

FEMININITY, CENSORSHIP, AND MORE IN TEX AVERY CARTOONS.

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As to put this issue today into perspective, I shall first quote Gilles Deleuze, writing about American society:

For Ford, as for Vidor, society changes, and does not stop changing, but its changes take place in an Encompasser which covers them and blesses them with a healthy illusion as continuity of the nation.

Finally, the American cinema constantly shoots and reshoots a single fundamental film, which is Birth of a Nation-Civilization, whose first version was provided by Griffith.¹

Applied to Tex Avery cartoons, the matter would then correspond to a continuance in a pragmatic view upon American society, faithfully following its inner changes, and yet keeping the same celebration of its existence as such. The films play with the variations in the expectancy of the audience, for example when it comes to representing female characters and femininity.

¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1, The Movement-Image*, Minuit, Paris, 1983, pág. 205, Continuum, London, New York, 2005, pág. 152.

I would also like to refer to a recent debate that went on the SAS² newsgroup, about “research on gender stereotypes in films and TV”. The discussion moved from an all-American context to a more multinational one, widening the prospect and suggesting the evidence of a multiplicity of viewpoints. So much so that two complementary issues came to my mind. To begin with, after sociologists Hadley and Galloway, the fact that one’s cultural background and environment will strikingly shape one’s “attitudes, emotions, beliefs and values”³, and thus distort one’s perception and analysis of the culture being studied, whether it be one’s own culture or another. This implying that one should always try to keep in mind the spirit/mood/values that are/were contemporary to the culture being studied.

So, this goes alongside with the recent treatment of Tex Avery cartoons in a 2003 Warner DVD release of his “complete works at MGM”. On what grounds can the producers and distributors in 2003 decide on the political correctness of sixty year old films, and consequently censor them, denying cartoons both the relevance to their own time and their artistic entity? Could one imagine Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus* repainted with the Goddess clad in a T-shirt and trousers?! (Actually, murals in Venice, California, dare it). In the DVD release, the fact is that political correctness has dealt with the representation of colored people and Japanese, but not with femininity nor “explicit” iconography. And yet, the representation of women in Avery’s cartoons could well call for a similar fate today, would they be narrow-mindedly watched as Warner people recently perceived the pictures of Blacks.

The bottom line of this introductory digression could be that - according to Warner’s today - the American audience is still allowed to watch 1950’s discriminative representation of women, but not of Blacks, Japanese, nor Natives.

So, let us consider such appearances of femininity.

² SAS: Society for Animation Studies : <http://gertie.animationstudies.org/index.php>.

³ Omaggio Hadley, *Teaching Language in Context*, Heinle & Heinle, Boston, MA, 1993, pág. 359.



When first featured in *Red Hot Riding Hood* (1942), the Averian girl already has “all it takes”. Her appearance sets a new code of representation of femininity, with a trail of machist sexual innuendo, such characters as Betty Boop, years before, had – yet less vividly – put up.

Differently from Betty Boop, she has a full grown-up figure, with a classic head body ratio of 1/5. The Girl is meant to entertain and arouse the American soldiers’ libido. Such a schematic rendering of femininity is tolerated by censorship and Hays code, and is even encouraged by the Army.

Tex Avery : “Actually, we were thinking of the army when we made the first one

in that *Red Hot Riding Hood* group. (...) We had it rather rough on the reaction of the wolf, you know, steam coming out from under his collar and all that. When the censor saw it, he said, ‘Boy, he’s getting too worked up’, so we had to trim and juggle and cut back. It got back to Washington, to some colonel or whatnot, that the censor had cut out quite a bit on us. Finally, Louis B. Mayer got a telegram from the colonel, saying that he wanted an uncut version of a *Red Hot Riding Hood* cartoon for his personnel overseas. The studio dug around, and I don’t know how many prints they gave him but, man, it went over great overseas”⁴.

The success of *Red Hot Riding Hood* was such that the Army encouraged more of these cartoons. Indeed, their implicit purpose was not pedagogical, as for example *Private Snafu* series was.

The Girl is some sort of sacrificial license to morality, accepted for the sake of war effort. So, such indulging open sexuality, such implicit praise of rape could be shown to soldiers overseas. Their sexual frustration - as it was thought – would increase their aggressiveness against the enemy. What could happen to alien women was actually secondary.

The character was apparently inspired from a part played by Betty Grable in *A Yank in the RAF* (20th Cent.fox, 1941). Tyrone Power plays

⁴ Tex Avery, quoted by Joe Adamson, *Tex Avery, King of Cartoons*, New York, Da Capo, 1975, pág. 182.

an American pilot enlisted in the British RAF. He sits at a table close to the show in a cabaret, making sure not to miss Betty Grable's singing and dancing. The classic construction of the sequence that follows is an alternation of shots of Grable in the show, with shots of male onlookers either applauding or otherwise indicating "enjoyment" by nodding or smiling. The four reaction shots of Power within the sequence catch him: a) fixing his tie as he looks; b) moving his eyes up and down as though "taking her in," all the while chewing gum; c) sighing heavily and waving at her while she waves at the audience in the song "Hi Ya Love"; and d) applauding loudly long after the audience has stopped. This is the scene in which Power exhibits the most active enthusiasm in response to Grable.

The girl also recalls the generous morphology of Mae West (remember the latter was already very popular among World War II pilots, as their life-jackets, due to the volume of their buoyancy aids, were nicknamed after the actress's name, and with reference to her generous figure). Mae West's "personality" had already been hinted at earlier on (particularly in *Dangerous Dan McFoo*, 1939), and will directly be referred to in *Big Heel Watha*, (1944), as Minnie Hot-Cha. She is even more celebrated to in *The Shooting of Dan Mc Goo* (1945); indeed the saloon girl in called Lou, a vivid and suggestive rendering of Lady Lou, the bar tender played by Mae West in *She Done Him Wrong* (1933). As often, here again, Avery gets his inspiration from formal conventions shared by the public, and evolves from there into a discourse of his own⁵. As a matter of fact, the famous tagline "Come up and see me sometime", from *She Done Him Wrong*, is shown flashing on top of Grand-Ma's building in *Red Hot Riding Hood*.



⁵ One must also recall Alberto Vargas' pin-up girls, who surely inspired Avery's iconographic representation of his own girls.

Symmetrically to the Girl, the character of the Wolf typifies such a thematic process. The zoomorphic character is a variation on a popular convention, between the two world wars. The Avery wolf is the literal or strictly iconographic representation of the archetype of the male seducer. Jane Gaines suggests an etymology of the expression:

The derivation of the World War II “wolf” exemplifies how meaning fluctuates historically and demonstrates that it is not ever self-evidently contained within a representation. The original use “wolf,” earliest cited around 1917, was for the male homosexual who was particularly aggressive. Its use spread to the dangerous ladies man in the 1930’s. By World War II, “wolf” was a more complimentary term for a man who was successful with ladies, but it could be used negatively to refer to the guys back home ravaging the women.⁶

Today it seems difficult to know exactly whether, during the war years, the connotations brought about by the word « wolf » generated the cartoon character, or they did develop after the representation Avery proposed. Anyway, this character plays his part, directly inspired from a popular reality.

When screening a Girl-Wolf cartoon, it is obvious than the seducer is himself totally seduced in his turn. He overacts to an erotic stimulation and the Girl appears as the object of his desire. If the Wolf is a zoomorphic character, it is may be because it would have been too bold - risqué- , if not obscene, to portray him as a human being.

The Saloon Girl, as it is, is thus used as a set code, and appears repeatedly over the war years; more precisely five times, from 1943 to 1945, (not mentioning *Uncle Tom’s Cabana* in 1947, nor *Little Rural Riding Hood* in 1949). Of course, this character “works” within the specificity of that restricted corpus.

But, first of all, what to do with the many other characters that crowd the cartoons before, and after, the war years? Would the animator’s inspirational whim be the only reason for such changes in the general look of his characters?

If one pays closer attention to the early cartoons, those of the 1935 - 1941 Warner period, the first impression is that characters will be either zoomorphic or anthropomorphic, according to the requirements of the theme and tone of the film. And there, even so,

⁶ Jane Gaines, *The Showgirl and The Wolf*, *Cinema Journal* 20, No. 1, Fall 1980, pág. 62.

those requirements may not be that obvious, so that there may not be any tangible correlation, or connection, between the appearance of the characters, and the plot itself. In fact, from a closer perspective, it all depends on what is at stake, or what has to be explicated. Indeed, things suddenly get trickier when they deal with human feelings, not to mention desire and lust.

Let us focus on non-recurrent / secondary characters; in such cartoon as *Cinderella Meets Fella* or *The Isle of Pingo Pongo* (1938), *Uncle Tom's Bungalow* (1937), *Land of the Midnight Fun* (1939), *Cross Country Detour* (1940), one can witness many crowds, human creatures, coping with human situations: one king and his court, natives, sailors and tourists, boy-scouts, respectively. Next to other zoomorphic characters, one can also find animals playing their "ordinary" parts, such as the Eskimo dog, the bear, or the industrious beavers in *Cross Country Detour*.

A rather similar pattern occurs in the late MGM period, in the 50's. Fairly realistic UPA style human creatures – if not actual TV shots – cram the series of *House of Tomorrow* (1949), *Car of Tomorrow* (1951), *TV of Tomorrow* (1953). Human characters also near other more Averian creatures in *One Cab's Family* (1952: the nurse), *Little Johnny Jet* (1953: US Air Force officers), or *else Field and Scream* and *The 1st Bad Man* (1955). They never have any outstanding personality. To some extent they merely participate to the story, as any prop would do, whether male or female.

And yet, particularly and meaningfully in the early years, some supporting characters will keep a zoomorphic appearance, or display a human feature that is meant to suggest more.

Land of the Midnight Fun offers a distorted hint at sexuality, when the cruising ship encounters a raft, which apparently barely shelters a lonely man sprawled eagle next to a barrel. A line is cast, that the shipwrecked rejects and throws away. He then bends behind the barrel to hold tightly a gorgeous female creature, a-posteriori giving a very different meaning to his exhausted posture beforehand. Sexuality is present; yet it is only, and very implicitly, hinted at. Indeed, later in the same film, the female cabaret dancer, who could well display what cabaret dancers are expected to, is in fact represented as a very decent looking – and rotoscoped – Eskimo female skater. What would have been too openly suggestive is avoided by that trick in the film: having the dancing part performed by an Eskimo wearing her traditional long, thick clothes.

Avoiding over-explicit sexual innuendo is dealt with differently with the antelope in *The Isle of Pingo Pongo* (1938), or else in *Cross Country Detour*. Sexuality will be alluded to, not even by zoomorphic characters, but directly by animals. In the second sequence of the film, the voice over comments on what is shown. “Here’s a shy little deer. Hello Deer!” The animal looks at the “camera”, stands up, takes a lustful pose and says “Hello, Big Boy!” before she walks away on her hind legs, rolling her suddenly very feminine hips.



Later on, one encounters a lizard shedding its skin, but in the way a call girl would act a strip tease. The shot is fifty seconds long (out of a nine-minute fifteen-second film) and is yet stopped by a censored sign that hides the creature’s breasts. So it is a strip tease, but enacted by a zoomorphic creature, so that morality is safe. (De facto, the animated creature was drawn from

a rotoscope technique, after the footage of a true strip tease.) In a third sequence, a vertically split screen displays a horrific monster on the left, and a sissy-looking and speaking very young girl (similar, in appearance at least, to Goldie in *The Bear’s Tale*). Eventually, she will scare the monster away with her shouts! The human character, here, is devoted to ironically illustrating a childish female feature, void of any sensuality.

In *Johnny Smith and Poker Huntas* (1939), sexuality is indirectly focused upon by child caring, in the last sequence. The two anthropomorphic characters, of a very neutral appearance, escape the crowd. A prude ellipse then shows a letter-box that reads : “Mr and Mrs Johnny Smith”. So they are officially perceived as a couple, and are shown in a very middle-of-the-road American family scene: both are sat on a sofa, their eight kids (four Johnnys and four Huntas) playing around.

Anyway, is it a tribute, a filiation to freak shows?⁷ A popular entertainment at the end of the 19th century, freak shows gradually

⁷ One can refer to Mark Langer’s work, and more particularly to his 1998 SAS conference

leave room to a new phenomenon: cinema, and more precisely burlesque films. The physical appearance of Avery's characters is then but one, among many components, which relates his cartoons to burlesque cinema and earlier shows. Keeping close to the notion of "show", from a pragmatic perspective, his films recall Buster Keaton's movies: the audience will experiment a double expectation. Firstly they expect what one could call a "normal", "logical" flow of events, topped by the other expectation, coming from their awareness of the humoristic impact of what they are watching.

One could actually add one more strata of "normality" – or rather "ill-normality": what seems natural to the cartoon characters within the diegesis may recall real-life situations; paradoxically, it usually is thoroughly cut from any realistic everyday-life parameter, as the audience may experience it. And yet, the weirder the comic situation, the bigger the magnifying effect on the audience. Everyday-life reality is thus violently thrown back at them, so that they can laugh at it, and at their own expense.

As one may imagine it, monsters and freak shows were not the only source of inspiration for Tex Avery.

The influence of contemporary famous actresses was however already very important during the same Warner Period. So much so that their voices – à la Katherine Hepburn (most female secondary and main characters of the cartoons), and curves – à la Mac West (the steer in *Cross Country Detour*) could not be missed.

Their impact on anthropomorphic female characters was yet still fairly slight.

Let us focus on two 1937 cartoons: *Uncle Tom's Bungalow* and *Little Red Walking Hood*. In Topsy, Eva's young black friend, one may find some very faintly ambiguous features, especially in the way she moves. Eva, however, just like Red in the first version of *Little Red Riding Hood*, is more like a flat faced, painted nosed, lipped and eyed cloth doll than like a young girl. Red speaks, walks and acts like a woman, yet she is a freak, some doll alive. Cinderella (*Cinderella Meets Fella* – 1938) still displays a flat face; but her nose and lips are prominent, her figure is more like one of a child. Her appearance is already striking, all the more so when compared to the other secondary characters, very like the Fleisher crowds in *Gulliver's Travel* (1939).

Very ironically, thanks to the medium of animation, Avery reinvents the personalities of characters such as Cinderella, otherwise clad in a somewhat paradoxical situation: having to seduce a Prince – just like a courtesane- and yet be true to the innocence of a virgin. With Avery, the child-related components will eventually vanish and leave room to blossoming femininity.

Lou, in *Dangerous Dan McFoo* (1939), is very strongly recalling another Fleisher creature : Betty Boop. Sexual innuendo were pushing hard in Avery's inspiration, obviously, but the weight of society remained too strong. So, Lou is half human, half dog, among a crowd of dog-like characters. Her face is hardly human, although her body is a shy shaped Mae West image / homage.

In 1940, in *The Bear's Tale*, Avery moves one step further, deepening the aesthetic process and daring representation he had already attempted before with such characters as Little Red Riding Hood and Cinderella. Goldie is a child, who looks like Shirley Temple, speaks like Katherine Hepburn, and moves like Betty Grable and Mae West. Goldie assumes a strikingly ambiguous behavior.



The ambiguous personality of the child-woman nourishes from its iconographic representation. The proportion of the head compared to the body is more the one of a young girl than that of a young woman (1 to 3 instead of 1 to 5). The smooth appearance of her limbs and joints recalls that of babies or dolls. The puerility of her figure interacts with the eroticism of her movements and postures to suggest the fantasy of a child-woman⁸.

Such a fantasy, or a myth, can be found in burlesque live action cinema. Chaplin taking a professional advantage of Paulette

Godard's young age and look is one telling example. The part Chaplin

⁸ One should consider today's political correctness, and its correlated social refusal of any pedophilic innuendo ; and compare them to the social accepted standards of the time. It was then preferred to hint at sexuality via very young female icons, rather than openly display femininity.

gave his partners is just as relevant. A parallel must be made between the behavior of Droopy, the little shabby-looking dog in *The Shooting of Dan McGoo*, who wrenches the saloon Girl from the Wolf, and that of Chaplin the « little fellow », in the last third of *The Gold Rush* (1925) who saves Georgia (Georgia Hale) from the appetite of bulky Jack. Thus, the Averian girl quite smoothly gets in the tradition of Hollywood actresses.

When Warner Goldie wonders: “What has she got that I haven’t got?”, she enters into a hip move and puts her hand in her hair. She not only questions seduction and lust, she also heralds the MGM Girl of the 1940’s and her unmistakable postures.



Then comes World-War II, and the code set in 1943 keeps on over the war years. When Red appears as a childish character, it is only as a diegetic mistake in the cartoon (*Swing Shift Cinderella* and *The Screwy Truant* - 1945), both to create a comic effect and to oppose the former code of representation to the new one. Another character, either the Grand’ Mother (*Red Hot Riding Hood*), or the Fairy Godmother (*Swing Shift Cinderella*), is also used by Avery as a foil to the Saloon

Girl. The latter is attractive, provocative, yet apparently so in a very ambiguous, ingenuous mood. Hence the former will embody any repressed phantasm. Her old age and nymphomania will trigger one further comic effect. However, in *Swing Shift Cinderella* the Saloon Girl becomes more than a provocative icon. The reductive catalyst of libidinous behaviors is balanced by a celebration of the American woman. Cinderella is not only - merely - some vain vamp. As many American females of the time, she claims and takes upon herself the autonomy and independence gained on the assembly lines after 1941. So, in the last sequence of the cartoon, within some immaterial and elliptical ten seconds of filmic time, Cinderella turns from a swinging vamp to a poor ragged creature and finally to a proud and gorgeous plane factory worker, still very attractive in her blue outfit. Tex Avery

there assesses the American woman as in full control of her deeds and choices within society.

Here comes the first occurrence of Avery's ambiguous discourse: is he truly celebrating the American women of 1945? Or is he keeping a distanced and still machist outlook at them, as the last shot of the cartoon may suggest it? Could not be his appraisal of the recent female social independence merely a façade? That is to say: an artist's trick as he explicitly directed one in 1943 in the opening sequence of *Red Hot Riding Hood*. As later in *Uncle Tom's Cabana* (1947), he claims his difference, his standing apart from the Hollywood norm.⁹

Another example, and an alternative answer to the feminist understanding of the end of *Swing Shift Cinderella*, is euphemistically given in *Henpecked Hoboes* (1946): a rebellious hen gets her autonomy, sends the rooster riding a rocket to the North Pole, and lives her own adventurous life with would be clones of *Of Mice and Men* characters. She is eventually "whacked" back to the poultry-yard where she should belong, by the surviving and revengeful rooster. So, whether pupil, worker, or housewife, should not people have to keep to the norm, society expects them to abide by?

Or else, is Avery somehow suggesting a satire of the American society? Northrop Frye defines satire as militant irony, a means to value what is grotesque and absurd in our societies¹⁰. Tex Avery will consider moral standards with great distance. He never proposes any clear alternative: he is not a militant, and he is not a satirical director.

He walks on the edge of anti-conformism, yet he remains on the safe side. Sex, social status, and moral values are three beacons in our civilization. Mocking them may represent an attack against them, as the Marx Brothers tend to mean it in their films: the comic artists convey anti-conformist hints with them. However, the sheer amount of gags per minute, together with the usual twists in the end, will paradoxically tame and bend such meaning in Avery's cartoons. Characters and

⁹ *Red Hot Riding Hood* (1943): (sissy voice over) : But, waiting in the wood was a mean old wolf... Ready to pounce apart poor Little Red Riding Hood. Wolf : - Ooh! stop it! (repeats the words and the tone of the voice over) (...) I'm fed up with that sissy stuff. It's the same old story over and over. If you can't do this thing a new way, bud, I quit! Little Red Riding Hood : - Meee too! Every single Hollywood studio has filmed it this way. Gd'Ma : - Yeah! I'm plenty sick of it myself! Director (voice off) : - OK OK! All right! We'll do the story a new way... *Uncle Tom's Cabana* (1947) : Uncle Tom : Well now chillin'. Tonight ol' Uncle Tom will gonna tell you the *real* true story about Uncle Tom's Cabin... Now ; uuuh ; this is the first one of 'em Hollywood Cartoon Company ever got the straight dope on this Uncle Tom stuff. This is the way it really happened...

¹⁰ Northrop Frye, *Anatomie de la critique*, Paris, NRF, Gallimard, 1969, pág. 272.

diegesis, first and foremost, are animated embodiments of “making laugh”. The gags sublimate any subversive innuendo.

The End of World War II was to alter the independence and autonomy the American women had accessed. Or at least this is what the evolution of Avery’s corpus leads us to believe. As early as 1946, the female representation shifts away from a mainly libidinous perspective, and becomes morally friendly to the mainstream social expectancy.



In *The Hick Chick*, the main female character is no longer anthropomorphic. Her body is twig-like and no longer displays sensual curves. Her head is that of a hen; well, she is a chick! Only her postures recall the libidinous Avery Girl. She aims at seducing some thick country rooster, before she falls the victim of the caricatured charm and words of some gallinaceous clone of Charles Boyer and the Avery Wolf. However, she is no longer openly looking for sex, as the former Girls were supposed to be. She is after a husband, a far more puritanly correct quest. Hence the key sentence to the film, that is repeated as a leitmotiv: “Will you marry me?”

A female character may well appear on stage the year after (Eva in *Uncle Tom’s Cabana*); she does so for a good cause; and she is fully dressed in white to perform her southern song.

On the contrary, in 1948, over simplification in the female representation, if not regression, increases. In *What Price Freedom*, the female character has turned into an alien creature, no longer quite a flea, yet far from looking like a woman. Her size ratio, once again, is that of a weird doll, with her head outrageously disproportioned compared to her body. So much so, that her postures “à la saloon girl” become grotesque, and out of place. On top of that, any hint of lust is vacuumed. Marriage is at stake here again, and explicitly so for the sake of maternity.

Female creatures are still allowed sexual need. Yet, to get so, they have to turn into frantic Disney looking bunnies, humiliated as a bunch of Sinatra groupies in *Little Tinker* (1948).

In *Flea Circus* (1954), a sequel of the flea story, mating is implicitly mentioned so as to justify the prolific maternity. However, it is all very clichésque, and it keeps its distance with prude and restrained America: the story takes place outside the US (the only case with *The Blitzwolf*), in some far away exotic country. Indeed, Fifi the male flea repeats “Vive la France”! Panoramic shots disclose the Eiffel Tower... So, only distance (in every meaning of the word) may enable to mention sexuality.

So, how is it supposed to happen in America? Tex Avery tells it all, in two films of 1952 and 1953. The global context is war again; America is facing a crisis, and puts its hope into its young. This mood is tangible in *Little Johnny Jet*, and to a lesser extent in *One Cab's Family*. Both can be perceived as very patriotic arguments in favor of the traditional values of American society.

Each cartoon features a couple, a cab and a sedan car in one, a B29 bomber plane and a cargo plane in the other. Both expect and welcome a baby boy. Both young deceive their fathers' expectations. The former rejects becoming a cab and dreams of a future as a roadster; the latter is a jet airplane, and a nightmare and dishonor for his propeller fitted, veteran father. Eventually, both sons will save the lives and honor of their fathers. The safety and the perpetuity of America belong to the sons; it is the old myth of the frontier revisited, the “Go West my Son” adapted to the reality of the time. Indeed, the old B29/father in *Johnny Jet* wins both the race against the other jet planes, and the contract to reequip the Air Force, only because he is literally pushed in the back by his own son.

The father assesses the superiority of the young. As he gets the Air Force's order of 10,000 more of his son, he symbolizes this vital race towards modernity. Is that, at the same time, an echo to conscription? A call for national involvement in some new war effort and rearmament? An implicit incitement to give one's sons to the Nation? The symbolic meaning may be manifold; in any case it remains very chaste. Isn't the B29's wife called Mary? And she seems quite eager to fulfill the duty the Nation is expecting from her. So here, maternity is perceived as a patriotic sacrifice; one has to offer one's womb for the sake of the survival of the nation. The point is no longer to arouse the virility and aggressiveness of the GI's, as in the 1940's; now, the



point is to celebrate the fertility and availability of American mothers, as well as the capability of production of America at large. The mood in *One Cab's Family* is not that of enlisting Yet, in a way, it is just as socially propagandist. Here, traditional moral values and family are at stake. The son rescues his

father, at the cost of his own physical integrity. This will enable him to gain his father's recognition, together with a certain right to be different, as long as appearances are safe. He will indeed be a cab, just like daddy; but he will hide his racing engine under his bonnet. Let us read : puritan America will accept a certain degree of evolution in its youth, yet it has to keep to the strict guidance of the prevailing moral code.

Such is Avery's premonitory discourse, film directors as Nicholas Ray will depict in 1955 in *Rebel Without a Cause* (still some stories with fast cars and accidents!). The raging surge for living, as James Dean embodies it, is only tamed when his maturity, his dominant role in the adult world have been acknowledged. The final hug with his parents (just a few seconds of filmic time) wipes away, and concludes, one hundred filmic minutes of teenage conflict. In *Rebel Without a Cause*, rebellion may indeed be eventually displayed on screen; yet it is soon turned into the celebration of social and family consensus.

Similarly, America, in *One Cab's Family*, goes on thanks to its sons, and it does so all the better than reconciliation seals the abiding - or at least an apparent abiding – to fitting the norm.

In this perspective, the part played by women in society is much more limited than earlier cartoons described it. The cartoons in the 1950's stand far from the 1943 depiction of the American nuclear family, as in *One Ham's Family*. (Mr. and Mrs. Pig are suggestively symbolized by two letter boxes suddenly joined by a third one, still small, yet proudly erect. Soon after in the film, Mr. and Mrs. Pig are shown twice together in their bed, and in two different positions, leaving room for interpretation.)

In the later period cartoons, when celebrated, women are devoted to motherhood (*Little Johnny's Jet*, *One Cab's Family*), and are denied any sexuality. When caricatured and mocked, women are reified, mere objects of men's phantasms (*TV of Tomorrow*, 1949; *Droopy's Good Deed*, 1955). As a matter of fact, their representation was even more openly incorrect in the pre-war years. Indeed, in *Daffy Duck in Hollywood* (1938), live footage is inserted by Daffy into the cartoon itself, which among other news items shows a beauty contest and its mock winner (an obese woman). For the sake of humor, Avery there depicts, and takes advantage of a self assumed very male chauvinistic point of view – and today a very provocative, politically incorrect one.

In the 50's, the mother's body is actually kept un-shown. Either birth is suggested by an anxious father (*The Hick Chick*, 1946; *One Cab's Family*), smoking one cigarette after another in a waiting room. Or, even more extreme, maternity is both hidden, and refused to the female, as in *Little Johnny Jet*. There, a mechanized mutant, half stork, half helicopter, delivers the baby. Motherhood is reduced to a passive non-part, to a cleaning and caring female, a foil to the male new-born and to the father.

In a nutshell: when at Warners, in 1935 and after, cartoons display cloth doll-like starring characters, when of human appearance. They are void of any suggestive curve, if not of sexual innuendo. In 1940, one can meet ambiguous "femmes enfants", à la Shirley Temple, or reminding such actresses as Paulette Godard in Chaplin's films.

The girl's image also abides by the machist stereotypes of the "femme-object". 1943 is the corner stone, introducing what was to be set as the typical sexiest Averian Girl, meant for GI's and others, and featuring very independent female characters (factory workers).

The end of World-War II will imply a return to more puritan representations of women, as well as to moral values, from anthropomorphic appearance back to bird-shaped, then insect-shaped characters, and finally in 1953 to child caring machines (very symbolically) concerned about the perpetuity of the US Army.

Femininity is, by then, only hinted at through heavily made up eyes and lips, that the magic of animation transplants on cars and planes; so that one should eventually speak of "machinemorphic" characters. Such representation imposes a maximum distance and prevents any libidinous connotation.

Avery would then play the part of the jester; he mocks and caricatures society and people, finally emphasizing the moral backlash in America. However he would safely remain protected by his laugh, making sure not to take sides. As it seems, Avery's imagination and inspiration would have smoothly followed the evolution of mentalities over his twenty or so years of creation.

And yet, one cartoon has both escaped the censorship of the Hays Code in the golden age of Hollywood, and been granted the "ok" by today's



Warner political correctness. In 1944, *Big Heel Watha* will celebrate femininity in a very ambiguous, queer way: an unaccounted for subversive cartoon if any, it openly portrays a homosexual Native Indian warrior. As usual in Avery's universe, girl chasing, food hunting, in an explicit war and black-market context, together with frustration are at stake. However, there are two food/love hunters: Screwly Squirrel, and Heel Watha, the Indian brave. The latter regularly

appears with stereotypical feminine postures and behaviors, and confesses: "this is the happiest moment in my life" when unwillingly kissed in the end by the machist squirrel. How censorship at the time did not dismiss gay innuendoes remains unanswered, as this matter was never raised, not actually spotted, by Avery historians.

Indeed, at that time, censorship was focused on different matters. It is important to keep in mind that Avery always worked under the Hays Code, put together by the MPPDA (Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America) as early as 1927, and actually enforced by the Production Code Administration in 1934. It came up as an answer of the film industry to more or less explicit threats of boycott from the part of such groups as the Legion of Decency or other religious and puritan lobbies. It would have entailed hard times for business, so the MPPDA set up that list of recommendations which bluntly was an act of auto-censorship.

As a matter of fact, together with sound, the late 1920's had witnessed an increasing number of violent and erotic sequences in films, or else incestuous innuendoes, which were perceived as offensive by a significant part of the population and deciders. One may think, among others, of *The Public Enemy* (1931), or *Scarface* (1932), two relevant gangster films. Bold, risqué, if not pornographic animation was released too, as *Eveready Harton in Buried Treasure* in 1925. The MPPDA recommendations are known as the "Don'ts and Be Carefuls"¹¹, and for example forbid suggestive nudity or illegal traffic in drugs...

Betty Boop (Fleisher studios) is a telling example of the effect of the Code on animation. In the pre-Code era, she is wearing a very short dress and a garter that enhance her suggestive figure. She embodies phantasms and fantasy, and is the whimsical main character in her cartoons, contrarily to the parts she is given after 1934. By then, she has become a shy, tamed decently dressed rational adult. Leon Schlesinger, who ran the animation studio at Warner, wrote in a paper article in 1939: « We cannot forget that while the cartoon today is excellent entertainment for young and old, it is primarily the favourite motion picture fare of children. Hence, we always must keep their best interests at heart by making our products proper for their impressionable minds ». ¹² Schlesinger spoke as a producer, not as a creative artist; so he saw the financial interest he could have in not coming into conflict with the public. Well behaving in society becomes then a key thematic thread in many films. One can show live action actors kissing; yet it is indecent for animated characters. After 1934, a cartoon cow must wear some clothe to veil its dug...!

As we have seen it, (the lizard strip tease), Avery has used such devices as the insert "censored" to express without showing. For the side effect of the Hays Code on directors, whether in animation or live action films, was to encourage them into a great inventiveness in codes, angle shots, iconographic and linguistic euphemisms, and so on, so as to suggest instead what could no longer be shown. Avery would regularly apply such implicit creative principle. One just has to remember the conspicuous "erected" wolves and bulging eyes "balls" from *Red Hot Riding Hood* (1943) to *Little Rural Riding Hood* (1949). Yet hints may sometimes be less obvious : let us point out how the cabaret where Red dances is first presented in *Red Hot Riding Hood*. A high

¹¹ See the complete list in appendix 1.

¹² Quoted by Karl Cohen: *Forbidden Animation. Censored Cartoons and Blacklisted Animators in America*, McFarland, Jefferson, NC, 1997, pág. 28.

angle shot focuses on the typical entrance of what could be a hotel, or indeed a cabaret, either on Hollywood Blvd, or in New York. So why should the “camera” freeze for a couple of seconds on such frame? There is nothing particular there, except the number of the building in the block, which is “5910”. Nothing special if one reads in thousands; the sexual innuendo gets clearer when one reads : “59 – 10”... This obviously went unnoticed through censorship.



As a matter of fact, Avery and his teams, first at Warner, then at MGM have always been fairly free to create. However, in order to be on the safe side, they would add gags or sequences to their films, that they knew would never be tolerated, and that in a way would conceal the element they wanted to keep: « (The synopsis) would go to the Hays Office. (...) If we had one suggestive gag there, then in there we would inject perhaps three that we knew we couldn't get by with. »¹³ Avery was actually censored on two occasions: first in *Heckling Hare* (1941), because one sequence was considered too violent; second, in *Red Hot Riding Hood* (1943), in which the wolf, his feet shackled, was compelled by Red to marry the Grand-mother.

However, at that time, changes and alterations dealt with themes, which were related to moral values, violence, and religion; they never considered ethnic issues.

¹³ Interviewed by Joe Adamson in Joe Adamson : *Tex Avery, King of Cartoons*, Da Capo, New York, 1975, pág. 184.

Racial archetypes and stereotypes were not taken into consideration by the Production Code Administration. At that time, very pragmatically, authors, producers and public – that is: society at large - did not perceive any racist cliché in the films. Very few are accessible today, via such web sites as Vintage Toon Cast, or in dvd compilations of “forbidden films”.

Mentalities will gradually change after the Second World War, and the studios will follow the evolution of American society: ethnic stereotypes will be less and less called for to create gags. Of course it must be understood as the white “majority” getting aware of their culpability facing the black “minority”. At the same time, racist clichés among various white communities (Italians, Irish, Jews, and so on) persist, as well as sexist gags. By the end of the 60’s, American TV has no longer access to the complete uncensored catalogues of animated films.

Tex Avery has not often used Afro-American gags in his cartoons. Yet, in 1968, when United Artists put up a list of banned films, known as “Censored Eleven”¹⁴, three of them are Avery’s, and those three all belong to the Warner period. According to United Artists, the films shared grossly racist sequences, and were basically politically incorrect.

In the United States, the fluctuations of puritanism and the perception of political correctness, the power of lobbies, whether political, religious or ethnic have made it that some banned films became available for a while later on, before they recently disappeared from catalogues again. So that Uncle Tom’s Bungalow (1937) and The Isle of Pingo Pongo (1938) were censored from 1968 to the mid-eighties, before the latter, together with Johnny Smith and Poker Huntas (1938) were banned as from 2008. Uncle Tom’s Cabana (1947) and Half Pint Pygmy (1948) have vanished from the so-called “complete” Tex Avery at MGM 2003 DVD. Actually, seen from a distance, one may well wonder why such a recent feature as Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull (2008) has never been questioned about the way it portrays Central America natives ?...

So far however, only complete films have been dealt with. The reasons why they should, or should not, be banned remain to be debated. It is obviously a matter of how the public will perceive them. People will react very differently, depending on their age groups, social classes, cultures, nationalities.

I would also like to raise another issue today. What right does anyone have to cut, mutilate a work of art, without explicitly warning the public of such facts? Because such is the case in the 2003 DVD. Not only

¹⁴ See the complete list in appendix 2.

have they omitted two films, but they have also cut off sequences from six others: *Blitz Wolf* (1942), *Happy-Go-Nutty* (1944), *Henpecked Hoboes* (1946), *Lucky Ducky* (1948), *Daredevil Droopy* (1951), and *Droopy's Good Deed* (1951).

It is obvious these sequences may hurt people today, in particular Japanese or Blacks. But may be the films should be left as they are, and watched and understood with in mind the socio-historic context that prevailed at the time they were released? Yes some films bear racist pictures and tags; but it is may be wiser to acknowledge the racist dimension of these films, and assume and accept the painful reality of our common past, rather than hide it and ignore it. Censoring these films today, according to me, means denying their artistic legitimacy and entity, as well as denying that part in the history of our civilization.

APPENDIX 1: THE DON'TS AND BE CAREFULS

(published in October 1927 by the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America)

Resolved, That those things which are included in the following list shall not appear in pictures produced by the members of this Association, irrespective of the manner in which they are treated:

1. Pointed profanity-by either title or lip-this includes the words "God," "Lord," "Jesus" "Christ" (unless they be used reverently in connection with proper religious ceremonies), "hell," "damn," "Gawd," and every other profane and vulgar expression however it may be spelled;
2. Any licentious or suggestive nudity-in fact or in silhouette; and any lecherous or licentious notice thereof by other characters in the picture;
3. The illegal traffic in drugs;
4. Any inference of sex perversion;
5. White slavery;
6. Miscegenation (sex relationship between the white and black races);
7. Sex hygiene and venereal diseases;
8. Scenes of actual childbirth-in fact or in silhouette;
9. Children's sex organs;
10. Ridicule of the clergy;
11. Willful offence to any nation, race or creed;

And it be further resolved, That special care be exercised in the manner in which the following subjects are treated, to the end that vulgarity and suggestiveness may be eliminated and that good taste may be emphasized:

1. The use of the flag;
2. International relations (avoiding picturizing in an unfavorable light another country's religion, history, institutions, prominent people and citizenry);
3. Arson;
4. The use of firearms;
5. Theft, robbery, safe-cracking, and dynamiting of trains, mines, buildings, etc. (having in mind the effect which a too-detailed description of these may have upon the moron);
6. Brutality and possible gruesomeness;
7. Technique of committing murder by whatever method;
8. Methods of smuggling;
9. Third-degree methods
10. Actual hangings or electrocutions as legal punishment for crime;
11. Sympathy for criminals;
12. Attitude toward public characters and institutions;
13. Sedition;
14. Apparent cruelty to children and animals;
15. Branding of people or animals;
16. The sale of women, or of a woman selling her virtue;
17. Rape or attempted rape;
18. First-night scenes;
19. Man and woman in bed together;
20. Deliberate seduction of girls;

21. The institution of marriage;
22. Surgical operations;
23. The use of drugs;
24. Titles or scenes having to do with law enforcement or law-enforcing officers;
25. Excessive or lustful kissing, particularly when one character or the other is a “heavy”.

Quoted from Gerald Mast (ed.), *The Movies in our Midst: Documents in the Cultural History of Film in America*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1982, pág. 213-214.

APPENDIX 2: THE “CENSORED ELEVEN”

1. Hittin’ the Trail for Hallelujah Land (1931, Rudolph Ising)
2. Sunday Go to Meetin’ Time (1936, Friz Freleng)
3. Clean Pastures (1937, Friz Freleng)
4. Uncle Tom’s Bungalow (1937, Tex Avery)
5. Jungle Jitters (1938, Friz Freleng)
6. The Isle of Pingo Pongo (1938, Tex Avery)
7. All This and Rabbit Stew (1941, Tex Avery)
8. Coal Black and de Sebben Dwarfs (1943, Robert Clampett)
9. Tin Pan Alley Cats (1943, Robert Clampett)
10. Angel Puss (1944, Chuck Jones)
11. Goldilocks and the Jivin’ Bears (1944, Friz Freleng)