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J. P. Telotte

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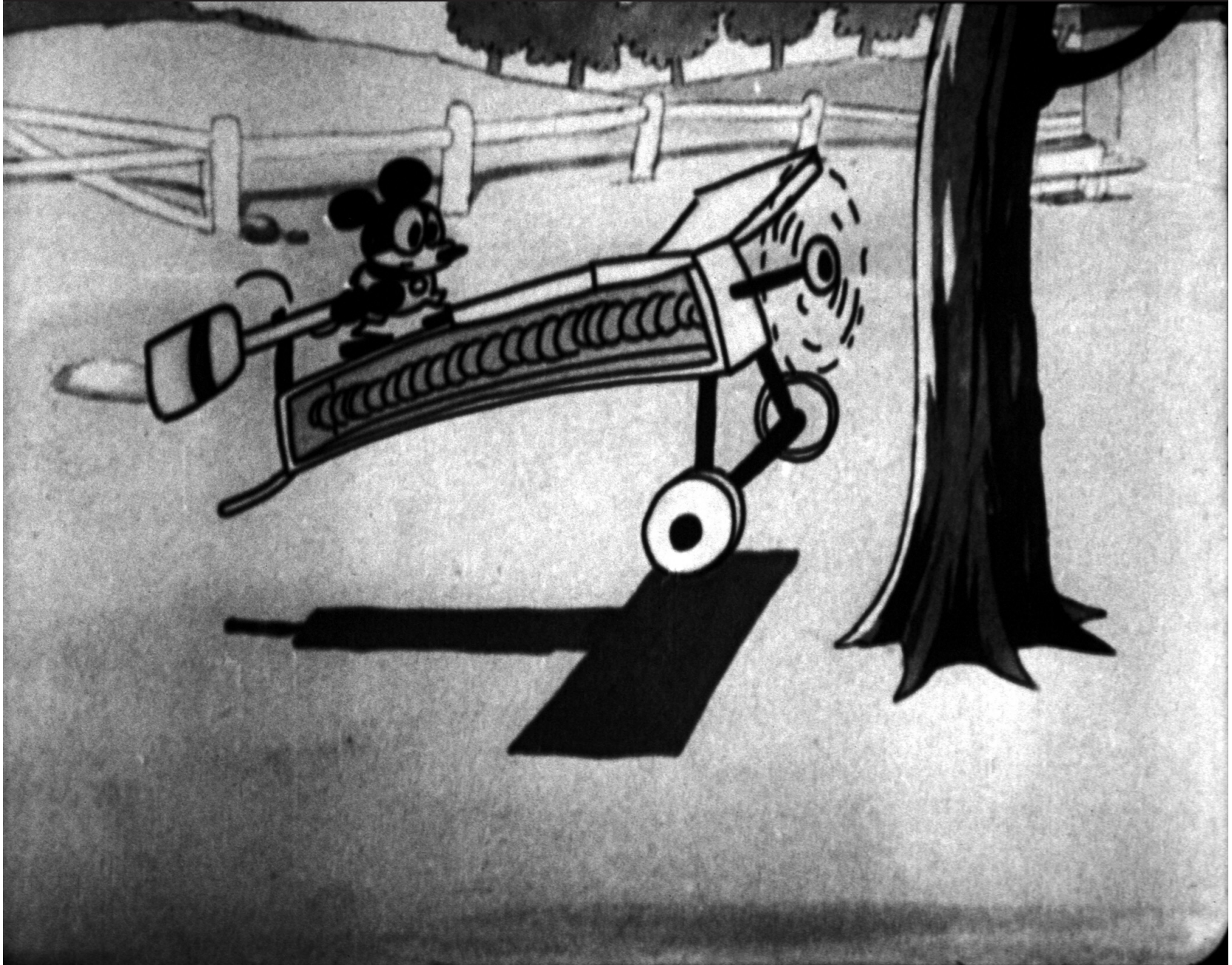
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The Stereoscopic Mickey:

SPACE, ANIMATION, AND THE MOUSE

BY J. P. TELOTTE

Mickey navigates perilously close to a tree in a scene from *Plane Crazy* (1928). *Photo courtesy of Photofest.*

Abstract: Film history has partially obscured the accomplishment of the first Mickey Mouse cartoons. With the appearance of the fully synchronized-sound *Steamboat Willie* (1928), they have been primarily discussed in relation to that technology, being both praised and attacked for the ways they use sound. While useful, such assessments have also shifted attention away from something fundamental to animation, a sense of how these films confronted the problems of space and constructed a character—Mickey Mouse—who must seem at home in that space. This issue of space is particularly significant, since it adds a note of complexity to discussions of Disney's later development of a "realistic" style and sheds some light on the studio's problematic relation to modernism. This article examines the first decade of Mickey Mouse films in this spatial context in an effort to excavate that distinctive visual style, one that clearly strongly appealed to audiences of early animation.

Keywords: animation, Walt Disney, Mickey Mouse, modernism, space

The invention of a new space conception was the leitmotiv of modernity itself, supported by the modernist avant-garde call for an escape from history, that affirmed the importance of space both for architectural planning and form and for modern life as a whole.

—Anthony Vidler[1]

This had always been the objective of modernism: to flatten out, to bring to the surface, in order to make the base show itself for what it is.

—Esther Leslie[2]

Critics' readings of the early Mickey Mouse cartoons—and to some extent of the Disney Studio's early animation efforts—have in the course of film history been partially obscured by their very accomplishment. Starting with the third Mickey cartoon, the fully synchronized *Steamboat Willie* (1928), the cartoons have been inextricably linked to the coming of sound and largely discussed in the context of their successful application of that technology. In fact, the earliest Mickey efforts—*Plane Crazy* and *The Gallopin' Gaucho* (both 1928), along with *Steamboat Willie*—have been both praised and attacked from this vantage point. Michael Barrier in his history of the Hollywood cartoon, for example, emphasizes their singular achievement, how "from the first, Disney grasped sound's potential for involving his audience in what was happening on the screen" (57), while Esther Leslie in her discussion of modernism and animation argues that, through their use of sound, these films demonstrate "Disney's accomplished sell-out of the quintessence of cartoons, their modernistic dissolution of conventional reality" (149).[3] While there is some accuracy in both assessments, what they and other historical accounts omit is an appreciation of something quite fundamental to animation: how these films confronted the problems of space and constructed a character—Mickey Mouse—who would have to seem at home in that space. This issue of space is particularly significant, since it adds a note of complexity to discussions of Disney's later development of a realistic style,[4] and, as the epigraphs to this article suggest,

it sheds some light on the studio's problematic relation to modernism.

Leonard Maltin's history of the American cartoon claims that "there was nothing special or different" about the first Mickey Mouse cartoons (34), that essentially they were similar to Disney's silent Oswald the Lucky Rabbit efforts, the design of which had also largely been determined by Ub Iwerks. The first two Mickeys, *Plane Crazy* and *The Gallopin' Gaucho*, center around a mischievous and highly inventive character, and the gags mix physical slapstick with an element of what Barrier terms "psychological" humor (47). The new mouse hero was a familiar type—"a formulaic mouse of a kind that had long been plentiful in competitors' cartoons" (Barrier 49), or, as Neal Gabler suggests, "essentially Oswald with shorter ears" (113). For the most part, that similarity was all to the good, since by this point the cartoons produced by the Disney studio had a reputation for their workmanship and were already being studied by other animators.[5] That sense of imitation or sameness, though, has often been used to prop up the conclusion that sound—when introduced in *Steamboat Willie* and later added to these first efforts—was essentially all that distinguished this new creation and was the real source of Mickey's popularity. Yet there is something else different about the first Mickeys, for these cartoons, especially *Plane Crazy* and *The Gallopin' Gaucho*, which were both designed for a silent world, also use space differently and link their new central character to this world in a way that even many of the later Mickey cartoons—those burdened by what Gilbert Seldes has described as a felt need to "give him too much to say" (170)—do not.

Sound is, of course, what interested distributors in Disney's new product, largely because it suddenly became the cinematic fashion in the wake of Warner Brothers' *The Jazz Singer* (1927). And the success of Disney's first sound release, *Steamboat Willie*, quickly prompted the studio to revisit its first efforts with the mouse and add sound to both *Plane Crazy* and *The Gallopin' Gaucho*. But, as Maltin's comment reflects, the prevailing wisdom is that those first efforts were very primitive and largely, as Gabler assesses, "the

product of desperation and calculation," done "as quickly as possible so that Walt could find a distributor and keep his company afloat" after losing his Oswald character to Universal (114–15). However, Gabler also notes that two representatives of MGM, Howard Dietz and Felix Feist, liked the silent *Plane Crazy* enough to recommend it to Nicholas Schenck, president of the parent company, Loew's, and arrange a showing (116). Why Schenck decided not to contract for a series of Mickey Mouse films is unknown, but this decision may simply reflect his primary focus on the company's business operations, in which his capacity had been primarily to oversee its theatrical holdings. In any case, clearly there was something very attractive about these first efforts, although that something would become overshadowed by sound as the new technology increasingly came into play.

To better understand the significance of the first Mickey Mouse cartoons and, eventually, better gauge Disney's emergence with sound's introduction as a premier animation studio, we need to see these early cartoons in another context, one closer to their position within an evolving animation aesthetic. Particularly, we should consider their relationship to that modernist fascination with space that both Anthony Vidler and Esther Leslie have explored. There was, it can be argued, something more three-dimensional about the mouse, something that we might—to use the phrasing of one contemporary commentator—even term "stereoscopic" (Scheffauer 79) because of the way Mickey enhanced and exploited the sense of depth in the filmed world. As Leslie chronicles, animation was long ago linked to the modernist spirit and seen as reflecting many of the same concerns as early-twentieth-century avant-garde art. She argues that "for the modernists, cartoons [. . .] are set inside a universe of transformation, overturning and provisionality" (vi), and that their superficial emphasis of these characteristics was "a virtue, a motive, and a motif," since their "dissolution of form" pointed to something more significant: "a chance to return to

the drawing board of social formation" (vii). This point was made decades ago by Sergei Eisenstein, who early on championed animation and especially Mickey Mouse, finding in the work of Disney "an upheaval, a unique protest against the metaphysical immobility of the once-and-forever given" (33). For some, then, the cartoon, including the early Disney efforts that were praised by Eisenstein, as well as figures of the aesthetic and social avant-garde such as Salvador Dali and Walter Benjamin, embodied the modernist spirit of change, while also marking an interesting meeting ground between high and low art and the worlds of politics and entertainment.

Yet Leslie's interpretation of that modernist affinity bears further consideration, for she bases her linkage of cartoons to the avant-garde spirit on what she describes as the essential "flatness" (121) of early cartoons, the two-dimensionality that foregrounds their constructed nature and seems so primitive today. Thus she argues that the "flatland" (19) they depicted and of which their characters were a part was important precisely because it subvert-

> **[T]he cartoon [. . .] embodied the modernist spirit of change, while also marking an interesting meeting ground between high and low art [. . .].**

ed a realist sensibility, particularly that associated with Hollywood narrative, while it promised to reveal how, in the grip of modern capitalist society, audiences were "just as lifeless as the figures on the screen" (181). Yet in discussing that same modernist spirit from the perspective of architecture and graphic arts, Vidler offers a very different take on how space, form, and dimensionality were read in this period. As the epigraph above indicates, he believes that a new sense of space was the very "leitmotiv of modernity" (*Warped* 5), particularly as space came to take on psychological and social dimensions and, in so doing, to hint (also subversively) at the incommensurateness of many of our other normal categories (e.g., class, gender, and nationality). Nowhere was that "modernist art of space" more in evidence, Vidler suggests, than in film, for there, especially in those forms that most explored the possibilities of graphic design—expressionist, constructivist, and animated film—a new sense of space most clearly seemed "to transform reality itself," while "the surroundings no longer surrounded, but entered the experience as presence" ("Explosion" 14–15), not *flattening* space out, but revealing its further dimensions. In effect, whereas Leslie, from a rather strained Marxist perspective, sees a subversive power in the marked absence of dimension in much early animation and its tendency to flatten out and abstract our sense of the real, Vidler, with his phenomenological vantage point and following the lead of Walter Benjamin,[6] locates that same power in a kind of expansive and revelatory power of filmic space—its ability to explore unseen dimensions, to play with forms, to make space visible and give it a voice. As Herman Scheffauer, a German art critic of the period, offers, this subversive power came from the cinema's capacity for "the vivifying of space," for projecting not so much an image of the *real* world but a new "stereoscopic universe" (79).

Against the backdrop of these different approaches and their dissimilar appreciations of spatial significance, we might begin to better gauge the appearance—and early popularity—of Disney's

mouse, who was clearly a native of that stereoscopic realm. The mouse was from the start more than just a new character and, certainly, more than a one-off version of Disney's previous "star," Oswald. As noted, Mickey does evoke something of Oswald's appeal, which Russell Merritt and J. B. Kaufman ascribe to his "ebullient energy and high spirits" (86). But Mickey is in a more complex world than Oswald or a more daunting competitor like Felix the Cat occupies, and he is more focused on finding ways of coping with this stereoscopic world and participating in what Eisenstein describes as "the liberation of forms" (21), the transformative and ultimately subversive power of film images. In fact, this encounter is key to his own modernist spirit, as he must address the challenge of modernism's "flux of form" (Vidler, "Explosion" 22), operate in an often satiric landscape, and live in a world that is every bit as alive and dimensional as he is—as the apparently conscious steamboat whistles that nudge each other in *Steamboat Willie* or the church steeple that dodges Mickey's plane in *Plane Crazy* clearly demonstrate.

Rising to this challenge and confronting space at a time when, as Vidler notes in *Warped Space*, it was becoming freighted with the weight of "psychological projection or introjection" (8) and even becoming "phobic" (2) is a key marker of the first Mickey cartoons, if also a characteristic they would later de-emphasize as Mickey does indeed become bound (in the later 1930s) to a conventional world. It is certainly *part* of their kinship to the era's Felix cartoons, which found their own "special attraction," as Donald Crafton terms it, in their character's emphasis on the "polymorphous plasticism" (329) of both his body *and* his environment. But while the Messmer/Sullivan cartoons emphasize Felix's ingenious use of that plasticism—as we see in his ability to turn his tail or a graphic flourish like an exclamation point into a useful prop, thus flattening out the world, making "everything in the drawn world [. . .] of the same stuff" (Leslie 23)—the early Mickeys seem far more intent on making space

function within the narrative so that space might thereby reveal *itself*.

Of course, *Plane Crazy* rather quickly demonstrates its—and its new central character's—fascination with such spatial matters through its very subject: building a plane to transcend the limited world of the farmyard inhabited by Mickey and a variety of other animals and depicted in great detail as the film opens. As Vidler might suggest, the narrative almost immediately attaches a psychological dimension to this effort to fly, as it introduces Mickey with an iris-in on him reading a book, *How to Fly*. More than simply forecasting the mouse's intention, this opening speaks of a kind of popular desire at work, one underscored when he turns a page, sees a picture of "Lucky Lindy," smiles, and, with the help of a mirror, immediately starts to transform himself into the pictured aviator, tousling his hair/fur to achieve the same casual look as his idol. This kind of transformation runs throughout the film, as a dachshund becomes a twisted rubber band to turn the plane's propeller or a turkey's tail feathers become its rudder. From the start, though, with the book, the plane, and his Lindbergh "look," Mickey is simply positioned within what we might term the spirit of the age, as part of a technological effort to move beyond our limitations, as both plane and sky become freighted with desire.[7]

Plane Crazy [. . .] [places] Mickey and his sky adventures in a stereoscopic context by the way it *spatializes* his actions [. . .].

This context already suggests that the cartoon merits more consideration than allowed by Robert Sklar's dismissal of it as a simple romantic escapade. In his commentary, he mistakenly superimposes on the film a conventional romantic plot, describing it as a narrative about Mickey's effort to build a plane "to impress his girlfriend, Minnie, and get her up in the air where she won't be able to run away from his advances" (62). However, the film shows Mickey fashioning two planes, the first of which has only one seat, cannot accommodate a passenger, and quickly crashes into a tree. The second, cobbled together from an old flivver and various other "found" parts—including the turkey "rudder"—has a backseat that Mickey offers to Minnie in thanks after she gives him a good luck horseshoe. Any libidinous interest, such as his attempt to kiss Minnie once they are airborne, is more of an afterthought or a hint of the rather delirious effect that flight has on him. More important, the focus on constructing—and reconstructing—planes underscores the ambition at the core of the film—to move, to soar, to break free of the barnyard world where everything occurs. And that imitative note, wherein Mickey attempts to ape Lindbergh and the other famous fliers of the era,[8] only helps satirize that driving spirit here.

Yet just as important as this thematic embrace of the modernist spirit is the style in which it is presented. *Plane Crazy* effectively visualizes that attitude, placing Mickey and his sky adventures in a stereoscopic context by the way it *spatializes* his actions: it depicts them neither in a "flatland" nor within a conventionally realistic space, but instead uses them to "warp" space (Vidler, *Warped* 5). Of course, the home-built plane itself helps accomplish this feat, because in quickly going out of control or, as the title suggests, "crazy"—it seems to come alive, bucks Mickey off, and leaves Minnie a frightened passenger on a runaway mount—it shifts from the common horizontal movement of most cartoon conveyances of the day to various unpredictable loops and twists that allowed animator Ub Iwerks to explore every element of the frame, to let the plane itself become rubbery, almost fluid in form,

and to build a series of gags around the unusually unstable perspective—anathema to conventional cinema—that results. Thus as the "crazy" plane bears down on and then hits a frightened cow running into the frame's background, the cow flies up into the air and then into the camera, its white udders and black hide momentarily—and startlingly—blotting out the image. As the plane then veers toward the roadside and a telephone pole, the pole also briefly blacks out the image, as if there had been a violent collision. And when the plane turns back toward the road, heading into the depth of the frame, it comes upon a car moving into the foreground and seems to head directly into the vehicle, whose black radiator blacks out the frame once again. In repeating these same thrill scenes and implied impacts—with both car and pole—and in exploiting the impression of a subjective shot from within the plane, the film exploits our illusory occupation of an unpredictable space; moreover, it uses those suddenly blacked-out frames to *spatially* convey the comic fear and anxiety of the possible collisions, effectively giving space a psychological and symbolic force. It also reaches for another improbable spatial effect, for in each case the implied camera does not simply veer improbably away from a collision; it seems to *go through* that space, as if the narrative had cut away to a slightly displaced position a moment later. In fact, each of these effects is a variation on a similar displacement shot that introduces the apparent collisions, as Minnie screams helplessly in close-up and the camera seemingly moves in on her face and into her mouth, which also serves to black out the image. This is not a novel effect for animation in this period—it occurs in several of the Oswald shorts and later shows up in the Bosco cartoons of ex-Disney animators Hugh Harmon and Rudolf Ising—but here it works to prepare us for the rapid spatial displacements that are, at one and the same time, experiments with creating three-dimensional effects *and* efforts at exploiting the affective possibilities of spatial disorientation, producing a very unrealistic sense of space, or what Vidler terms "warped space." It thus points to what we might describe as a kind of

spatial or stereoscopic consciousness at work here, one that results in a pointedly spatial gag that concludes the film. As Minnie pulls up her outrageously expanded bloomers, which have parachuted her safely to earth, and turns her back on the now-crashed plane and its would-be Lindbergh, Mickey looks with disdain at the apparently *unlucky* horseshoe she gave him earlier and flings it into the deep background of the frame, from which it emerges, after describing a long arc, as if it were a boomerang, to ring him around the neck. Space here, it seems, incorporates our fears, admits of no easy mastery, and certainly has the last word, as it—three-dimensionally—mocks Mickey's efforts to emulate a "real" hero (and by extension, the cartoon's aspirations for a level of realism like that of feature narratives).

The second silent Mickey, also quickly converted into a "talkie" after *Steamboat Willie*'s success, was *The Gallopin' Gaucho*, a work that, on the face of it, seems a bit more derivative and perhaps more nearly linked to the world of earlier silent film than *Plane Crazy*, but that similarly suggests something of that stereoscopic consciousness, drawing the film both toward and away from a realist register. Because of its obvious link to Hollywood narrative, particularly to Fairbanks's *Gaucho* (1927), Leslie dismisses it as "a Douglas Fairbanks pastiche" (26) and offers no commentary. Mickey's character here, though, equally recalls Felix the Cat, as he continually resorts to the sort of practice that had become identified with Felix, using his tail for comic effect, treating it like a surreal, infinitely manipulable prop instead of a natural part of his body, and, thus, the source for a great variety of gags. When Mickey arrives at the Cantino Argentino, rather than entering through the door, he turns his tail into a hook and jauntily uses it to swing into a window. Once seated on the windowsill, he again uses his tail as a hook, this time to steal a mug of beer from a waiter's tray. As he watches Minnie dance, he snakes his tail around her, uses it to wind her up like a top, and then pulls it to spin her around. Later, in an effort to save her from Pete the Cat, he pulls his tail out from his body as if it were an endless rope, ties

a noose, and uses it to lasso a post and hoist himself into the building where she is being held. Finally, as Mickey and Minnie ride off on his ostrich mount, both turn their tails into coil springs to cushion their ride and allow them to comfortably celebrate the rescue with a kiss. As is the case with Felix, such antics have a visual appeal, point up the clever nature of the character, and demonstrate his—or her—ability, despite all appearances, to triumph over various obstacles—in fact, over reality itself. However, such gags are much the stuff of silent cinema, silent animation, and a flat world.

Yet two stylistic signatures do set *The Gallopin' Gaucho* off from much that had gone before and, certainly, from the Felix cartoons. One is simply movement itself, the manifest liveliness—or aliveness—of the central character, the same spirit that provides the impulse for the plane constructions in *Plane Crazy*. The Mickey who enlivens these narratives is pointedly a rascal and almost constantly in motion here, seldom seeming to stop, as Felix so often does, to contemplate a problem before acting.[9] He seems to quickly intuit the appropriate response to each situation, in part because a central tenet of his "character animation"—another phrase frequently applied to Disney cartoons—is that Mickey is a figure of movement, a constantly "gallopin'" gaucho, which is a point established from the opening to the final scene in this cartoon. It begins with Mickey charging across the Argentine landscape, incongruously astride an ostrich, and it ends with his ostrich carrying him and Minnie off as they kiss, in love but also still in motion. In between—and indeed, in the Fairbanks fashion—Mickey vaults into windows, dances a tango with Minnie, fights with Pete, chases him across the landscape and over various physical obstacles, and then duels with him. Mickey is, in effect, constantly moving, suggesting the sort of figure that was especially suited to Machine Age culture, to a time and place when, as Cecelia Tichi has observed, "speed and the belief in cultural acceleration were proclaimed from every quarter to be [. . .] *the* defining characteristics" (101), yet also effectively satirizing that figure

and the conventional film narratives that featured him.

The other defining feature of *Plane Crazy* is a stylistic fascination with space, with a rather more complex, or stereoscopic, world in which to place this new figure and one with which he might interact. As Barrier notes, the Felix cartoons, like most efforts of this period, were typically marked by "dull, uniform staging," with the central figure usually placed against spare, uninspired, and pointedly flat backgrounds (32)—clearly within the realm of Leslie's "flatland." In contrast, *The Gallopin' Gaucho*, like *Plane Crazy*, is pointedly a space-conscious effort, as is demonstrated by the use of background décor, an accent on complex structures and landscapes, and even a compositional emphasis on dimension. The interior scenes, for example, show detailed pictures and posters on the walls, cracks, and exposed brick. In fact, several shots let us glimpse in the deep background a "Reward" poster for "El Gaucho," apparently a reference to Mickey's rascally character in this film and an unusual use of such depth to build characterization—in this instance, to explain the careful attitudes of many of the Cantino's folk when he enters. When Pete kidnaps Minnie, we see in the rear of the Cantino another, and unexpected, use of that deep background that further reveals the film's dimensional design: behind this obviously very rough and dangerous place is a sign incongruously marked "Family Entrance"—out of which Mickey's drunk ostrich then staggers. When the ostrich subsequently collapses while Mickey is chasing Pete, the deep background again provides the seed of a gag, as it shows laundry hanging on a line and a bucket of starch nearby, which Mickey runs into the background to retrieve and into which he dips his ostrich, to stiffen his legs so they can resume the chase. Such drawing together of background and foreground to construct gags is consistent with the film's narrative use of structures, such as the Cantino and the multistory building from which Mickey must later rescue Minnie. Nicely detailed and typically presented at angles to the frame line to increase the depth

illusion, these structures frame Mickey's actions—dancing, fighting, dueling—within a three-dimensional world. Yet conditioned as we are by a later mode of criticism to see compositional depth simply as a signpost of realism, we lose some appreciation of what is being accomplished here. Certainly, this attention to dimension suggests a different sort of texture for the narrative world, moving it away from the almost abstract landscape of the Felix cartoons, but also toward a realm that is not so much designed for realism as designed to afford unexpected possibilities—surprise and even a *surreal* humor.

In any case, a more emphatic sense of dimension is not the only result of that spatial sensibility here. As in *Plane Crazy*, we see a consistent effort to mine the space for a number of other effects, to give it a "voice" in the narrative. For example, in a move that *was* rather unusual for this period, offscreen space repeatedly becomes implicated in the narrative, as when Mickey and Minnie dance a tango. As this comic/romantic scene plays out, suddenly a hugely out-of-scale hairy paw with extended claws—truly, a rather surreal intrusion—reaches into the frame from a previously unseen space on the right to grab Minnie and pull her offscreen. This sudden warping in the narrative space, as Vidler would offer, breaks the happy mood, reestablishes the possibility for danger that had earlier been vaguely linked to "El Gaucho," and embodies the fear that Minnie feels when Pete the Cat—owner of the paw—unexpectedly makes off with her. Later, when the two antagonists duel, all seems lost when Mickey stumbles, loses his sword, and tumbles offscreen, but it is again into a previously unseen area where he reaches under a bed and discovers a chamber pot, which he flings into the next shot to miraculously finish Pete and save Minnie. That use of offscreen or previously unseen space does more than simply build a spatial logic for the narrative; it suggests that the very depth and extensiveness of this world—this pointedly *un*flatland—holds, as we have previously seen, possibility, surprise, or, in the instances noted here, both danger and hope.

Obviously the most heralded of the early Mickey Mouse cartoons and the first pointedly designed for sound, *Steamboat Willie* is in some ways less inventive visually than either of its predecessors. While offering little that might pass for dialogue, much less what Seldes terms "verbal wit" (170), the film does point to an almost forced desire for sound, often at the expense of Vidler's notion of "space conception" (*Warped* 5). While critics responded to it very favorably— the *Variety* reviewer described it as "a peach of a synchronization job" (qtd. in Barrier 55)—the film seems to aim for little beyond that signal accomplishment, offering no sound perspective, traveling sound, or fading sound, such as we have come to expect by way of aural realism. Rather, sound is simply *there*, as narrative gives way to performance and space constricts around the performer. In fact, Barrier offers a rather dismissive summary of the film: "Mickey, his girlfriend Minnie, a cat captain, and a boatload of domestic animals make a tremendous variety of musical and nonmusical noises—but not much else" (55). Yet, the nature of that enthronement of sound was distinctive enough, for, as Gabler in his 2006 biography of Walt Disney points out, this was the first work "imagined [. . .] fully as a sound cartoon in which the music and effects were inextricable from the action" (127).

The action, perhaps because of a felt need to lay things out very simply, to make the link between sound and image both visible to the audience and easy for the animators to coordinate, is certainly less than in the previous Mickey cartoons. While *Steamboat Willie* emphasizes the same spirit of change or transformation that marks many other cartoons of the period and is often seen as sharing their modernist character, it yokes the various demonstrations of that transformative spirit to the performance of sound while rendering space somewhat secondary. Thus, when a goat on board the steamboat eats Minnie's sheet music, Mickey opens its mouth, as if he would somehow enter to retrieve the music, but then decides to turn the goat's mouth into a phonograph, with Minnie cranking its tail so that the song, "Turkey in the Straw," emerges from its

mouth, as if from the funnel-speaker of an old Victrola. Following that transformation, each animal on board becomes an equally effective musical instrument in Mickey's hands. It is as if the goat's eating of the music—literally *internalizing* the potential for sound—inspires Mickey to *externalize* it, to recognize and then release the potential for music everywhere he sees it, in a kind of aural version of Vidler's notion of "projection" (*Warped* 8). To accompany this new phonograph, Mickey also pulls a cat's tail to punctuate the music and then swings the animal by its tail to produce a continuous siren-like sound. A goose soon becomes a bagpipe, a pig proves another sort of wind instrument as Mickey plays on its teats, and a cow's teeth stand in for a xylophone. In fact, the various animals Mickey uses—and abuses in the common fashion of early cartoons—easily mesh with other "found" instruments he plays—a washboard, pots, pans, a wooden tub— to suggest a world of unexpected aural potential that Mickey does not simply *produce* but *discovers* and *discloses* to the delight of both Minnie and the audience, as this process of musical discovery, of turning sound into physical correlatives, essentially becomes the narrative. The ability to draw sound out of every object, to locate in a previously silent world an unexpected dimension—a capacity for speech, voice, and rhythms—is *Steamboat Willie*'s version of the efforts of *Plane Crazy* and *The Gallopin' Gaucho* to disclose the unconventional possibilities of space and, through those possibilities, transcend this world's limits.

Beyond this difficult equivalency, though, we find another spatial dimension accompanying the film's aural emphasis and attesting to an effort at determining how sound might be used to enhance the spatial component of the narrative. *Steamboat Willie* not only synchronizes sound to action; it also uses sounds to realize space—to bring it into being and to suggest its substance. While much of the action is laid out in a conventional horizontal fashion with little movement across the screen, when Mickey's steamboat approaches Podunk Landing, we hear its whistle before it comes around a

bend in the background, as sound heralds what screen space hides. Once Mickey starts up the goat/phonograph, its music similarly serves to build spatial reality by suturing offscreen and onscreen space. So when Mickey moves from the steamboat's deck to the ship's interior, we continue to hear "Turkey in the Straw," as if through a window, and when at the end of the film Mickey throws a potato at a mocking parrot and knocks it out of a porthole, an audible splash and squawking indicate the parrot has fallen in the river. Moreover, those sounds motivate Mickey's impish smile of satisfaction on which the film concludes. These and similar sound effects thus serve to help construct a more complex spatial environment here, by announcing an unseen presence, suggesting contiguous space, and even motivating character reaction to what happens offscreen. That complexity, as sound comes to the narrative fore, serves less to create surprise or humor than it does to build the complexity of this world.

In that substitution—or amplification—of an unexpected aural richness for a surprisingly evocative space, *Steamboat Willie* thus suggests something of both the strength and weakness of the early Mickey Mouse cartoons. That process of discovery, the revelation that sound too might hold an unexpected potential, attractively links all of these cartoons, helps to establish the new mouse's identity as a revealer or discoverer of different sorts of depth (both aural and visual), and ties these cartoons, both narratively and stylistically, to the modernist impulse earlier described. However, that turn also forecasts a move away from the modernist spirit, not simply because of the shift in emphasis from the visual to the aural register, but because of a manifest concern with using sound to help construct a more realistic cartoon world—suturing onscreen and offscreen space, constructing narrative/temporal continuity, even building character motivation. And in gaining a voice—Walt Disney's own voice, it should be noted—Mickey himself would, as Seldes notes, become increasingly bound to that reality, tamed because "forced" into a "verbal" world (170).

Yet, a somewhat later Mickey cartoon, one that also heralds a new technology that some would see as another step in a realist direction, reminds us of the need for a more complex view of these early Mickeys. With *The Band Concert* (1935), Mickey's first foray into Technicolor,[10] Disney crafts a film that pointedly revolves around these issues of space, sound, and the mouse. By this point, as numerous commentators have noted, Mickey had become a much more domesticated mouse, less the trickster, explorer, and daredevil, since Donald Duck was being groomed for such roles. *The Band Concert* underscores this change, depicting Mickey in a proper and traditional role as the conductor of a rural orchestra, but outfitted in an oversized uniform that repeatedly trips him up and mocks his efforts at conducting. Nevertheless, Mickey tries to keep other unruly, rambunctious types in order, especially a constantly intrusive Donald, who keeps trying to subvert their classical performance with a penny flute version of "Turkey in the Straw," ironically the very number that signals Mickey's subversive high spirits in *Steamboat Willie*.

Just when Mickey seems to have achieved some sort of harmony, to have brought his ragged group of musicians in line, even to have silenced the duck and his repeated subversive sounds, the deep background forecasts another possibility. It undergoes a visual transformation, as the pastel-colored pastoral scene suddenly darkens to announce the surprise appearance of a cyclone, which gradually devastates the countryside and then wreaks havoc on the concert. While Mickey and his fellow musicians find themselves suddenly sucked up into its funnel and whirled about, they comically try to continue their actions—conducting, reading the music, playing their instruments—in empty, almost abstract space. In the chaotic, even absurdist scene that results, one in which dimension, direction, and orientation are shown as completely unstable, as the aural tries to maintain its sway in the midst of visual chaos, there is a kind of revenge of modernist space, at least a reminder of how much remains outside of and unaccounted for

> **[D]imension, direction, and orientation are shown as completely unstable, as the aural tries to maintain its sway in the midst of visual chaos [. . .].**

in conventional conceptions of space as well as sound. And with Donald having the last say—or sound—as he emerges from the devastation to toot "Turkey in the Straw" one last time—the film also reminds us of the sort of character who was so appealingly native to that earlier world.

We might, in fact, see *The Band Concert* as a rather reflexive meditation on the earlier Mickey Mouse cartoons and on the mouse's appeal, even as it couches that reflection within the conventional "illusion of life" style that was coming to mark much of Disney animation by the mid-1930s. A similar moment of reflection recurs in several other Mickeys of the later 1930s, most notably in *Mickey's Trailer* (1938), which begins with a trailer set against a pastoral sunrise backdrop. Quickly, though, discordant mechanical sounds occur while the deep background literally begins to deconstruct. In fact, the scenery folds up like a fan: it was an accessory part of the trailer, and the real location in which the trailer is parked is a dirty junkyard, which reminds us, in the process, of the constructed nature

of space in all such narratives. Such instances of narratizing space suggest many of the tensions that lingered in Disney animation, particularly as the studio moved to create characters and worlds that were indeed more aligned with the evolving potential of sound and with conventional film narrative. They clearly recall the complex, surprising, even subversive spirit that marked the very first Mickey Mouse films, while they also underscore how, after being given a voice and placed in an aural environment, Mickey and his world were slowly being pressed—or in this case, *folded*—into conformity.

Yet the fact that films like *The Band Concert* and *Mickey's Trailer* could so effectively mock that development and even narratize the tensions between the original mouse and his later incarnations precisely, in terms of a struggle between space and sound, suggests that, at least in this period, something of that spirit lingered at Disney, even as the studio pushed toward additional moves in a realist direction with the undertaking of initial steps toward producing a feature film (*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* [1937]) and developing its signature spatial technology, the multiplane camera. Briefly, the stereoscopic mouse remained alive, letting us glimpse something of his character and his world, indeed something of a visual style that had originally so appealed to audiences and attested to Disney's links to a modernist spirit.

NOTES

1. Vidler, *Warped Space* 4–5.
2. Leslie 297.
3. In his essay "Disney and Others," Gilbert Seldes offers a rather less extreme version of this same criticism, noting that "[b]ecause Mickey Mouse is a character, Disney finds himself forced occasionally to endow him with a verbal wit and to give him too much to say, which is against the spirit of the animated cartoon" (170).
4. For background on what has been termed the "illusion of life" style, see its elaborate treatment by two of Disney's most famous animators, Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston, in their *The Illusion of Life: Disney Animation*.
5. Describing his days working in the cartoon industry in New York, first with Raoul Barre's studio and then with the Fleischer brothers, animator Dick Huemer notes the extent to which others began to study the Disney products, particularly to learn how he "gave his characters weight and life and breath and naturalness" (qtd. in Adamson 33).
6. The link to Benjamin lies precisely in his emphasis on the "exhibition value" of the artifact, on stripping away its "cult value" in order to open it—and our world—up for inspection and analysis. See Benjamin 224–25. It is worth noting that Benjamin did address the impact of Mickey Mouse, not only emphasizing the anarchic energy and satiric spirit, but also applauding the realistic component of Disney's new character. See also Leslie 81–85.
7. This imitative element might also suggest a kind of metanarrative implicit in *Plane Crazy*: it reflects Disney's own ambitions for his studio and new cartoon figure. With this film and his new character, Disney was certainly trying to imitate such previously successful cartoon characters as Felix and his own Oswald the Rabbit, which had effectively been stolen from him by his distributor. But at the same time, Mickey represented much more, a kind of emblem of Walt Disney's vaulting ambition, as Gabler argues, "to make himself animation's indispensable man" (132). Mickey's desire to soar above the barnyard, even after a failed attempt, easily maps onto his creator's story of pioneering efforts, dashed hopes, and dogged persistence.
8. For background on the various efforts to imitate Lindbergh throughout American culture in this period, see Telotte.
9. Barrier notes that Felix had only "the rudiments of a personality," and we might add that this personality, in marked contrast to Mickey's, was practically characterized by a level of stillness, a notion at least hinted at in Barrier's reference to his "curious and rather hard-boiled" approach to everything (31).
10. Of course, Disney had earlier innovated three-strip Technicolor for cartoons in the Silly Symphony series with *Flowers and Trees* (1932). In part because of cost, but also to further differentiate the Mickey Mouse series from the Silly Symphonies, Disney delayed adding color to the Mickey films until *The Band Concert*.

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J. P. Telotte is a professor of film and media in the Literature, Communication, and Culture Program at Georgia Tech. Coeditor of the journal *Post Script*, he has published widely on film and television. Among his recent books are *Disney TV*, *The Essential Science Fiction Television Reader*, and *The Mouse Machine: Disney and Technology*. He is currently working on a study of animation and its relation to modern and postmodern conceptions of space.