

The Presence of the Artist: Kim Deitch's Boulevard of Broken Dreams vis-a-vis the Animated Cartoon

By Charles Hatfield [citation](#) [printer friendly version](#)

- 1 Kim Deitch's graphic novel *The Boulevard of Broken Dreams* (2002) has belatedly introduced his work, which derives from underground comix, to the mainstream book trade. The novel, starring Deitch's signature character Waldo the Cat, represents more than thirty years of musing on cartoons and comics past. The book draws together several discrete publishing projects from over an eleven-year period, the first being Kim and Simon Deitch's original, forty-page version of "Boulevard" (as published in the final issue of *Raw*, 2.3, in 1991). Waldo himself dates back a good deal further, to Deitch's earliest comic strip efforts in the late 1960s; in fact a nameless prototype of Waldo was Deitch's earliest recurring character (Beauchamp 67; *Beyond* 8). This character reflects his lifelong fascination with the history and, as he has said, "lore" of animated cartooning, as both art form and industry. In the final, revised version of *Boulevard*, Deitch fully inhabits this history, reenacting and embellishing it. In effect, he uses the lore of animation to examine the creative process, the value of cartooning, and, by implication, the cultural status of the comix artist. Rewriting the history of animation through the lives of fictional cartoonists, Deitch reveals a haunted, romantic and doubly tragic vision: *Boulevard* at once laments the industrialization of a deeply personal art form yet undercuts its own idealizations by invoking the oft-considered link between creativity and madness. As such *Boulevard* represents one of the most provocative in a recent spate of meta-comics that explore the very value of the cartoonist's vocation.
- 2 To read comix vis-à-vis the animated film risks swimming upstream against the spirit of *exceptionalism* (to use Bart Beaty's phrase) that dominates current comics scholarship ("Search" 67). By *exceptionalism* I mean the general effort to locate the exceptionality, or "uniqueness," of comics as an art form, apart from points of reference such as cinema. Many recent theorists and critics have questioned the long-standing analogy between comics and film; indeed current formalist work (e.g., prominent studies by Will Eisner, Scott McCloud and Robert C. Harvey) rejects this once-attractive comparison^[1]. In such work we are told that comics offer a unique form of *reading*, in contrast to the allegedly passive experience of watching films.
- 3 While sympathetic to this agenda, I maintain that animated filmmaking offers a compelling, indeed *the* necessary, point of reference in the case of Deitch's novel, for three reasons:
- 4 First, animated cartoons have been a source of inspiration for many comix artists, and were an important fund of imagery for the late-sixties underground in particular, with its emphasis on the subversive recasting of familiar elements from cartoons past. R. Crumb, with his satiric nods to the "funny animal" tradition, is only the most obvious of many examples: his sketchbooks and early comics are rife with imagery inherited from animated cartoons and their printed spin-offs. ^[2]

5 Secondly, early animated cartoons had a special relationship with comic strips, because comics served animators as an all-important fund of imagery and narrative material. Paul Wells points out that, in the early silent era, “the dominant [commercial] mode of animated film was the adaptation of the comic strip” (Wells 17). While this influence, as Donald Crafton argues, may have consisted more in borrowed characters and narrative tropes than in the determining of film form per se (*Before Mickey* 47), the comics’ impact on early animation was still significant. Indeed Norman Klein finds, in the pre-sound animated cartoon, an “anti-realist” mode of “print-oriented” graphic narrative, owed to nineteenth-century graphics and illustration and therefore akin to comics. The earliest Mickey Mouse cartoons, Klein observes, are “animated comic strips with a frantic life of their own,” owing little to live-action cinema and instead obsessed with graphic transformations of “surface, rhythm, and line” (Klein 4-5). This should come as no surprise, given the predominance of print cartoonists in early animation.

6 In any case, Deitch’s work habitually invokes both of these inspirations, the early comic strip and the early animated cartoon, and *Boulevard* invokes the memory of an era during which these two forms had yet to split decisively from each other. In fact the seminal work of Winsor McCay, both an animator and a strip cartoonist, is central to Deitch’s understanding of this history, for McCay served Deitch as a key inspiration during the mid-1960s (a period of renewed interest in McCay’s work), around the time he began experimenting with comics and created Waldo (Beauchamp 67). Indeed, McCay, as we’ll see, has a large (if thinly veiled) presence in the novel.

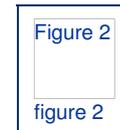
7 The third (and perhaps a more important) reason to read *Boulevard* vis-à-vis animated cartooning is that, for Deitch, animation is an implicitly autobiographical subject. His father, Gene Deitch, is a renowned animator: a veteran of UPA, Terrytoons and Rembrandt Films. As creative director of Terrytoons in the late mid-fifties, Gene Deitch attempted to reboot that venerable studio with an infusion of young talent and a push for streamlined graphic modernism, in the UPA style^[3]. During this period his son Kim became acquainted with many animators, and developed an intense interest in the history of cartoon films (Beauchamp 57). This brief period is memorialized in the foreword to *The Boulevard of Broken Dreams*, in which the author recalls his father running “an old established animation studio in Westchester county [...] a fascinating old place [with animators who] had been in the business since the 1920s” (n. pag.). Gene Deitch is himself fictionalized, in the novel proper, as animator “Bert Simon” (a name that recalls not only Simon Deitch, Kim’s brother and collaborator, but also “Harry Simon,” Kim’s onetime fictional persona). ^[4]

8 For all of these reasons, *The Boulevard of Broken Dreams* invites rereading in light of animation history. Yet an even more compelling reason can be found in Deitch’s deep understanding of animated cartooning as an art form and an industry^[5]. Through his fictional family of animators, the Mishkins, and their circle of acquaintance, Deitch effectively dramatizes a crucial shift in cartoon history: that is, the transition from an artisanal to an industrial model of animation, a transition in fact begun in the 1910s, confirmed and completed in the decade following, and prerequisite to Disney’s rise in the late twenties. *Boulevard*, opening in the early sound era, reexamines this transition by looking backward to the pre-Disney era, and in the process becomes a vehicle for Deitch’s reflections on the status of the cartoonist as both artist and industrial functionary.

9 Deitch’s Waldo, like fellow underground comix cats Fritz (by R. Crumb) and Pat (by Jay Lynch), represents a sleazy and dissolute parody of once-popular characters from the history of animation, most obviously Pat Sullivan and Otto Mesmer’s much-loved Felix the Cat (1919–)^[6]. Deitch himself has repeatedly disavowed Felix as a major influence, and points out

that such “dark humanoid cat[s]” were ubiquitous in the animated cartoons of the twenties; indeed, such blackface cartoon critters were legion before and after Mickey Mouse: witness Oswald the Rabbit, Flip the Frog and Bosko^[7]. Deitch cites as a particular influence the hordes of black cats who so often featured in Paul Terry’s “Aesop’s Fables” series (starting in 1921). Yet Deitch himself underscored the family resemblance between Waldo and Felix the Cat in the first lengthy “Waldo” serial, titled “Deja [sic] vu,” published in *Gothic Blimp Works* in 1969 (*All Waldo* 13-21). Here Felix appears as Waldo’s uncle, “an aging CIA operative” who ends up being buried near a gravestone marked “Sullivan” (**Figure 1**). This relationship between Deitch and the lore of animation grew richer and more complex in such later stories as “Keep ‘Em Flying” (1977), in which Waldo sacrifices his creator to a Farmer Al Falfa-like tyrant, straight out of Terry’s “Fables,” who presides over an army of black cats (**Figure 2**). Such tales foreground Deitch’s interest in the cartoon iconography of the pre-Disney era.

10 While these early stories reveal a deep interest in animated cartoons, it was not until the original version of “The Boulevard of Broken Dreams” (1991) that Deitch, working with his brother and co-writer Simon, at last turned directly to the history of animation as a subject. “Boulevard” cast Waldo as the satiric chorus in a roman à clef about the cartoon industry, post-Disney. The new, novel-length version of *Boulevard* gathers up and re-envision[s] Waldo’s entire career (and Deitch’s career) to date.



11 In *Boulevard’s* first half, set mainly in the Depression era, Waldo serves as the debauched alter ego of animator Ted Mishkin. He is also the star of a series of cartoons produced by the “Fontaine Fables” studio under the supervision of Al Mishkin, Ted’s brother (a fictive reminder of animation’s real-life Fleischer and Disney brothers). As it unfolds, the novel depicts the transition from a more devilish Waldo, whose adventures have a protean, anarchic quality (like Fleischer cartoons in the pre-Hays Code period), to a tamer, Disneyfied incarnation – a reflection of Disney’s tremendous influence on animation in the early 1930s. Deitch smartly captures the early-thirties shift away from freewheeling graphic humor, toward Disney-like story formulas shaped by melodrama and sentimentality, a shift that effectively redefined the potential of the animated cartoon as a narrative form (see Klein 122-134). The latter half of the novel extends the Mishkin family drama to the present day, while casting a satiric eye on the fate of vintage cartoon characters in today’s postmodern consumer culture (Waldo becomes part of a line of dolls marketed through a Toys’R’Us-style retail chain).

12 The relationship between Ted Mishkin and Waldo is the novel’s foundation. That relationship calls to mind what Donald Crafton has termed *self-figuration*, that is, the animator’s reflexive self-representation, a practice that was common, indeed pervasive, in early animated cartoons (11).^[8] Waldo becomes Ted’s cartoon id; the cat’s roguish on-screen adventures reflect, in heightened form, the animator’s tamped-down wishes and anxieties. This process of self-figuration becomes especially fraught in sequences that depict Ted’s on-screen cartoons. Throughout the novel Ted creates, or relives, cartoon allegories about his own work as an animator – about the animator as both artist and wage slave. These meta-cartoons recall a bygone era of individual artistic expression through animation (an era represented in the novel by an anachronistic Winsor McCay-like figure). They also testify to Ted’s helplessness, his unspoken resentments, and his inarticulate but enduring love for fellow animator Lillian Freer: his muse, later his wife, and, by novel’s end, his caretaker.

13 If early animation can be characterized by self-figuration, and today’s orthodox animation, in contrast, by the erasure of the individual artist,^[9] then *Boulevard* depicts the personal losses suffered by those caught up in this depersonalizing process – Ted Mishkin and Lillian Freer,

especially. The subject is a fraught one for comics, because the history of animation, like that of comic art in its newsstand heyday, is one of artisanal labor harnessed to an industrialized and compartmentalized process: an assembly line approach spearheaded by John Randolph Bray in the 1910s that quickly became industry standard (Crafton 137-167 passim), then later developed to its highest degree in the tightly coordinated workings of the Disney studio. Before Bray, animated cartooning would seem to have had little potential as a fast and cost-effective means of cinematic entertainment; the process was too slow, too laborious and too idiosyncratic to yield a steady output of commercial fare. However, after Bray (and rivals like Raoul Barré), prolificacy and reliability became the new bywords: the leading studios, such as Paul Terry's, the Fleischers' and Disney's, emphasized compartmentalized production and assembly-line efficiency. During the late twenties and throughout the thirties, Disney used this more disciplined, industrialized approach to spur his studio to new heights of technical and artistic innovation; yet the very nature of the process insured that individualistic and exploratory work would ultimately take a backseat to formula. Since this industrializing process took hold in the 1910s, the shape of "orthodox animation" has almost always been determined by massive, top-down and relatively impersonal assembly-line methods, a tendency cemented by Disney's success. Whereas Winsor McCay had envisioned a future for animation centered on the individual artist, an independent "creator of subjects" with all the latitude and personal touch of a painter (Canemaker, *McCay* 133), animated cartoon narrative has come to be dominated (understandably, given its technical requirements) by large-scale collaborative processes and commercially-oriented groupthink.

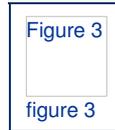
14 Because his influence on this process was decisive, Disney looms large in Deitch's novel. It was the Disney studio that introduced narrative formulas stenciled from nineteenth-century melodrama, a move that showed, not simply Walt Disney's own tastes and interests, but also his drive to achieve greater verisimilitude. As Norman Klein points out, this shift toward melodrama went hand in hand with Disney's technological expansionism – his campaign for greater depth, detail and photorealism. Melodrama served Disney, not only ideologically and emotionally, but as a narrative rationale for his technical ambitions: To create feature-length cartoons, and thus to gain economic advantage, Disney aspired toward a speciously "realistic" (and dramatically effective) style in which melodrama, rather than graphic humor, played the dominant role (Klein 122-125). This style practically demanded an increased workforce, a more tightly controlled and hierarchicized production process, and graphic homogenization.

15 The ascendancy of Disney assured that, in popular accounts of animation, the assembly-line method would become the default mode, the one that would have the greatest influence on the popular and professional conception of the art form. Deitch's novel points to a time of transition between the increasingly dominant Disney aesthetic and the earlier, more protean (also admittedly cruder) approach of, for example, the pre-Code Fleischers. Deitch's Al Mishkin, determined to beat Disney at his own game, and anxious to hold creditors at bay, bids to transform the Fontaine Fables studio into a Disneyfied cartoon factory, under the leadership of ex-Disney man Jack Schick; Schick then sets out to transform the Waldo cartoons stylistically and, as Deitch implies, ideologically. Deitch reveals the connection between the shift in graphic style (toward a rounded, neotenic cuteness) and other major changes: the shift in technological means and the shift toward more moralistic and middlebrow content. As Fontaine Fables goes "color," Waldo, once the randy, free-spirited embodiment of amoral playfulness, becomes the object of moralizing sentiments and bathos.

16 Ted Mishkin resists this development, but the most vocal kind of resistance comes from Ted's alter ego, Waldo, who complains about being softened and degraded. For example, a memorable scene set in a movie theater shows a hopeless Ted watching the latest of the

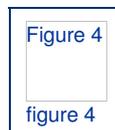
studio's output, while Waldo complains that Schick & Co. are "turning [him] into a fuckin' pansy!" (**Figure 3**). Such outbursts suggest that Waldo is not only the tormenting embodiment of Ted's creative energy and talent, but also his mouthpiece, daring to say the things that Ted, browbeaten by Jack Schick, cannot. Waldo thus becomes the satiric chorus in this story – he supplies sidelong commentary on the transformation of the cartoon business.

17 This transformation, which completes the cartoon's shift from an artisanal to a fully industrialized model of production – becomes clearest in the novel's invocation of cartoon pioneer Winsor McCay. Here McCay is reimagined as the eccentric "Winsor Newton," venerable survivor of animation's Golden Age. Himself a frustrated creative artist, Winsor Newton shares his long-deferred dreams and ambitions with Ted Mishkin. He represents (as does the real McCay, in some accounts of animation history) the transition from a time of hand-crafted animation to a time of increasingly efficient but numbingly workmanlike, assembly-line production. From the outset, Newton begs Ted to resist this transformation, and urges him "to be the torch bearer of this thrilling young art of ours!" (n.pag.). Says Newton, "Don't end up on some wretched assembly line," such as the Fontaine Fables studio.



18 Newton is introduced as a has-been genius in the novel's opening, a scene compounded of history and fantasy: a testimonial dinner on his behalf, held in a New York speakeasy in 1927. This scene is based on an actual event, a 1927 dinner for Winsor McCay that has apparently been recounted numerous times, but most authoritatively by biographer John Canemaker (*McCay* 159). During this scene – Deitch's version, that is – Newton performs his animated vaudeville act of 1910, to the indifference of all the diners except an enraptured Ted Mishkin, who sits alone at a table, gazing reverentially (even as he sketches on the tablecloth and empties shot glass after shot glass). Newton then gives a speech – as did McCay, at the real-life dinner – to the table-ful of animators who have gathered in his honor, among them studio bigwig Fred Fontaine and his young, go-getting lieutenant Al Mishkin (who hopes, vainly as it turns out, to introduce Ted to his boss). Rhapsodizing about the "wondrous potential" of animation, Newton is cut off in mid-speech when one of the party yells for a waiter--at which Newton bursts into a righteous rage, swearing, "God damn it! The hell with all of you! You guys have taken the art I created and turned it into shit!" (**Figure 4**). He then fades away, escorted out by Ted, whom he urges to carry on his vision (as the two drive off in a taxi, past people queuing beneath a movie marquee to see Jolson's *The Jazz Singer*).

19 This scene, or rather the real-life incident on which it was based, served as the inspiration of the original "Boulevard of Broken Dreams." In life, Winsor McCay's testimonial dinner did indeed veer into acrimony (as recalled by eyewitness I. Klein to Canemaker):



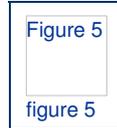
Animation should be an art. That is how I conceived it. But as I see what you fellows have done with it, is making it into a trade [*sic*]. Not an art, but a trade. *Bad luck!* (159)

20 Not quite the fiery, blue-worded outburst of Deitch's Newton, but clearly an expression of deep disappointment. This valediction, or some version of it, became the spark for Deitch's opus, because to him McCay's accusation "summed up the whole problem with animation in microcosm" (Ford, n. pag.). While this view may be, as critic Tom Crippen has charged (42), more romantic than accurate, nonetheless the scene functions powerfully to overture the novel. What's more, the characterization of Newton is subtle: he is introduced, not simply as the cherished defender of a grand old Idea in the face of gross commercialism, but also as an addled, somewhat gusty, perhaps pitifully self-deluding figure.

21 Newton, like the real McCay, performs in a vaudeville act blending live theater with animated

critters (Canemaker, *McCay* 143-144), yet he entertains dreams of using animation for a loftier purpose: to treat, in his words, “a great universal theme.” This theme is the enduring value of Art itself, against the grinding oppressiveness of mere living – implicitly, the embittered pioneer wants to use the animated cartoon to comment on its own commodification. His vehicle will be a Chaplinesque scenario of the “little guy” resisting the forces of industrialization and mass production – in the guise of a factory scene replete with huge gears, a conveyor-driven assembly line, and a grimacing clock (**Figure 5**). It is this *Modern Times*-like scenario, his dream project, that Newton shares with a spellbound Ted and Lillian.

22 Ted’s apprenticeship under Winsor Newton represents his link to the beginnings of the animation industry, and indeed to a pre-industrial period of essentially autographic animation, in which individual craft and vision dominated. This period is splendidly evoked by one of the novel’s several frontispieces, which recreates a poster for Newton’s vaudeville act of 1916, “Milton in College” (**Figure 6**). This “poster” suggests the links between Newton’s character and, not only the real-life McCay on whom he is based, but also the scientific and mechanistic – in a word, Newtonian – heritage associated with his name. In this image, a weary, anthropomorphic globe asks, “Is dull care and the *gravity* of this weary old world weighing *you* down? Then come and see, Newton’s New Law of Laughter!” The expression “dull care” references McCay’s strip, *A Pilgrim’s Progress by Mister Bunion* (1905-1910), in which the protagonist totes around a valise bearing that very phrase; while the Newtonian associations of “gravity” and “law” point up the essential paradox of cartoon animation, that is, its promise to deliver anarchic fantasy by means of the strictest discipline (including technological apparatus and know-how). The figure of Milton the mastodon (inspired by a character in McCay’s film *Gertie the Dinosaur*) represents animal energy, tamed and shackled, while the surrounding animal figures, in contrast, hint at possibilities for cartoon anarchy and explosive hijinks. Like McCay’s Gertie, Milton serves his creator, the animator, as both comic antagonist and self-figuring alter ego; the humor in Newton’s stage act, modeled on McCay, stems partly from the way the animator/impresario imposes his will on his recalcitrant characters. (This assertion of mastery, a recurrent trope throughout the history of animation, might be called the “little god” syndrome, from Terry Gilliam’s observation that to be an animator is to be “an impish God” [Wells 127].) ^[10]



23 Ted Mishkin’s murals at the “Berndale Acres Sanitarium,” seen in the middle portion of the book, show how both Ted and Lillian are connected to Newton and thus to the early days of animation. One mural in particular, which, according to Ted’s psychiatrist, represents the “ideal period” or “most pleasant time of [Ted’s] life,” links Newton’s on-stage Milton act with his behind-the-scenes artistry in his studio, and with all the technical apparatus of early animation, including even the precinematic animation devices, the phenakistoscope and zoetrope (**Figure 7**). Here young Ted stares through the slots in the phenakistoscope and watches the transformation of a devil’s face as it stretches and reveals its long tongue (an image shown in greater detail elsewhere in the book).^[11] Ted’s facial expression is ambiguous, connoting a kind of shock – a sense of wonder, perhaps, but also anxiety. Around the rim of the mural an unspooling reel of film creates a border of minute framed images, which, on closer inspection, show that the torch is being passed, creatively, from Winsor Newton to young Ted. It is Ted himself who is drawing the images of Milton that appear within the frames – and he does so with Newton’s clear encouragement.



24 This mural also establishes a connection between Newton, Ted and Lillian, who is shown in the audience for Newton’s vaudeville act. Ted’s psychiatrist reads the



inclusion of Lillian in the mural as a bit of therapeutic wish fulfillment on Ted's part, but later in the text we discover that, indeed, Lillian *did* attend a performance of one of Newton's "Milton" shows as a young girl. She too, then, is symbolically linked to the early days of animation, the artistic ethos of Newton, and the possibility of realizing something in animation other than "assembly line" pabulum. This link becomes significant later in the novel, when we learn that Lillian, like some ex-Disney artists in real life, has thrown herself into the labor movement and leftist politics more generally, even joining the Communist party, for which she suffers during the 1950s blacklist (as did, e.g., ex-Disney and UPA animator John Hubley).^[12] We also learn that Lillian has experimented with avant-garde and politically oriented animation, such as abstract "tone poems" in a sort of Oskar Fischinger mode. Thus Lillian too represents a symbolic return to individual, artisanal animation – an alternative, however ill-fated, to the decadent, formula-ridden animation of the post-Disney period.

25 Oddly, this connection is cemented by a brief sexual tryst between Lillian, fresh from quitting her job at Fontaine Fables, and the venerable Winsor Newton himself. This is revealed late in the novel, in a flashback to 1933: Disgusted by Fontaine's turn toward sentimentalized, Disney-like output, Lillian walks out on her job (and on former lover Al Mishkin), whereupon she runs across Winsor Newton at an automat. While visiting Newton's long-dormant studio on Staten Island, Lillian begins to make love to the old man, precipitating, apparently, a heart attack that kills him – just after he has invited her to join his dream project: again, an ambitious animated film about the triumph of Art itself. Newton's lurid end, and the novel's final revelation – that Disneyland, of all things, was based on an idea copped from Newton – throws an unsettling, ironic light on his status as the exemplar of artistic freedom and integrity.

26 Of course, throughout the novel such grand principles are continually linked to alcoholism, delusion and confinement (as in the sanitarium). Creativity is depicted as potentially maddening, cartooning as a dark plunge into the unconscious. As much as Lillian represents Ted's muse, or inspiration, the devilish Waldo too embodies his creativity, especially in its antic, aggressive and libidinal aspects. The creative process, as personified by Waldo, brings both liberation and ruin. Perhaps this is why Waldo is such an unstoppable force – shifting from Ted to his nephew Nathan in the novel's latter half – and why, in the end, the tale remains ambiguous about whether Waldo actually has an existence, and agency, independent of his victims. (The middle portion of the novel, narrated by Ted's psychiatrist, ends with the doctor himself seeing Waldo, after which he too goes mad.)

27 This ambivalence about creativity and madness is shared even by the novel's portrayal of the beatific Winsor Newton, Ted's patron saint. The elder Newton, for a time, is confined like Ted to the "Berndale Acres Sanitarium," a reflection of Deitch's real-life stint in the 1960s as a worker in an asylum (Beauchamp 66). He seems to have but a tenuous grip on consensus reality (Ted's psychiatrist describes him vaguely as "brilliantly mercurial"). From the first, Newton is presented as a pitiable anachronism, a mix of faded grandeur and not-to-be-admitted irrelevance. His grandiloquent talk of animation-as-Art, though it inspires some of Deitch's most beautiful pages, bear signs of self-deluding (or is it simply visionary?) craziness, a sense of importance sometimes bordering on fatuousness. Tellingly, Newton's visions of a grand, elevated cartoon project are revealed within the context of the asylum, where, in a full-page image, Deitch surrounds him with crazed inmates – laughing, drooling, running wild – and a parodic invocation of the muse, here touching an unspooling reel of film with her brush as if to animate Newton's vision (**Figure 8**). Waldo, cast against type in Newton's scenario (Newton sees the Cat as artist and "everyman"), huddles on the floor, hands over his ears, as if in denial. Implicitly, Newton's lofty design – his vision of a film in which "mere mortality" is

trumped by the timelessness of Art – is linked with insanity.

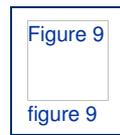
28 This dark side complicates considerably the novel's view of Art, lending a strong touch of ambivalence to Deitch's otherwise crystal-clear valorization of the individual artist over industrial mass production. As Tom Crippen has lamented, *Boulevard* embraces, in good romantic fashion, a starkly etched, adversarial view of the relationship between art and business, so much so that the story threatens to boil down to a simplistic, "art-good, business-bad" polarity (41-42). Certainly Deitch prefers the products of individual struggle to assembly-line effort, and his work privileges the roughness, dark humor and psychological repleteness seen in some pre-Disney animation (as well as in much experimental animation since). As a parable of the struggle between pre- and post-Disney, *Boulevard* is broadly drawn. Yet this struggle is but a necessary backdrop for Deitch's examination of the link between creativity and psychological unease: obsession, alienation, dread.



29 The novel in fact centers on this putative link. For example, Waldo's darkly humorous repartee with Ted (a kind of torture for the artist) suggests the uncanny, dreamlike way in which cartoons may manifest the unconscious. *Boulevard* captures just this uncanny quality through its blurring of dreams, hallucinations, on-screen cartoons and (fictive) "reality" – as stands out most clearly in two bookend sequences that recreate "Dream Street," a Fontaine Fables cartoon about animators working at the behest of a merciless time clock. Said sequences blend the cartoon "reality" of Ted and Lillian's workaday world with the cartoon-within-a-cartoon world of Waldo, and here Deitch blurs the lines between the two so effectively that one cannot really separate the different realms. Dream and reality are equated through his graphic style, in an overspill of images at once beautiful and disturbing.

30 "Dream Street" depicts a make-believe studio called "Fable Toons," with a factory-like atmosphere much like the "real" Fontaine Fables. This make-believe studio is populated by cartoonists who are anthropomorphized "animals," among them two clearly modeled on Ted and Lillian. The cartoon shifts into a bizarre dream sequence, as the Ted and Lillian-like characters are forced to work overtime into the late night, which causes the Ted character to fall asleep at his drawing board. Waldo the Cat then leaps from the drawing board and pulls the Lillian character into the sleeping animator's dream (**Figure 9**), a riot of cartoon anthropomorphism that climaxes with the appearance of the monstrous "Sandman," Waldo's nemesis. Here the dream-world of the cartoon recalls the more nightmarish episodes in Dave Fleischer's darkly subversive "Betty Boop" films, in which odd transformations and sexual symbolism run amok (Wells 73-76). At one point the "Sandman" literally chases Waldo and the cartoon girl off the screen, and into the human "reality" of the Fontaine Fables studio, where Ted, Lillian and the rest of the staff stand watching the cartoon (**Figure 10**). Thus dream and reality blur.

31 Dream and nightmare are essential to Deitch's work, as the novel's title suggests. This association of cartooning with nightmare is fitting, for the trope of *dreaming* was central to early animated films, especially to their smudging of the lines between animator and animated. For example, as Crafton points out, a logic of dreams and "incoherence" underlies Emile Cohl's early animated efforts – a fluid dream-logic of metamorphosis and flux (*Before Mickey* 66-69; *Emile Cohl* 258-267). This same preoccupation informs much of Winsor McCay's work in comics, with its similar emphasis on transformation. While McCay's film and onstage work stressed the relationship of the cartoonist, as lightning-sketch artist, to his creations, his print cartooning often privileged the notion of dream or



nightmare (not only *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, but also the lesser-known and frequently disturbing *Dreams of a Rarebit Fiend* and similar strips). This same nominal emphasis appears in early Cohl films such as *The Puppet's Nightmare* (1908) and in Bray's McCay-inspired debut film, *The Artist's Dream* (c. 1913). In such films dreaming and hallucination provide the rationale for the cartoonist's ever-shifting imagery.

32 Because animation is thus tied to the notion of “dreaming,” the presence of Waldo as nightmare – as the dark underside of the creative process – makes sense. There was always the possibility, in the lightning-sketch films and vaudeville routines of McCay, and in the various “out of the inkwell” type cartoons that followed from several studios, that the relationship between the “real” world and the world of the cartoon might become one of opposition, even violence; that the cartoonist's own creations might somehow get away from him, and the impish God might lose control. In Deitch's novel, Waldo represents exactly this, for he cannot be controlled, by Ted or by anyone. He represents the cartoon come to life, darkly heckling his creator, who has surrendered his art to the new industrial order.

33 In the end, *The Boulevard of Broken Dreams* testifies to a certain restiveness, a lively unease, about the creative process; thus its implications go beyond its esoteric interest in the mazy byways of cartoon history. Yet the novel's historical milieu is not merely incidental to its larger themes: the twilight world of early animation and the plight of its frustrated artists provide a perfect context for Deitch's darkly comic explorations. The novel's splicing of animation and comics is apt, not only because the two fields share historic roots and a graphic vocabulary, but because both fields suffer from a vexed relationship between art and commerce. Orthodox animation, after all, is a field defined largely by trademarks rather than individual artists, properties rather than creators. It has often treated its artists as so many interchangeable cogs – and yet the field is fearfully charged with creative energy, and draws from its best artists an extraordinary, sometimes wounding, commitment of self. It has this in common with comics – and so Deitch, turning his love of animation toward the comics page, has found a felicitous match of subject matter and medium. *Boulevard* speaks to comics, makes sense as a comic, because it is set in a field at once glorious and abject, with an artist-hero, Ted Mishkin, at once fiercely imaginative and hopeless, frightened, dispossessed. An ironic *künstlerroman* ending in collapse and withdrawal, the novel cannot help but throw a questioning light back on comics itself – for how can we avoid reading Ted Mishkin's plight as that of the comics artist?

34 Despite its larger relevance, then, and its vivid particularity, *Boulevard* belongs to a recent cluster of meta-comics that amount to reflections on the very worth of the art form and the nature of the profession. Like Seth's *It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken* (1996), *Boulevard* meditates on the value of cartooning, ending with a bittersweet recognition that mingles defeat, irony and pleasure; like Dylan Horrocks' *Hicksville* (1998), *Boulevard* spins a fable of Art vs. Commerce, acknowledging at the same time that some wonderful cartooning has come out of that struggle. *Boulevard*, however, does something that these other books do not – it captures the joy and terror of drawing, of cartooning, of making up things that then overwhelm you. Faced with the erasure of the individual artist, Deitch reasserts the artist's presence with a countermyth at once fantastical and historically resonant, funny and frightening.

Notes

[1] The cinema/comics analogy, intuitive and long-lived, can be found in many of the seminal popular studies of the art form, often as part of a brief précis of formal characteristics meant to accompany an otherwise historically-oriented treatment. See for example Horn (56-57), Perry (14) and Steranko (I:3). Eisner's shifting position vis-à-vis this analogy is instructive: he has often been cited as a master of “cinematic” technique in comics, as when, e.g., Steranko likens his pages to film storyboards” (II:116), and Eisner himself told Steranko that he came to regard

comics as “film on paper.” Yet in later interviews and writings Eisner would privilege live theater and print as his reference points. Indeed, as early as 1973 Eisner told interviewer John Benson that print “has always been the most attractive [medium] to me. [...] There’s an intimacy in reading that to me transcends motion pictures” (“Art and Commerce” 7). McCloud similarly praises the medium’s “intimacy” in *Understanding Comics* (212). For critiques of the comics/film analogy, see Eisner, *Graphic Storytelling* 69-73; and Harvey, *The Art of the Comic Book*, 173-191. For a recent reconsideration, see Christiansen.

[2] This image-poaching occasionally blossoms into sustained homage. Consider, for example, the back cover of Crumb’s *Mr. Natural* No. 1 (1970), with its parodic article, “Great Cartoon Characters of the Past: Where Are They Now,” a mock-tribute to Paul Terry’s animated bird-and-cat duo, Gandy Goose and Sourpuss, as depicted in the Terrytoons comic books published by St. John. The influence of such animation-derived comics is clear in, e.g., *The R. Crumb Coffee Table Art Book* (3-5).

[3] Gene Deitch’s brief, frustrated tenure at Terrytoons is recounted at length in, e.g., Maltin 143-148 and Barrier 548-550.

[4] Deitch’s “Harry Simon” persona appears in his illustrated story, “Two Jews from Yonkers,” published in *Weirdo* No. 11 (1984), and reprinted in *Beyond the Pale!* (1989). Brother Simon Deitch is there rechristened “Jake Simon.”

[5] For evidence of Deitch’s interest in (and *Boulevard’s* fictive elaboration of) animation history, see Deitch’s “outtake” from the novel, “The Ship That Never Came In!”, in both its print (1992) and its online animated (2003) versions. See also press coverage of *Boulevard’s* release in 2002: e.g., Baker, Ford.

[6] For more on the origins and popularity of Felix (one of the leading cartoon franchises of the 1920s), see Canemaker, *Felix*; Crafton, *Before Mickey*, Ch. 9.

[7] The racial and racist implications of these characters warrant further study, beyond the scope of this essay. Indeed racist cartoon typology – more broadly, the question of cartoon stereotyping – remains an urgent but neglected topic. See Gordon, Ch. 3, for discussion of the relationship between African-American types and deracinated “funny animal” characters. Arguably, underground comix (e.g., Crumb) exposed and reasserted the racist origins of such characters – with inevitably controversial results.

[8] The tradition of self-figuration dates back at least as far as McCay’s pioneering *Little Nemo* (1911), in which the titular hero himself begins drawing, becoming the artist’s alter-ego (Crafton, *Before Mickey* 103; Canemaker, *McCay* 133).

[9] I draw the term “orthodox animation” from Wells, *Understanding Animation*, which posits useful distinctions between orthodox and “experimental” styles. See Wells 35-39, 43-46.

[10] The artist’s attempt (whether successful or not) to assert mastery over his creations be seen in many, many cartoons. Take for example the “Sorcerer’s Apprentice” and “Night on Bald Mountain” segments of Disney’s *Fantasia* (1940), in which the theme is implicit, or Chuck Jones & Michael Maltese’s *Duck Amuck* (1953), in which it is overt.

[11] Interestingly, the zoetrope, or “wheel of life,” was originally christened the Daedalum, or “wheel of the devil.” These two different names, taken together, capture the ambivalence inspired by animation, with its uncanny, vital yet frightening conjurations of movement and life (an ambivalence that informs Deitch’s entire novel). Also striking in this regard are some of the names given to the Phenakistiscope: e.g., Fantoscope and Phantamascope. Regarding these devices, see C. Lucassen’s site on pre-20th century optical toys, <http://web.int...optical/index.htm>, part of “Anima,” a larger site devoted to chronophotography (à la Muybridge), pre-cinema and animation.

[12] Lillian is shown picketing during the famed Disney strike of 1941 (which Deitch mis-dates to 1942), and, later, standing up to Joseph McCarthy at a HUAC hearing. For discussion of the impact of the blacklist on animation, in particular of Hubley’s communist affiliation and his consequent firing from UPA in 1952, see Barrier 533-535. Regarding Disney’s involvement with HUAC, see Smoodin 159-160.

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Written and Illustrated by Kim Deitch. A visually beautiful, narratively intricate, and powerful book by one of the most original, and - until now - least recognized comic artists at work today. The place is New York City in 1933. The setting: the Fontaine Talking Fables animation studio. One of the godfathers of American underground comics, Deitch grew up among animators, and this graphic novel is his twisted allegorical history of the rise and fall of American animation. Spanning from 1927 (when theatrical cartoons began to hit their stride) to 1993, it's crammed with intrigue, mysteries and Deitch's trademark exploding page layout. 2. Kim Deitch – Much of Kim Deitch's work deals with the animation industry and characters from the world of cartoons. Waldos appearance is reminiscent of black cat characters as Felix the Cat, Julius the Cat. The son of illustrator and animator Gene Deitch, Kim Deitch has sometimes worked with his brothers Simon Deitch, Deitch's influences include Winsor McCay, Chester Gould, Jack Cole, and Will Eisner, he attended the Pratt Institute. Kim Deitch's entry in the Webcomic Hurricane Relief Telethon *The Ship That Never Came In*. an animated cartoon based on a Waldo strip that Deitch originally wrote for Pictopia in 1992. 3. *Raw* (magazine) – *Raw* was a comics anthology edited by Art Spiegelman and Françoise Mouly and published by Mouly from 1980 to 1991. Deitch, Kim and Deitch, Simon. *The boulevard of broken dreams*. (2002). ***. I'm not a big fan of graphic novels, but this one came highly recommended. It is classified as a Young Adult novel, but I'd take a close look at the "kids" who check it out of the library. It's really more of a collection of three "adventures" of the artist's hero figure, the cartoon cat, Waldo. Waldo has all the mischief of early cartoons and none of the cuteness of the commercialized Disney characters that became so popular. Waldo's fictional creator Ted Mishkin is a tortured ge Wow. This book really suprised me. I was little luke warm on Deitch's work in Best American Comics 2006, but this was really enjoyable and artful.

A half forgotten dream populated by smudges of shadow against a glowing, antiseptic white. There was a voice, whimpering, sobbing. There are voices, cold, fearsome, warping and waffling along the topology of my fragile consciousness. Some indistinct, some, painfully clear. "Is it ready?" "All tests indicate successful integration,-" "Good. Get it set up and in the program." "Just remember, like the others, there is not guarantee that there will be any indication-". "I know. I heard you the first twenty times. C'mon. Budget's a wasting and Deitch is a wonderful comic book artist and writer and I had hoped "Boulevard of Broken Dreams" would be a masterwork but it's a disappointing and fairly minor piece. I recommend others to seek out "The Search for Smilin' Ed" or "Shadowland" for better examples of Kim Deitch's brilliance. ...more. flag 3 likes · Like · see review. Jul 09, 2014 Ben Cheng rated it it was amazing.· Waldo has all the mischief of early cartoons and none of the cuteness of the commercialized Disney characters that became so popular. Waldo's fictional creator Ted Mishkin is a tortured ge Wow. This book really suprised me. I was little luke warm on Deitch's work in Best American Comics 2006, but this was really enjoyable and artful. Anyone who has read Kim Deitch before will recognise many of the same themes prevalent in this book as explored in previous books: the early days of cinema/animation, early 20th century curios, unreliable narrators usually drunk/on drugs, and the hinting that Waldo is a demon in cat form. This is all well and good but after reading most of Deitch's books ("Shadowland", "Alias the Cat!", "The Search for Smilin' Ed", "A Shroud for Waldo") it's getting a bit repetitive and boring.· Deitch is a wonderful comic book artist and writer and I had hoped "Boulevard of Broken Dreams" would be a masterwork but it's a disappointing and fairly minor piece. I recommend others to seek out "The Search for Smilin' Ed" or "Shadowland" for better examples of Kim Deitch's brilliance. Read more.