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Richard Neupert, *French Animation History*. Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011. xviii + 192 pp. Figures, plates, references, further reading, and index. \$115.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-4443-3836-2; \$94.95 U.S. (eb). ISBN 978-1-4443-9257-9.

Review by Robin Walz, University of Alaska Southeast.

French Animation History delivers precisely what it promises, a focused treatment of animated films and their makers in France from late nineteenth-century origins to the twenty-first century. In this concise, erudite, and synoptic treatment, Richard Neupert covers some familiar territory in film history, such as the development of basic animation techniques, the contributions of pioneering animators like Emile Cohl, and provides informative treatments of well-known feature-length French animated films such as *Fantastic Planet* and *The Triplets of Belleville*. He also delves into film projects and experimental techniques developed by animators that were not commercially viable, but were rich in aesthetic, narrative, and avant-garde possibilities. Not until the contemporary era, Neupert argues, with the establishment of the Centre National de la Cinématographie and the founding of the International Animation Film Association in Annecy, did animation emerge from margins of film to gain widespread recognition in terms of French national cinema and international acclaim. So, while French animators and their productions may not be as well-known or as widely distributed internationally as the Looney Tunes cartoons or Disney animated feature films produced in Hollywood, Neupert champions French animation for its long history of aesthetic innovations and quality. His national cinema approach to the topic is somewhat limiting however, and scholars interested in the relationship of *French Animation History* to the transnational trends in animation or the rise of visual media as mass culture will need to look elsewhere.

Organized into six chapters, *French Animation History* broadly divides into two parts. The first half of the book concerns pioneering French animators in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries who, like other experimental filmmakers of the era, tended to work in an artisanal mode to develop the early techniques of animation. The introductory chapter charts the familiar territory of the transformation of early animation devices, such as the phenakistoscope and zoetrope, into projection systems. One of the earliest innovators in this process was Emile Reynaud, who adapted his patented table-top praxinoscope into of a series of projection devices—*théâtre optique*, the magic lantern, and *pantomime lumineuse*—that combined movable figures against changing backgrounds, a technique that later became a basic feature of cell animation. Other technological innovations followed, such as the time and motion chronographic film studies of Etienne-Jules Marey, the use of pixilation in the trick films of Georges Méliès, and Segundo de Chomon's forays into the stop-motion film animation of objects.

As with other treatments of early French cinema, Emil Cohl appears in Neupert's book as the founder of film animation. Schooled in political caricature and magazine cartoon parody, Cohl adapted drawing for film by slightly altering a line or image in frame-by-frame successions and then shooting the movie one frame at a time (two or three frames per shot would become the later standard) with a camera mounted opposite a backlit background board. The culmination of Cohl's early efforts was *Fantasmagorie* (1908), about the fantastic adventures of a little clown and often credited as the "first true animated cartoon" (p. 25). In addition to cartoon drawings, Cohl experimented with a wide repertoire of early film animation

techniques (pixilation of puppets or objects, paper cut-outs, combining live action and animation) and narrative strategies (gags, image transformations, dialog balloons) that would come to define the medium. While Cohl enjoyed the good fortune of working for such major studios as Gaumont, Pathé, and Éclair, other early artisanal animators such as Lortac (Robert Collard) and O'Galop (Marius Rossillon) largely ended up producing commercial advertisements that were projected during the newsreel portion of movie programs. Neupert also highlights some of the non-commercial and experimental aspects of the early decades of animated filmmaking: non-representational film experiments by avant-garde artists such as Man Ray and Fernand Léger, the puppet animations of Polish émigré Ladislav Starewitch, the pixilation film *Barbe bleue* (*Blue Beard*, 1936) by Jean Painlevé, and the "pointillist" pinscreen technique developed by the immigrant Russian and American animation team of Alexandre Alexeieff and Claire Parker. Neupert preliminarily concludes that, despite these pioneering efforts, in the early years "animation would remain a fragile, quirky, artisanal subset of French film production during the cinema's classical era" (p. 98).

The second half of the book concerns the institutionalization and stabilization of the French animated film industry since the mid-twentieth century. By accident of history, French animation received a boost of state support during the Occupation through the Nazi-mandated Comité d'Organisation de l'Industrie Cinématographique (COIC) with its charge to promote "French" national cinema, which included animated films and their critical recognition through the Emile Cohl Prize established in 1943. While the Vichy period was short-lived, French animators such as Paul Grimault began to flourish under the COIC, producing both short and near feature-length films. State sponsorship and the official promotion of French culture through the international distribution of animated films continued under the Fourth and Fifth Republics, beginning the recognition of the artistic value of film animation by the Institut des hautes études cinématographiques (IDHEC) at the Cannes Film Festival in the 1950s, which subsequently led to the establishment of the International Animated Film Association (ASIF) in Annecy in the 1960s with its attendant annual international animation film festival. The advent of television boosted the commercial demand for short cartoons delivered through quick production techniques, perhaps most successfully realized by the Hungarian-born animator Jean Image (Imre Hazdu) in such popular series as *Piccolo et Picolette* (26 episodes, 1963-1965) and *Kiri le clown* (130 episodes, 1966-1969). In the absence of any major French film studio production of animation during these decades, Neupert emphasizes how the twin influences of state sponsorship and the television industry contributed to the development of innovative niche studios of French film animators. In this regard, René Laroux's animated science fiction feature film, *La Planète sauvage* (*Fantastic Planet*, 1973), was exceptional in its international distribution and success.

In a final chapter on "French Animation's Renaissance," Neupert discusses some recent successes of French animated filmmaking. Under the "Cartoon Plan" developed as part of the European Union Commission's Media Program to promote European television and cinema, Neupert focuses upon selected animators whose films display what he considers to constitute the most innovative and successful dimensions of French animation today. Foremost among these figures is the cut-out animator Marcel Ocelot, whose feature-length animated films include *Kirikou et la sorcière* (*Kirikou and the Sorceress*, 1998) and *Azur et Asmar* (*Azur and Asmar, the Princes' Quest*, 2006). Despite criticisms of Orientalist themes in these movies, Neupert praises both Ocelot's personal vision in these films and their commercial success in terms of movie attendance and DVD sales. Neupert also provides in-depth discussions of a few other recent French animated features, notably *The Triplets of Belleville* (2003) by Sylvain Chomet, *Renaissance* (2006) by Christian Volkmann, and the *Persepolis* (2008) film adaptation of Marjane Satrapi's comic book series by the same name. Together with shorter consideration of a few other French animators and films, Neupert concludes that today "animation has become economically important, aesthetically vibrant, and culturally crucial to France's persistently impressive national cinema" (p. 169).

Yet to accord cultural status to animation due to its place within French national cinema also reveals a critical weakness in *French Animation History*: ultimately, what is “French” here? Neupert is aware of this problem. In discussions of early aesthetic and technical innovations, he acknowledges that several “French” animators were immigrants, most notably from Eastern Europe and Russia. Among contemporary influences upon French animation, Neupert occasionally invokes comparisons to such American animators, cartoonists, and filmmakers as Ralph Bakshi, Harvey Pekar, and Richard Linklater, although it is unclear why these particular individuals are mentioned over equally influential animators from America and elsewhere. There is also an occasional tendency for Neupert to celebrate French animation as a kind of national competition, particularly in the contemporary era, noting when official French support for film animation surpasses that of the National Film Board of Canada, or when a French animated feature film rivals Disney in terms of critical acclaim and Oscar nominations. The contemporary success of French animation in the globalized marketplace is invoked in relation to the United States, Japan, and South Korea, but no meaningful description of the international landscape of film animation production or distribution is provided.

Such slippage in Neupert’s approach may stem from his adherence to a French national cinema model, rather than fully embracing a transnational turn in film studies. In the two decades previous to the European Union’s “Cartoon Plan,” for example, when French animation was still characterized by Neupert as a niche industry, high volumes of innovative, experimental, and highly personal animated films were being produced elsewhere throughout the world. Sometimes this was the result of governmental support, such as the Arts Council of Great Britain and the National Film Board of Canada. Commercially-driven animation companies that rivaled the Hollywood cartoon factory emerged as well, for example the dozens of anime studios that sprouted up in Japan, or the hundreds of animated short films made by Zagreb Film in Croatia. In addition to international animation film festivals, such as the one held annually at Annecy, film compilations of animated shorts enjoyed international distribution through theater circuit releases and on public television during the 1970s and 1980s. Independent animated feature-length films like *Fritz the Cat* (USA, 1972), *Allegro non troppo* (Italy, 1976), and *Heavy Metal* (Canada, 1981), began to achieve international success in advance of the French “animation renaissance” as well. None of this diminishes the accomplishments of the animators and films featured in *French Film Animation*, but it suggests that a transnational approach might constitute a more productive historical and cultural terrain upon which these French achievements could be compared and measured.

These caveats aside, *French Animation History* is a richly informed and highly readable scholarly book that will appeal both to specialists in the field and to the curious interested in this popular, and often neglected, dimension of French filmmaking. Unfortunately, the high price tag on the book, even in its electronic format, means that it is largely destined for library acquisition. Scholars of French film and cultural studies are encouraged to have Neupert’s book added to their university library collection.

Robin Walz
University of Alaska Southeast
rrwalz@uas.alaska.edu

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