

Panel B2

Sala delle Colonne 1

Researching the History of Women in Animation



Malcolm Cook

'Distributor As a Woman Proves Surprise': Margaret Winkler and the Transformation of Early Animation History

Histories of early animation are dominated by men, both as subjects and as historians, despite female characters frequently appearing in cartoons of the period. This paper will consider the place of women in this field by examining the career of Margaret Winkler, who served as distributor and financial backer for many important animated cartoons of the 1920s including Felix the Cat, the Fleischers' 'Out of the Inkwell' series, and Disney's 'Alice Comedies'.

In terms of the historical conditions of the animation industry of the time, Winkler was a rare, and perhaps unique, example of a female distributor, a point noted at the time, resulting in the 1922 *Exhibitors Herald* headline quoted in this paper's title. Winkler faced a male-dominated environment, conducting business under the name M.J. Winkler to avoid drawing attention to her gender. After she married Charles Mintz he took control of the company she had started, and she retired from the industry following the birth of her children.

The films Winkler helped finance and distribute provide an additional perspective on the place of women in early animation. In many cases the casual misogyny of cartoons of the period are evident: Felix the Cat is frequently placed in peril due to his attempts to woo a mate, yet when he succeeds marriage and parental duties are shown as a bind that must be escaped, for comic effect. The Disney 'Alice Comedies' offer an alternative representation, showing a female character entering strange cartoon worlds. The technological challenges of incorporating a live-action figure into animation meant Alice, the supposed protagonist of these shorts, was often side-lined in the cartoon world. This series thus provides an apt analogy both for Winkler's infiltration of the animation industry and for her ultimate exclusion from it.

Alongside these historical and textual analyses, this paper will reflect on the application of feminist film historiography to animation. While both Donald Crafton (1982) and John Canemaker (1991) give Winkler due credit and note her importance as a woman within early animation, there is cause to consider whether existing models and methodologies might replicate rather than reveal the gender inequalities of the time. A discussion of Maggie Hennefeld's idea of 'destructive metamorphosis' (2014) offers an opportunity to rethink our approach to animation history.

Biography

cook.malcolm@gmail.com

Malcolm Cook is a Lecturer in Film at the University of Southampton. He has published a number of chapters and articles on animation, early cinema, and their intermedial relationships. He has co-authored (with Max Sexton) the book *Adapting Science Fiction to*

Television: Small Screen, Expanded Universe (Rowman & Littlefield, 2015). He is currently writing a monograph on animation in Britain before the coming of sound, examining the role of prior stage and print entertainments on its development.