*Birth of an Industry: Blackface Minstrelsy and the Rise of American Animation* [Book review]

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Malcolm Cook is a Lecturer in Film at the University of Southampton. He has published a number of chapters and articles on animation, early cinema, and their intermedial relationships. He has also co-authored (with Max Sexton) a book titled *Adapting* *Science Fiction to Television: Small Screen, Expanded Universe* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2015). This book explores the way the adaptation to television of a range of science fiction sources, including literature, cinema, radio, and comics, has been used to explore and define the medium specificity of television. He is currently researching and writing a monograph on the development of animation in Britain before the coming of sound, examining the role of prior stage and print entertainments and the relationship of these forms with spectatorial perception.

Nicholas Sammond, *Birth of an Industry: Blackface Minstrelsy and the Rise of American Animation*, Duke University Press: Durham and London, 2015; 400pp; ISBN 978-0-8223-5840-4, $94.95 (cloth); ISBN 978-0-8223-5852-7, $26.95 (pbk)

The representation of race in silent and classical Hollywood animation has received limited critical attention, especially outside the Disney canon. Christopher Lehman and Henry T. Sampson have catalogued in detail the racist imagery in animated cartoons of the period, but provide restricted critical understanding of it ([Lehman 2007](#_ENREF_7); [Sampson 1998](#_ENREF_9)). Recent research has offered more nuanced accounts of the history and role of race in ‘golden age’ animation ([Crafton 2013](#_ENREF_3); [Goldmark 2005](#_ENREF_4); [Sperb 2012](#_ENREF_10)), yet popular discussion of the topic remains mired in simplistic binaries, pitting political correctness against racism, censorship against artistic freedom. A recent example can be seen in the discussions about ‘trigger warnings’ added to Tom and Jerry cartoons on the Amazon Instant Video service ([Coughlan 2014](#_ENREF_1)). Nicholas Sammond’s *Birth of an Industry: Blackface Minstrelsy and the Rise of American Animation* offers a timely, valuable, and theoretically distinguished intervention in this field, while also carrying more wide-ranging implications for the study of American animation.

As might be expected, Sammond clearly delineates the strong historical connections between blackface minstrelsy and animation. In his introduction Sammond, drawing on the substantial existing work on this entertainment, provides a useful overview of this popular stage act. For it the performer applied burnt cork or black greasepaint makeup to their face, wore loosely fitting costumes and other accessories, and adopted codified performance styles, all of which served to create a caricature of African-Americans ([18-25](#_ENREF_8)). While these performers were frequently white, black performers, such as Bert Williams, also adopted this act ([62-65](#_ENREF_8)). Sammond shows how early animation developed in contact with minstrelsy through the shared venue of vaudeville in the first two decades of the 20th century ([47](#_ENREF_8)). The animated characters that followed, including Mickey Mouse, Ko-Ko the Clown, Bimbo, and Flip the Frog, were consistently depicted using the same iconography, with white gloves, wide smiles, and elastic bodies ([70](#_ENREF_8)).

Moreover, Sammond highlights the close performative connections between the minstrel act and the scenario of many animated cartoons of the silent period. Minstrel acts were frequently structured around the interaction of two blackface minstrels, named Tambo and Bones after the musical instruments they played, and an interlocutor, who was frequently white. The interlocutor would quiz these minstrels, with their confused response producing a comic effect ([24](#_ENREF_8)). Sammond persuasively argues that the interaction between animator and animated character seen in many silent cartoons has a shared history with this relationship between interlocutor and minstrels ([46](#_ENREF_8)). In doing so, he extends a more politically charged reading of what Donald Crafton has aptly called the ‘hand of the artist’ convention ([Crafton 1982, 338](#_ENREF_2)), indicating Sammond’s wider ambition in this book.

Beyond the connections highlighted above,Sammond argues that the relationship between animation and minstrelsy is not simply one of shared historical context in vaudeville or a continuation of a particular iconography, but that the two are bound together structurally and theoretically. The title *Birth of an Industry* implicitly acknowledges this in evoking the film *Birth of a Nation* (1915). D.W. Griffith’s epic is commonly taken as a watershed moment for the decisive shift from the ‘cinema of attractions’ to narrative cinema ([Gunning 1990](#_ENREF_5); [Stokes 2007](#_ENREF_11); [Koszarski 1990](#_ENREF_6)). Just as America was founded as a nation on racial exploitation, equally the American film industry was founded in Griffith’s racist portrayal of that history. Likewise, for Sammond, the rise of animation is deeply imbricated with minstrelsy through the material and social conditions that they shared, especially industrialisation and the rationalisation of labour.

It is for this reason that the book begins with three chapters titled simply ‘Performance’, ‘Labor’, and ‘Space’, before the fourth chapter ‘Race’ takes as its primary topic the issues of representation that might be anticipated in a discussion of animation and minstrelsy. After the aforementioned introduction, chapter 1 (‘Performance’) and chapter 2 (‘Labor’), provide a revised account of the rise of animation from its origins in vaudeville performance to a rationalised industrial form. Here Sammond argues that the minstrel’s performance of racialised power relations finds a correlation in both the animator’s position as worker and their creation and control of the animated character. In each case there is a tension between forced labour and a wilful or playful refusal of it ([71](#_ENREF_8)). The animated character as minstrel is thus bound up with not only race, but also Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism ([108-111](#_ENREF_8)). Both the minstrel/slave and animated character are living commodities, they are both subject and object simultaneously and in this lies their deeper affinity.

Chapter 3 (‘Space’) addresses the changes in animated cartoons arising from the coming of synchronised sound in the late 1920s. Sammond shows how silent animated cartoons of the 1920s constructed a material and social space that was porous. Silent animated cartoons enacted narratives of escape and containment in which minstrel characters could move between the drawn and live world, epitomised by the Fleischers’ Out of the Inkwell series ([149](#_ENREF_8)). This extended to the space of the spectator with exhibition practices such as live prologues and singalong cartoons ([150-159](#_ENREF_8)). The arrival of sound produced a new segregation of space, in which animated characters existed in a parallel but wholly separate realm, one in which the hand of the artist or the audience was no longer acknowledged or interacted with ([180](#_ENREF_8)). As a result the minstrel and their performative origins became vestigal, no longer attached to their historical referents ([183](#_ENREF_8)). This newly segregated animated space allowed for the emergence of new racial representations that Sammond categorises as ‘racist caricatures’. Bound up with jazz music and white fantasies of blackness, these caricatures moved away from the minstrel’s concern with labour and rebellion, instead offering a new fantasy of libidinous and sensuous freedom ([184](#_ENREF_8)).

Chapter 4 (‘Race’) extends discussion of the vestigal minstrel and its interaction with racist caricatures. Drawing on the work of Freud, Sammond examines the relationship between humour and violence in animated cartoons, delineating a continuum of audience response from empathy to sympathy ([211](#_ENREF_8)). For Sammond the humour of these animated cartoons arose precisely from their depiction of race and the tensions inherent there, not despite them ([256](#_ENREF_8)). Likewise the presentation of violence, both physical and social, in animation is not coincidental but inherent to the form, a product of the plasmatic ability of animation to metamorphose and transform, which is here argued to constitute an essential formal property of animation ([208](#_ENREF_8)). Given this, the adoption of minstrelsy and racial caricature in animated cartoons that create these characters only to punish them is determined by an aesthetic or theoretical affinity with animation as well as a historical correspondence.

The extended concluding chapter takes an approach also seen in the introduction, providing an analysis of recent examples of blackface minstrelsy as a way of reflecting on both the recurring ideas minstrelsy raises as well as the changes it undergoes in particular historical contexts. Sammond gives an engaging and enthused reading of *Tropic Thunder* (2008) in which Robert Downey Jr. plays an actor who performs in blackface. This close reading brings into focus several of the recurring ideas of the book. A discussion of method acting and its representation in *Tropic Thunder* reveals the contradictory ideas of authenticity and performance inherent in minstrelsy ([277](#_ENREF_8)). These are in turn tied up with the form’s racial representation, the idea of blackness as both fixed and mutable. Breaking with the rigorous historical specificity seen in the main discussion, this concluding chapter does bring a fresh perspective on the core themes raised throughout the book. Equally it will undoubtedly serve to expand the appeal of the book to broader audiences. Yet in choosing a live-action film it takes us away from animation at a key moment, where another case study would allow the close connection between minstrelsy and animation to be crystallised. For instance a close reading of *Avatar* (2009) through the ideas Sammond raises would be enlightening.

*Birth of an Industry* is accompanied by a comprehensive and invaluable companion website (http://scalar.usc.edu/works/birthofanindustry). All the films referred to in the book, whether those analysed in detail or mentioned in passing, are available to view, alongside many additional visual and audio references that are not reproduced in the book. These are accompanied by text providing simplified accounts of the main historical and theoretical points of the book. Readers may find it useful to spend some time absorbing the overview sections to orient themselves before starting the book, although the full complexity of Sammond’s nuanced arguments will best be understood by alternating between book and site. The site might also serve as a useful standalone resource for younger students in secondary education who are not ready for the main text. There are some limitations to this resource, but these do not detract from its usefulness. The image quality and resolution of the film clips is variable, reflecting understandable technical, copyright, and historical factors. Likewise the site did not always display as intended on this reviewer’s tablet device, a familiar compatibility issue that plagues many resources in this age of myriad devices and browsers. Nevertheless, this is a fantastic resource that does not require any additional payment or subscription and sets a new standard for digital resources accompanying an academic monograph.

*Birth of an Industry* will become a vital addition to the reading list of university courses that address representation in animation, or indeed the representation of race in cinema more generally. In its ambition to rewrite early animation history it must also be seriously considered as a source for courses looking at the history and development of animation. The exclusive focus on American filmmaking in this book restricts consideration of important aspects of this topic, such as the transnational basis of vaudeville and animation, and the international reception of American animated cartoons, leaving both topics as vital areas for future research. Non-academic audiences and undergraduates may find the book a challenging read as it incorporates theoretically sophisticated language and concepts alongside its detailed historical account. For instance in his discussion of race Sammond writes ‘more plainly put, the fantastic and resistant form of the blackface minstrel was an embodied corollary to the plasmatic substance, the metamorphic form of the cartoon character, a being that could alter itself or its environment seemingly at will (and certainly at the will of its creator)’ ([212](#_ENREF_8)). Incisive and original as this analysis is, many readers would disagree that this is ‘plainly put’, yet it is indicative of the register of the writing as a whole. Similarly, despite the apparent simplicity of the four chapter titles and a general chronological development across them, the ideas in the book emerge, as Sammond himself observes, ‘recursively’ ([30](#_ENREF_8)). On the one hand this results in a degree of repetition and elaboration of core ideas in every chapter. On the other hand the full implications of what has been raised sometimes only becomes apparent much later in the book. Both characteristics perhaps encourage non-linear reading strategies and rereading, which will also be aided by the online companion.

Beyond the specific history Sammond uncovers, *Birth of an Industry* serves to again demonstrate the need to consider animation as an interdisciplinary field, and the value of detailed historical research and analysis in achieving that. By placing early animation in the immediate context of other cultural practices and the wider social and political context of their period he brings fresh understanding to a history that may have seemed settled. He writes in his introduction ‘It would be easy to suggest that...times were different then. Yet times are always different - that’s what makes them times’ ([8](#_ENREF_8)). Only through the kind of historical and theoretical contextual work Sammond conducts here can we understand and demonstrate animation’s centrality to ‘the times’ whether past, present, or future.

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