

# ESSAY

## KILLING A MOUSE

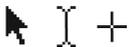
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e can look into cyberspace but we cannot touch anything. It is on the other side of a transparent screen that is impossible to get round, like a page that cannot be turned. To work over there we need an agent on the other side we can control. With a graphical user interface such as Macintosh we can reach our hand over the frontier where it appears as an icon that we can steer using a mouse. This icon takes one or other of about twenty different forms depending upon what we are doing.

With icons like these we can select points, lines and areas:



Animated icons show the passage of time:



Together they give us space and time, a condition of the possibility of knowledge. Then we can move things about over there with the pan hand:



Sometimes it wears a glove.



Other icons are more specialised, most of these come from Macintosh System 7.



What a rigmarole we have here; crosses, nibs, keys, fingers, wands and a noose. Where do they all come from, what do they all mean?



The pointer was borrowed from Xerox PARC, the blending finger and wand came from Adobe, the hourglass came from the early Apple Lisa operating system and lives on in Microsoft. Nearly all the other icons were created by Susan Kare, who was an employee of Apple in the early eighties. She was one of the first artists to work directly on a screen rather than paper.

I asked her how she had gone about designing them. A successful icon, she said, was easy to remember and you could guess what it meant. Like many designers, the rational description she gave of her work seemed slightly at odds with the beauty of the results, as if the tropes upon which the icons

were based had been transparent to her. The pan hand was one of hers, but before I could ask she added that the author of the gloved hand was unknown, so I missed my chance to ask if it had been Mickey's.

Macintosh and Mickey Mouse are both privately owned interfaces, one to cyberspace and the other to film which use simple animated drawings, originally in black and white, then later in colour and sound. The Mouse lived in the nowhere zone before the real film began and is a byword for unimportant. Even so he made a lot of money for other people and in 1998 was voted divine honours by the US Congress when they extended his copyright protection until 2047. Since it is illegal to show him we must make do with Apple's version and imagine that one of its fingers has been cut off.



The Mouse mutates continuously so that any description is provisional. He lacks a proper name; the one he uses in the English speaking world is translated as Topolino in Italy; Michel Sans-Culottes in France, and so on. No more versatile actor ever lived; amongst many other parts he has played a hunter, knight, explorer, aviator, pianist, cowboy, Arab, sailor, and sorcerer. Like Al Jolson he crosses the silent-talkie divide and wears minstrel gloves and blackface.

He has black hands. In 1929 he covered them with white ribbed gloves in a very singular manner. In his third cartoon, *The Opry House*, (4:20 to 4:40), dressed in drag, under the Crescent and Star, he does a belly dance in which his navel flies off leaving him without one like Adam. Then pulls on a cap and does a Jewish turn. Then, as if this is not peculiar enough, just as he finishes this, he pulls his hands from behind his ears and shows his gloves which are marked with black spots on their palms. They are still there later when he plays the piano. In the next few films every character including Minnie wears gloves with spots on their palms. In later films they become less frequent and change first into a cylindrical hole then to a circle. On some poster portraits you can see right through them. The marks vanish before the

war, but the gloves are permanent and we never see his hands again. Even so, some memory of the marks as being part of the right way to draw him has lingered. In *The Art of Mickey Mouse*, a collection of drawings by artists published in 1995, they occur in seven out of the one hundred and thirteen images.

To the best of my knowledge this dance sequence is the only occasion when religious symbols have ever been portrayed in a Disney film. Having mocked Islam and Judaism does Mickey, in the interests of interfaith impartiality have a dig at Christianity as well by displaying stigmata? Did Disney not notice? And who would want to crucify the Mouse? The only man with the means, motive and opportunity to do such a thing was the person who drew him. This was not Walt Disney who had stopped cartooning by 1924 and to his occasional embarrassment could not even draw the Mouse. That person was Ub Iwerks, the only man aside from Walt whose name had ever appeared on the title card.

Try to us imagine it from Walt's point of view. The first thing, the most important thing, that he had to do was to protect Mickey. His multifaith moment had been insulting to almost everyone in the United States. So far nobody has said anything but if the marks vanish their absence might become meaningful; so let's make every character wear gloves with marks to draw attention away from the Mouse. Then fade the marks out slowly. Their loss was just one of many plastic changes Mickey suffered over the years, such as the whites of his eyes becoming part of his face, his snout becoming less rat-like and losing his tail.

The Disney Brothers were daring but sometimes naive businessmen who had to deal with dishonest producers and truculent staff. When they were swindled of the rights to their most successful character, Oswald the Lucky Rabbit, they learned their lesson; and to be fair to them there had never been any question about who owned the rights to what their employees drew. Nor did Walt forget Ub after he left in 1931 to found his own studio, when it folded in 1940 he took him back at \$75 per week.

Ub's Mickey is fluid and voiceless, John Updike described him as jiving and having soul. After Ub left Walt's Mickey becomes less goggle eyed but more babyish, he talks and appears in Technicolor. His film career was mostly over by 1940, post war comic strips have him in a suburban setting feeding his dog.

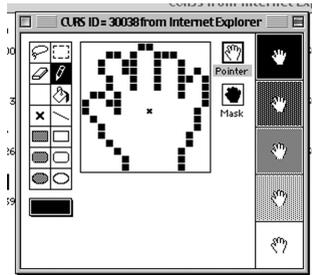
Then he moved to TV and started *The Mickey Mouse Club*, turning from a fetish to a totem, less entertaining perhaps but more valuable that way.

Look at it from Ub's point of view: Where lesser men filled in between poses Ub could draw straight ahead, frame after frame as if drawing time itself. But what he created Disney owned and it was with Walt's voice that Mickey first spoke. All Ub could take from Disney when he left were things no one could accuse him of stealing because they had never been there in the first place: the stigmata. Here in Ub's 1932 cartoon *Spooks* his new character, Flip the Frog, Mickey sans nose, sans ears, laughs in the face of death.



Stigmata first appeared in the late medieval period as images that could cross the boundary of the human body and be made manifest in human flesh. Cordelia Warr has described how the marks of Christ were discovered within the bodies of saintly women like Clare of Montefalco who claimed to have no need of physical images since she had Christ in her heart. After her death in 1308 she was found to have signs of the crucifixion actually inside her heart when it was cut open during a transgressive autopsy by her fellow nuns who badly needed to know if she had been telling the truth or not. The wounds of Saint Francis resembled those on contemporary paintings of the crucifixion. They became the norm not only because of his fame but because

they were visible and could be drawn, as they were by Durer. It is this classic type we see on Mickey's hands. It is not known if his feet are afflicted since he has never taken his shoes off.



When the gloved hand moved to Macintosh the marks jumped interfaces. Icons have what is known as a *hot-spot*, a single unmarked pixel about which they act. You may come to sense its location through use. More or less everybody must realise that the pointer's hot-spot it is at the tip of the arrow. Otherwise their position can be revealed by a resource editor. For the hand the default pixel is in the palm. Stigmata are a Catholic but not a Protestant phenomena and one is reminded of Umberto Eco's observation that with its universal icons Macintosh is Catholic whereas Microsoft is Protestant; the pair of them resting on a Talmudic machine code.

Take a close look at your mouse. Mine carries an image of a bitten apple, the start of all the trouble. On the top is a little button, a track ball like a scab I can pick at with my finger. When I turn it over an infrared light glows in my palm. Via this device my hand is incarnated on screen in a glove copied from the Mouse copied from a Jew in blackface. What the glove conceals is a mark left by a square Roman nail. This is a long way from binary numbers. These are deep waters. Where we cross to a virtual world we are not alone; at our tactile interface with cyberspace we are holding the right hand of Christ.

Whether you believe in them or not does not matter. Being believed in is not how stigmata propagate. The marks appeared successively on Jesus, St Francis, Mickey Mouse, and then on a mechanical mouse and its avatar in cyberspace. At each stage

## ESSAY

the vector was an image of the previous incarnation, such as sculptures or paintings of the crucifixion, then drawings of St. Francis, then Mickey Mouse cartoons. Stigmata are in some ways invisible. Doubting Thomas could not see them; Francis may have been a fraud; Disney did not notice, or pretended not to; Susan Kare did not know. The meme that is moving here is not a thing at all but something that cannot be described, a traveling ambiguity. The there-and-not-there quality they have is useful to them, as it would be to any parasite.

In that case we must consider the possibility that they may not have started with Jesus. He did not resist crucifixion and may have accepted the nails in response to an older voice, Psalm 22 perhaps, or another image lost to us. In that case there is no telling how old this non-thing is, or in a deep sense what it is either. All we do know is that having passed through its human phase twenty centuries after its first known appearance, its hour having come round at last, it has now slipped into cyberspace; where it bides its time.

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