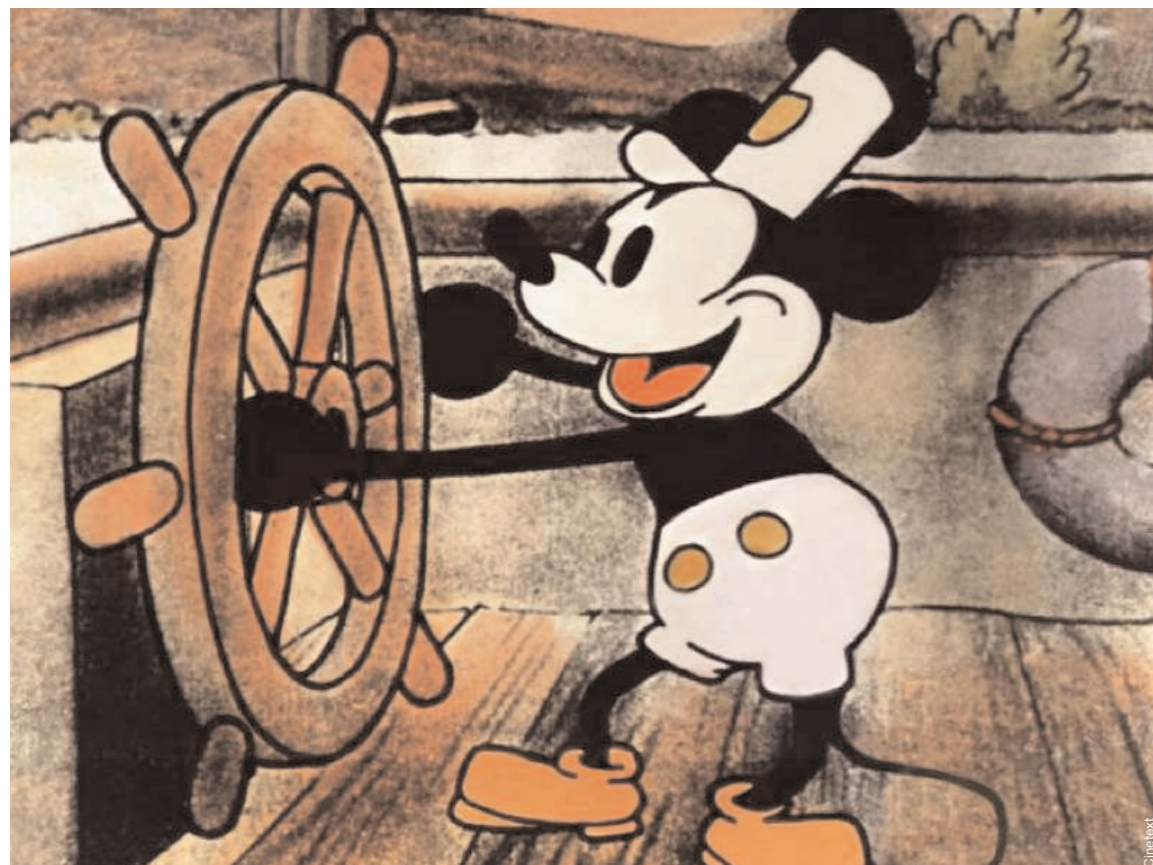


The path to the first modern cartoon



It's 1928: Mickey Mouse in *Steamboat Willie*, the first popular cartoon with sound

Der berühmteste Nager der Welt? Das ist zweifellos Mickey. Vor 80 Jahren wurde er aus der Trickfilm-Taufe gehoben. MIKE PILEWSKI zeichnet die Vorfahren der Maus nach.

medium US www.

These days, animated films and TV shows are some of Hollywood's most popular products. Animated cartoons are almost as old as cinema itself, but modern cartoons owe much of their popularity to innovations by Walt Disney.

Disney's best-known characters, Mickey and Minnie Mouse, were the product of nearly three decades of animation experience, going all the way back to J. Stuart Blackton in 1900. Blackton's 90-second film *The Enchanted Drawing* shows him sketching a man's head, a bottle of wine and a glass. When Blackton reaches over to the drawing, the drawn bottle and glass become a real bottle and a real glass, from which he drinks the wine. The drawn man's face changes to a frown before Blackton puts the bottle and glass back — at which point they again become part of the drawing.

Although not really a cartoon, this opened up possibilities of changing the action between frames of film — or even changing it after every frame. Blackton's *Humorous Phases of Funny Faces* (1906) is often considered to be the first animated cartoon. An unseen hand draws faces of a man and a woman who look and smile at each other. When a cigar

appears in the man's mouth, the woman starts to disappear behind a growing cloud of smoke.

In 1911, Blackton worked with Winsor McCay on an animated version of McCay's popular newspaper cartoon, *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, about the fantastical dreams of a little boy. During the film, the viewer's perspective changes, while playful figures dance and show off their elastic bodies. It was a technical masterpiece, with a three-minute color sequence made from 4,000 individual drawings. Each 35-millimeter frame was colored by hand.

As part of a live vaudeville performance, McCay spoke to a drawing of a dinosaur, which obeyed his commands and began to move, thanks to his skill at animation. In the film version, *Gertie the Dinosaur* (1914), McCay brings Gertie to life at a dinner party. Gertie became the first popular animated character, opening the door to countless other cartoon animals.

The most famous of these was Otto Messmer's Felix the Cat. In his first film, *Feline Follies* (1919), Felix is introduced as "Master Tom, who scalps unwary mice and breaks feline hearts with equal assurance and dispatch." Humor is the focus of his adventures. The stilted language of the

insert titles is only the beginning; the characters have exaggerated facial expressions, say funny things, and get themselves into humorous situations. While the protagonist is off visiting a female cat, for example, mice come out and have a party at his house, dancing around in a circle before eating everything in sight.

Felix took his format from newspaper cartoons: the short films each have a complete story and a punch line, and when the characters speak, words appear above their heads.

Felix became as popular as any movie star and introduced the world of merchandise. Thousands of Felix dolls, clocks and comic books were sold. His round face, big eyes, and easily drawn black-and-white body naturally inspired other animal characters. In their *Alice Comedies* of the mid-1920s, Ub Iwerks and Walt Disney had a cartoon cat, Julius, who looked just like Felix.

Changing studios in 1927, Iwerks and Disney made the pointed ears on Julius long and rounded to create Oswald the Lucky Rabbit. Cartoons with Oswald introduced a new level of complexity; but Iwerks and Disney left Universal Studios and had to change the character again. Disney made Oswald's ears round and gave him clothes and a different tail. Mickey Mouse was born.

Hyperactive Mickey dances and jumps around to the music

Mickey's first film, *Plane Crazy* (April 1928), included far more visual gags than anything else at the time. It was also far more surreal. Some animals behave in a human way, some don't, and objects often seem to be made of rubber. By pulling on various parts of a car, for example, Mickey turns it into an airplane and takes Minnie for a ride. While up in the air, he tries to kiss her, but she jumps out, using her underwear as a parachute. Mickey walks out horizontally into space after her, then discovers how far above the ground he is, before running back to the plane.

Mickey's — and Disney's — real popularity came 80 years ago this month, on November 18, 1928. *Steamboat Willie* was a very loose parody of *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* (1927), a Romeo and Juliet story with comic stunt actor Buster Keaton (see *Spotlight* 2/06). Disney broke new ground by adding sound, using music played

by an orchestra and little noises that the mice and other animals make. Though not the first sound cartoon, *Steamboat Willie* was the first that had a professional quality to it.

In the film, Mickey steers a riverboat carrying farm animals. Minnie joins him, but drops the guitar she's carrying. A hungry goat eats it. Minnie turns the goat's tail, and like a music box it starts playing a melody. A hyperactive Mickey dances and jumps around in exact time to the music. He hits some pans to create a rhythm, then hits and squeezes various animals to make other sounds.

Like many cartoons of this period, *Steamboat Willie* was made for viewers without today's sensitivities. Disney later cut 30 seconds from the seven-minute, 45-second cartoon to avoid the appearance of cruelty to animals. (Felix, for his part, dealt insensitively with fat people, immigrants and the unemployed.)

Just as most human actors lost their jobs when "talking pictures" came along, so did cartoon characters. The studio that produced Felix chose not to invest in sound, and moviegoers came to prefer Mickey. Disney then perfected the art of animation, creating the first feature-length cartoon, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, in 1937 and synchronizing music and action again in *Fantasia* (1940). ●

Watch some early cartoons at spotlight-online.de

animated [ˈænɪmətəd]	Zeichentrick-
assurance [əˈʃʊərəns]	Selbstsicherheit
break new ground [ˌbreɪk nuː ˈgraʊnd]	etw. völlig Neues tun
cartoon [kɑːrˈtuːn]	auch: Zeichentrickfilm
cruelty to animals [ˌkruːəlti tu ˈæniməlz]	Tierquälerei
decade [ˈdekeɪd]	Jahrzehnt
dispatch [dɪˈspætʃ]	Promptheit, Effizienz
dwarf [dwɔːrf]	Zwerg
enchanted [ɪnˈtʃæntəd]	verzaubert
exaggerated [ɪgˈzædʒəreɪtəd]	übertrieben
feature-length [ˈfi:tʃər ˌleŋθ]	in Spielfilmlänge
feline [ˈfi:lɪn]	Katzen-
follies [ˈfɔ:lɪz]	Dummheiten; Wortspiel auf <i>follies</i> : Variététruppe
frame [freɪm]	Einzelbild
frown [fraʊn]	Stirnrunzeln
insert title [ˈɪnsɜːt ˌtaɪtəl]	Zwischentitel
merchandise [ˈmɜːtʃəndaɪz]	Waren, die mit einem anderen Produkt/Ereignis verknüpft sind etw. gehorchen
obey sth. [ooˈbeɪ]	jmdm. etw. verdanken
owe sth. to sb. [ˈoʊ tə]	Fallschirm
parachute [ˈpærəʃu:t]	auch: Wortspiel auf <i>plain</i> : einfach
plane [pleɪn]	spitz
pointed [ˈpɔɪntəd]	Pointe
punch line [ˈpʌntʃ laɪn]	Gummi
rubber [ˈrʌbər]	Sensibilität
sensitivity [ˌsensəˈtɪvətɪ]	etw. präsentieren, vorzeigen
show sth. off [ˌʃoʊ ˈɔːf]	etw. skizzieren
sketch sth. [sketʃ]	Land der Träume
slumberland [ˈslʌmbərˌlænd]	Schneewittchen
Snow White [snou ˈwaɪt]	etw. zusammendrücken
squeeze sth. [skwiːz]	etw. steuern
steer sth. [stɪər]	gestelzt, hochtrabend
stilted [ˈstɪltɪd]	der Ältere
the Elder [ði ˈeldər]	Takt
time [taɪm]	Unterwäsche
underwear [ˌʌndərweər]	unvorsichtig
unwary [ˌʌnˈweəri]	Varieté
vaudeville [ˈvɔːdəvɪl]	

Also this month...

100 years ago, on November 20, 1908, British-American journalist Alistair Cooke was born. From 1937 until his death in 2004, Cooke reported from New York for the BBC. His weekly *Letter from America* was a radio classic. You can listen to it at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/letter_from_america/

300 years ago, on November 15, 1708, British statesman William Pitt the Elder was born. Pitt led Britain during much of the Seven Years' War (1756–63), making Britain the dominant colonial power in North America. The US city of Pittsburgh, where Britain defeated the French, was named after him.