

RESEARCH PAPER

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THE VISIONARY FROM WACKYLAND: BOB CLAMPETT'S EARLY FILMS

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Taking the example of early films by Bob Clampett, one of the most important animators of Classical Hollywood cinema, the paper explores the dichotomy between the so-called artistic animation and animation as a product of the Hollywood assembly lines and mass production system. While the former is seen as a proper art form and has a venerable treatment in animation studies, the latter is underappreciated, neglected and often dealt with in a patronizing way. This dichotomy is the main reason why the field of animation studies is very often elitist and full of biased and unbalanced approaches, wherein modernist works are seriously analysed, while the lighter, entertainment-oriented Hollywood fare is dismissed with condescension. However, as also argued by Fawell, the light touch and elegance of these films today makes them among the most significant works to come out of Hollywood.

Bob Clampett directed 87 films in his career and the present paper deals with his early phase, namely the 40 *Looney Tunes*, which were all made in black-and-white and starred Porky. Although his later phase is beyond doubt more important and considered today among the most intriguing contributions to Hollywood animation, many of his early works also brim with energy and a feeling of vitality. Clampett's early phase has so far been inadequately explored, but is also of immense importance for any serious analysis of the development of his style.

Key words: animation, classical Hollywood, elitism, vitalism, energy, vitality, style, surrealism, deranged humour

INTRODUCTION

Although he was one of the most intriguing and versatile animators of the classical Hollywood period, Bob Clampett's work has not received the kind of recognition usually reserved for Tex Avery or Chuck Jones (fellow colleagues at Warner Brothers). When discussing his *oeuvre*, the focus is usually on the

latter phase of his career, while his early work is most often ignored. This paper focuses solely on the early period of his career to 1940, arguing that this period, although inferior when compared to his later work, is of critical importance for understanding the development of his style.

The paper is divided into three sections. The first section (1.1. – 1.3.) analyses the crucial reasons for the critical neglect of his work – the typically elitist approach exemplified here by Bendazzi, where the mass production practices of the classical Hollywood period were deemed unworthy of serious consideration, and the belief, exemplified by Danks, that Clampett's early films are simply rudimentary, although the same could be said about both Avery and Jones. This section concludes with an untypically positive assessment of Clampett's early career (provided by Milton Gray), where he argues that Clampett was chosen to direct *Looney Tunes* due to his exceptional talent. Since all forty of Clampett's early films belong to the *Looney Tunes* series, the author also analyses the difference between the *Merrie Melodies* and this series.

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The second section offers a stylistic, as well as a qualitative analysis of Clampett's early films, wherein the forty films belonging to this phase are divided into three qualitative categories, with eight films singled out as Clampett's most important early contributions.

The last section offers case studies of three films which are of crucial importance for understanding the evolution of Clampett's style. Along with the analysis of *Porky in Wackyland*, his most famous early film, this part also examines two often overlooked, but very accomplished works – *Injun Trouble* and *The Lone Stranger and Porky*.

1.1. THE ELITIST APPROACH TO CLASSICAL HOLLYWOOD ANIMATION

One of the most important reasons why classical Hollywood animators have so far been mostly underappreciated by the majority of animation historians is the prevailing elitism of animation studies, wherein there exists a sharp division between the so-called serious *auteurs* such as Norman McLaren, John Hubley or Alexandre Alexeïeff, on the one hand, and the Hollywood animators of the Golden Age, who are alluded to as entertainers and craftsmen much more than artists. One typical approach¹ can be found in the famous book by Giannalberto

¹ See also the excerpt from the book by John Halas (1987: 29), where he gives the following account of Warner's animators: "The Tex Avery, Chuck Jones and Bob Clampett cartoons

Bendazzi – *Cartoons – One Hundred Years of Cinema Animation*, where, in his overview of the output of the Warner Brothers company, he states:

In the filmography of this production company, no single film stands out. *Gold Diggers of '49* (1936), *A Wild Hare* (1940), *Coal Black and de Sebben Dwarfs* (1943) deserve mention for historical rather than artistic reasons. The first film, which marks Tex Avery's debut, shows the artist's developing style; with the second film, Bugs Bunny's adventures began; the third, directed by Bob Clampett, was indeed a good film, a sort of animated *Hallelujah!* starring an all-black cast. As a matter of fact, in the case of Warner Brothers, to search for a masterpiece would be a respectable but short-minded critical approach. Although these films were made by prominent filmmakers, who did excellent creative work, they were also a series of productions in which quantity counted as much as quality. The repetition of a formula was no less important than the skilled variations in the formula itself, and each episode belonged to a saga without beginning or end. (2006: 97)

Although Bendazzi acknowledges the “excellent creative work” of these prominent filmmakers, whose characters “were manipulated in a virtuoso manner within a unity of time, place and action” (2006: 97), he does not mention any examples of this excellent virtuoso work and it does not entail for him that these are great works of animation art because for him “in the case of Warner Brothers, to search for a masterpiece would be a respectable but short-minded critical approach.” Bendazzi concludes his overview of the company's output with a similar approach: “Despite a few exceptions (above all, the irrepressible Tex Avery), the style of each film was established by the animated protagonist even more than by the artist-director (whose style could be distinguished from time to time only by an attentive observer)” (2006: 97).

achieved world-wide success, and it was quite useless for European animators to try to copy them. They had an American flavour, combining childlike visual invention, good clean fun, slapstick humour and draughtsmanship of the highest order. Few attempted to criticize human failings, social conditions or psychological complexities: the problems of the world were left to politicians and writers. These films were simple to follow and were uncomplicated in their form and content: if there was any moralism behind the story-lines, the general message was that, quite simply, good must on all account win over bad. The Big Bad Wolf must be outwitted and punished. Even before the Second World War, however, it appears that some of the steam ran out of the American cartoon industry. Repetitions were frequent and it is possible that the public became too accustomed to the gag cartoon format.” Somewhat ironically, it is generally considered today that Warner's animators started making their best films approximately from 1941, when the United States had just entered World War II.

There are certainly intriguing elements cited by Bendazzi, like the quantitative nature of the series production, wherein producers like Leon Schlesinger were interested mostly in the financial aspect of animation, and the subsequent homogenization, which is an inseparable element of mass production. All Hollywood animation is the result of mass production practices, but the same argument can be applied to almost all filmmakers working in Hollywood, a place where quantity far outweighs quality. Even some of the best directors working there, e.g., Frank Capra, John Ford, Ernst Lubitsch or Raoul Walsh, made many films that were made mostly due to the constant demands for mass production and the pressures of the studio executives. But does this mean that it would be short-minded to search for a masterpiece by *these* directors, too?

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An instructive example is the output of Michael Curtiz. In his enormous opus, consisting of more than fifty films directed by him in Europe, and more than a hundred just in Hollywood, he made a multitude of undistinguished films such as *I'll See You in My Dreams* (1951), *The Story of Will Rogers* (1952), *The Boy from Oklaboma* (1954) or *The Comancheros* (1961), but at the same time he also directed a great number of acknowledged Hollywood classics such as *Angels with Dirty Faces* (1938), *Casablanca* (1942), *Mildred Pierce* (1945) and *The Breaking Point* (1950). *Michael Curtiz: The Greatest Director You Never Heard Of*, a documentary film with a very appropriate title, mentions that William Friedkin found the inspiration for his *Exorcist* in Curtiz's *Doctor X* (1932), which he considers an equally successful film, and that Steven Spielberg was inspired by Curtiz's *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938) when making his *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981). According to Spielberg: "You couldn't imagine the man that made *Casablanca* also made *Yankee Doodle Dandee*. And it's hard to believe the guy that did that did *Mildred Pierce*. I don't think there's ever been a filmmaker in the great history of our business that is as eclectic and has such a variety in his body of work as Curtiz" (qtd. in Leva 2012). However, due to his extreme eclecticism and a versatile style that he could adapt to almost any genre, he was often neglected by critics and film historians. To use another quote from the same documentary film – "The problem with Michael Curtiz is that he could do everything. You can't pigeonhole him, and therefore it's taken a long time for him to get his due" (Kati Marton qtd. in Leva 2012). A master of fluid visual style characterized by very elegant camera movements and inventive camera angles, his work is also distinguished by efficient and economic storytelling typical of the great Hollywood filmmakers, often derisively called "professionals", to avoid any connection of their work with art.

1.2. CRITICAL NEGLECT AND THE IMPORTANCE OF CLAMPETT'S EARLY FILMS

It is sometimes very demanding to analyse the work of directors who were making their films during the period of Classical Hollywood because almost all of them made an amazingly great number of films, many of which were just barely adequate or even less than that. Samuel Goldwyn Jr.'s description of the work ethic of Michael Curtiz is applicable to the majority of filmmakers working in Hollywood: "He told me that he was always very proud of the fact that he would finish a picture on a Saturday and Sunday he'd read a new script and Monday he'd come in and be ready to talk about it" (qtd. in Leva 2012). The same hectic schedule was not reserved for live-action films only; it was a practice that was equally pronounced in the animation industry. All the directors working for Warner Brothers made a huge number of films. In a very short time span of just ten years, from 1937 to 1946, Bob Clampett directed 86 animated films for Warner Brothers² and many of these are just ordinary, run-of-the-mill cartoons.³ Tex Avery was working for Warner Brothers for seven years, from 1935 to 1941, and in that short period he directed 61 films.⁴ Chuck Jones was directing for Warner Brothers from 1938 until 1962, when his contract was terminated by the studio, and in that period he directed 206 *Looney Tunes* and *Merrie Melodies* and eleven entries in the *Snafu* series.⁵ By comparison, Yuri Norstein, one of the most renowned masters of animation, directed just seven films in the period of twelve years, from 1968 to 1979, when he directed *The Tale of Tales*, his sole animated film of longer duration. Frédéric Back, one of the most acclaimed Canadian animators, directed only nine animated films between 1970 and 1993.

When Bob Clampett directed *Porky in Wackyland* in 1938, this was just one of the ten animated films he directed that year. In 1943 Clampett directed eight films, most of them high quality productions, including some of the most acclaimed American animated films like *Coal Black and de Sebben Dwarfs* and *Tin Pan Alley Cats*.⁶ Clampett's output of 86 films directed for

² 82 of them belonged either to *Looney Tunes* or its sister series *Merrie Melodies*.

³ Clampett made just one more theatrical cartoon after leaving Warner Brothers – *It's a Grand Old Nag* (1947), produced by Republic Pictures.

⁴ After a quarrel with Leon Schlesinger, his last few films were finished by Clampett; two of them were released in 1942.

⁵ See Maltin 1987, Schneider 1988, Beck and Friedwald 1989.

⁶ Both of these films belong to *The Censored Eleven*, a group of eleven Warner Brothers shorts removed from United States television due to their offensive racial stereotyping.

Warner Brothers⁷ can be neatly divided into two distinct phases. His first forty animated films were all made in black and white, they starred Porky Pig and belonged to the *Looney Tunes* series.⁸ He was finally given a chance to direct a *Merrie Melodies* cartoon in 1941 with *Goofy Groceries*, one of his most memorable films and the beginning of a new phase in his career, in which Clampett would direct some of Hollywood's most celebrated animated films.⁹ Even though Clampett's contribution to American animation has become more recognized today, the first phase of his career, except for the landmark *Porky in Wackyland* (1938), has usually been neglected, and it is widely believed that the majority of his important films were made in the period from 1942 to 1946. A typical analysis of his early work can be found in an article by Adrian Danks:

His early black and white cartoons were uneven in their conception and execution, highlighting his limitations as a fluid animator. During the next five years, Clampett did direct several important Warners cartoons, and he was integral to the development (if not the invention, as he often claimed) of such characters as Porky Pig, Daffy Duck and Bugs Bunny. Nevertheless, with the exception of such cartoons as *Porky in Wackyland* (1938), *Polar Pals* (1939) and *The Film Fan* (1939), Clampett's often rudimentary early work is eclipsed by that of Avery and Frank Tashlin. It is not until 1941–42 that Clampett's cartoons truly cohere into a dynamic and expressive "whole". From 1942 until 1946 many of the greatest cartoons produced at Warner Bros. were directed by Clampett. (2005)

Although it is easy to accept the argument put forward by Danks that the cartoons made in the latter phase are Clampett's key accomplishments, his early work has not received due appreciation. *Porky in Wackyland* is a masterpiece of American animation and *Polar Pals* is an adequate film typical of Clampett of that period, but there are other important films that are missing from this overview of his early career. It would also be difficult to agree with

⁷ Clampett also made one film with Mr. Hook (*Tokyo Woes*, 1945), two entries in the *Snafu* series, and *Any Bonds Today?*, a 1942 propaganda film.

⁸ Clampett made 59 *Looney Tunes* and 23 *Merrie Melodies*. The first 48 cartoons he directed for the *Looney Tunes* series were all made in black and white, while the last eleven (starting with *The Hep Cat* in 1942) were made in colour. All the *Merrie Melodies* films were made in colour.

⁹ *The 100 Greatest Looney Tunes Cartoons*, edited by Jerry Beck, features 21 cartoons directed by Bob Clampett. Friz Freleng is also represented with 21 films, while only Chuck Jones has a larger selection of films (37).

the statement that Clampett's early work was eclipsed by Tashlin and Avery, whose early career was also very often characterized by average or even subpar results. The 21 films Tashlin directed for Warner between 1936 and 1938¹⁰ and the 61 films made by Avery for the same studio between 1935 and 1942 probably constitute a stronger body of work, but the difference is not substantial. Avery's work for Warner was very inconsistent, which was also emphasized in Joe Adamson's *Tex Avery: King of Cartoons*:

Pleasing as many of these are, there are only two Warner films, out of sixty made in six years, that are worthy of the name Tex Avery. One is *Porky's Duck Hunt* and the other is *A Wild Hare*. One gave birth to Daffy Duck and the other spawned Bugs Bunny. One set the tone for all Tex Avery and all Warner Brothers cartoons to follow, and the other created the character that toppled Disney from his unassailable throne. (1975: 50)

This account of Avery's output during his Warner Brothers period is somewhat too harsh and ignores his multiple other important films such as *The Village Smithy* (1936), *Little Red Walking Hood* (1937), *Cinderella Meets Fella* (1938), *Thugs with Dirty Mugs* (1939) or *Porky's Preview* (1941), but there are very few, if any, animation historians who would dispute the fact that Avery's Warner Brothers phase was a sort of training ground for his more accomplished films made at MGM, which represent the pinnacle of his career. However, his MGM output is just a continuation of trends that he had already started at Warners', where he polished and brought to perfection his wild and exaggerated humour, the sense of timing and pacing, and created a wonderfully absurd universe unified by a firm logical progression and the accumulation of insane gags. Although his Warner Brothers films were often slow and tame when compared to the works made at MGM, they were indispensable for the formation and evolution of his style. A very similar assessment can be applied to Clampett's early phase, which is also inferior when compared to his later masterpieces. However, we can find in them a germ of many ideas that will come to fruition only later in his career and are also an inevitable starting point for any serious discussion of Clampett's contribution to animation.

¹⁰ Tashlin joined the Disney studio in 1938, but came back to Warner in 1943, so these films can also be seen as his early phase.

1.3. CLAMPETT'S SIGNIFICANCE FOR THE *LOONEY TUNES* SERIES

Warner Brothers animation was divided into two different series, *Merrie Melodies* and *Looney Tunes*, and up to 1942, there was a big difference between them. Both series started in black and white; *Looney Tunes* showcased cartoon stars, mostly Bosko in the beginning, while *Merrie Melodies* were one-shot musical cartoons that had to take advantage of Warner's ownership of several music publishers, promoting the popular songs of the day. At least one complete chorus of a song owned by Warner had to be incorporated into each cartoon. *Honeymoon Hotel* (1934), a part of the *Merrie Melodies* series, was Warner's first animated film in colour and from that year *Merrie Melodies* were all made in colour, while *Looney Tunes* continued to be made in black and white. In 1942, Bob Clampett directed *The Hep Cat*, the first *Looney Tune* made in colour, and in 1943 this series also went all-colour and the distinction between the two series was completely lost.

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Because of the use of colour, *Merrie Melodies* was a considerably more prestigious series and only the most important directors in the studio were allowed to make them, such as Freleng and Avery. While this series can be thought of as Leon Schlesinger's attempt to compete with Disney's similarly structured and massively successful *Silly Symphonies*, *Looney Tunes* were considered second-tier cartoons and reserved for beginners, including Clampett. Milton Gray, however, offers a different perspective¹¹ on the role of Bob Clampett in creating *Looney Tunes*:

Disney and MGM had much bigger budgets than Leon had to make cartoons with. And so it was very difficult to try to compete. Now, to amortize that cost, they had a very low-budget series called the *Looney Tunes*, which were all in black-and-white. As the studio was growing, they were adding new people. They put all the new people, the beginners, in the black-and-white unit. Now, Bob Clampett, he had to do the *Looney Tunes*, while the other guys did the *Merrie Melodies*. And they contributed a few *Looney Tunes* to fill out the schedule, but mostly they were done by Bob Clampett's unit. This is my opinion, based on a lot of circumstantial evidence. I really believe Leon put Bob in charge of that to save it, because Bob Clampett had all these great ideas. (qtd. in *Behind the Tunes: Man from Wackyland* 2004)

¹¹ See the documentary film *Man from Wackyland: The Art of Bob Clampett* (2004), made for the *Looney Tunes Golden Collection: Vol. 2* DVD box set.

2. STYLISTIC INFLUENCES AND CHARACTERISTICS OF CLAMPETT'S EARLY FILMS

Along with Chuck Jones, Bob Clampett was one of the two closest associates of Tex Avery when he came to work for Leon Schlesinger, but cartoons made by Clampett are much closer in spirit to Avery than those made by Jones and he may be considered a proper heir of Avery's unique style. While Jones was mostly influenced by Walt Disney's films, at least in the beginning of his career, making some of the cutest and most untypical cartoons in the Warner canon, e.g., *Tom Thumb in Trouble* (1940), *Joe Glow, the Firefly* (1941), or the complete Sniffles series, Clampett was pursuing a very different path, creating some of their wildest and looniest cartoons, many of which were made in the early phase of his career and will be elaborated further in the paper.

Although Tex Avery was probably the biggest influence in his career, Clampett had a plethora of other interests and he was equally influenced by the works of the Fleischer brothers and their surreal visual gags, Disney's personality animation, and also Hugh Harman and Rudolf Ising, the very first creators of *Looney Tunes*. Many of his early films such as *Porky's Five & Ten* (1938) and *Injun Trouble* (1938) show a trait shared with the films of the Fleischer brothers and Harman and Ising: a blithe disregard for the overall structure of the film, with more attention paid to small and random details than to the narrative conventions. However, it is this very same disregard for the conventions of the properly structured cartoon and the emphasis on silly and incidental gags that gives a rambunctious energy to his cartoons and a carefree, cheerful spirit that is the prevailing structural element of the Fleischer brothers, and also of the most successful cartoons by Harman and Ising. The Hollywood cartoons of the thirties gradually adopted Disney's personality animation with its fully animated characters and the increasingly realistic character designs, and Clampett was no exception, but he also retained the older animation technique – rubber-hose animation, giving his characters incredible elasticity. John Kricfalusi argues¹² that Clampett was such a memorable director because he used the best of all techniques, the old and the new: "Clampett was the only director that, as all the studios supposedly improved during the thirties and added new techniques, didn't discard the old techniques. [...] So he kept the early cartooning techniques, added acting, added solidity..." (qtd. in the DVD comment of *Buckaroo Bugs* 1944).

¹² In the DVD comment of *Buckaroo Bugs*. *Looney Tunes Golden Collection: Volume 5*, DVD 3. Commentary track (Eddie Fitzgerald, John Kricfalusi, and Kali Fontecchio).

Clampett's films teem with gags, are full of cheesy puns and might feel too crowded, but at the same time they revel in their nonsense and their unrestrained humour. Many of his films contain topical gags whose meaning is lost on modern audiences and which can be appreciated only if the spectator is acquainted with their context, but they are also a great indicator of the cultural influences of that period. Clampett was interested in everything that was popular and fashionable at the time, from popular music, strips and magazines to movies, and it is no wonder that he was also very much influenced by Hollywood films, from silent films with Douglas Fairbanks, Harold Lloyd or Buster Keaton to modern screwball comedies:

During 1937, I became very enthused about the newest trend in feature film comedy, where, in place of comedians in baggy pants, normal-appearing actors were performing hilarious comedy in a more underplayed and sophisticated manner. But, when you least expected it, there would be a broad comedy breakout. These films, which began with *My Man Godfrey*, were known in the trade as "screwball" comedies. I was looking for a character with which to try and capture the brash but sophisticated spirit of this new comedy style. (Barrier and Gray 2008)

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His cartoons show, at the same time, the influence of the surreal and often quite bizarre cartoons of the 1910s and 1920s, which were seldom well structured and were often just an accumulation of very loosely connected gags, as well as the nuanced approach of the Disney animators. While action and broad comedy was often the only goal of the earlier cartoons, and there was no place for elaboration of character psychology, Clampett shows in his cartoons that he is equally interested in both the wild, impossible gags and the characters, although a full refinement of this approach can be noticed only in his later phase, when his animators proved able to visualize all the nuances of a complex character psychology found in his best films. Clampett's insistence on a barrage of gags was also the approach of a filmmaker who was conscious of the limitations of his animators at the time. Clampett notes: "Since we couldn't depend on animation, we were depending upon surefire gags; like the sign gags, or something blowing up and coming down as something else... was always a tremendous laugh" (qtd. in Barrier 1999: 349). Clampett was working with Chuck Jones first, and then with Norm McCabe, but none of them could capture the exaggerated insanity of his ideas at that time. They were given justice only after Tex Avery left for MGM and Clampett inherited his unit, which included Bob McKimson, the best draftsman in the studio,

and Rod Scribner, whose exaggerated and vigorous animation, inspired by the fluid approach of newspaper cartoonist George Lichty, perfectly suited his temperament. Although the *auteur* theory has often been singled out as the most successful approach to classifying the best films, the approach suggested by John Fawell, wherein the contributions of the greatest collaborations are also given weight, is an equally inspired one (see Fawell 2008: 18).

The best source for studying Clampett's work is probably the aforementioned interview conducted with Clampett by Michael Barrier and Milton Gray. This interview reveals the different strands of Clampett's work; it shows that fluid personality animation was his goal from the very beginning, although he would have to wait for the most capable collaborators in order to accomplish it. Clampett admits that Disney films were always a source of much inspiration, particularly their use of personality animation, which showed him the way how to make his characters palpable and vivid. Clampett describes his function when animating his films in the following fashion:

Primarily as a storyteller and an actor. Not an actor in the sense that I appear on the screen myself, but in the sense that I act through my characters. In finalizing my scripts, I always create my characters' complete performance—each movement, facial expression, voice inflection, and nuance; you know, each gesture of the hand, a lift of the eyebrow, everything. If I'm doing Porky Pig I don't stand off removed from Porky directing him, I get inside of Porky and I think like Porky, I talk like Porky, I have a s-s-sp-speech p-p-p-problem. I walk like Porky, and I feel like Porky. I, too, was short and chubby as a child, and I know exactly how Porky feels. (qtd. in Barrier and Gray 2008)

Before making *Goofy Groceries*, his first *Merrie Melodies* cartoon and the beginning of his second phase, Clampett made 40 *Looney Tunes*, all featuring Porky, whose appearance was a necessary prerequisite. These 40 films can be divided into three different categories. The first category comprises his eight best films made in that period, including *Porky in Wackyland*, his seminal film. These already contain in embryonic form many elements that would be further refined in his second, mature phase, such as the predominance of surrealistic elements, the inherent craziness of his screwball characters, and a refined feeling for editing and timing. The following eight films could be singled out as the best representatives of his emerging deranged and zany world, which served as Clampett's trademark: *Porky's Five & Ten* (1938), *Injun Trouble* (1938), *Porky & Daffy* (1938), *Porky in Wackyland* (1938), *Porky in Egypt* (1938), *The Daffy Doc* (1938), *The Lone Stranger and Porky* (1939) and *Porky's Poor*

Fish (1940). Except for *Porky in Wackyland*, the majority of these films have been sadly neglected by animation historians, who mostly concentrated on Clampett's latter phase. Six out of these eight films were made in 1938 and *The Lone Stranger and Porky* was the first of the fourteen films that he made in 1939. *The Lone Stranger and Porky*, one of his best early works, was the fifteenth film made by Clampett. After that film, he entered a period of serious decline, and only one of the twenty-five films that followed can be considered satisfactory.

We can thus see that even in his first phase, before making *Goofy Groceries*, Clampett had two completely contrasting phases, with the majority of his intriguing works made before 1939. Almost all of his eight arguably least successful films¹³ – *Get Rich Quick Porky* (1937), *Rover's Rival* (1937), *Wise Quacks* (1939), *Porky's Hotel* (1939), *The Film Fan* (1939), *Ali-Baba Bound* (1940), *The Chewin' Bruin* (1940), and *Patient Porky* (1940), were made in 1939 and 1940, the worst phase of his career.¹⁴ That leaves us with 24 films in the early phase. These can be considered rather average and not completely satisfying as a whole, but they nevertheless contain many intriguing elements and are also instrumental for the analysis of his style. In his overview of Clampett's early career, Barrier (1999: 347) describes how Clampett, who was only twenty-four when he started directing in 1937, persuaded his executives to hire his high-school friend Ernest "Flash" Gee to help him with writing gags. Gee was not a focused gagman who could spend the day sitting in his office, but once he started talking, he was very funny and full of ideas. The two young men would often spend the night playing ping-pong, discussing the details of the story. Barrier is right when he concludes that "the comedy in Clampett's black-and-white cartoons was always the kind of stuff that a couple of high-school chums might have come up with over a Ping-Pong table" (1999: 347). Indeed, the majority of the 24 'average' films from the early part of his career contain many examples of this type of silly humour.

However, all of these films also contain scenes that are imbued with a joyful, easygoing spirit that is an essential ingredient of Clampett's style, and which is so reminiscent of the works by the Fleischer brothers and Harman and Ising. When analysing *Porky in Wackyland*, Maltin notes that a similarly imaginative treatment

¹³ The first two films from this list were his second and third film.

¹⁴ From 1941, when he directed *Goofy Groceries*, until 1946, when he directed his last film for Warner, *The Big Snooze*, Clampett directed 46 films (including *Any Bonds Today?*), and only three of them can be considered failures: *We, the Animals – Squeak!* (1941), *Porky's Pooch* (1941), and *Wacky Blackout* (1942), the only one not featuring Porky.

also permeated Clampett's more routine works, which made them very appealing. Writing about *Porky's Five & Ten*, Maltin observes that "the gags are plentiful and ingenious, but it's the happy spirit of the cartoon that makes it so endearing" (1987: 238). This same jovial approach, coupled with moments of energetic—even frenetic—pacing, make his early films, although often unfocused and loosely structured, quite charming and special. Some of the reasons for why Clampett's films are among the most memorable of that period include his frantic characters and the constant influx of wild and impossible gags. The frenzied energy gives these films an incredible sense of vitality, a fact recognized by many animation historians, including Danks, Beck or Barrier: "What is most arresting in many of Clampett's black-and-white cartoons is not their schoolboy comedy but their crazy, restless energy – the sort of energy that might be expected to show itself in the work of a 'very, very imaginative' director who was working himself free of severe emotional restraints" (Barrier 1999: 348).

Porky & Daffy (1938) is a typical example of the fast-paced approach and anarchic humour that can be found in his early films. The boxing match between Daffy and an aggressive rooster is full of surreal and outlandish sight gags and exaggerated and impossible movements of the characters. The quick editing rhythm resembles the similarly frantic pacing that was the dominant characteristic of many of Tashlin's cartoons from the same period. The impossible ways in which Daffy manages to escape his opponent who is chasing after him, including riding an invisible bicycle, are a great example of the youthful energy and wacky humour typical of Clampett. Even Daffy, the most exaggerated and compatible character Clampett ever worked with, is surprised by the fantastic powers he possesses when he addresses the audience: "I'm so crazy, I don't know this is impossible". All three main characters in the film (Daffy, the rooster and the pelican referee) show Clampett's growing mastery over the nuances of personality animation. This film is also a continuation of the subversive humour that can be found in many of Clampett's films. The design of the pelican's beak has more than a passing resemblance to the human male anatomy, while in his previous film, *Porky's Party*, the silk-worm knits items such as bras and panties.¹⁵ These two cartoons are also a great example

¹⁵ One of the most subversive gags in the whole Clampett *oeuvre* can be found in *Porky's Picnic*, in which we see a little boy named Pinky attacking a squirrel, trying to cut his head off. Probably the most infamous scene in any Clampett film is the end of the director's cut of *Hare Ribbin'*, in which Bugs Bunny shoots the dog through the mouth. The scene was altered for its theatrical release, but Clampett's original cut can be seen in the *Looney Tunes Golden Collection Volume 5* DVD set.

of how some of the most moving characters in Clampett's bizarre universe can have just a secondary role in a cartoon, but nevertheless be extremely energetic and memorable. The pelican from *Porky & Daffy*, the goose from *Porky's Party*, the amorous horse from *The Lone Stranger and Porky*, the hilarious mouse from *Pied Piper Porky* and the suicidal canary from *The Sour Puss*¹⁶ are just a small sample of the extremely amusing characters who contribute to the recognizably crazy energy of Clampett's cartoons.

Clampett's cartoons include a very strong sense of time and space and this has a twofold effect: on the one hand, these films are an intriguing time capsule and a strong reflection of the period in which they were made, featuring the celebrities of the period, most commonly from Hollywood films and radio shows. On the other hand, this very trait makes some of these films more suitable for an American audience rather than an international one, as those outside America may not be familiar with the origin and background of many of the jokes. There are many cartoons which feature radio stars of the period, the radio being an immensely popular medium at the time. *Porky's Hero Agency* features Porky dreaming of being the famous Greek hero Porkykarkus, which is an allusion to the character Parkyakarkas from a popular radio show hosted by Eddie Cantor. Cantor appears in *Porky's Naughty Nephew* as one of the participants in a swimming race. When he bangs his head into a buoy, he exclaims "At last, a buoy!", a reference to the well-known fact that all five of his children were daughters, often a source of humour in his shows. Lew Lehr's famous catchphrase "Monkeys is the cwaziest peoples" also appeared in many Warner cartoons and Clampett used variations of it in *Porky in Egypt* and *The Sour Puss. Africa Squeaks*, apart from featuring some of the most racist imagery in the entire Warner canon, parodies both the live-action film *Stanley and Livingstone* and a radio program featuring Kay Kyser. All of these jokes must have been hilarious for a 1930s audience but have become dated with the passage of time.

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3. FROM *IN7UN TROUBLE* TO *THE LONE STRANGER*

The crazy, unbridled energy of compelling supporting characters will often lead a cartoon in a completely different direction, showing a blithe disregard

¹⁶ When Porky's canary sees the cat kissing the mouse, he says "Well, now I've seen everything!" and shoots himself in the head. This would become one of the common tropes in Clampett's cartoons, as well as the shark's ending line "Pussycats is de cwaziest peoples!", one of the many hilarious variations caricaturing Lew Lehr's popular radio catchphrase.

for the storytelling conventions of a steady narrative progression. In Clampett's cartoons, anything can happen, and any character can completely change the course of action. The central theme and the marginal events often overlap; a seemingly insignificant character becomes the dominant one and the fringes of the cartoon are given the same narrative importance, which gives them a tremendous liveliness. While many of Clampett's cartoons can be analysed as the embodiment of the extraordinary vitality so typical of his approach, three of them deserve special consideration: *Injun Trouble* (1938), *Porky in Wackyland* (1938), the most famous film of his early period,¹⁷ and *The Lone Stranger and Porky* (1939).

Injun Trouble is perhaps the first wholly satisfactory film of Clampett's career. However, the film has often been neglected in animation histories, partly because it was, due to its racial stereotyping, very rarely shown on television.¹⁸ In this cartoon, a spoof of the Western genre,¹⁹ Porky is a pioneer leading his wagon train from New York to California, into the territory controlled by the gigantic Injun Joe. While all of Clampett's previous films, with the exception of *Porky's Five & Ten*, had very inconsistent pacing and uneven gags, *Injun Trouble* is a big leap forward in terms of the director's control. In this film, the rhythm is sustained throughout, and Clampett manages to capture a hyperkinetic energy that is similar to the comedies of Buster Keaton or Harold Lloyd. While *Porky's Five & Ten* had some random successful moments of surreal humour, it is much more sustained here and the film is perhaps his first work in which the type of humour could really be described as zany and looney. The scenes in which the mountain splits in half, the gigantic Indian appears, and eats the top of the mountain like a bowl of ice cream, or the final moments of Injun Joe, who cuts a tree trunk into a Statue of Liberty only to be defeated by being

¹⁷ *The 50 Greatest Cartoons: As Selected by 1,000 Animation Professionals* by animation historian Jerry Beck comprises the fifty most critically-acclaimed cartoons made in North America. There are seventeen cartoons made by Warner Brothers, five of which were made by Clampett: *Porky in Wackyland* (1938), *Coal Black and de Sebben Dwarfs* (1943), *A Corny Concerto* (1943), *The Great Piggy Bank Robbery* (1946) and *Book Revue* (1946).

¹⁸ Many of Clampett's cartoons have for a long period been available only in copies of very inferior quality, which certainly contributed to their lesser critical evaluation. The situation completely changed in 2017, when Warner Archive released the 5-disc DVD set *Porky Pig 101*, which collected 99 black-and-white *Looney Tunes* and 2 *Merrie Melodies* made in colour. Since all of Clampett's first 40 films featured Porky, they all appeared in this collection. Although interpositives or duplicate prints were used for the restoration instead of the original negatives, many films were remastered for the first time, making them accessible for the first time in high quality prints.

¹⁹ Bob Clampett remade the film in 1945 as *Wagon Heels*, which was, although more polished, slightly less successful.

tickled by a bearded hillbilly named Sloppy Moe, are just some examples of the well-executed and typically deranged gags.

The constant influx of gags reminds us of Harman and Ising's films from the very beginning of the *Looney Tunes* series, with the difference that all the elements of the film structure are much more organically linked in *Injun Trouble*, from the fluid and vigorous animation, the intriguing and well-rounded characters to the steady and balanced rhythm. Apart from the Keatonish energy and kineticism, the film is imbued with a mixture of absurd, bizarre gags and an often silly childishness that captures the happy spirit of unbridled humour with great skill. Although the character of Injun Joe can be seen today as an example of unacceptable racist humour, he is much more likely the result of "the Clampett treatment", where almost everyone in his films was shown in a bizarre and exaggerated way to enhance their cartooniness and to partake in his absurd, wacky universe. Sloppy Moe, the hillbilly character in the cartoon, could also be seen through this problematic stereotypical prism, but he is much more likely just another goofy and exaggerated character in Clampett's and Warner's "evil", anti-Disney empire.

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After this film and the aforementioned *Porky's Party* and *Porky & Daffy*, Clampett made a film which is universally acknowledged as one of the undisputed jewels of Hollywood animation – *Porky in Wackyland*. Described by Charles Solomon (1994: 103) as an example of unbounded imagination and "an animator's delight" and by Leonard Maltin (1987: 237) as "an eye-popping tribute to the unlimited horizons of the animated cartoon", the film features the strangest gallery of unusual, bizarre creatures seen in the animated films up to that time, surpassing anything that had ever been seen even in the works of the Fleischer brothers, the previous masters of cartoon lunacy. A bird with a waffle pan head, a three-headed beast resembling The Three Stooges, a two-headed dog, a duck singing "Mammy!", and a scooter-like creature are just some of the denizens of this wildly surreal landscape. Clampett was very proud of the film, emphasizing its great artistic value and its influence on modern animation:²⁰ "I designed the backgrounds in the manner of surrealistic, Picasso-like modern art, and it got all sorts of critical attention. This was the first of its kind. What we were trying to do, UPA did beautifully after us" (qtd. in Barrier and Gray 2008).

²⁰ In the same interview, Clampett mentions that the critic of the LA. Herald called *Porky in Wackyland* "a masterpiece of preposterous fantasy", while *Injun Trouble* and *The Lone Stranger and Porky* won important animation awards.

As argued elsewhere,²¹ the film is a very successful mixture of incredibly surreal moments and anarchic humour in the vein of the Marx Brothers, proving that the output of the best Warner animators is, along with the screwball comedy cycle, the most intriguing successor of the glorious silent era of American comedy and the classic films of Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton and Harold Lloyd.²² Featuring extreme distortions of the characters, the film is a wonderful example of the aforementioned “hybrid” animation style in which Clampett used both Disney’s newly-developed principles of personality animation as well as rubber-hose animation in the vein of the Fleischer brothers, which proved very suitable for the impossible elasticity of the characters. Clampett’s *oeuvre*, in which old and new stylistic choices are merged, is a great example of the coexistence of styles within the output of the same author, as opposed to the old-fashioned evolutionary approaches, in which the history of style is seen as a line of uninterrupted development in one direction.²³ The consequences of this simplistic approach are that, after Disney’s animation had been proclaimed “realist” and even “hyperrealist”, Warner’s approach was simply called anti-Disney, while the Fleischers’ works were “surreal”. According to this viewpoint, animation became an art form only with the advent of the UPA films, although all of its stylistic characteristics had already existed in American animation.²⁴

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Featuring bizarre characters and an unbelievable progression of surreal and nonsensical gags, Clampett’s *Porky in Wackyland* is a brilliant example of sustained lunacy which “demonstrates the potential of animation to create fantastic,

²¹ See Petković 2018.

²² As a sidenote, it is very intriguing to observe how American live-action comedy of the silent era is almost universally critically-acclaimed, while the animated works by Warner Brothers or Avery’s output at MGM are still insufficiently recognized, probably because of their supposedly low-brow, ‘merely’ entertainment-oriented appeal.

²³ See also the following quote from Langer’s comparative discussion of the technological development of the two dominant American animation studios of the thirties – Disney’s and Fleischer’s: “Aesthetic changes do not necessarily occur in a coherent, linear manner. All of these methodologies assume a kind of rational, continuous unfolding of technological history. As this study demonstrates, innovation takes place in a context far more complex and fragmented than that envisaged in previous considerations of the Stereoptical Process and Multiplane camera” (1992: 359).

²⁴ Compare Disney’s *The Reluctant Dragon* (1941), Clampett’s *Porky in Wackyland* (1937), Avery’s *Page Miss Glory* (1936) or *Porky’s Preview* (1941), the Tashlin-supervised films in Columbia in the early forties, or the seminal films by Chuck Jones made already in 1942, including *The Dover Boys at Pimento University* or *The Rivals of Roquefort Hall* and *My Favorite Duck*, to name just a few examples.

dreamlike scenarios" (Furniss 2017: 133). The beginning of the cartoon, when Porky lands in Wackyland and sees the sign "It can happen here",²⁵ is the best explanation of Clampett's style; in his cartoons the rules of logic are abandoned and we enter a world of limitless possibilities in which everything is possible, and even desirable. A lot of animation from the film will be reused later by Clampett in his *Tin Pan Alley Cats*, another surreal masterpiece which, being part of the *Censored Eleven* cartoons, is sadly out of circulation.

After *Porky in Wackyland*, Clampett made *Porky's Naughty Nephew* (1938), which resembled the somewhat cluttered approach of the Fleischers, although it featured very intriguing bizarre and surreal gags at the swimming race. *Porky in Egypt* (1938) and *The Daffy Doc* (1938) were two more strong films with zany and looney humour, followed by *The Lone Stranger and Porky*, his first film made in 1939, after which Clampett entered the worst period of his career, in which he showed a noticeable lack of interest in Porky, who, being the star of the studio, had to appear in every *Looney Tune*. *The Lone Stranger and Porky* is usually skipped or mentioned only sporadically in animation histories, which is a pity, because it is one of the strongest cartoons of Clampett's early phase and another example of the crazy energy that pervades his films. Stylistically, the film shows many important influences on his career – from Harman and Ising (the opening gag when the Lone Stranger stays in the air while riding on his horse through the hills) to Avery, the Fleischer brothers and the impact of popular entertainment.

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The most pervading influence in the film is Avery's and the structure of the cartoon, which is a spoof of the western genre and the popular travelogues, is inspired by tropes already popularized in Avery's films. One of the typical characteristics of Avery's films is their common use of signs, which often interrupt and comically comment on the action, breaking the illusion of the diegetic world. In this film, when the Lone Stranger is falling from the cliff, we see a sign asking the audience whether he will die on the rocks below. The audience gives an emphatic negative reply and the Lone Stranger is saved in time. However, it does not mean that everyone in the cartoon will be saved by the fourth wall protectors.²⁶ In the scene in which we see the conflict

²⁵ The sign is a reference to the Sinclair Lewis novel *It Can't Happen Here*, published only two years before the film.

²⁶ Compare also Avery's *Cinderella Meets Fella* (1938), made just a few months earlier, in which a desperate Egghead is saved by Cinderella, who enters the diegetic world after watching the film in the theatre.

between the main villain in the film and the Lone Stranger, the villain fires his gun and misses. The narrator mocks the villain, calling him a 'plug shot', but the (offscreen) narrator pays for his contemptible attitude by being shot by the enraged villain. The constant breaking of the fourth wall was one of Avery's favourite gags and it was repeatedly revisited throughout his career. Only a few months after Clampett's *The Lone Stranger and Porky*, Avery would make *Thugs with Dirty Mugs*, in which the Killer and his gang listen to *The Lone Ranger* on radio. The cartoon features one of the most memorable interplays between the diegetic and the 'real' world—a member of the audience helps the police, telling them the location of the villains, because he had already "sat through this picture twice".²⁷

In one of the more memorable gags in *The Lone Stranger and Porky*, the Lone Stranger tells his horse "come on Silver, old girl, get moving. Movies are your best entertainment", revealing Clampett's obsession with popular culture and particularly with films. References to other films are a constant source of gags (and inspiration) in many of Clampett's early cartoons. In *Porky's Hero Agency* we can see the Greek temple labeled "Shirley", an obvious reference to the child star Shirley Temple; the underwater hotel in *Porky's Five & Ten* features caricatures of Stan Laurel, Oliver Hardy, Greta Garbo and Mae West; Edward G. Robinson's face is shown on the wall of the cave in *Polar Pals*, and *The Film Fan*²⁸ deals with the world of contemporary films, mentioning popular hits like *The Four Feathers* and *The Old Maid*, but also *Gone with the Breeze* and *Abs of a Wizard*, typically playful word plays on two legendary films made that year, *Gone with the Wind* and *The Wizard of Oz*.²⁹

Despite the obvious influence of Avery, the cartoon also contains segments which are distinctly Clampettian, showing the gradual evolution of his style. Clampett was also a master of rubbery metamorphic gags, showing him to be a successor of the anarchic cartoons of the twenties and the equally deranged world of the Fleischer brothers. Brimming with energy and the constant barrage of gags, the cartoon is also an early example of the remarkable kineticism that would become the distinguishing feature of his films. While both Avery and Clampett were struggling with timing in their early phase,

²⁷ However, it does not mean that the police are very grateful, since the police captain calls him "you little tattle-tale!".

²⁸ This cartoon re-uses segments of *The Lone Stranger and Porky*.

²⁹ This is just a small selection of film references in Clampett's early cartoons. Some other typical examples are *Porky's Movie Mystery*, *The Chewin' Bruin* and *The Timid Toreador*.

in a few years they would be in complete control, a fact also noticed by Norman M. Klein:

In less than 400 days of war, The United States put over twelve million Americans in uniform, from a startup of less than 300,000 soldiers, an escape trick if ever there was one – from the Great Depression into the integrated industrial economy of the postwar era. And during that transformation, the two cartoon masters of speed were Avery and Clampett. (1998: 199)

The seeds of this evolution can be found in Clampett's early films, and this cartoon is one of the best examples.

Even more typical for Clampett is the unexpected, open structure of his film, with a seemingly irrelevant element often becoming the dominant one. Although Porky should supposedly have a leading role in the cartoon, he is rarely onscreen and doesn't even speak in the film. The role of the Lone Stranger is more prominent, but at the end of the film his horse Silver all of a sudden becomes the star of the ending scene. After the villain attacks the Lone Stranger, their horses also get ready to fight; they start growling and snorting, but very soon romance takes over and we even see a few new-born foals, including one with a moustache and an ominous laugh that ends the film. A scene with rather incidental characters in this way becomes the dominant line of action by the film's end, proving that in Clampett's cartoons there is always a possibility that some unexpected element will appear and change the course of the film, leading it in some unforeseen direction. These quirky, offbeat and unexpected moments, in which what goes on on the fringes suddenly becomes the dominant element, give Clampett's cartoons incredible freshness and vitality.

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CONCLUSION

Although the status of animation in classical Hollywood, including the output of Warner Bros. studio, has improved, it is still far from perfect. Generally speaking, there are two tendencies in animation studies; American scholars primarily focus on American animation exclusively and often ignore many quite different (and equally intriguing) international artists. A recent example is Maureen Furniss's *Animation: The Global History*, in which she provides a wide-ranging overview of American animation, yet does not mention superb

artists such as Nedeljko Dragić or Sándor Reisenbüchler. Her overview of the Zagreb School of Animation, for example, is only two pages long and mentions only Dušan Vukotić and Borivoj Dovniković Bordo. The other, equally inadequate, tendency is the European one, often elitist, and focused primarily on the ‘artistic’, ignoring the enormous contributions of classical Hollywood animation (apart from the output of the UPA studio, which fits into the European concept of the ‘artistic’). Besides Halas and Bendazzi (who have been mentioned earlier), we could also add Cinzia Bottini who, while praising UPA’s output, also ignores almost everyone in classical Hollywood animation. In spite of the reappraisal of classical Hollywood animation, this area is still insufficiently explored. To date, only Steve Schneider’s *That’s All Folks!: The Art of the Warner Brothers Animation* (1987), remains a major monograph on classic Warner animation, providing the only all-encompassing view of this studio. Despite its enormous importance, Clampett’s *oeuvre* has still not been analyzed in book-length form. There still remains much to be explored in classical Hollywood animation with its inherent energy and elegance.

It is the feeling of incredible energy that is perhaps the most important, but at the same time the most critically neglected element of classical Hollywood cartoons, including Clampett’s. In his analysis of classical animation, Hrvoje Turković singles out the element of vitalism as the one which is crucial and which gives these films their lasting impact: “No matter how unsympathetic one may be of the worldview that the classic cartoon sought to revitalize – it was an integrative model of the bourgeois world – the fundamental cognitive and ontological vitalism of this type of film cannot leave anyone indifferent” (2012: 125).³⁰ A very similar line of thinking can be seen in Fawell’s analysis of the hidden art of Hollywood, in which he criticizes the overwhelming tendency of film criticism to ignore the complexity and sophistication of films that have a lighter and comic touch: “On the other hand, many of the works that seemed light and frivolous at the time now represent Hollywood’s crown jewels. Hollywood’s great success is what many deemed, originally, its greatest weakness: its studious lack of content, its light touch, and its glancing way of dealing with its subject matter” (2008: 158). Although Fawell’s focus was on live-action films, this same conclusion can be similarly applied to the world of animation. McLaren, Trnka, Lye or Norstein are deservedly called masters of animation, but the same respectful approach should also be applied to the Hollywood masters of animation, from the Fleischer brothers, Disney or Hanna and Barbera to works

³⁰ Translation mine.

of Avery, Jones, Tashlin or Clampett. Although the early films by Bob Clampett are very often just playful and not fully developed exercises, they provide us with a very useful glimpse into the stylistic development of one of the greatest masters of animation, in Hollywood and beyond.³¹

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³¹ Thanks to Eugene Belianski for proofreading the article.

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