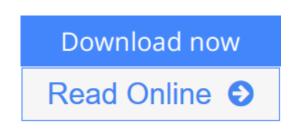


Birth of an Industry: Blackface Minstrelsy and the Rise of American Animation

By Nicholas Sammond



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In Birth of an Industry, Nicholas Sammond describes how popular early American cartoon characters were derived from blackface minstrelsy. He charts the industrialization of animation in the early twentieth century, its representation in the cartoons themselves, and how important blackface minstrels were to that performance, standing in for the frustrations of animation workers. Cherished cartoon characters, such as Mickey Mouse and Felix the Cat, were conceived and developed using blackface minstrelsy's visual and performative conventions: these characters are not like minstrels; they are minstrels. They play out the social, cultural, political, and racial anxieties and desires that link race to the laboring body, just as live minstrel show performers did. Carefully examining how early animation helped to naturalize virulent racial formations, Sammond explores how cartoons used laughter and sentimentality to make those stereotypes seem not only less cruel, but actually pleasurable. Although the visible links between cartoon characters and the minstrel stage faded long ago, Sammond shows how important those links are to thinking about animation then and now, and about how cartoons continue to help to illuminate the central place of race in American cultural and social life.

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Editorial Review

Review

"This is a truly foundational book, explaining how blackface minstrelsy is central to the representational practices, industrial systems, and technologies of animation. *The Birth of an Industry* analyzes cinema and race through the lenses of labor and aesthetics, and the elegant and scrupulous historiographic practice serves as an example to scholars working in any number of fields. Nicholas Sammond has made an immediate and lasting contribution to our understanding of the peculiar symbiosis of race and cinema, and to its particular relevance to the animated film."

(Eric Smoodin, author of Regarding Frank Capra: Audience, Celebrity, and American Film Studies)

"Welcome to an X-ray of Toontown, its Bones showing. Minstrelsy has sometimes seemed the skeleton in the closet of American animation, its racist tar coons hiding inside our most beloved cartoons—Felix, Mickey, Bugs, Daffy, and a host of others both before and after them. With sweeping erudition and definitive archival and theoretical diagnoses, Nicholas Sammond shows just how pervasively blackface figurations have formed the backbone of our animated fantasy lives. Modern cartoons don't merely nod to nineteenth-century blackface performance, Sammond establishes, they constitute its afterlife." (Eric Lott, author of *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*)

"Nicholas Sammond's study provides a detailed, thoughtful, exhaustively researched examination of the process by which the early animation studios cast about for technical and semiotic models to inform their new art form and drew upon the complex and conflicted vocabulary of blackface minstrelsy to do so." (Christopher J. Smith *Journal of American History* 2016-09-01)

"*Birth of an Industry* is a welcome addition and valuable contribution to the ongoing academic discussion of the relationship of ethnic tensions to the art and business of animation." (Christopher P. Lehman *African American Review* 2016-06-01)

"Sammond's impressive *Birth of an Industry* condenses and stretches various links among the evolving art, labor, and business of early animated film." (T. Lindvall *Choice* 2016-04-01)

About the Author

Nicholas Sammond is Associate Professor of Cinema Studies at the University of Toronto. He is the author of *Babes in Tomorrowland: Walt Disney and the Making of the American Child, 1930-60*, and the editor of *Steel Chair to the Head: Essays on Professional Wrestling*, both also published by Duke University Press.

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