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Le rêve infernal de Mutt et Jeff I

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THE INFERNAL DREAM OF MUTT AND JEFF

by Zoe Beloff

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The Laughter of Things

The story goes like this: A. Mutt, his head full of get-rich-quick schemes, is sent to an insane asylum on account of his gambling addiction. Here he meets up with Jeff, a little guy who firmly believes that he's a heavyweight boxing champ. Together they set off into the world to make a buck. Their suits are rumpled and cheap, their physiognomies so crudely drawn that you might well call them the *Lumpenproletariat*. But somehow they survive to become the protagonists of the longest-running comic strip ever. It started in the *San Francisco Chronicle* in 1907 and kept going until 1983. Soon Mutt and Jeff were making lots of money for their creator, Bud Fisher. Seeking another way to market the duo, Fisher decided to hire a company to animate them.

I found the hapless pair on a roll of film in a storehouse of objects from the history of cinema that goes under the name of The Vrielynck Collection in Antwerp. The title on the box read *Le rêve infernal de Mutt and Jeff I*. It called out to me.

The film is only two minutes long. It was marketed for children and was to be played on a toy projector. It seems to date from the early 1930s, but I can't be sure. I don't know whether it is an "official" Mutt and Jeff film animated by the studio of Raoul Barré and Charles Bowers or a European bootleg put out by the

Ozaphan Company. The information on the box is in German, and the title is in French. The film isn't even genuine celluloid, but cheap, flimsy cellophane.

Unsurprisingly the narrative finds our heroes destitute. Mutt and Jeff have lost everything. The world has become a frozen wasteland. They tussle over a tiny blanket, their only possession. Finally the duo set off in search of firewood. The only other living creature turns out to be a devil who sends Mutt and Jeff plummeting straight to hell. But even here the poor devils are freezing their asses off; icicles hang from their noses. Unable to wake from this hell, Mutt and Jeff make the best of it. Soon Mutt has stolen the last little flame in hell and gleefully tosses a devil in a frying pan.



FIG. 1—Mutt and Jeff in free fall. *The Infernal Dream of Mutt and Jeff*, Bud Fisher Films Corporation, c. 1930, 16mm

As I watched the film, I found myself plunged back into the time when the great stock market crash of 1929 sent the economy into free fall. For a lot of people the world had literally gone to hell; they were left with nothing. I thought of the words of the great media theorist and left-wing philosopher Walter Benjamin, who said that cartoons expose the fact that what passes as civilization is barbarism. The impoverished world of violence and sadism in cartoons is really our world. This is not naturalism but realism. Perhaps *The Infernal Dream* traces plummeting stock prices and economic collapse. Perhaps it is not a dream at all, but life in the Depression. Perhaps we are still there, along with Mutt and Jeff, right now.

Reanimation

I spend a lot of time looking at and listening to objects that have been discarded, thrown on the scrap heap. In my work I explore what might be called the dream life of technology. I attempt to reanimate the remains of cinema's past: discarded films, old projectors, to set them in motion so that they might speak again, but differently. For me, the cinematic apparatus is not just machines but more importantly our interaction with them.

It was initially the title alone, *The Infernal Dream of Mutt and Jeff*, that gripped my imagination. What might it mean? I found myself on a journey to explore how utopian visions of social progress intersect with the cinematic apparatus, industrial management, and modernism. Was cinema from its inception a medium of psychosocial control or does it contain the

potential to experience the world in new ways? Can we awaken from this world of illusion or has our digital media sucked us down even deeper?

The Graphic Method

Of course Mutt and Jeff are not people at all but just moving lines, and these lines or traces take us back to the very beginnings of the moving image with the graphic method of the French physiologist Etienne-Jules Marey. In the late nineteenth century Marey conducted pioneering research to find ways to record and make visible the motions of the body as they changed over time. In his early work he developed machines to register internal movements in the human body such as pulse, breathing, and blood pressure. To chart motion over time, he used what was called the graphic method. For example, when he wanted to understand the motions of a bird in flight, he attached a bird to a harness so that the movement of its wings, now hooked up to wires and levers, caused lines to be etched onto charcoal-blackened paper wrapped around a revolving cylinder. He turned to photography and used a revolving shutter to take multiple exposures on a single glass plate of a man running. He dressed the runner completely in black with white lines and dots that would read as points in time on the image. He was not interested in the individual but in the motion itself. This technology is the forerunner of today's motion capture. Movement is abstracted from the individual and exists as an independent entity and most importantly as a useful commodity. Marey's first client was the French army.

The Productive and Unproductive Body

Marey conceptualized the body as a complex mechanism. If the body is a machine, then the next question is how can it be optimized, improved. He was asked to figure out how to make French soldiers march more efficiently. At the same time that he was carrying out this research, his protégé Albert Londe was using a similar motion studies camera at the hospital of the Salpêtrière to document the distorted gait of women diagnosed with hysteria. Londe photographed bodies that refused to be coordinated, whose inner rebellion was expressed in motions that were excessive and strange. So we see that from the very beginning of motion picture recording, the productive body was shadowed by its unproductive double.

While Marey and Londe were working in Paris, in the United States Frederick Winslow Taylor set himself the task of optimizing production in the American factory. Considering the human body to be just one among many moving components on the assembly line, he believed his goal was to get workers to speed up. His tool was the stopwatch. Another team of researchers, Frank and Lillian Gilbreth, took a subtler approach. Rather than simply force workers to toil to the point of exhaustion, they had the idea to break down physical tasks into their most elementary gestures and optimize each gesture for efficiency; that is, to eliminate unnecessary motions.

They regarded themselves as scientists and in the 1910s founded the new discipline of Scientific Management. It was with a spirit of progress that they entered into this new field. They wanted to show how workers could take it upon them-

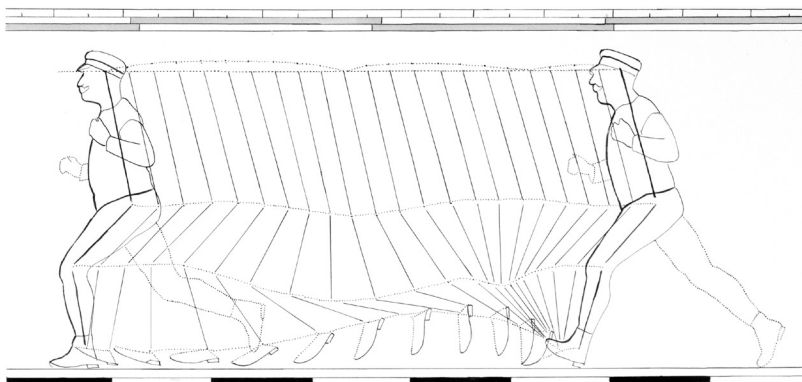


FIG. 2—*Marche ordinaire*, Etienne-Jules Marey. Tracings made from projected and overlapping chronophotographs (1895)

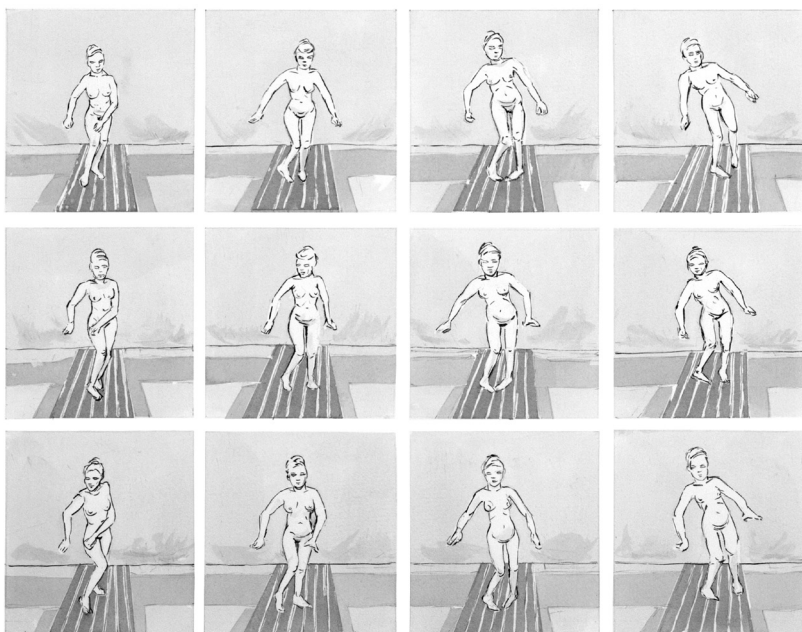


FIG. 3—*Démarche pathologique*, Albert Londe. Chronophotographs of a hysteric at the Salpêtrière Hospital (1895)

selves to study and optimize their own motions not only to make more money for management but because time-motion studies were intrinsically fascinating. And because labor would now take less time, the worker would have more time for enlightened leisure activities. Or so their story went.

To this end the Gilbreths set to work filming all kinds of people at work: champion fencers, adroit bricklayers, famous surgeons, and the champion oyster opener of Rhode Island, to give but a few examples. They photographed their activities against gridded backgrounds, with clocks in the foreground so that the motions of the body could be charted and measured. The Gilbreths' method was very similar to that of Muybridge and Marey, except they didn't want just to record the body in motion but to change it. They believed that if people studied their films they would learn to synchronize their movements with the more efficient movements shown in the films; their bodies would reflect the motions they watched on screen.

A Utopian Gesture

To make motion visible, the Gilbreths created fantastic objects they called chronocyclographs. With a 3-D camera, using a very long exposure time, they photographed people with a little light attached to one finger as they worked. Then they created a wire sculpture of the light trail described by the movement of the worker's hands. The worker was to study this frozen gesture and learn from it. Frank Gilbreth named one such object "Perfect Movement." Was he referring to aesthetic perfection, precision? The idea that a movement could be "perfect" is quite



FIG. 4—Cyclograph study woman demonstrating light-tracking hand motions. First picture showing pointed spots, the spots showing direction. Frank B. Gilbreth (1914)

extraordinary. Frank Gilbreth described chronocyclographs thus:

It is extremely difficult to demonstrate to the average person the reality and value, and especially the money value of an intangible thing. The motion model makes this value apparent and impressive. *It makes tangible the fact that time is money and that an unnecessary motion is money lost forever.*¹

I think of chronocyclographs as utopian objects with real consequences. Motions became things and the people that made them, the workers, have vanished. Motion and money were equated. Movement in this world is no longer free or spontane-

ous; it is constrained, rationalized; it is part of the economic equation.

Artists were quick to pick up on the research of the industrial engineers. They too wanted to be part of modernity and create

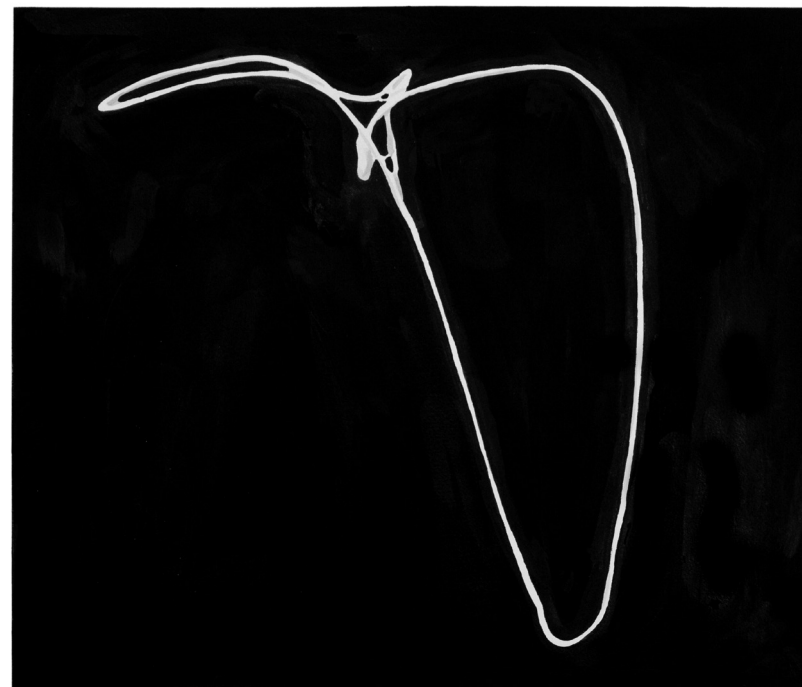


FIG. 5—"Perfect Movement." Wire Model. Frank B. Gilbreth (c. 1912)

a new aesthetic in keeping with the times. It is easy to see how "Perfect Movement" relates to the sculptures of Brancusi and how Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* was inspired by Marey's motion studies. In each case the individual has vanished and only the motion remains as an object, an art object.

Innervation

The Gilbreths believed that by studying films and chronocyclographs, workers would become “motion-minded” and would experience the world in a new way, conscious of their movements. Walter Benjamin used the word *innervation* to describe how our nervous system changes through our interaction with moving images on a very fundamental level. He thought that since we live in a technological world, our synchronicity with the moving image enables us to come to grips with this new reality, to become one with technology rather than be its servant.

Benjamin was very interested in the industrial film and wrote about how the actor before the camera was in the same situation as the worker undergoing an aptitude test for his or her manager. Thus the audience understood the situation of the actor, since this experience of testing was one that they understood from their own lives. More profoundly, Benjamin held out the utopian promise that cinema could open up our experience of the world. He talked about how the camera penetrated our reality, threw us inside it, exploded our world in a split second. Technologies like slow motion or extreme close-up shook us out of habitual and deadening patterns of thought so that we might see the world with fresh eyes. Benjamin called this “The Optical Unconscious.” He pointed out that while radical art still had upper-class connotations that intimidated people, cinema was an egalitarian medium. Chaplin and Mickey Mouse were just as radical of modernists as Marcel Duchamp, but no one needed to feel any special education was required to appreciate them. More than that, they made people laugh.

Industrial Films

Some years ago I heard that a business college in New York was throwing out their 16mm films. I rescued sixty instructional films, most of them from the mid-twentieth century. All looked like they had been shot in the same dreary institution, a place that seemed to encompass the home, the office, the school, the factory, and the mental asylum. Together they implied that our whole world had become an institution to manage and monitor bodies. These films lacked any of gloss or nostalgia. I thought about them for a long time.

The Gilbreths’ time-motion studies had become part of the curriculum and many of the films demonstrated their principles. I chose two films, *Motion Studies Application* and *Folie à Deux*. Both are artlessly crafted instructional productions from the early 1950s, but they nonetheless fascinated me. I wanted to create a dialogue with them, to explore their unconscious, their hidden history. I would need to make a third film that would somehow set them into dialectical motion. It would have to be something that could not be described in words but only shown, something that might suggest a radical potential buried within these drab and discarded objects.

At first these films seemed very dark. *Motion Studies Application* was not actually made by the Gilbreths, but it illustrates their methods. The title *Folie à Deux* sounds romantic, but it is in fact the clinical name of a contagious paranoia. It is one in a series of films made to illustrate how to identify, but not treat, mental disorders. They were two sides of the same coin, the presentation of the productive and unproductive body.

Just as Marey's marching soldiers had their double in Londe's hysterics walking, so the productive workers in *Motion Studies Application* had their dysfunctional double in *Folie à Deux*. The efficient and orderly motions of women stuffing envelopes find their distorted reflection in the flamboyant gestures of the mother and daughter in *Folie à Deux*.

In both films people are represented as they were in the Gilbreths' films, as simply the bearers of motion. One might call them objects, but the implications of seeing them this way are disturbing. In *Motion Studies Application* a split-screen shot of a woman shows her performing the mind-numbing task of inserting wooden pegs into a series of holes. On the right side of the screen she performs the task more efficiently, and upon finishing sooner, she appears to look condescendingly at her less



FIG. 6—The operator at right waits for her less productive self. *Motion Studies Application* (c. 1950)

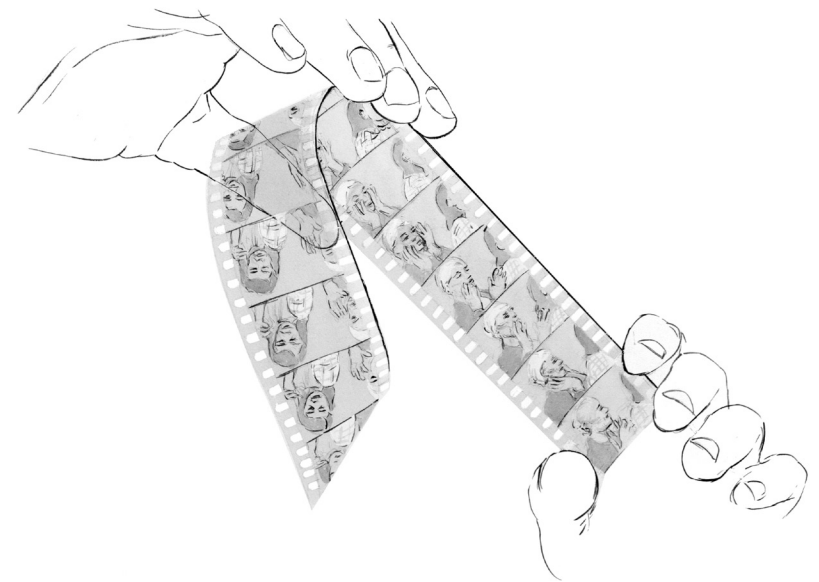


FIG. 7—A contagion of images. Two patients suffer from folie à deux: the mother mirrors the daughter's insanity. National Film Board of Canada (1952)

efficient self. Does this mean that when you internalize motion you also internalize management?

Folie à Deux also invokes the double. Here, a mother and daughter share the same feelings of persecution to the point that they both experience actual physical symptoms of sickness and shortness of breath. Gradually it becomes clear to the daughter that the psychiatrist who initially appears so concerned is not interested in her story as such but is merely urging them on to elicit characteristic symptoms of the disorder. The film reveals the psychic price of real people being treated as nothing more than objects or bearers of symptoms. As the young woman puts it to the doctor, "I want to feel free and do

things as I please . . . normal human things . . . as normal human beings want to. The same things as you want to do. You're human, well I'm also human. You know what you would like, well I also like . . . Well, put me in your class; you're a human being and you know what I'd like." Her entreaty is to no avail: the film ends with the young woman and her mother being sent back to the ward.

The World of Lively Things

Karl Marx wrote about the relationships between things and people. He described how, in the Industrial Age, people came to be treated more like things or interchangeable parts in a factory while things or commodities, that is, the products of human labor, suddenly seemed to have a life of their own with strangely human characteristics—at least in the way we talk and think about them. It seems as though commodities assume a ghostly objectivity and live their own lives. They may rise or fall in price. People might desire or even fall in love with them. They enter the fray of a marketplace that might be sluggish or animated. The commodity's value no longer has any relation to the worker who made it, who has quite lost control of these lively objects. Marx thought that people should benefit from objects that they create rather than the profits going to shareholders.

Walter Benjamin also explored the world of things in a different way. In his essay "On the Language of Man and Language as Such," he writes that language is simply the communication of mind or of being; it does not require words or vocabulary. He suggested that objects communicate with us through what he

calls their "material community," their shared existence with us. A simple thing such as a lamp conveys its being to man, and that is how knowledge and naming begins. It is something that we can only experience intuitively or that we can perhaps grasp in a nonverbal way through art.

Benjamin discusses mimesis as a profound way of understanding and communicating with the world around us. People have always imitated things and found correspondences between things. It is common in the games of small children. As Benjamin noted, "the child plays at being not only a shopkeeper or teacher, but also a windmill and a train"; the distinction between the animate and the inanimate is immaterial. Reading or misreading Benjamin's writing inspired me to see the world from the perspective of objects themselves, to try intuitively to give them voice through motion.

The Revolutionary Potential of the Pratfall

These ideas come into play in the world of slapstick and cartoons. (Chaplin once said that he wished he could be a cartoon so he could do the perfect gag without having to worry about having to draw breath.) In slapstick, things take on a life of their own. They might be thought of as Marx's lively objects gone out of control. A ladder will swing around and happen to smack a policeman in the face. The gesture made by the ladder operates on the level of a universal language that grows naturally out of the play of children that Benjamin described.

It is here, I believe, that we enter into the dream life of objects, where the repression of our industrial world erupts.

Slapstick is its excess. When Chaplin becomes too efficient on the assembly line in *Modern Times* (1936), he pushes everyone's buttons! In *One Week* (1920) Buster Keaton misreads a manual and builds his house inside out, and it spins madly like a merry-go-round. In this ecstatic moment there is liberation from drab small-town America with its cookie-cutter houses before the inevitable collapse. It is beautiful.

I think of slapstick as the third term, the revolutionary potential hidden between the efficient body of the worker and the disordered body of the emotionally disturbed. Slapstick posits a new relationship between the world of things and the world of people. It begins by destroying the order of the world that we know and leads us . . . where? We don't know, but that is its strength. It doesn't precisely prescribe for us but says simply that our world can be other than it is. When I shot a third film to create a dialogue between *Motion Studies Application* and *Folie à Deux*, I tried to give objects the opportunity to lead their own lives, and I did not know until the moment of shooting what exactly they would do. The actor followed the Gilbreths' instructions but mimicked the industrial films too far, with a mad excess. I wanted to experience what would happen if the tools of production refused to remain hidden and everything went wrong.

Things Talk Back

If we conceptualize the commodity as a condensation of social forces and ask it to speak, what would it say? Perhaps like A. Mutt in the cartoon *On Strike* (1920), the commodity would



FIG. 8—The Pratfall. Three frames of 16mm film

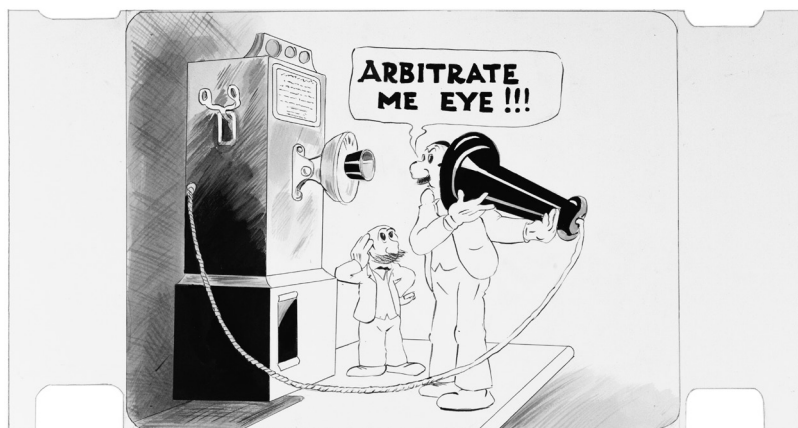


FIG. 9—*On Strike*, Bud Fisher Films Corporation (1920)

yell “Arbitrate me eye!!!!” at his at his creator and CEO. In the film *On Strike* Mutt and Jeff discover that thanks to their antics Bud Fisher is making a mint and living the life of Riley. Furious, they demand 75 percent of the profits, a three-hour workday, and a five-day workweek. When Fisher insists on arbitration, Mutt threatens to strike but then conceives an even better idea. He and Jeff will animate themselves. The commodities will become workers and take production into their own hands!

Now Mutt and Jeff must learn the process of animation, and in the course of this, they reveal the illusion of their own production and show the hidden labor that brings them to life. Jeff sits at an animation table drawing himself while Mutt is busy photographing each drawing. When Jeff realizes it’s going to take three thousand drawings to make one cartoon, he freaks out. Too much work! This is the labor that most commodities in

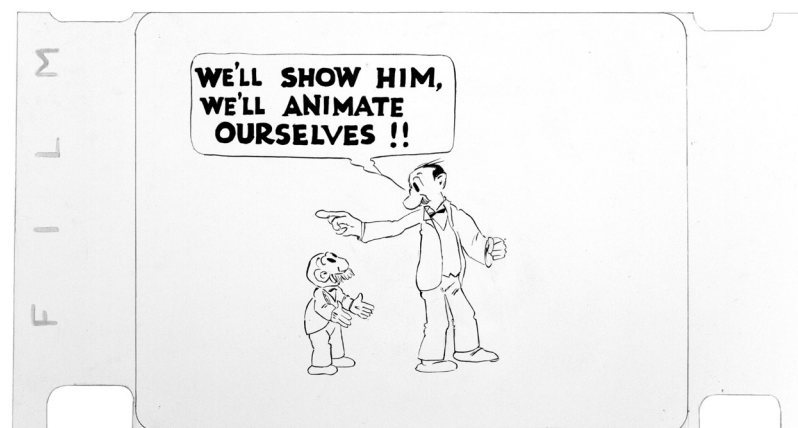


FIG. 10—*On Strike*, Bud Fisher Films Corporation (1920)

their shiny new packages hide so well. They seem to *be* rather than to be *made by* someone.

Animated cartoons are slippery objects. Do they belong to the world of things or people? They seem so lively, but who or what are Mutt and Jeff—an expression of Bud Fisher’s imagination, his intellectual property, a product from the animation assembly line of the studio of Raoul Barré and Charles Bowers, or just lines, traces of ink on celluloid, or all of the above? *On Strike* ends with Mutt and Jeff’s own film a flop at the box office. They beg their creator to take them back, offering to work for free. Of course Bud Fisher has the last laugh; he owns the little fellows.

I like to think of early animated films as thought at work. Cartoons from the early days did not conceal their means of production. The figures are clearly just lines drawn in ink, yet like the protagonists of slapstick—both Chaplin and the

ladder—they reveal a hidden potential in their constant improvisation and metamorphosis. They map out a world that is in constant flux. A line can turn into a man and then turn into house or a mouse, a word, or an idea in a bubble. Everything and anything is possible. Everyone understands them and we respond with laughter.

Benjamin celebrated the revolutionary potential of laughter. He saw the joke as a moment of liberation in which cracks and fissures abruptly opened up the status quo, producing in its own way what surrealists might call a disorientation of the senses, a glimpse of freedom on both a psychic and a political level. His friend Theodor Adorno was not so sure. Adorno looked at cartoons and saw not liberation but cruel laughter. He saw Donald Duck taking a thrashing. He thought that this was another way that ordinary working people received training in punishment and got used to the idea that they were going to get beaten over the head by their bosses.

A. Mutt and R. Mutt

I always knew that A. Mutt had a long-lost cousin who mingled with the art crowd, who might look like an artist but was just as much of a prankster as A. His name was R. Mutt, and he was the alter ego of Marcel Duchamp. In 1917 he submitted for exhibition a sculpture called *Fountain*. It caused a scandal at the time because all he had done was to up end a urinal and sign his name to it. He said that he wanted to show that art does not reside in an object but in an idea. It is the idea that is important. He took something utterly mundane and made



FIG. 11—R. Mutt's *Fountain* (1917)

it speak differently. For Duchamp art could be serious and funny at the same time. As Louise Norton put it at the time, “Then again there are those who anxiously ask, ‘Is he serious or is he joking?’ Perhaps he is both! Is it not possible . . . it puts it rather up to you.”²

Works by radical artists such as R. Mutt and others who were inspired by the industrial technologies of motion capture seem to breathe a rarified aesthetic air far removed from the factories where the Gilbreths were at work. Yet while the artists were concerned with making work that expressed the modern era, the objects they created were soon caught up in the “infernal dream.” For, as we have seen, objects, once they reach

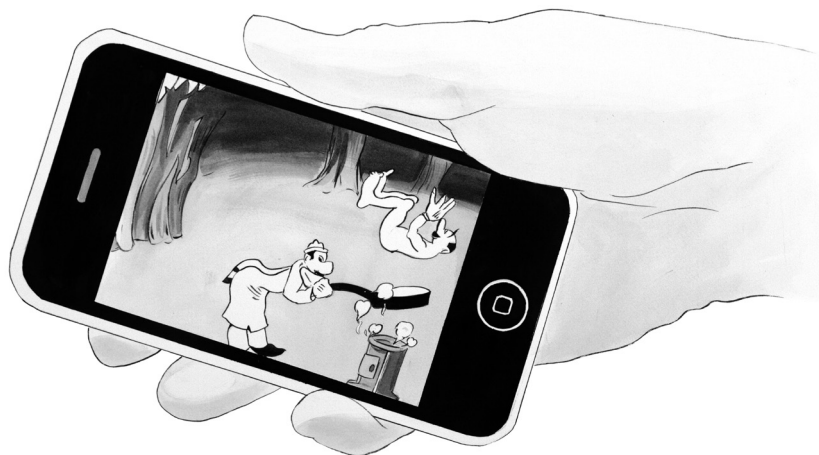


FIG. 12—A. Mutt fries a devil (c. 1930)

the open market, go on to live their own lives as commodities separate and apart from their creators' intentions.

R. Mutt didn't aim to turn an ordinary, industrially manufactured object into a high-priced art object by signing his name. He did not care about money.³ He wanted to shake people out of their habitual ways of thinking about art, showing us that even the most humble and banal object has the potential to be other than it is. The original 1917 *Fountain* disappeared; it may have been lost, destroyed, or stolen. But so strong is the lure of commodity fetishism that even objects that have been destroyed can return from the dead. In 1964 gallerist Arturo Schwarz in Milan reproduced numbered copies of Duchamp's Readymades in editions of eight, which Duchamp signed. (A prototype of *Fountain* and four additional copies outside of the numbered series of eight brought the total to thirteen new *Fountains*).

Suddenly eight new *Fountains*, perfect replicas of the original, were up for sale. This is another kind of production in which price is predicated on the limited edition and the aura of the artist circulating in what Adorno called the "culture industry."

The Infernal Dream isn't over; it's hard to wake up. But just when you think things have really gone to hell, you too can turn the tables and fry up a devil for dinner! As Benjamin said, when civilization becomes barbarism, perhaps all you can do is to prepare to survive civilization any way you can . . . even in hell you can have a laugh.

Notes

1. Frank Bunker Gilbreth and Lillian Moller Gilbreth, *Applied Motion Study: A Collection of Papers on the Efficient Method to Industrial Preparedness* (New York: Sturges & Walton Company, 1917), 125.
2. Louise Norton, "Buddha in the Bathroom," in Joseph Masbeck, ed., *Marcel Duchamp in Perspective* (Engelwood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1975), 71.
3. Interviewed shortly after Duchamp's death, John Cage spoke about the artist's attitude toward money. Duchamp never really used his art to make money; in fact he was opposed to the idea of private property. However, late in life he was astonished by the amount of money that his artist friends were making. He couldn't understand how they did it. Cage describes Duchamp with his "Valise" as the rather feeble attempt of a small businessman who tries to act in a businesslike way in a capitalist society, a man who has the idea of how to make a small company but has no notion of how to become a big corporation. Moira Roth and William Roth, "John Cage on Marcel Duchamp: An Interview," in Masbeck, ed., *Marcel Duchamp*, 156.

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