. But she has the right of way, by God. You get that feeling from her. Now that can be done very quickly. Once you have established that you'll get a minor laugh then because the audience WANTS her to come to some sort of a problem. You zoom your camera ahead and pick up a banana peel lying on the sidewalk. Then you cut to her being mean again, intercutting shots. Get an angle shot from the banana peel down onto the pavement, looking across the banana peel, seeing her approach the banana peel (this is a good dramatic shot.) You do a series of fast intercuts, increasing your pace as you go." "We're approaching this peel closer and closer. You cut to the banana peel, she walks in, steps OVER the banana peel, **(SLIDE 40)** and falls into a manhole."³³ Chaplin actually described this setup in four shots!

CLIP 7: GOLD RUSH chicken scene (run silent during quotes)

(SLIDE 41) "Chaplin was one of my idols", Jones said. "I borrowed a lot of gags from the Gold Rush for my own work. I used with Bugs (Bunny) the scene of Chaplin's partner, hallucinating that Charlie is a big chicken he wants to eat. I learned so much from Chaplin. I took so much from Chaplin. It's like the old saying, "Steal from the best." Chaplin was the very best."³⁴

Jones uses the GOLD RUSH material as inspiration for the opening scenes of 1943's WACKIKI WABBIT. **(SLIDE 42)** Writer Tedd Pierce is caricatured in human and 'hot dog' form with Mike Maltese as the hamburger. The writers also provide the character voices.

CLIP 8: WACKIKI WABBIT (00:22-1:25)

32 Niven, BRING ON THE EMPTY HORSES, P. 190-191

33 Chuck Jones, Cal Arts interview, 1976.

34 Vance, p.159.

(SLIDE 43) Two Maltese/Jones collaborations featured “Playboy Penguin” as a Jackie Coogan-like figure whom Bugs has to ‘help’. 8 BALL BUNNY, (1950) contains a fight scene inspired by Chaplin’s balletic movements **(SLIDE 44)** and the “Chicken scene” from THE GOLD RUSH.

CLIP 9: 8 BALL BUNNY (2:17-3:13)

(SLIDE 45) THE RABBIT OF SEVILLE (1950) is another Jones/Maltese collaboration inspired by Chaplin’s balletic barbershop scenes from THE GREAT DICTATOR. “Chaplin sort of originated that funny little hoppy run, where you (turn and) bounce along like that.” Jones recalled. “I’d use that a lot...deliberately so, because it always looked funny, and always seemed strange, too because it wasn’t necessary...The essence of all this is timing.”³⁵

CLIP 10: RABBIT OF SEVILLE

(SLIDE 46) An entire generation of animators had grown up with Chaplin films. The next generation had to rediscover him, since his films were no longer in wide circulation by the 1970s. I obtained copies of the Don Graham lectures in 1977 **(SLIDE 47)** and attempted to recreate the action analysis sessions by screening my silent film collection, which included EASY STREET, THE RINK, and THE IMMIGRANT, to other students in the first character animation classes at the California Institute of the Arts. Joe Ranft, who became head of story at Pixar, was a frequent attendee at these screenings. Ralph Eggleston, story man at Pixar Animation Studios writes:

(SLIDE 48) “Many of us at Pixar were introduced to the great silents through Joe (Ranft) (and I’m guessing, by way of you!!). Keaton, Chaplin, Laurel and Hardy, Fatty Arbuckle...many of our films were influenced. In particular, Wall-e. **(SLIDE 49)** (While making it) we watched ALL of the Chaplin features (binge style), and many of his shorts. As far as the stories, we all know that if **(SLIDE 50)** something can't "play" without sound, it's probably not working. Sound is a wonderful tool, and brings so much to the films we make. But the clarity of having things read without sound is the best foundation one can have.”³⁶

CLIP 11: WALL-E

(SLIDE 51) The newest generation of animation students have better access to the Chaplin classics than ever before. Beautifully-restored Chaplin films are shown in animation classes. My 2007 textbook on animated storytelling, PREPARE TO BOARD analyzes the movements of Chaplin’s two characters in THE GREAT DICTATOR and The Tramp’s silhouette value. While

35 Jones, interview with Greg Ford, Montrose, California, 1969.

36 Ralph Eggleston, email to author, January 12, 2014.

the animation medium has grown in importance since Chaplin's day, it has not forgotten its roots. The best animated acting is still expressed through pantomime.

(SLIDE 52) As Sydney Chaplin wrote to his brother Charlie in 1936, "It is my candid opinion that this medium has only been scratched, it offers tremendous possibilities...it will be the future medium of the greatest artists and poets...These will not be Animated Cartoons, but Animated Art."³⁷ History has proven Sydney Chaplin right, and while technology has changed over time, animators continue to perpetuate the legacy of visual comedy in the spirit and inspiration of Charles Chaplin.

³⁷ Sydney Chaplin, letter to Charles Chaplin, June 4 1936

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