

Reviewed by Dan Bashara

Frame by Frame: A Materialist Aesthetics of Animated Cartoons

by Hannah Frank

Edited by Daniel Morgan.

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It is a rare thrill to be surprised by a work of criticism. In animation studies, we have many ways of conceptualizing the medium at its center. Animation is a branch of cinema, or, in the digital age, maybe cinema is a subset of animation. It is drawn cinema, or it is moving graphic design. It is an outgrowth of the trick film or perhaps of the comic strip or else of the optical toy. Or it is a *sui generis* art form that takes advantage of whatever technologies are around it at any given time. We are used to animation's porous boundaries and hybrid status, and we have a large body of scholarship grappling with what it is and how to talk about it. Hannah Frank's *Frame by Frame: A Materialist Aesthetics of Animated Cartoons* is an intervention in this discussion, and it is worth being blunt: I have never seen animation talked about in this way before. It is field-defining, mind-expanding scholarship, and it is a joyous surprise.

Frank's book is more than a surprise, however; it is *about* surprise. The question that echoes throughout this book—"Did I just see that?"—carries the ultimate lesson of this impressive and meticulously researched study.¹ Frank examines animated films of the Golden Age (1920–1960) frame by frame, sometimes even poring over individual cels stacked atop one another to compose a frame. In so doing, she illuminates what hides unseen within the studio cartoons that unraveled in front of their audiences at twenty-four frames per second: smudges and creases, mistakes and jokes, traces of fatigue and artistic intervention. In treating the familiar seven-minute ani-

¹ Hannah Frank, *Frame by Frame: A Materialist Aesthetics of Animated Cartoons*, ed. Daniel Morgan (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019), 57.

mated short as a collection of thousands of photographs of hand-painted art, Frank opens a space to consider the role of human fallibility, private whimsy, and unrecognized labor in the industrialized realm of Golden Age studio animation. Labor is the most important of these; one of the book's main goals is to recuperate the artistry of Hollywood's unnamed inkers, painters, and camera operators and to reveal the centrality of their labor to the medium. When viewing animation frame by frame, we find surprise traces of these artists, including sometimes their literal fingerprints; for Frank, these traces are "an index of their presence."²

There is a second kind of labor at issue in this way of thinking about animation: our own, as the audience. If this method of viewing animation is in part an ethical responsibility, bearing witness to the hourly or daily toil of faceless employees, it is also an aesthetic necessity. To fully understand cartoons, Frank argues, one must *work*, as fair recompense for the painstaking, finger-breaking work of the artists who created them. This reciprocity is evident in the book's introduction, "Looking at Labor," and conclusion, "The Labor of Looking." (Elsewhere, there is a section heading that reads simply "Eyestrain.") However, central to the book's premise is that this work is fun. As Frank notes, looking for the labor in animation "can mobilize an inquisitive gaze that plays with and within the image. Rather than worry that we cannot ever know what it is that we are looking at, we delight in the masquerade. Forensic investigation becomes a game."³ This spirit of play suffuses the book, balancing the towering demands of Frank's research—the time, the focus, and, yes, the eyestrain—with the thrill of discovery that such research offers.

This joining of work and play both celebrates the artistic labor of below-the-line cartoon workers and constitutes the book's most exciting paradox. Frank ruthlessly demystifies the animation apparatus. One description reads, "there is not a single mouse, nor is there a cat, a chair, a mirror, or a door. There is only a stationary camera of prescribed focal length, directed downward at a table, on which is placed a stack of paintings."⁴ This seemingly clinical approach is a feature of Frank's argument, not a bug: "[T]o see the labor of photography is to puncture the phantasmagoric spell of animated cartoons."⁵ However, her next move is what makes this book so thrilling because Frank's demystification somehow reinvests animation with another kind of magic. She insists that as we remove cartoons from their imaginary worlds and ground them in the prosaic, workaday world of industry, their component pieces become charged with life: with the frustrations, boredom, and dreams of the anonymous people who created them. Far from being a simple record of a thing that once was, the photograph becomes "an object in which knowledge hides, an object out of which knowledge must be startled."⁶ This startled object, this living thing, is the key to Frank's view of the animated frame and the boundless world onto which it opens.

In chapter 1, Frank begins to teach us how to, in her words, look at this world. Exploring the animated film as an indexical document, she willfully takes its constituent frames out of order to see how they resonate with one another, a method undergirded by Sergei Eisenstein's theories of cinematic montage. For Frank, this

2 Frank, 53.

3 Frank, 47.

4 Frank, 146.

5 Frank, 67.

6 Frank, 16.

means that “[t]he single frame is viewed in isolation, in conjunction with frames that do not precede or follow it, and is juxtaposed with other instances of photographic reproduction wholly distinct from animation.”⁷ This method immediately bears fruit as Frank discovers, for example, images of newspapers copied from cartoon to cartoon, some of which bear startling traces of the world from which they were taken. Echoing Walter Benjamin, she finds “the tiniest authentic fragment[s] of daily life” hovering in the periphery of the cartoon image.⁸ Stopping the film and exploring the single frame turns the cartoon into an unexpected archive. Ultimately, Frank proposes a new way of seeing the cartoon: “I thus inaugurate a study of the single frame, the single document, in which the tiniest of details—a brushstroke, a shadow, an errant speck of dust—is freighted with historical and, ultimately, political weight.”⁹

Chapter 2 juggles the epistemological questions that emerge from this mode of looking, wondering “what happens if one were actually to *watch* an animated cartoon as a photographic record of graphic images.”¹⁰ This strategy requires attending to photography’s materiality, particularly when it comes to mistakes in the image: a backwards cel, a fingerprint on the lens, or dust in the air between. Most importantly, it means leaving behind the cartoon’s fictional world and inhabiting the fuzzy netherworld between fantasy and reality. Such an orientation can lead to historiographic difficulties; upon finding a black spot in one frame of a Mickey Mouse cartoon, Frank muses, “[I]s what I am seeing on the cel, on the camera lens, in or in front of the projector, on the film emulsion, a digital artifact, on the screen?”¹¹ There is no answer, at least to the question of what happened. Consequently, the question becomes an aesthetic one: the spot just happens to be the same size and shape as Mickey’s ears, and what might we do with that graphic echo and the new abstract pattern it introduces into the image? Elsewhere, paint applied unevenly from cel to cel causes a spot of color to wander around Snow White’s dress, and an improperly dusted cel depicting Mickey beset by gnats adds a second “swarm” to the first.¹² Frank’s analysis of these moments involves a delightfully perverse use of André Bazin’s theory of photographic realism, collapsing the material cel and the imaginary cartoon into one world. Like it or not, Frank argues, this is the cartoon you’re watching, mistakes and all.

Chapters 3 and 4 focus more on labor, turning the previous chapters’ theoretical insights to an explicitly political end. Chapter 3 is a celebration of unseen laborers, the painters and inkers whose work was considered “noncreative.”¹³ Here Frank zeroes in on frames of abstraction—explosions, snowstorms, blurs of rapid movement—and spotlights the women who created them. Indeed, Frank is abundantly clear that her analysis aims to recuperate the labor of women who worked and who were not recognized for it: “The fact remains that these women were separated from the creative process, even as what they produced was intrinsic to the final product. It is *their* work that fetches high prices at special auctions. It is the traces of

7 Frank, 15.

8 Frank, 39.

9 Frank, 15.

10 Frank, 46.

11 Frank, 47.

12 Frank, 57, 63, respectively.

13 Frank, 79–80.

their hands that we see on-screen.”¹⁴ By highlighting the undeniably creative output of female inkers and painters—and they were almost always female in the studio system—Frank reveals the political import of looking at cartoons frame by frame as photographs of paintings. Within the cartoon narrative, that frame of exquisite blue abstraction is merely water, and watching it whiz by at projection speed, you’ll barely notice it anyway. But if you stop the film, you’ll see a woman at work.

Chapter 4 offers a sustained history of xerography in animation, especially as used by Disney for *One Hundred and One Dalmatians* (Wolfgang Reitherman, Hamilton Luske, and Clyde Geronimi, 1961). The chapter is also a virtuosic gathering of the book’s various threads, as labor history, animation theory, and formal stylistic analysis sing together in profound harmony. The introduction of xerography promised to preserve the artist’s handiwork by copying it directly to the cel rather than having it inked by a third party. But how could mechanical reproduction be a more honest guarantor of the trace of the artist than manual reproduction? And what would such a conceptualization of art mean for the female inkers whose role it was to trace over the male artists’ pencil drawings, especially as xerography eliminated their jobs? What follows is an intricate and elegant theory of the animated line. Caught somewhere between image and text, between original and copy, and between trace of the artist and stamp of the machine, the line emerges from Frank’s exploration as a complex and contradictory force that scrambles our notion of what it means to draw a picture.

One cannot walk away from these chapters thinking about cartoons in the same way as before. Frank’s methodology, voraciously interdisciplinary, reveals the dense web of cultural and historical relations in which every cartoon—no, every *frame* of every cartoon—is caught. Her argument draws, in part, from sources one might expect: from labor history, film theory, and photography theory, from Eisenstein and Benjamin and Bazin. But what could literary history and microfiche, Emily Dickinson and Fernando Pessoa and Google’s book scanning project, possibly have to say about cartoons? A whole lot, it turns out. Frank explains in her first chapter that we must view cartoons as montage rather than as sequential cinema, and she enacts that method in the very explanation of it. Over and over, as Frank places seemingly unrelated concepts into unexpected juxtapositions, thesis and antithesis add up to a paradigm-shifting synthesis. Ultimately, she reminds us why we do scholarship and research in the first place. She shows us that what we thought we knew intimately we did not actually know at all; she has crafted, patiently and painstakingly, a theory of surprise.

I would be remiss to not mention the circumstances of this book’s publication. *Frame by Frame* is Frank’s dissertation; she was not able to see its publication as a book before her death in 2017. Yet what we have here is not an undigested dissertation; this is a book—a formidable display of research prowess and fearless intellectual tightrope walking—written in lucid, powerful prose that bears the mark of her playful intellect. Near the end of the book, she responds to a passage by Vladimir Nabokov musing upon the history of a pencil, of which, she informs us, over one million were used to draw *One Hundred and One Dalmatians*: “But the sheep is gone, the saw is gone, the pencil is gone. We are left with only its trace, the trace of its trace, a copy of a copy of a copy, a screen grab of a digital file of a scan of a print

14 Frank, 81.

of a photograph of a palimpsest of glass, celluloid acetate, and paper—thousands of them. Where do we even begin?²²¹⁵ We, too, are left with Frank's trace. It is a bold and exciting foray into unexplored territory, and while it is a crushing blow to know that she will not guide us through this territory any further, Hannah Frank has shown us where to begin.

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15 Frank, 142.