

Why animation historiography? Or: Why the commissar shouldn't vanish

Timo Linsenmaier

“*Truth is strange, stranger than fiction.*”

William Makepeace Thackeray, *The tremendous adventures of Major Gahagan*
(Thackeray 1921, 1)

In spring 2008, a vociferous discussion erupted on the Society for Animation Studies' mailing list on the subject of an extensive definition of animation. More technically-oriented explanations clashed with highly theoretical ones, scarcely finding a common ground between the variety of arguments brought forward. Strangely absent from the discussions, however, was the question of animation historiography, of an analysis of the processes by which our historical knowledge of animation is obtained and transmitted, helping in the definition of the object of inquiry.

And indeed, while there have been rather many histories of animation, so far only a few animation scholars have thoroughly undertaken to explore how historical developments relating to their study of animation are registered and chronicled. There are certainly well-worn, often formative paths of narration that so far characterise how history has been viewed and written in Animation Studies. Several examples come to mind: Giannalberto Bendazzi's gargantuan, yet curiously Vasarian canonical work *Cartoons: One Hundred Years of Cinema Animation* (Bendazzi 1994); Michael Barrier's landmark, but deliberately re-narrating *Hollywood Cartoons: American Animation in Its Golden Age* (Barrier 1999); John Halas' influential, but very production-orientated framework *Masters of Animation* (Halas 1987); or Sergey Asenin's *Walt Disney: Secrets of a Drawn World* (Asenin 1995), which, while in many ways insightful, is peculiarly unsuspecting of the difficulties of “oral history”.

These works, while all of them milestones in Animation Studies, to a certain extent miss the possibility of reflecting on the ways in which intrinsic as well as extrinsic factors influence the way historical conceptions are developed. However, this is certainly attempted in works like, for example, David MacFadyen's book *Yellow Crocodiles and Blue Oranges* (MacFadyen 2005) that draws on a large variety of sources and their analysis; it can also be encountered in Robin Allan's *Walt Disney and Europe* (Allan 1999) that undertakes a laborious verification of sources to establish its main arguments.

This paper will endeavour to examine some aspects of this heterogeneous initial situation, posing the question of “how history has been and how it is *written*” (Breisach 2004, 4). A discussion that has been conducted in the discipline of history itself since in the 19th century, Leopold von Ranke asked the question of “*wie es eigentlich gewesen*” (a question well-nigh untranslatable, as it not only asks for “what has actually happened”, but also for the metaphysical implications of what has happened) - especially as, thinking of Hans Belting's “The End of the History of Art?” (Belting 1987), similar discussions have been launched profitably in other disciplines.

However, a first stocktaking of views on the process and implications of the writing of history hardly seems favourable: One of the first thinkers to tackle the question was Aristotle, who in his *Poetics* clearly states which side he has sympathy for when comparing history and poetry:

“The poet and the historian differ not by writing in verse or in prose. The work of Herodotus might be put into verse, and it would still be a species of history, with meter no less than

without it. The true difference is that one relates what has happened, the other what may happen. Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular.” (Aristotle)

Edward Halper interprets this by determining that Aristotle sees the discipline of history as a chronicle of human events that are intrinsically particular and, consequently, never the subject of scientific knowledge: “History would seem to be well-named: it is indeed a *story*” (Halper). It has taken historians a rather long time to embrace the concept of the narrative aspects of their discipline. One of the “founding fathers” of modern historiography, Edward Carr, remarked in his George Macaulay Trevelyan Lectures delivered in the University of Cambridge in 1961: “It used to be said that facts speak for themselves. This is, of course, untrue. The facts speak only when the historian calls on them: it is he who decides to which facts to give the floor, and in what order or context” (Carr 1961 p.11).

Only when embracing this point of view and the discussions ensuing from it, historians came to terms with a development that many had seen as “perhaps the most far-reaching, comprehensive, and explicit challenge to history as a discipline” (Evans 2000 p.81): the structuralist and deconstructivist theories that during the 1960s were developed in France by Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida, and that more or less openly called for the abolition of history as an academic discipline. Roland Barthes had, in his 1968 essay “The discourse of history”, charged that historians’ claim to reconstruct past reality rested on a pretence. For him written history was an “inscription of the past pretending to be a likeness of it, a parade of signifiers masquerading as a collection of facts”(Barthes 1981 p.8). Objectivity, whether it be the objectivity of the historian himself or of his sources, was “the product of what might be called the reverential illusion” (Barthes 1981 p.11). For Barthes, the illusion lays in the fact that the past is only imagined to be out there, waiting to be discovered. In practice it is an empty space waiting to be filled by the historian. Verbatim quotations, footnote references, and other tools of the historian’s trade would simply be devices designed to produce what Barthes described as the “reality effect”, an effect that should convince the reader, and the writer himself, that these particular representations of the past were more than straightforward storytelling. Richard Evans quotes Jacques Derrida in noting that “historians’ own understanding of what they did remained [...] ‘stubbornly logocentric’.” (Evans 2000 p.81). Derrida indeed went much further than Barthes and argued that the relation between signifier and signified changes each time a word is uttered. In such a case, language becomes an infinite play of significations, all equally valid - or invalid. It is true that Derrida, as Willy Maley has put it, denies the equation of textualization with trivialization (Maley 2008). Still, the implication of text as an essentially “differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces” (Derrida 2004 p.81) results, in Derrida’s interpretation, in everything becoming “discourse” or “text.” In other words, every document, every source, becomes a mere arrangement of words. In this view - as we apprehend the world through language alone - nothing exists outside language, with all the aforementioned consequential ambiguities. From such a conviction, it was only a small step to jar what had hitherto been regarded as the foundations of the discipline, as e.g. Keith Jenkins did:

“No discourse - and therefore no contribution to, and/or comment on, aspects of an existing discourse - is of a natural kind. You cannot find a historical or geographical or scientific or literary discourse just out there, just ‘growing wild’. Discourses are cultural, cultivated, fabricated and thus ultimately arbitrary, ways of carving up what comes to constitute their ‘field’, so that like any approach in any other discursive practice an introductory discussion about ‘history today’ could begin from innumerable starting points and be developed in various ways: in these matters one always has to make that a start (and come to an end) somewhere.” (Jenkins 1996 p.15)

Drawing on these observations, Jenkins maintains that while the past can be represented in many modes, the only valid ones would be those that call attention to their own processes of

production, explicitly reflect their own assumptions, and indicate the constituted rather than the found nature of their reference - what Jenkins calls “the historicised past” (Jenkins 1996 p.10).

Indeed, Lawrence Stone found that the “linguistic turn” has “taught us to examine texts with far more care and caution than we did before, using new tools to disclose covered beneath overt messages, decipher the meaning of subtle shifts of grammar and so on” (Stone 1991 p.27). This certainly is a development to be welcomed. Hayden White, one of the most ardent advocates for a new understanding of how a historical discourse can be established, has pointed out the “growing awareness on the part of historians of the literary narrative elements in their own work - research as well as writing” (White 1996 p.37).

However, for historians the past turned out not to be completely at the mercy of historical “narrativity” after all. White, who besides was one of the most outspoken postmodern critics of history as a discipline coined the term “emplotment” to highlight that historians, in order to make a story intelligible and meaningful as history, told it (consciously or unconsciously) *only* in conformity to their preferences. In later writings he back-pedalled on this assumption, especially when confronted with an ongoing discussion on Holocaust denial and postmodernism (further reading e.g. Eaglestone 2001). He maintained that in his earlier writings he was more concerned to point out the ways in which historians used literary methods in their work and, in so doing, inevitably imported a “fictive” element into it, because their written style did not simply report what they had found but actually constructed the subject of their writing. In his later work he came to draw a clear distinction between fiction, on the one hand, and history, on the other. “Rather than imagine the object first, then write about it in a manner that is therefore mainly subjective, history exists only in the action of writing, involving a kind of simultaneous production or identification of the author of the discourse and the referent or thing about which he or she was writing” (White 1996 p.49). Historical imagination, he says, calls for the imagining of “both the real world from which one has launched one’s inquiry into the past and the world that comprises one’s object of interest” (White 1996 p.49). In this light the action of writing history escapes the action of writing mere fiction. An abolition of differences of meaning in texts, especially in source material, thus cannot be upheld, as Richard Evans ascertains:

“The distinction between primary and secondary sources on the whole has survived the withering theoretical hail rained down upon it by the postmodernists. The past does speak from sources and is recoverable through them. There is a qualitative difference between documents written in the past, by living people, for their own purposes, and interpretations advanced about the past by historians living at a later date.” (Evans 2000 p.108)

Very much the same can be said of animation. There is a qualitative difference between animation films made in the past, by living people, for their own purposes, and interpretations advanced about those films by scholars living at a later date. A small deviation into Soviet history will illustrate this further. There is scarcely an example better suited to exemplify this train of thought than what Frederick C. Corney has called the “telling of October” (Corney 2004), namely the targeted constructing of the myth of the October Revolution as a great rising of the masses of oppressed workers in Russia as opposed to a *coup d’état* by a small and almost follower-less political group. “All revolutionary regimes seek to legitimize themselves through foundation narratives that, told and retold, become constituent parts of the social fabric, erasing or pushing aside alternative histories” (Corney 2004 p.IX). The October Revolution which brought the Bolshevik regime to power in 1917 resulted in a devastating civil war that continued until 1921. Fleeing from terror, an enormous amount of emigrants left Russia after the Red Army’s ultimate victory, a process which stripped the country of its social, professional and intellectual elites. Consistent with their aim to dominate the whole of Russian society, the new regime made no exception from its purges and cleansing for culture, though it did not operate with the same thoroughness in the cultural sphere as in the social and political arena. At least in the early years, scholars and artists

continued to enjoy a fair measure of intellectual freedom. “With the help of a fair amount of *laissez-faire* policy, the Bolsheviks hoped to regain the confidence of the intellectuals, who did not bother to disguise their distaste for Bolshevik vulgarity and brutality” (Maes 2002 p.237). Before Stalin’s ascent to power, this led to an enormous output of creativity in every department of the arts - in animation, too, for that matter. The Avantgarde artists earned, as Boris Groys has put it, “admiration everywhere and deservedly so for their daring radicalism” (1996 p.9). This changed fundamentally, however, when in 1932, Stalin published a manifesto in the *Literaturnaja Gazeta* which stated that “the masses demand of an artist honesty, truthfulness, and a revolutionary, socialist realism in the representation of the proletarian revolution” (Harrison 2003 p.418). This led to the advent of Socialist Realism as a dogmatic framework during the second half of the 1930s, and the early Soviet animation pioneers’ “crude and cruel, but vigorous” (Stephenson 1968 p.148) animation shorts as well as other Avantgarde artworks would not be tolerated any more. Now, moral and ideological certainty was required from all works of art in the line of duty of the Soviet Union. If, as Paul Wells puts it, “animation legitimised the social and political ambivalence of narratives by simultaneously approximating some of the conditions of real existence whilst distancing itself from them by recourse to the unique aspects of its own vocabulary” (2002 p.21), such an approach could no longer be allowed. What Soviet bureaucracy needed were “images that are made with the purpose to help along a desirable reality” (Wyss 1997 p.57), not images that questioned this not at all perfect reality.

Indeed, it was the propaganda department that had found the most radical answer to the question of what this “reality” should look like, especially in photography. David King has - in his book “The commissar vanishes” (King 1997) - magnificently documented the efforts of Soviet propaganda officials during Stalin’s reign of terror to alter history and to show that Stalin had almost single-handedly brought about the revolution. When during the great purges somebody had fallen out of grace or was shot, hordes of Communist party workers retouched photographs showing him or her, thus eliminating all but Stalin from the images. “The physical eradication of Stalin’s political opponents at the hands of the secret police was swiftly followed by their obliteration from all forms of pictorial existence” (King 1997 p.7). King notes that so much falsification took place during the years of terror that it became possible to tell the story of the Soviet era through retouched photographs - not the “reality of the past”, but the “reality of the time being.”

“The libraries of the former Soviet Union still bear these scars of ‘vigilant’ political vandalism. Many volumes - political, cultural, or scientific - published in the first two decades of Soviet rule had whole chapters ripped out by the censors. Reproductions of photographs of future ‘enemies of the people’ were attacked with disturbing violence. In schools across the country, children were actively engaged by their teachers in the ‘creative’ removal of the denounced from their textbooks. A collective paranoia stretched right through the period of Soviet rule.” (King 1997 p.6)

The discussion whether photography is depicting “reality” is as old as the technology of photography itself, and time and again artists have strived to undermine or contradict this “reality”. Thomas Demand’s fascinatingly intricate cardboard worlds, Cindy Sherman’s “film stills”, Vladislav Mamyshev-Monroe’s painfully obvious, yet surprisingly ambiguous masquerades, Andreas Gursky’s painstakingly composed monumental light-boxes or (art historian turned photographer) Jeff Wall’s subtly arranged cityscapes all point into that direction, guiding the beholder along towards a denouement of the underlying “structures” that constitute this particular kind of “reality.” But none of them have succeeded as staggeringly as Soviet propaganda.

Jan Assmann maintains that “history by way of recollection becomes a myth. In this process, it does not become unsubstantial, but on the contrary, it gathers formative and normative strength” (Assmann 2005 p.52). By shaping these recollections, the “telling of October” effectively “emplots” the Bolshevik version of history, the foundation myths of Soviet

Russia. Hans Belting has pointed towards the ultimate necessity to go beyond these “emplotted” renderings of historical events. He underlines the necessity of the historian’s endeavour to retrieve the historical sources by deconstructing the processes that obliterated them: “The production of the imaginary is necessarily subject to a social process, wherefore fiction not inevitably takes up the place of the imaginary. [...] The authority that it gains lives solely on the power we convey to it.” (Belting 2000 p.82).

How effectively its prerogative of interpretation has been used by Soviet propaganda to convey power to the Bolshevik version of the events of the October Revolution can strikingly be traced by means of a virtually unknown film of Jurij Norshtejn, “25th - The First Day.” Co-authored with Arkadij Tjurin, this is Norshtejn’s first attempt at directing after long years as animator with Sojuzmul’film. 1967 marked the 50th anniversary of the October Revolution. Although Stalin’s excesses had been decried, his methods, though somewhat alleviated, were still made ample use of by the Soviet authorities. When Norshtejn and Tjurin set out to glorify the revolution, they were genuinely fervent and deeply inspired by the idea of a “regenerated world, a destiny shaped by the people themselves,” (cit. sec. Kitson 2005 p.38) a vision that had long been at the heart of the Communist propaganda efforts.

Now Jurij Norshtejn is as good a synonym for artistic integrity as can be found, and the concentrated self-reflexive perspective that forms the very focus of his work - Mieczylaw Walasek quotes him in underlining this attitude: “What kind of viewer do I have in mind in my work? As paradoxical as it may seem, I have myself in mind.” (Walasek 1980 p.42) - elevates him above suspicion of “collaborating”, of making a film without pouring his very lifeblood into the endeavour. In fact, in drawing his inspiration and sources for this film from artists of the time of the revolution, often fallen from grace since the advent of Socialist Realism - the title is taken from a poem by Majakovskij; the images cite artworks from Tatlin, Petrov-Vodkin, Chagall, Malevich, Deineka; and the music is by Shostakovich - he met with the wrath of the censors. The work was blamed as being “formalist” - meaning “degenerated” - and was not released to the general public.

While this shows the aforementioned absence of currying favour with the authorities, the film also illustrates the way Norshtejn and Tjurin approached what they saw as the revolutionary zeal of the masses, conveyed to them as to any other Soviet citizen by the myths Soviet propaganda created around the October Revolution: the salvo of the Cruiser Aurora, the storm of the Winter Palace, the Workers’ Councils taking power and so on.

The young artists are certainly not to blame for this. Artistically, as Norshtejn later affirmed, the reflections on artists of the time and the transformation of their creative findings into adequate movement, taught him what animation was about - the very concept of “the essence of animation” (Eizenshtein 1986 p.87) that Eizenshtein speaks about in his writings about animation. But this point illustrates very clearly that the “telling of October” had been done so effectively that even an independent-minded artist like Norshtejn was unable to overcome this - to use David Beresford’s somewhat worn expression: “History is written by the winners” (Beresford April 27, 2003).

Without reverting to a naïve realism: This is precisely the point at which a merely theoretical approach fails: Animation that is made for propaganda purposes loses nothing of its “essence” in Eisenstein’s sense, nothing of its intrinsic characteristics, but gains a meta-level that is only properly understood by placing the work in its historical context. Carr in his lectures has referred to the menace “of becoming ultra-theoretical [...], the danger of losing [one]self in abstract and meaningless generalizations,” (Carr 1961, 65) and Ethan de Seife has drawn attention to the often problematic “jargonistic blurring of terms which could [...] use more clarity” (Ethan de Seife, April 07, 2008).

This is no[t] to imply that all theoretical approaches necessarily entail problems and are of small value, quite on the contrary. As we have seen above, properly applied theoretical

models allow for a more accurate formulation of questions. It is important that theory informs practice, but at the same time it is important that theory does not lose sight of practice. The following quote can on the one hand be read as a declaration that the irresolvability of a question means that the work of research and scholarship is necessary, and needs to continue. On the other hand, the example at the same time is not entirely unaffected by aspects of the aforementioned indefinite language-games that we have seen to curtail research-based modes of investigation:

“Oh, yes, the felicity of Felix. To the perennial question bedeviling animation scholars - who animated, authored, originated Felix? - Pat Sullivan or Otto Messmer? - for us, Felix is the very answer to the question. The felicity of Felix is that, as a figure of metamorphosis, of plasmaticness, as Eisenstein called the ‘essence’ of animation [...], he gives the lie to any attempt to fix, arrest, isolate and thereby render inanimate (such a figure of) animation in any particular creator/ animator/ author of him, in any determinate origin.” (Cholodenko 2007 p.15)

Indeed, the knowledge about the authorship does not change anything about Felix’ animated “essence”, but it does make a huge difference in what we have called the meta-level of this question. The fact that it is difficult to ascertain who is the actual author of Felix’ adventures hints, if at nothing else, at least at the approaches to authorship, copyright and distribution practices during the time of his creation and so constitute a point of departure for an historical investigation into these fields - an investigation that can be substantiated drawing on sources and interpreted according to the standards of historical method, eventually leading to the finding of an historically accurate proposition about the actual authorship of Felix.

This historical method, meaning the techniques that condition the way in which sources are researched and then used to write history, is based on the rules of verification laid down by von Ranke and elaborated in numerous ways since his time. Von Ranke’s metaphysical considerations about the past may today seem hopelessly naïve or simply outdated, but their value as a point of departure for a process aiming to “establish a symbiotic relationship between theory and empirical research, where one contributes to the development of the other” (Hedström and Swedberg 1996 p.127) remains unopposed. Regardless of theoretical modes, the vast majority of historians’ efforts are devoted to ascertaining the value of sources and establishing them as firmly as possible in the light of others. Even postmodernists use footnotes. The way history is written is “designed to enable the reader to check the sources on which a historian’s statement is made to see whether or not they support it. They are not mere rhetorical devices designed to produce a spurious ‘reality effect’” (Evans 2000 p.109). The credulity of Thackeray’s ingenious Major Gahagan’s tales may not always defy scrupulous verification, but his dictum that truth is sometimes stranger than fiction is profoundly maintainable - especially as, as Evans points out, “what counts as evidence is not determined solely by one historian’s perspective but is subject to a wide measure of agreement which concerns not only individuals but also communities of scholars” (Evans 2000 p.110).

It is therefore much to be regretted if, as Geoffrey Eley and Keith Neild have observed, “theoretical hauteur instructs a redoubt of methodological conservatism, and the latter shouts defiantly back. Between the two lies a silence, a barrier that in these tones cannot be crossed. For progress in understanding the truth and objectivity of history, each side must attend more closely to what the other is saying” (Eley and Neild 1995 p.364). Ultimately, I am convinced that we can re-tell history, that we can come up with a discourse that is meaningful and gives us a glimpse of “wie es eigentlich gewesen”, knowing about the limitations, but also about the advantages of this approach - in other words, prevent the commissar from vanishing from our scholarly field of vision, because we are caught up in a trench warfare between what makes an historical approach to animation or a theoretical approach to animation “superior.” In a message to the aforementioned SAS mailing list, Ethan de Seife called on scholars not to “exclude any text or field of study so long as it can bring something relevant and pertinent to

the discussion” (Ethan de Seife, April 08, 2008) or - as Alan Choldenko has phrased it somewhat more poetically - “not to render inanimate the work of research and scholarship” (Alan Cholodenko, June 29, 2008). That is even more the case as - as I have pointed out in this paper - there is much to be gained from a benevolent interdisciplinary interaction of the approaches. Siegfried Kracauer’s last, little-known book deals with his findings and thoughts on historiography, and he defines a relationship between the two spheres that seems to me very worthwhile of pursuing: “Historians longing for synthesis hanker after the consolation of philosophy, and philosophers of history devise over-all models for use in the lower regions” (Kracauer 1995 p.99). If a process of interaction and interdisciplinary *rapprochement* like this would take place in the time to come, it would not only define more clearly what we as animation scholars are doing and how we are doing it, it might also strengthen the standing of our field in academia in general.

Timo Linsenmaier is currently writing his PhD thesis on Soviet animation aesthetics. He studied Media Theory at Karlsruhe University for Arts and Design (HfG) and Animation History at the Russian State Film School (VGIK) in Moscow. This paper was presented at Animation Unlimited, the 20th annual SAS conference, held at the Art Institute at Bournemouth, 18-20 July, 2007.

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