

Before sound was recorded onto films, the silent era was filled with live concerts. Musicians would improvise along or play a score tailor-made to fit with each flick.

Carl Stalling was a principle accompanist for the Lexington, Missouri, silent movie house from the age of 12. In his mid-20's Stalling moved to Kansas City, continuing his gig playing to silent films. One day, an as-yet-unknown Walt Disney saw heard a film with Stalling's musicking. He was so impressed with his work that he asked him to score some of Disney's first cartoons, & later hired him as Disney Studios first music director. Their work is some of the earliest instances of animated films with synchronized sound; & their innovations a new way to tie moving image to its sound.

'Mickeymousing' dates back to 1928. It is a close synchronization of music & image, where the movements on screen—whether or not animated—are mirrored by gestures in the audio. The soundtrack itself becoming an augmentation of the choreographic flow alongside any sound effect & vocal track. To sync the music to the hand-drawn cells the musicians would play to a click-track pulsing out the tempo in headphones while recording. The now-common technique being a then-unheard-of practice in the making.

A cartoon character walks up a staircase. What is heard? The standard accompaniment might be a pitch contour 'going up', some sort of scale pattern 'rising'. But these directional metaphors simply reinforce an arbitrary link clichéd into a convention. The connexion between a drawing & a sound bears no necessity: anything does. & yet, ascending tones easily summon up a mental image of a line-drawn dramatics persons in the act of climbing up flights of stairs.

Composer & film theorist Michel Chion has intensely studied the inter-relationships between sound & image & claims "we never see the same thing when we also hear, & we do not hear the same thing when we see

the deep listening club
passos manuel

#3: animation
2025

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Composer & film theorist Michel Chion has intensely studied the inter-relationships between sound & image, & claims "we never see the same thing when we also hear[, &] we do not hear the same thing when we see

as well." In other words, there exists an unspoken audio-visual contract that film-makers exploit to construct our cinematic experience, which is really pure fiction. When Chion writes this he is referring to cinema in general, not just to animation.

Though intro sequences & theme songs were already a thing at the cinema, television brought with it a new milieu for earworms—sonic branding enters the home. Indeed, the radio already had jingles & the like, but (as with Chion) the image changes the way we see/hear. How easy is it to imagine the distinct colours of The Simpsons when hearing a part of its opening vocal line?

Cartoon theme songs are embedded into the collective unconscious of a screen-locked society. But sonic mutations show up when changing the channel to a different 'dub' of the soundtrack. At times, it is only a minor shift; at others, the alternate has no resemblance to the original at all. It is quite odd to see/hear the 'same' images synchronized to entirely different music.

From Japanese anime to visual music & CGI the histories of animation are diverse—a treasure of audiovisual tales to see/hear. The soundworld of a cartoon is limitless: it has no original reference tied up with our everyday offscreen experience—if you consent to the possibility of imagining a screenless life. The sonic universe of an animated film is invented from scratch; a drawing is not 'pre-loaded' with a sound.

Some of what was seen/heard:

carl stalling.....THE SKELETON DANCE
walt disney.....THE BIRTHDAY PARTY
ikuo oishi.....ポン助の春
scott bradley.....PUSS GETS THE BOOT
carl stalling/mit franklyn.ZOOM & BORED
norman mclaren....DOTS/SYNCRHOMY/MOSAIC
w/ evelyn lambart.....LINES: VERTICAL

&

the newton brothers.....joe hisaishi
yoko kanno.....14 \ 00.....richard stone
danny elfman.....josé natário

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