

# Felix the Catalyst: An Antipodean Who Animated Modernism

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The cartoon character Felix the Cat was a global celebrity, starring in more than 180 animated films (Gerstein) in the decade before the debut of Disney's Mickey Mouse. According to American animator John Canemaker, Felix is 'the world's most famous cat,' yet to Australians he is the quintessential Aussie larrikin. Although Felix's New York birthplace situates him at the very heart of global modernity and justifies his absorption into the mainstream history of animation, his Australian ancestry invites speculation that his metamorphic and subversive antics—behaviours otherwise described by Patricia Vettel Tom (65) as characteristic of de Certeau's archetypal trickster—were of antipodean origin instead. If Felix might be considered either metropolitan or provincial depending on the observer's point of view, does he 'belong in a local, a national, or a transnational context?' (Dixon, 'National Literatures' 2). Another puzzle: where does Felix belong in the context of modernism/modernity? From his genesis in a small animation studio in New York, Felix the Cat quickly became a worldwide phenomenon, remaining so throughout the 1920s, and is today firmly locked into the conventional account of twentieth-century popular culture. New York was, of course, home to the fledgling pre-Hollywood film industry and key to the rapid spread of visual modernity, yet it was also a hub of high-art modernism. As a star of the silent screen, and as a work of art whose every frame was hand-drawn in pen and ink by an individual artist, does Felix represent both the egalitarian and the exclusive strands of modern culture, following Robert Dixon and Veronica Kelly's contention that Australia is 'a vital generating centre of international cultural innovation' (Dixon and Kelly xvii)?

Expatriate Australian painters of the early twentieth century, from Tom Roberts to Roy de Maistre, who believed that visiting Britain was in fact 'going Home,' were disappointed with their offhand welcome and restricted entrée to the cultural establishment, and exerted less influence on high-art practice than they had perhaps expected. Meanwhile, however, other expatriates—exponents of non-traditional arts—were successfully infiltrating metropolitan visual culture, surreptitiously modernising and democratising it.

Even the most casual observer of global popular culture today must be aware of its disproportionate complement of expatriate Australians. Nevertheless, Aussie expatriates from the previous century were more coy about their background, often falsifying their origins. 'What if these undercover antipodeans were part of a counter-colonial conspiracy?' sounds like the plot of a bad airport novel; nevertheless, I nominate Felix the Cat, not only as an illustration of antipodean trespass into metropolitan modernity, but as a significant facilitator of the convergence of avant-garde modernism and low-brow kitsch.

When Alice fell down the rabbit hole into Wonderland, she worried that she would end up in the Antipodes, a topsy-turvy land that she wrongly called the Antipathies (Carroll n.p.). Innocent mistake or not, Alice's Antipodes/Antipathies slip of the tongue anticipates her adaptations to Wonderland's irrationalities. Her 'fall' through the rabbit hole is of course described from a northern hemispheric perspective. Although going against convention, an antipodean Alice could equally have 'fallen' from south to north. Similarly, Felix the Cat might be described as having 'fallen' from the southern hemisphere to metropolitan New York,

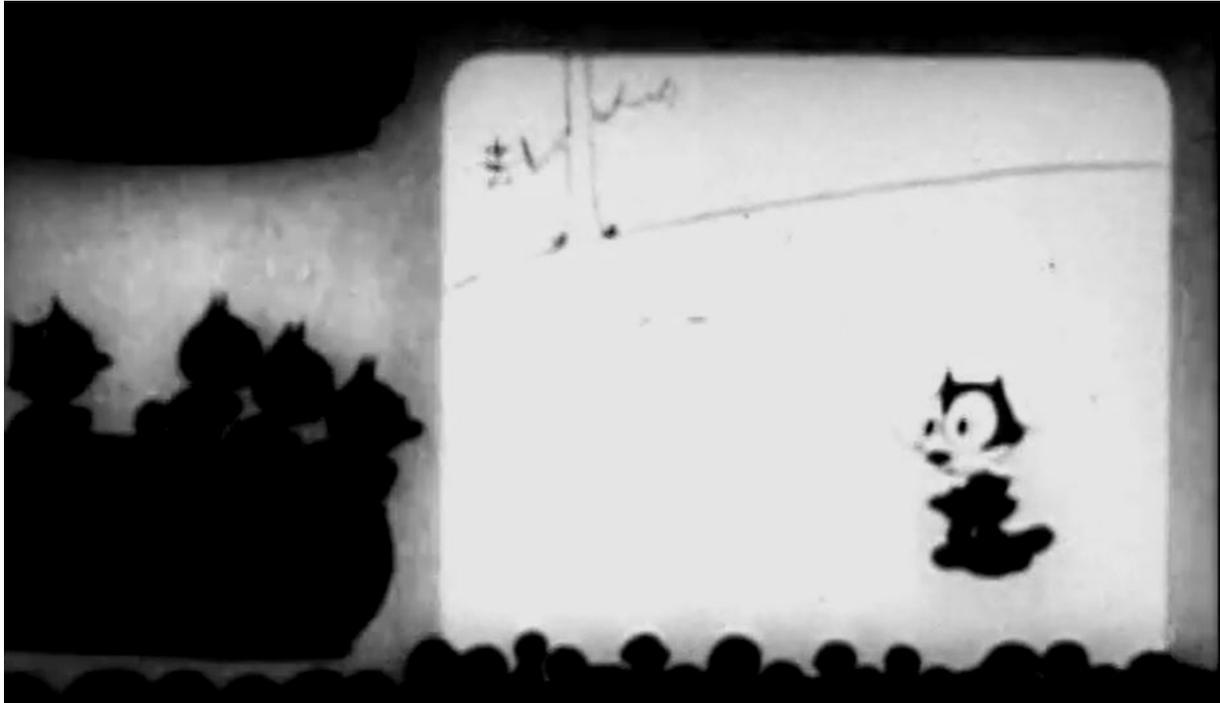
bringing his own antipodean peculiarities and shape-shifting capabilities with him—especially if we agree with Bernard Smith that the Antipodes is not a concrete position but a theoretical one (Smith 7, quoted in Giles 31).

Felix the Cat is now just over a hundred years old, for he made what is claimed to be his first cinematic appearance in *Feline Follies* on 9 November 1919. He may even be a little older, as he is said to have appeared in the title role of *The Tail of Thomas Kat*, a cartoon that is now lost but known from its 1917 copyright registration (Nelson 8), and his portrait appears twice on the title frame of each of the ten-or-so *Charley* cartoons (based on Charlie Chaplin and made with his cooperation) that were exhibited in 1918–1919 (Collier n.p.). Although Felix was born in New York, making him an American citizen—and perhaps justifying later claims, by Canemaker and others, that he was the creation of American cartoonist Otto Messmer—he was the natural offspring of the Australian cartoonist, Pat Sullivan. In an interview published in the *Commerce Caravel* in 1930, near the end of Felix’s life, Sullivan admitted that ‘Felix is both child and friend to me’ (Canemaker 131).

Patrick Peter Sullivan was born in Paddington, an inner Sydney suburb, in 1885. It is often stated that he was born Patrick O’Sullivan, and only later dropped the ‘O’ from his name, but a birth certificate exists giving his family name as Sullivan.<sup>1</sup> He is described as having attended night classes at the Art Society of NSW while working as a gatekeeper at Tooheys Brewery by day (Young n.p.) until, in 1905, he was hired as part-time artist/caricaturist for the trade-union newspaper *The Worker*. In 1909 he travelled to London, where he failed miserably as comic-strip artist, music hall song-and-dance man, and small-time boxer. He managed to get to New York by 1911—either as an accidental stowaway (Foyle n.p.) or an onboard animal handler (Young)—where he eventually found work ghosting episodes of William Marriner’s *Sambo and His Funny Noises* comic-strip for McClure newspapers (Torre 34). Sullivan was not a lone antipodean in New York. Rather, he was part of an Aussie colony of cartoonists and animators that included Harry Julius, a short-term visitor who had previously produced a weekly animated series titled *Cartoons of the Moment* for Australian cinema and later founded the Cartoon Filmads production studio back in Sydney; the lightning-sketcher Alec Laing, whom Julius claimed had once produced stop-motion animation of the Boer War for British Pathé, making him ‘the first black-and-whiter to do cartoons for the screen’ (Julius 19); and the cartoonists and illustrators Frank A. Nankivell, Alex Sass and Reg Russom (Sass 42). At one stage Sullivan shared an apartment with Hugh McCrae, poet and occasional artist, who had illustrated the comic strip *Jim and Jam, Bushrangers Bold* for the *Comic Australian* in 1911 (Lindsay 90–91). Many years afterwards, McCrae recalled that, in the early stages of Felix’s development, Sullivan suggested that McCrae ‘do the drawings while he (Sullivan) supplied the ideas’ (Bradish 9). As Ian Gordon suggests, the large proportion of Australians contributing to New York’s animation hot-shop is ‘indicative of the transnational nature of comic art and artists in the early twentieth century’ (Gordon 5).

Following Marriner’s death in 1914, Sullivan was employed by Raoul Barré’s pioneering film animation studio where fellow Australians Laing, Julius and Sass also worked at various times. Barré was Canadian, so technically as much an outsider as his Australian staff, but his training at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris and his European experience made him an honorary metropolitan. When Barré sacked Sullivan in 1915 because of ‘unsatisfactory’ work (Canemaker 21, 34, 163), Sullivan set up his own animation studio—The Pat Sullivan Studios—just off Broadway. He started out by rehashing Marriner’s *Sambo*, changing the racist comic-strip into equally racist *Sammie Jonsin* animated cartoons which were released by Universal in 1916. This was a less than auspicious beginning for what would become the most

successful American animation studio of the 1920s, all due to the creation and subsequent fame of Felix the Cat. By ‘fame,’ I do not mean fame of the fifteen-minutes Warholian sort, but genuine international fame that lasted more than a decade. Felix wittily acknowledges his own fame in the 1927 cartoon *Flim Flam Films*, in which house-husband Felix takes his three kittens to the cinema. They have trouble gaining entry because of the ‘no cats admitted here’ policy, but eventually sneak in. The curtain rises to reveal the first item: a Felix cartoon. The kittens cry out delightedly ‘Look, there’s Daddy!’



**Figure 1: ‘Look, there’s Daddy!’ Frame from *Flim Flam Films*, 1927.**

In *Felix Out of Luck* (the 1921 Paramount original, not the 1924 Margaret J. Winkler cartoon of the same title)<sup>2</sup> Felix, the common man/cat, loses his sweetheart to a sophisticated artist from New York. However, in his dual role of artistic creation and cartoon character, Felix typically negotiated an on-screen merger of the high- and low-brow versions of modernism, and perhaps even a real-life truce between New York’s bohemian artists and hard-working animators. Patricia Vettel Tom acknowledges Felix’s rightful place in any analysis of aesthetic/high modernism: ‘like modernist painting, early animation was also a visual response to modernity, sharing with “high” modernism such concerns as self-referentiality and physical and societal transgression’ (65). Vettel Tom opens her essay with a reference to Victor De Bann’s ‘The Art of the Motion Picture,’ an illustration that first appeared in *Life*, 22 December 1927. Both Vettel Tom and Donald Crafton (3) illustrate this eight-frame quasi-cubist view of a couple’s night out at a New York picture-palace. Up grand staircases and through marble halls they go, until in the final frame they reach the darkened auditorium and their desired goal—not a Tom Mix western, not a Rudolph Valentino romance, but a screening of Felix the Cat.

As if being a movie star wasn’t enough, Felix was also the first figure to appear on American television. In 1928, RCA began experimental television broadcasts via W2XBS and needed a test subject that could sit patiently under strong lighting for hours on end without demanding food and toilet breaks. No human actor would do it, so a papier-mâché Felix was employed in this capacity for over a decade. Felix’s high-contrast black and white colouring is a plausible explanation for why the television technicians chose him from the array of toys available from

F.A.O. Schwartz's New York store, but it is tempting to wonder whether the engineers recognised Felix as a fellow enthusiast of what RCA's president would later call the 'New American Art' (6).

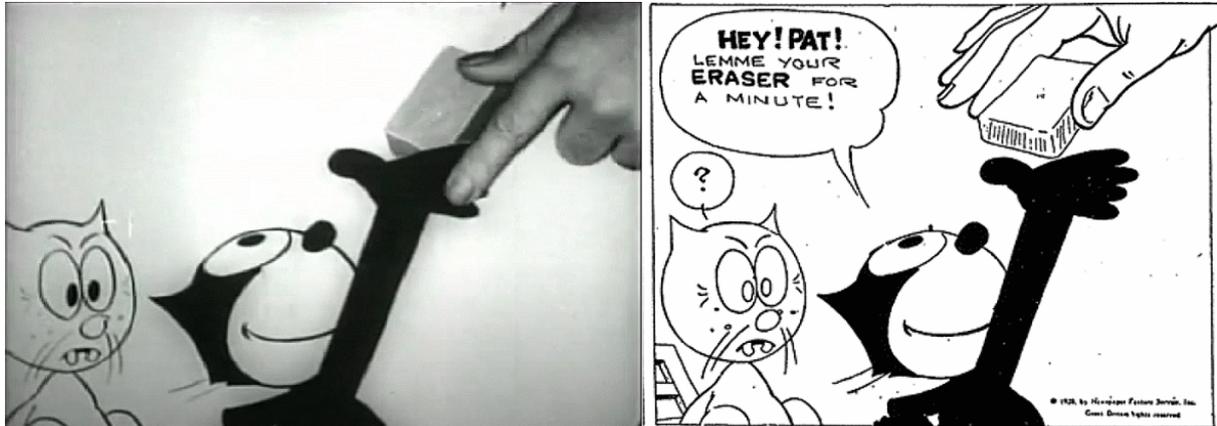
Being modern is more than having mass appeal, more than promoting electronic whizz-bangery. If, according to Marshall Berman, being modern is 'to experience personal and social life as a maelstrom' while being a modernist is 'to make oneself somehow at home in the maelstrom' (345), Felix is both. Only once did he succumb to the stress of modern life, and that was at the very beginning of his long career. In his first extant screen appearance, *Feline Follies* (1919), Felix—still calling himself Master Tom—romances the beautiful Miss Kitty, quite forgetting his domestic mouse-catching duties. Subsequently fired by the householder, the now homeless Felix rushes to his love, only to find her with a litter of black-and-white kittens that look just like him. *Feline Follies* is the most scrutinised of all Felix's repertoire, yet the paternity of these kittens is rarely, if ever, ascribed to Master Tom. Rather, because no time is shown to have elapsed between the characters' first meeting and the unexpected disclosure of 17 kittens—a number which, by the way, far exceeds a single litter—it is Miss Kitty who is blamed for having been careless with her favours in the past. Surprisingly, those scholars who normally applaud animation for its unique exaggeration of plot and elasticity of time, ignore the possibility that the kittens could be Master Tom's. Whether or not the kittens are his own, Felix shirks his responsibilities, runs away and commits suicide. *Feline Follies* was a rare occasion when Felix does not triumph in the end. Magically resurrected in *Felix Turns the Tide* (1922), he returns as a war-hero to discover that in his absence Miss Kitty has married someone else and the couple has many, many kittens. 'Gosh, I had a narrow escape!' Felix exclaims. (The plot and Felix's sentiments were recycled in one of the few Felix sound cartoons, *Hootchy Kootchy Parlais Vous*, 1930.) After his moral lapse in *Feline Follies*, Felix turned the tables on modern society, ironically using extreme versions of modernism's own characteristics against it.

Just as modern painting tossed aside centuries-old attempts at pictorial mimesis, so too Felix perversely stressed the artifice of animation—and of himself. In *Felix Saves the Day* (1922) he first appears, tail-less, issuing from the inky nib of the animator's pen, acknowledging us—the audience—once he has succeeded in extracting his tail. Yet, having first convinced us of his artificiality, Felix then asserts his authenticity by inserting himself into filmed sequences of New York, apparently catching a cab and taking the El train to the baseball stadium where newsreel footage of the crowd cheering Babe Ruth is intercut to suggest it is applauding Felix's own team. This combination of live action and animation wasn't new, with the Pat Sullivan Studio clearly owing a great deal to Max Fleischer's *Out of the Inkwell* series (Canemaker 62). Fleischer's animation was more stylish than Sullivan's, but it lacked Felix's self-reflexive irony.

In *Comicalamities* (1928) Felix subverts the balance between animator and animatee, assuming first autonomy from and then authority over his creator. Felix is drawn without a tail, but is given one when he complains to the animator. (The anonymous animator is usually identified as Messmer; however, in the comic strip version of 'Comicalamities' signed by Sullivan but ghosted by Jack Bogle [Canemaker 111], Felix addresses the animator as 'Pat.')

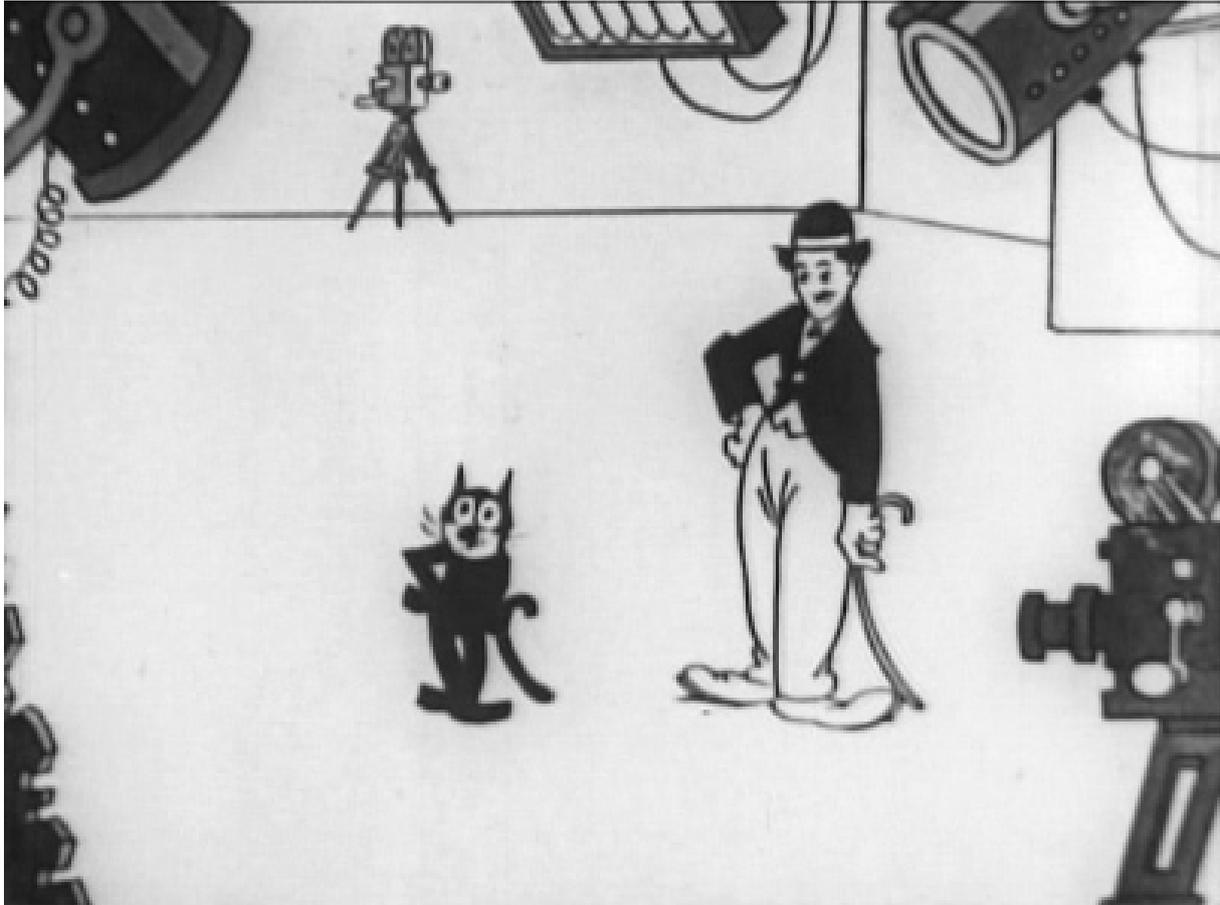
When Felix complains that he is just an outline drawing that lacks solid body-colour, the animator ignores him, leaving Felix to walk out of the frame and into a shoe-shine shop where he asks to be coloured-in with black boot polish. Once he has become the Felix we recognise, the real story begins. He meets a weeping female cat hiding her face behind a newspaper. Felix realises she is ugly, and this is the reason why she is so unhappy. He then becomes the all-powerful

animator, rubbing out her facial features and replacing them with more attractive ones. Having transformed her into his ideal mate, Felix showers her with gifts. Now that she is so beautiful, however, she spurns his advances. Felix cures his broken heart by ripping her out of the scene, leaving behind nothing but a blank hole, thus reminding us that this romantic-tale-gone-wrong is nothing more than a two-dimensional drawing on a sheet of paper.



**Figure 2: Left, frame from *Comicalamities*, 1928; right, centre frame from ‘Comicalamities’ newspaper comic strip, 1928.**

In asserting his existential independence from his master-painter, Felix is not only ‘flouting the convention’ (Vettel Tom 82) of art, but of society itself. In *Felix Revolts* (1923), Felix supports the many workers’ disputes of 1920s America by calling on the starving hordes of New York cats to strike: ‘We’ve had a dirty deal long enough,’ he says by means of a speech bubble. A greater threat to the equanimity of society than Felix’s overt soapbox spruiking, however, is the more subtle consequence of his metamorphic ability. Felix is truly at home in the maelstrom of modernity, triumphing over the ‘perpetual disintegration’ of modern society (Berman 345). Paradoxically, he overcomes the pervasive effects of a fragmenting society by fragmenting himself, for Felix can not only change his surroundings, but can change himself too. He uses his body parts, most commonly his prehensile tail, as a tool (*Felix Wins Out* 1923) or a weapon (*Tee-Time* 1930), or—as seen in the very beginning of *Feline Follies*—an emotive punctuation mark. In *Felix in Hollywood* (1923) he transforms himself into an attaché case and stows away on a train to Hollywood, where he turns his tail into a walking cane to mimic Charlie Chaplin. Vettel Tom suggests that Felix’s characteristic and apparently innocent use of his tail ‘plays a role analogous to that of the phallus’ (79), supporting her argument with the example of Felix’s behaviour in *Felix Wins Out* where he turns his tail into a snake. (Disney copied Felix’s trademark detachable tail for his Julius the Cat—a character politely described in Wikipedia as ‘appearing intentionally similar to Felix the Cat’—in his *Alice Comedies* of 1923–1927.) Near the end of *Felix the Cat Dines and Pines* (1927) he falls from a great height, shattering into a multitude of tiny cats, before becoming whole again. In *Pedigreey* (1927), having put himself together by pulling on his legs like trousers and his ears like a cap, Felix wanders into a nightclub, called the ‘400 Club.’ This is, of course, a reference to Mrs Astor’s ‘The Four Hundred’ list of nineteenth-century New York society, whose exclusivity was by now anathema to post-World War I America. ‘Only those with unquestionable lineage are eligible to [sic] membership here,’ says the maître-d’ by means of an intertitle, and throws Felix out. Like other expatriate antipodeans who reinvented their ancestry (Errol Flynn, for example), Felix gains entry to the ‘club’ (read ‘metropolitan society’) by concocting a respectable heritage: a story so fabulous in his case that it parodies the pedigrees of the social elite.



**Figure 3: Frame from *Felix in Hollywood*, 1923.**

In *Woos Whoopee* (1930), Felix is in a quite different nightclub. None of the aloof Four Hundred frequent the Whoopee Club. Instead it is filled with a raucous crowd who freely imbibe alcohol despite the current Prohibition laws, with Felix the loudest and drunkest of them all. On leaving the club in the early hours of the morning, drunk and literally legless at times, Felix is subject to nightmarish hallucinations. This cartoon appeared quite late in Felix's career, and late in Pat Sullivan's career too. Sullivan was notoriously a hard drinker, presumably a chronic alcoholic. He told a reporter in 1924 that Felix is 'coming perilously near getting a strangle-hold on my personality . . . An old German guy called Frankenstein once started something he could not finish. Well, I just feel like that about Felix' (Canemaker 87). Because of his larrikin behaviour, Felix may be considered Sullivan's alter ego, although 'larrikin' is perhaps too soft a term for Sullivan himself, as he is commonly described as alcoholic, paedophilic, sexually deviant, and syphilitic, insults that—although largely true—are part of an orchestrated campaign to depose Sullivan as Felix's creator and install his chief animator, the American Otto Messmer, as creator instead. Apportioning authorial credit for any mass-produced art is a futile exercise, but especially so in the case of film animation which, by requiring several individual frames for every second of screen time, needs an assembly line of artists. In Felix's case, for example, many artists apart from Sullivan and Messmer were involved, including Bill Nolan who in 1922 softened and rounded Felix's original angular shape (Arnold 47), and Raoul Barré who was employed as a 'guest animator' in 1927 despite having fired Sullivan twelve years earlier (Canemaker 111).

In the period between Felix's putative appearance in the now-lost *Tail of Thomas Kat* in 1917 and what is generally accepted as his filmic debut in 1919, Sullivan was incarcerated for nine months for the rape of a fourteen-year-old girl. Sullivan's story—and we should note that this

was the only available story until 1967—was that he developed Felix’s character while in prison and produced *Feline Follies* on his release, with Messmer’s help. ‘I made the cat, and the cat made me,’ Sullivan said in 1925 (‘Mr Pat Sullivan’). However, long after the deaths of both Sullivan and Felix, certain animation historians (in particular, John Canemaker) have pressed the case for Messmer as the creator of a self-aware animated feline character during Sullivan’s enforced absence from the studio. Certainly, Messmer, as head animator, did most of the drawings throughout Felix’s career, just as Ub Iwerks did most of the early animation for Walt Disney. But Sullivan, like Disney, did the key drawings, at least initially (‘Personal Items’ 20); and, more importantly, Sullivan, like Disney, invented the basic character—although their chief animators would have been influential in developing the appearance and characteristics of both Felix and Mickey as the series progressed.

The difference is that, unlike Disney, Sullivan failed to credit Messmer in the titles. Each Felix film, even towards the end of the series when Sullivan was visibly under the weather, bore the sole credit ‘A Pat Sullivan Cartoon,’ whereas Disney’s *Steamboat Willie* (1928) was not only identified as ‘A Walt Disney Comic’ but also ‘by Ub Iwerks.’ This discrepancy in treatment would have fed Messmer’s resentment when, in his mid-seventies (thirty-five years after Sullivan’s death), he was asked about his former career and made his first public claim to being Felix’s creator: ‘In 1919, I created a character which Paramount named “Felix the Cat,”’ he claimed in a filmed interview with Canemaker (*Otto Messmer*). His story is the version now widely accepted.

The periphery has since struck back in defence of Sullivan. Both Christopher Zinn’s 2004 documentary for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and the exhibition curated by Judy Nelson at Sydney’s Mitchell Library in the following year argued strongly for Sullivan’s reinstatement as Felix’s creator. Nelson found that Sullivan did indeed do the key drawings, even if leaving the rest to others as is standard animation practice (‘Sydney Artist’s Films’ 17), and that his earlier character of Thomas Kat, which he registered at the copyright office on 3 March 1917 (Nelson 8), had Felix’s distinctive detachable tail and hence was his prototype. Further forensic investigation published by Gerald Carr in his website identifies Sullivan’s distinctive hand-lettering in the speech bubbles of early Felix cartoons, by comparing it with letters and autographs he is known to have signed. Other clues to Felix’s Aussie background include those wretched kittens in *Feline Follies*, who greet their mother with ‘Lo Mum,’ not ‘Hi Mom.’ In a 1923 newspaper comic strip in the *Boston American* (Canemaker 81), an angry man with a rifle chases Felix saying, ‘I’ll catch you if I have to chase you to Australia’ (Lee). According to the description in David Gerstein’s filmography, *Felix the Globe Trotter* travels to Australia and returns with a kangaroo. This cartoon was apparently censored in some American states because Felix takes refuge in the kangaroo’s pouch (‘Felix, Full of Secret Sorrow’ 17). In Sullivan’s words on a return visit to Australia in 1927: ‘The censor, confusing the animal’s stomach with its pouch—if he knew that kangaroos had pouches—regarded the incident as vulgar’ (‘Tail Up’ 16). Was this Australian reference Sullivan’s idea, or Messmer’s? The dispute continues, with most recent texts having an each-way bet.

With Felix all but a dim memory, do his origins matter at all? Well, yes, if an immigrant Felix has managed to pass himself off as the All-American Hero who successfully overcame the pitfalls of modern existence. And yes, if we consider Felix’s world-wide influence. His fame was only matched by that of fellow silent-movie star, Charlie Chaplin who, being British-born, could be loosely described as a New York outsider just like Felix. In 1916 or 1917, Chaplin agreed that the Pat Sullivan Studio would produce a series of *Charley* (sic) cartoon features, based on Chaplin’s ‘Little Tramp’ persona. Once again, there are arguments about whether

Sullivan or Messmer was the responsible animator. As Sullivan was imprisoned for much of 1917, Messmer's advocates support his claim (*Otto Messmer*). However, Messmer's role is equally problematic, as he was drafted into the US army in July 1917, and not discharged until May 1919 (Canemaker 48). The *Charley* shorts were released in 1918–19 and, as mentioned above, each had two prototype Felixes decorating its title frame. As also mentioned previously, Felix and Chaplin met on a more equal footing in *Felix in Hollywood* in 1923: Felix auditions for a Hollywood producer by impersonating Chaplin's funny walk and using his tail as Chaplin's walking cane, until Chaplin himself happens by and chases Felix away. As professional pantomimists, Felix and Chaplin had a lot in common. According to Canemaker 'the Chaplin cartoon series proved to have a profound effect on Felix's subtle pantomime behaviour and facial expressions' (38). Chaplin reportedly confided to Sullivan: 'I have only one rival—Felix' ('Fortune and Felix'). Both Sullivan and Chaplin shared a distrust of the talkies. As late as 1936, when Felix and Sullivan were both dead, Chaplin still avoided using dialogue in his *Modern Times*.

It is generally agreed that Disney's Mickey Mouse killed off Felix—and Sullivan. The clue to Mickey's sudden success is evident in the title frame of *Steamboat Willie* (1928) where the phrase 'Sound Cartoon' is prominently displayed. This was Mickey's first appearance. He did not arrive with a fanfare, but with a cleverly synchronised soundtrack. The apparent causal connection between movement and sound in this cartoon persuaded the audience that Mickey existed in a world that was more real than Felix's. Sullivan realised that the addition of sound would alter the near-symbiotic relationship between Felix and his fans, by imposing a fixed narrative on the audience rather than relying upon their imagination. Thomas Edison—'father' of both the phonograph and the movies—shared Sullivan's reservations: 'talking from the lips of the figures on the screen destroys the illusion' ('Americans Don't Want Talking Movies'). However, Sullivan had no choice. Audiences demanded the novelty of sound: after the success of *The Jazz Singer* (1927) silent movies were now passé. Rather than following Disney's method of drawing pictures to conform precisely to a pre-recorded track, Sullivan took a short-cut by post-syncing existing Felix cartoons. As he had feared, the distraction of sound (especially when added as a clumsy afterthought) killed the magic of pantomime. The real Felix made his final appearance in 1930 (*Tee Time*). Sullivan died in 1933.

Sullivan left his estate to his father, Pat senior, passing to his brother, William, and then to William's son, also named Pat. Although Messmer told lawyer Harry Kopp that Sullivan had promised him the rights to Felix (Canemaker 137), there was no written evidence of any agreement. Indeed, all of Sullivan's business arrangements, including film contracts and merchandising licences, were a legal mess. Kopp sacked all the animators and shut down the studio. Only the newspaper comic strips continued, drawn by Messmer, Jack Bogle and, later in the 40s, by Joe Oriolo. In 1936, the Sullivan heirs licensed the Van Beuren Studio to make fresh Felix cartoons—this time with fully synchronised sound and in Technicolor—under the direction of Burt Gillett, a former Sullivan animator who had since been poached by Disney. The films, distributed as RKO-Radio Pictures Rainbow Parade Cartoons, were brightly—one might say, garishly—coloured, and Felix's voice was childishly high-pitched. The series, beginning with *Felix the Cat and the Goose that Laid the Golden Egg*, was clearly designed for a juvenile audience: Felix may have played the part of a feline super-hero, but he had lost his transformative spark and any awareness of the irony in being an animated figure who controlled his own destiny. Only three of these cartoons were made. Felix survived as just a comic strip until the 1950s, when Pat Sullivan (the nephew) joined with Joe Oriolo to re-animate Felix as a television series. After years of negotiations, including a failed deal with the Australian

production studios, Artransa (Torre 46), the first episode of *Felix the Cat* was broadcast in 1958. In all, 260 episodes were made in New York between 1958 and 1962.

Television's Felix is the Felix we are familiar with today—a perky cat who relies upon his Magic Bag of Tricks to resolve his problems, rather than using his own wits or metamorphic abilities. Although visually rounder in shape than the original Felix, his personality is one-dimensional. He is no longer an introspective loner, kicking against the constraints of the modern world, but a simple story-book character with a bag as sidekick. The bag, made of yellow fabric with a repeating pattern of crosses or stars, has been variously described as a Gladstone bag or a valise, but to me it is unequivocally a carpetbag, the accepted visual shorthand for an outsider—so at least some trace of the original Felix remains. In the mid-1990s, Don Oriolo (Joe Oriolo's son) produced a series of twenty-one cartoons as *The Twisted Tales of Felix the Cat*, with the intention of restoring Felix to his original metamorphic self, sans Magic Bag: 'In the '60s Felix's major prop was a magic bag to pull out tricks. "In the '20s," Berglund [Timothy Berglund/Björklund, series director] explains, "he was the magic and that's what he's like in our version"' (Mendoza). Yet the Magic Bag of Tricks was by now so much a part of Felix (as well as best-selling merchandise) that it was retained as the key transformative device, and Felix remained in its thrall.

This watered-down Felix is a far cry from Felix in his hey-day. He was the famous cat who led Macy's annual Thanksgiving Parade as a giant balloon for several years from 1927 (Arnold 48); the cat whom Sullivan presented as a plush toy to King George V and Queen Mary at the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley in 1924 (Maegraith 18). He was so famous that apocryphal stories of his achievements persist: how he flew across the Atlantic with Charles Lindbergh in February 1927 (a story inspired by a later photograph of Lindbergh testing a navy plane that had Felix painted on its fuselage), when it was actually Ruth Elder who took a Felix stuffed toy with her on her attempted transatlantic flight in October later that year ('American Super-Girl' 52); or how he was the mascot for the New York Yankees (a story based on the real-life footage of Yankees fans that Sullivan inserted into *Felix Saves the Day*), when the Yankees archivist has found 'no reference to Felix the Cat or to any other animated mascot' (Viquez n.p.). Stories of his exploits persist today, even if they seem a strange fit for Joe Oriolo's 'cute' Felix of the 1960s or for the even cuter *Baby Felix* of the Japanese anime series made in 2000–2001.



**Figure 4: Charles Lindbergh in cockpit of F3B-1 aircraft on USS Saratoga, 8 February 1929. US Navy photographer, National Naval Aviation Museum, Pensacola, Florida.**



**Figure 5: 'Felix the Cat Also Flew.'** Acme Photograph, *Literary Digest*, 29 October 1927.

The triumph of California-based Mickey Mouse over New York-based Felix the Cat was a shift that was not just geographical. It was a conceptual change from a cosmopolitan to an insular viewpoint. Although Hollywood was the apparent victor in disseminating its homogenised popular culture worldwide, it was at the expense of jettisoning Felix's catalytic fusion of aesthetic modernism and urban modernity. Disney might have succeeded in appeasing the East Coast avant-garde with his abstract animation in the 'Toccata and Fugue' segment of *Fantasia* (1940), if RKO had not dismissed it as 'longhair' and cut it from the version distributed for general release in 1942 (Thomas 161). Yet 'longhairs' appreciate cartoons, according to Esther Leslie: 'For the modernists, cartoons—which rebuff so ferociously painterly realism and filmic naturalism—are set inside a universe of transformation, overturning and provisionality' (vi).

Felix, Aldous Huxley's 'favourite dramatic hero,' exemplified the surreal possibilities of animation by 'portraying the fantastic and preposterous' (39). Iris Barry, writing ten years or so before she became MOMA's first film curator, recognised Felix's significance to high modernism: 'I am always being told that the cinema is not and never can be high-brow. That is just nonsense (or a misunderstanding of the word high-brow). Charlie Chaplin is very sophisticated, so is *Felix the Cat* (both of them are popular enough) and I call them distinctly high-brow' (Barry 166). Both Chaplin and Felix were outsiders who had invigorated American modernism with transnational infusions until they themselves were devoured by the popular culture they had championed—even created.

The cultural significance of Felix's career can be judged by the intensity of the fight for custody rights by both his home and adoptive countries. Even though Felix in *Pedigree* (1927) wasn't above lying about his origins when necessary, Sullivan assured Australians that he was different: "'I always make it known that I am an Australian,'" said Mr Sullivan, "and that I am proud of the fact'" ('Tail Up' 16). If I am guilty of labouring the point about Felix's Australian origins against the weight of recent industry support and academic argument for Otto Messmer's creative claims, it is not simply from misguided chauvinism. From my home here in Sydney, it is easy to misconstrue Felix as an antipodean cat who landed on his feet in the Big Smoke, yet were I back in post-World War I New York I might well have seen him differently.

Like so many outsiders, Pat Sullivan had been drawn to metropolitan New York's opportunities, bringing his own vernacular culture with him. New York has been rightly described as 'the city of twentieth century modernization' (Brooker 30), but this modernisation, although exciting and exhilarating, was not socially productive in the early part of the century when modernism consisted of two antagonistic streams of high-brow and low-brow culture. Avant-garde artists, for all their bohemian ways, were themselves as exclusive as the traditionalists they fought against and, as such, they were dismissive of the mass culture that was growing alongside them. Felix—initially through Sullivan and increasingly through his subsequent animators, all of whom were real-life examples of similar balancing acts—was able to mend these fences by introducing avant-garde concepts to a previously alienated mass audience: spoon-feeding them concepts such as cubism (Vettel Tom 71) and surrealism (Orfila 11) in the form of sight-gags. Following animation's (or even Felix's naïve yet cheeky) lead, popular culture similarly absorbed and democratised elements of aesthetic modernism, until its own mainstream version of modernism became dominant. In near-carnavalesque role-reversal, high art now quotes and appropriates animation and comic-strip references to ensure its relevance in the postmodern world. The original Felix would have laughed at the irony.



Figure 6: Frame from *Felix in Hollywood*, 1923.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> 'Patrick P Sullivan,' NSW Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages, Registration 8001/1885.

<sup>2</sup> Margaret J. Winkler became distributor of Felix cartoons in 1922, following Paramount's withdrawal from cartoon distribution. The arrangement lasted until 1925, when Sullivan moved Felix to Educational Pictures (also known as the Educational Film Exchange).

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