

Film Reviews

Quirino Cristiani: The Mystery of the First Animated Movies.

By Gabriele Zucchelli.

The Caravel Animation, 2007.

90 minutes. Blu-ray, color.

Situating itself at the intersection of film and immigration history, the documentary film *Quirino Cristiani: The Mystery of the First Animated Movies*, directed by Gabriele Zucchelli, is based on the book *L'uomo che anticipò Disney*, by historian Giannalberto Bendazzi (2007). In the story of early cinema, the question of who invented what or who did it first often dominates historical research, and this film suggests that animation, a specialized area of cinema, was born before mainstream cinema itself.

The earliest pioneer of animation was the French inventor Charles-Émile Reynaud (1844–1918), who created the first cartoon, *Pauvre Pierrot*, in 1892 via his Théâtre Optique at the Musée Grévin. The Théâtre Optique was a complex projection system, with perforated strips of paper, a rotating wheel, and a proscenium, which Reynaud developed by combining two optical gadgets: the zoetrope's moving drum and the praxinoscope's internal system of mirrors.

Reynaud's *Pauvre Pierrot* preceded the initial public presentation of the Lumière brothers' *cinématographe* device in Paris at the end of December 1895. A fundamental difference separated these two events and technologies: While Reynaud drew, one by one, his moving images, the Lumière brothers had figured out a way to set still photographs in motion. It did not take long before the *cinématographe* surpassed Reynaud's manual artistry thanks to its mechanical reproduction of photographic images.

After Reynaud and the Lumières, in this French genealogy of early cinema, the figure of Émile Cohl (1857–1938) looms large. A bohemian, caricaturist, illustrator, and admirer of Grand Guignol puppet theater, Cohl is credited with having created the first fully animated film, *Fantasmagorie* (1908), a two-minute projection. Admired by Walt Disney, *Fantasmagorie* included seven hundred drawings, each of which was double exposed. Needless to say, the manual artistry required by animation is a more painstaking process than photographic automatism. In the *cinématographe*, the recorded actions are performed live in front of the camera, instead of being drawn one posture at a time and set in motion according to the principle of the flip-book and the retinal phenomenon of “persistence of vision.” (The latter is an optical

illusion that enables perception of motion with photographic cinema and animated drawings.)

Animation has recently had a major comeback all over the world. Thus Bendazzi's discovery of Quirino Cristiani (1896–1984) is most timely and worthy of attention. Cristiani stands out as a political satirist and as the pioneer of the first two animated feature films and the first animated feature film with sound in international film history. The reason digital imaging and animation are compatible is that they share a crafted component. The former is based on computer coding, and the latter relies on manual drawing. By contrast, photographic cinema is born out of light, physics, and chemistry; it has nothing to do with numbers or manual artistry.

The son of a middle-class town clerk who could read and write in a country lagging behind in literacy and industrialization, the Italian-born Quirino and his family immigrated to Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 1900 from Santa Giulietta (Pavia province, Lombardy). As a young man, Quirino was a bohemian who soaked up the left-leaning politics of Buenos Aires.

Unfortunately, this cosmopolitan capital could not compensate for a country as much marred by elitism and corruption as Italy was. The elections of 1916 saw the presidential election of the radical party leader Hipólito Yrigoyen. Although Yrigoyen granted unprecedented freedom to the press, the press was unkind and mocked his social awkwardness by calling him *peludo* (shaggy). Cristiani's first feature, with animation based on Emile Cohl's cut-out method and with thousands of frames drawn by hand, was titled *El Apostol* (1917). Its subject was the new president trying to eliminate corruption but ending up being overwhelmed by the enormity of the task. With special effects by Andrés Ducaud, *El Apostol* lasted one hour and fourteen minutes at fourteen frames per second and anticipated the legendary and much less sarcastic Walt Disney. Cristiani's career was supported by another Italian immigrant, the producer Federico Valle, who had become famous for filming the very first aerial views in film history in 1909, during a flight of Wilbur Wright in Rome.

During World War I, Yrigoyen wanted to keep Argentina neutral. In 1918, the German commander in Argentina organized the sinking of an Argentinean ship and blamed the attack on Allied Forces in Europe, hoping to manipulate Argentinean public opinion. Yrigoyen covered up the incident to avoid taking sides with or against Germany; this compelled Cristiani to create his second feature animated film, *Leaving No Trace* (1918). President Yrigoyen confiscated the film.

By 1922 Yrigoyen finished his first term as president but was re-elected in 1928. Cristiani continued to feel that President "Peludo" was manipulated by

his corrupt colleagues in his allegedly radical party, so he set out to produce his third animated feature film, *Peludopolis*. In 1930, a coup d'état removed Yrigoyen from power, constraining Cristiani to rethink his satirical plot. The new ruler of Argentina, General José Félix Uriburu, permitted *Peludopolis* to premiere on September 16, 1931. Despite this gesture of tolerance by the provisional junta, the Great Depression-era crowds were not in the mood for the film's laughing tone. For that reason, after Yrigoyen's death in 1933, Cristiani respectfully took *Peludopolis* out of circulation.

All Cristiani's films were accidentally destroyed by fire (the reels were nitrate rather than celluloid). However, Zucchelli managed to retrieve a short documentary of Cristiani at work in his production studio. This footage is terrific because it shows the organized and mechanical way in which Cristiani drew, combined, and filed groups of cut-outs based on the segmentation of his caricatures in motion. During a trip to Argentina in 1943 to research the "gaucho segment" of *Saludos Amigos*, Walt Disney offered a lucrative job to the forty-five-year-old Cristiani. Yet Cristiani felt too old to start again in a new country. Historians still speculate as to whether the hugely popular Disney went to Argentina as an artist, a diplomat, a spy, or all of the above: Such is the power of animated cartoons. To be sure, the U.S. government wanted to be friendly with Latin America in the middle of a worldwide conflict.

Irreverent and eccentric, Cristiani possessed a vivid imagination that matched his resourcefulness in handling his complicated and unstable artistic career. A nudist and a fervent believer in balanced nutrition, Cristiani founded the advertising company Publi-Cinema, which allowed him to make short cartoons. Because the Argentinean distribution and exhibition networks were inadequate, he himself traveled all over the city of Buenos Aires showing Chaplin shorts, until the police shut him down for "disrupting traffic." Filled with interviews, visits to film museums displaying old cameras, on-location research, and exploration of Buenos Aires's art scene, Zucchelli's documentary is so rich that it is occasionally difficult to keep up with the unspooling of Cristiani's playful personality. From time to time, these anecdotes and insightful details might distract the viewer from the documentary's main arguments.

The recipient of several international awards, Zucchelli's film manages to oscillate between an intimate and a wide-ranging approach to a personal history, ably situating one individual's biography within a context of obsolete technologies, intricate international politics, and numerous collaborations with Argentinean magazines and colleagues in the arts. The documentary, mostly in color, but with plenty of materials in black and white, also illustrates the creative connections between Europe and the famously cosmopolitan Buenos Aires in the first half of the twentieth century. Due to the wealth and breadth of material collected by Bendazzi and Zucchelli, the documentary would certainly

be appropriate in any class on the history of Italian immigration or of Latin American studies.

—ANGELA DALLE VACCHE
Georgia Institute of Technology

Work Cited

Bendazzi, Giannalberto. 2007. *L'uomo che anticipò Disney*. Latina, Italy: Tunué.

Colorado Experience: “The Smaldones: Family of Crime.”

By Julie Speer.

Rocky Mountain PBS and History Colorado, 2014.

30 minutes. Streaming format, color.

The myth of the frontier figures large in Colorado’s history. Self-sufficient settlers on the eastern plains, grizzled miners in the Rockies, and chuck wagons in Durango influence much of the state’s self-imagined past. Rocky Mountain PBS, in conjunction with History Colorado (formerly known as the Colorado Historical Society and operator of the state historical museum in Denver), attempts to broaden that mythology by telling the stories of a diverse range of Coloradans in the public network’s *Colorado Experience* series. “The Smaldones: Family of Crime,” along with episodes on the Sand Creek massacre and the rise of the Chicano Movement, joins the series’s more regularly featured frontier symbolism. This brief narrative history, based on *Denver Post* columnist Dick Kreck’s 2010 true-crime book, *Smaldone: The Untold Story of an American Crime Family*, ties the tale of the Smaldone brothers, and especially Clyde Smaldone, to broader histories of Italian immigration, prohibition, and organized crime.

“The Smaldones” demonstrates that organized crime in Denver between Prohibition and the post–World War II era was by no means an “underworld” of secrets and shadows, but rather a network of very visible businesses run out of leading restaurants and nightclubs. The gangsters who sold illegal goods and services worked with law enforcement and participated in local, regional, national, and global economic markets. They openly donated to charitable causes, including the Catholic Church, and a number of leading politicians (even one governor) within their circle.

The film features period and contemporary photographs intercut with interviews with historians and journalists. The filmmakers made extensive use