

## **Iconology in Animation: Figurative Icons in Tex Avery's**

### ***Symphony in Slang***

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The current fascination with popular culture has generated numerous investigations focusing on a wide variety of subject matter deriving primarily from the mass media. In most cases they venture upon capturing its particular effects on the social practices of various target-audiences in our present era: effects that namely induce enjoyment and amusement within a life-world of frenetic consumerism verging upon the 'hyper-real'. Popular culture has become a shibboleth, especially for those who are absorbed in demarcating post-modernity: its ubiquity hailed as a socially desirable manifestation of the mass-circulated 'taste cultures' and 'taste publics' – along with their 'colonizing' representations and stylizations – found in our post-industrial society. Hence, the large quantity of studies available tends to amplify on the pervasive theme of the postmodern condition with an emphasis on pastiche and/or parody. However, before the issue of post-modernity became an agenda-setting trend, semioticians had been in the forefront in joining the ranks of scholars who began to take seriously the mass-produced artifacts of popular culture and to offer their expertise in unraveling the immanent meanings of the sign systems ensconced within those productions.

Since Roland Barthes' and Umberto Eco's critically acclaimed forays into the various genres of popular culture during the late 50's and early 60's, many semiotic scholars - following their lead - have attempted to extract from these mass art-forms meaningful insights concerning the semiotic significance portrayed in them. Many of these genres such as comics, detective/spy novels, science fiction, blockbuster films, etc., have been closely scrutinized and analyzed from an array of critical vantage points covering aspects that range, for example, from formal text-elements of the particular genre to its ideological ramifications in a socio-historical context.

One particular genre in the field of cultural studies that has been insufficiently examined is the animated cartoon. In this chapter, I would like to direct attention to a

remarkable cartoon produced by one of the most admired animation artists of the 20th century, Tex Avery, and to bring to light the semiotic significance of this master craftsman's artifact. I will discuss one of Avery's last cartoons for MGM, *Symphony in Slang* (1951), which can be seen as an excursion into the semiotic realm of idiomatic slang expressions 'inscribing' iconic or visual figurative signs that function as a subtle *meta-narrative*. This 'meta-narrative' device thus becomes a supplement humorously placing its references in synchronized step with the codes enunciated. Avery's cartoons rely heavily on the motivated sign – but in this particular cartoon we witness a *visually simulated meta-narrative* based on an interlocking of verbal and iconic sign vehicles; hence, as we will see, *Symphony in Slang* uses this as *the* exclusive comic device that can be considered distinctly innovative. Moreover, we are exposed to a humorous parody of a personal life story that is speedily related, in which the discursive features of the *diegesis* parade in slang or stock phrases. These marked verbal signifiers and signifieds are then transformed into iconic sign vehicles that finally become a *tour de force* of cartoon frenzy prompted by a captivating comic vision.

My interest in this particular cartoon by Avery stems from a concern with iconology - i.e. the 'logos of icons' and what this entails from a point of view underscoring the notion of figurative meaning in general, and reading these features off the iconic representations in particular. A question that intrigues me is why iconic representations of slang or stock expressions can be considered important. First of all, with the present inundation of a myriad of 'pop' visuals in our information age, we are caught up in a cognitive struggle to comprehend the interface between our 'taken for granted' language competence/performance and the diffuse presence of these fragmentary images. It seems to me that we are, to some extent, still in the dark in fully comprehending this particular interface. Secondly, I find Avery's cartoon a perfect example in which one could see it as a kind of 'primer' for understanding how one may begin realizing the pleasure of reading figurative icons and then to move on towards more challenging representations. And finally, Avery's cartoon – in a humorous fashion that is both aesthetically simple and accessible – awakens our

interest in perceiving conceptual metaphorical categories that are, as George Lakoff claims (1996), unconsciously considered, commonplace affairs.

### **Tex Avery and the world of cartoons**

More so than any other person, Tex Avery was the father of Warner Brothers' cartoons. At Warner's Avery created his own personal vision of animation: absurdity, exaggeration, speed and slapstick. According to Troy (1998), "anti-authoritarianism and anti-sentimentality also distanced him from Disney's respect for traditional values and piety. Furthermore, his satires and parodies of popular culture rooted Hollywood animation in the present rather than aiming at a [Disney-like] timeless appeal." He introduced what can be considered adult subject matter and took satire, violence, exaggeration, metamorphosis, pacing and timing further than anyone else had ever dared. As Chuck Jones, Avery's assistant, summarized (1991: 39), "We never made films for adults, and we never made films for children. We made pictures for what I suppose you could call a minority. We made pictures for ourselves, and we were lucky because the producers never knew exactly what we were doing. Jack and Harry Warner hadn't the remotest idea what we were doing." As a result, Avery and the other Warner Bros. animators were not only (un)disciplined but also unconstrained in indulging in their art form. Their liberated creations consisted largely of destroying what others had done: parodying film genres and film stars; finding ways to duplicate what Disney had done so that they could subvert it (Troy, 1998).

Despite the fact that animation is considered a form fixed within the domain of film art, it can be safely assumed that its unique mode of formal creation places it in an *imaginary world* beyond the strictures of the conventionally filmed and visually encoded representation of the 'realistic mirror-image' of our life-world. In other words, its technique, in which animation uses a series of drawings - as opposed to photographic 'real life' images - on pieces of celluloid where slight changes combine to create an illusion of movement, becomes the cornerstone of what I previously called its 'imaginary world'. In fact, it is the small changes in position, recorded

frame by frame, that create the illusion of movement. Each frame, of course, becomes a totally individuated *mise-en-scène*. “Thus animation yields complete control over the *mise-en-scène*. The filmmaker can design and draw literally anything, whether it resembles something in the real world or comes strictly out of his imagination; hence providing a vast range of possibilities for animated film” (Bordwell and Thompson, 1993: 417). And, indeed, it is the concept of ‘illusion of movement’ (of subsequently unfolding *mise-en-scène* frames) which compels me to entertain the notion that we are dealing with an art form that essentially provides a matrix capturing the formal structures or cognitive categories of what can be easily described as the world of ‘fantasy’ or of the ‘phantasmatic’.

Bruce summarizes in a nutshell the essence of cartoons:

[They] provide a dialogue between the life-world and illusion. They present the illusion of life before the eyes of living audiences. They often re-create specific times and spaces, but they are not bound to do so. They can ignore the dictates of reason. Enjoyment of cartoons presupposes that we can both suspend our disbelief and retain our awareness that this is ‘just a cartoon’. Most cartoons thus invoke our mythical consciousness, our willingness to accept things that are empirically or rationally ‘untrue’ (235). [Moreover], animation may be the high point in the development of motion picture technology - it has the ability to portray movement without actual objects to move. Unlike ‘live action’ movies, which represent ‘actual’ occurrences, the cartoon generates its own reality in which things ‘occur’. They are original creations rather than re-creations (233).

When cartoons achieved acknowledgement as a cinematic form in the 1920s and 1930s through the ingenious initiatives of Walt Disney and others, they then became the mainstay of a culturally induced staple offered by the Movie Industry as a kind of ‘overture’ or ‘intermezzo’ accompanying feature films presented as part of their standard review during movie matinees. The initial motives for cultural impact of this film genre were geared primarily towards the entertainment of children for the Saturday matinees. However, as the genre of cartoons became more and more a prevalent form created by other non-Disney animators for the various movie

companies, adults were not impervious to its extraordinary appeal - especially when animators such as Avery introduced adult-like connotations. Note that this particular appeal can be ascertained given the fact that the primary story lines and motifs were developed from a culturally familiar form based on the animal fable and the fairy tale, which remained highly appreciated. With the advent of movies in the 20th century, fairy tales – a genre that had never really vanished from the literary landscape - resurfaced as an important cultural form in feature films by Disney. And it was, of course, Avery who cleverly satirized the fairy tale usually subverting its conventional effects with roguish sexual innuendoes.

In addition to this, the cartoon genre drew most of its sustenance from the fertile emanations of the incongruous humorous events of those inimitably produced film comedies of Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd, Fatty Arbuckle, the Keystone Cops, Laurel and Hardy, the Marx Brothers, etc., which were already contemporaneous and highly popular. Indeed, this fertile productivity was based on a wide range of humorously devised antics in which the cartoon itself exploited to the utmost degree: e.g. gags, wisecracks, jokes, pratfalls, slapstick, and other comic events. It was this appropriation of the *comic element* that increasingly gave the cartoon its fascinating and mesmerizing effect and eventually its widespread appeal.

I should like mention the unconventionality of this cartoon, since it digresses from the familiar storyline cartoon-shorts that Avery produced for Warner Bros. and MGM. It was in those notoriously surrealistic cartoon-shorts that Avery created his unforgettable, zany animal cartoon characters: Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, Screwy Squirrel, the lascivious Wolf, Droopy, and many-many others. However, in this production the major ‘cartoon actors’ happen to be human replicas: St. Peter, Noah Webster, the narrator-protagonist, his girl friend Mary, and finally her old boy friend who becomes her future husband. Only the smug cat in a middle and the final frame of this cartoon production (“did the cat cut yer tongue”) reminds us of Avery’s preoccupation with his willful and morally rampageous animal characters.

### **‘Discourse-type’ and ‘iconic reflection-token’ in Avery’s cartoon**

This unconventional cartoon exposes the viewer to a type of narrative sequence that is actually quite simple, straightforward and commonplace: the narrative ‘journey’ of a love-story with its dazzling beginning, promising development, and inauspicious decline. Moreover, the string of frames simultaneously encompasses a verbal and an iconic string of signifiers and signifieds as putative *meta-sign vehicles* that reveal a strikingly motivated ‘meta-narrative’ sequence projecting figurative homologies for an aesthetic effect. In other words, the ‘real time’ narrative sequence enunciated verbally by the protagonist to St. Peter and Noah Webster is transformed into a ‘real time’ *imaginative meta-narrative* that is grounded in the iconic sequence concurrently displayed literally on the screen; thus becoming its symbolic supplement or analogue for the audience.

From the outset of this cartoon we immediately perceive an innovative linkage between a verbally articulated ‘discourse-type’ (i.e. slang or stock phrases) and a delineated ‘iconic reflection-token’ of this particular type. This is perceived as a fully realized utterance that re-presents the ‘discourse-type’. As initially enunciated by the narrator-protagonist, each complete utterance becomes *mimetically* reproduced in each subsequent frame. What we notice is the figurative representation of a verbal schema along with its respective image schema.

The first scene unfolds in which we notice the recently departed lining up and approaching St. Peter at the Gates of Heaven. Suddenly a spruced up and jaunty young man addresses St. Peter using a sociolect that literally confuses him. We begin to realize that through this apparent *phatic* act between the two, there is going to be a disruption in which social meanings will need to be negotiated. Thus, after the protagonist’s first utterances: “How’s tricks”; “What’s cookin”, the perplexed St. Peter directs him to the lexicographer Noah Webster to see whether this renowned authority on language can manage to decode the “non-standard” utterances enunciated (fig. 1). The protagonist begins his life-story by saying: “I was born with a silver spoon in my mouth”, thus relegating each utterance as an idiomatic

expression that will be visualized literally in each following frame. The following is a brief (schematic) outline of this cartoon narrative:



figure 1

The protagonist-narrator recounts his story in a screwball manner by saying how he got a job “throwing hash” and “punching cows” but couldn’t “cut the mustard”. He “flies” to Chicago and a girl “comes into the picture”. They begin to date by going to “the Stork club” and then “painting the town red”. He begins overspending and his “check bounces”. He’s apprehended and is sent to jail. While in jail, his girl friend, Mary, rekindles a relationship with an “old flame”. After being “sprung out of jail”, the narrator tries to win Mary back but can’t “touch her with a 10 ft. pole”. He sees her dallying with her old boy friend at a nightclub and jealously “burns up”. He then leaves to become “a beachcomber”, but eventually receives “a cable” from Mary. He returns to find her married to her old boy friend and caring for a “bunch of little ones”. After seeing this, our narrator “dies laughing” and we are back to heaven where he has just finished narrating his story to St. Peter and Noah Webster.

In this cartoon, each highly individuated *mise-en-scène* is encapsulated in a swift first person narrative development as verbally and visually-framed-signifiers that are transformed instantaneously on the screen as conceptually/visually-framed signifieds; hence, the visual impact of these encoded strings of frames is automatically decoded providing the viewer with an innovative *threshold* for cognitive accessibility that reminds one of the building-block stages of language learning (e.g. the use of picture cards in learning words and phrases). As Gaines

writes (quoted in Troy, 1998), “this is why systematic meanings peel off the images so easily, the simple indication of which is humorous meaning.”

### **Slang and the logos of the *vox populi***

There are almost 100 idiomatic/slang expressions and respective *mise-en-scène* frames in this six-minute cartoon. What materializes in this swift flow of narrative development is the representation of an informal stylistic cluster of expressions that is unquestionably figurative; i.e. the use of co-occurrence and similarity correlations to produce and/or inscribe on film verbal and iconic metaphors, metonymies and puns (see Lakoff and Johnson on ‘co-occurrence’ and ‘similarity’).

One mark of an informal style is the frequent occurrence of slang. Almost everyone uses slang on some occasions, but it isn’t easy to define the word. As David Crystal (1987: 53) claims, “The chief use of slang is to show that you’re one of the gang!” Eric Partridge was able to distinguish as many as 15 different reasons for the use of slang (quoted in Crystal, 1987: 53): ‘for the fun of it’; ‘as an exercise in wit or ingenuity’; ‘to be different’; ‘to be picturesque’; ‘to be arresting’; ‘to escape from clichés’; ‘to enrich the language’; ‘to add concreteness to language’; ‘to reduce seriousness’; ‘to be colloquial’; ‘for ease of social interaction’; ‘to induce intimacy’; ‘to show that one belongs’; ‘to exclude others’; and ‘to be secret’. But one theme recurs among all these reasons: the use of slang as a means of marking social or linguistic identity. And, as we have seen, Avery employs quite a few of these ‘reasons’ in order to enhance his motivated use of slang as a comic device. Crystal, however, makes a reasonable attempt to define the term. He notes that (1987: 53), “Slang is, by definition, a colloquial departure from standard usage; it is often imaginative, vivid, and ingenious in its construction - so much so that it has been called the ‘plain man’s (sic) poetry’.”

The foregoing statement by Crystal is an apt description of Avery’s creation. This cartoon isn’t only ‘imaginative, vivid and ingenious in its construction,’ but also humorously moves us by capturing in visually composed sign-vehicles the *social*

*imaginary* of a speech community reinforced through the art of animation. On the one hand, we observe the non-standard and/or popular social and linguistic identity of the protagonist-narrator; and on the other, the conservative and establishment (i.e. socially heteronomous) identities of St. Peter and Noah Webster. These two different ‘identities’ are set off in opposition in which the ‘discourse-type’ is underpinned as a simulated *closure*. This particular ‘closure’ is implicitly pitted against ‘heteronomous’ authority and - in Avery’s case - against ‘High Culture’. Notice even the subtle irony of the cartoon’s title *Symphony in Slang* - it literally becomes a ‘concert-showcase’ of an increasingly popular sociolect of the mid 20th century. Thus, the popular medium of animation establishes itself as a fulcrum not only for purposes of humorous entertainment, but also enhances an insight into the cognitive workings of figurative iconology (i.e. the logos of the *vox populi* itself along with the logos of icons). Moreover, we sense the somewhat unwitting attempt on the part of the jaunty protagonist-narrator to ‘pedagogically’ enlighten his interlocutors (and audience viewers) by presenting his life-story experientially through his particular sociolect. That is why the unfolding of this narration seems to resemble the pedagogical method whereby picture cards are usually employed in inculcating the addressees to acquire the meaning-structures of a particular ‘discourse-type’. And this is artfully driven home with the help of an imaginative parade of images.

### **The picture-card agency and figurative icons**

By focusing on the analogy of the picture-card agency, we can begin pointing out significant figurative signs within the frames. To illustrate briefly, metaphor is principally a way of conceiving of one thing in terms of another, and its primary function is ‘understanding’. As Fiske points out on metaphor: “What we are doing is expressing the unfamiliar in terms of the familiar [...] we must note that a metaphor exploits simultaneous similarity and difference” (1990: 92). There are many examples in the cartoon that verify this ‘primary function’. Take, for instance, the expression “I went to pieces” and its iconic representation of the protagonist’s body breaking up into fragments signifying ‘dejection’. Or take the expression “I tried to

chisel in” and the respective iconic illustration of the protagonist using a chisel and hammer to separate Mary and her old boy friend from dancing signifying ‘persistent intervention’. Metonymy, on the other hand, has primarily a referential function; that is, it allows us to use one entity to *stand for* another. An example of this is when the protagonist says “I sent a cable” and “She sent me a wire” in which we see the iconic depictions of the representative entities ‘cable’ and ‘wire’ directing us to the referential object that *stands for* ‘telegram’. Visual puns are also in abundance, such as when the protagonist leaning against the bar says “I felt a tug at my elbow” and where we surprisingly see the depiction of a ‘tug boat’ instead of someone grabbing and pulling his elbow (fig.2).



figure 2

or when the protagonist says “my breath came out in short pants” and we see a bunch of boxer shorts flowing out of his mouth (fig.3). As a result, these various iconic puns exhibit Avery’s penchant for surrealistic revelry.



figure 3

There is, however, an uncanny twist to the way Avery encodes his visual figures. Whether the figure is one of ‘co-occurrence’ or of ‘similarity’, we notice that the major sign-vehicles are predominantly iconic simulacra of referential objects that unexpectedly ‘perform’ fantastic acts (e.g. the ear playing the piano (fig.4), the check



Figure 4

bouncing like a basketball, the personified tear running down the cheek, etc.). Other figurative twists are examples in which a classic metonymy such as “He was short-handed” - usually meaning a lack of sufficient employees - is depicted in which we

see the tall, corpulent proprietor revealing dwarf-like arms (fig.5). What we have here is, simply, a merging of the verbal expression with an iconic prototype counterbalancing two or more sign-vehicles.



figure 5

The key to this technique is the semiotic commutation of the verbal to the iconic by means of metamorphosis. Strictly speaking, we are in the midst of a noteworthy display of multiple figurations (e.g. metonymy converting into metaphor, etc.) whereby these inventive and vivid visualizations ultimately anchor the - ‘one of the gang’ - demonstrations of popular meaning.

### **A ‘conceptual-category’ conundrum**

After viewing this wittily crafted piece of animation, I believe it becomes quite clear how the artist goes about shaping the mode of verbal and iconic codes. As I mentioned earlier, we perceive the linkage between a verbal ‘discourse-type’ and an iconic ‘reflection-token’ of the ‘type’. However, a conundrum may arise in which the iconic codification could be reversed and become the ‘type’, and in which the accompanying ‘implied’ verbal enunciation becomes the ‘reflection-token’. This would entail, of course, viewing the same cartoon without hearing the verbal ‘discourse-type’ utterances - i.e. viewing it without the soundtrack. This, in turn, can

invoke the familiar schema known as the rebus in which the iconic signs impel us to translate them into language constituents. Let's take as an example a drawing of the following concrete nouns: a human 'eye' + carpenter's 'saw' + 'automobile'. This would then inter-semiotically translate into the grammatical past-tense sentence, 'I saw a car'. Now, the question could then be posed: How easy would it be for a viewer to decode the swift flow of these cartoon frames by instantly apprehending the iconic constituents as signs (or even as a rebus), and by simultaneously understanding the thread of the narrative? I suspect that the process of decoding each iconic representation - frame by frame - would probably succeed if one were to follow the entire narrative development over and over, or in slow motion. As a consequence, we take it as 'second nature' that the elementary triggering of a verbal utterance elicits the image-schema that is embedded within the prototype core of meaning both cognitively and automatically. To be sure, this presupposes the pre-eminence of the linguistic act *in-and-of-itself*; and, in so far as it ultimately initiates primary meaning it also confirms the institutional priority of the social imaginary that is based on language, though emphatically supplemented by the image. In other words, the linguistic act - along with its putative image-schema - imposes cognitive structure on meaning.

I raise this point because I tend to support George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in their ongoing project to establish the notion that language can be seen - in most of its aspects - as metaphorical and, thus, consisting essentially of cognitively induced image-schemata. In other words, Lakoff and Johnson's general position is that "conceptual metaphors are grounded in *correlations* within our experience. These experiential correlations may be of two types: *experiential co-occurrence* and *experiential similarity* " (1980: 154-55). This position fits nicely with Avery's intention to link the verbal with the iconic. In essence, Avery's animated correlations of the verbal and the iconic corroborate the cognitive and experiential notions Lakoff and Johnson theoretically maintain as the cornerstone of language. Hence, while viewing the cartoon the 'verbal-type' becomes the catalyst of meaning and the 'iconic-token' caps its conceptual 'materialization'. However, the interesting point in our case study is that instead of imagining the iconic-schemata by experiencing them

only through natural discourse utterances, we actually see them re-presented frame by frame in an absolute literal manner providing an aesthetic experience of the *meta-narrative* on the screen!

### **Visual metaphors**

Visual metaphors translate linguistic metaphors, mostly those of emotions, into the form of an image (e.g. “our eyes met”, which is an orientation metaphor). Such ‘intersemiotic translations’ (Jakobson, 1959: 261) imply a twofold iconicity, one in the linguistic code and one in the visual code, where the referential object of the non-metaphorical object is depicted (e.g. the drawing of the cartoon actors’ eyes ejecting out of their sockets and ‘meeting’ in mid space). For Peirce metaphors exhibited three levels of iconicity. The 1st level of signs, which represents their objects by means of similarity is occupied by pictures (images). They signify their objects by means of simple, qualitative similarity (e.g., the expression “money was running out on me” and the iconic depiction where a series of personified dollar bills are seen dashing out of the protagonist’s pocket signifying ‘foolish overspending’). The 2nd level contains diagrams, which manifest a structural similarity between the relations of their elements and those of their objects. Finally, at the 3rd level of iconicity, metaphors are defined as “signs that represent the representative character of a *representamen* by representing a parallelism in something else.” See, for example, the expression “I raised a big stink” and the iconic depiction of the protagonist raising a skunk by the tail signifying ‘a furious complaint’ (fig.6). Peirce defined likeness as “a mental fact, and the sensation of it is no consequence except as an advertisement of that fact.” And he finally adds: “Anything whatever is an icon of anything, in so far as it is like that thing and used as a sign of it. The object of an icon may even be a ‘pure fiction’” (quoted in Noth, 1990: 132-133).



Figure 6

Despite the fact that Lakoff and Johnson have totally ignored Peirce's poignant analysis of metaphor, I have noticed a similar approach in circumscribing the workings of metaphor that substantiates *in toto* Peirce's rejection of the objectivist theory of iconic signs. In other words, our perceptual engagement with language in general and with the iconic in particular presupposes an experiential (i.e. subjective) interface between the encoding and decoding of meaning whether it is literal and/or figurative. This becomes, in the final analysis, a manifestation of any normative or habitual state of affairs whereby any sort of semiotic and/or symbolic action is instantiated.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, we respond to Avery's cartoon by assimilating the conspicuously contrived juxtaposition of the verbal and iconic sign-vehicles. Notwithstanding the fact that this cartoon deploys verbal and iconic meaning as a 'culture-specific' phenomenon, - i.e. the informal stylistic registers of American English - we can, however, value Avery's artful undertaking to facilitate the process of understanding a socially marked 'discourse-type'. (Incidentally, it should be pointed out that nearly all of the slang expressions in this cartoon are, or, have been

stock expressions in the language). We have no way of fathoming Avery's underlying intentions in producing such a cartoon - which is distinctly unlike any of his other characteristic creative accomplishments. To be sure, this inspired experiment in animation - which promotes an indigenous American sense of humor - seems to conjure up the etymological root of the word 'animate' itself: It encourages us to witness the quintessence of figurative meaning that is likely to foster an aesthetic endorsement of a widely misconstrued, popular cultural medium - in other words, to 'animate' both the 'plain man's/woman's poetry' and a veneration for the experimental possibilities of the cartoon genre.

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