



“Quasi at the Quackadero” (1975)

By Daniel Eagan

A favorite with midnight audiences when it was released in 1975, “Quasi at the Quackadero” was one of the first counterculture cartoons to reach a wide audience. It helped introduce a new generation of animation to filmgoers, as well as to popularize trends in alternative comics and music.

Born in New Jersey in 1949, Sally Cruikshank attended Smith College, where she won a scholarship to a summer term at Yale Art School. A classmate persuaded her to pursue animation. Back at Smith, she completed her first film, “Ducky,” a three-minute cartoon featuring an early version of her Quasi character, a duck-like figure who wears a hat and cape.

Cruikshank enrolled in the San Francisco Art Institute, where she was taught by Larry Jordan (his “Our Lady of Sphere,” 1969, is on the National Film Registry). Cruikshank’s “Fun on Mars” (1971) shows the influence of Jordan’s style of collage, but also retained her duck creatures. (The animator has said that her ducks were derived from Donald Duck drawing by animator Carl Banks.)

Cruikshank found a patron of sorts in E.E. Gregg Snazelle, head of Snazelle Films, one of the first large film production companies in San Francisco. Snazelle Films rented out studio space and equipment, made industrial films and commercials, and provided production services for other film companies. Cruikshank rented a Moviola there to complete “Chow Fun!” (1972). “Gregg saw the film and offered me a job,” she wrote later, “to experiment with animation, and do commercials for him when the jobs came in. He also hoped I’d figure out how to solve 3D without glasses!” She was employed there for ten years, spending most of that time working on her own films, a situation she describes as unimaginable today.

Cruikshank expanded her animating repertory over her next films. “Chow Fun’s” influences ranged from firecracker packaging to the 1930s cartoons by the Fleischer brothers and the Van Buren Studio. Not coincidentally, 1930s animation was a big influence on underground comics as well. Cruikshank said that when she first saw Robert Crumb’s work, “It was so good I almost couldn’t stand it.” Cruikshank reworked many of the ideas used in 1930s cartoons, notably the way animators brought objects like furniture and buildings to life. In the opening shots of “Quasi at the Quackadero,” an easy chair dances in time to the music, just like manhole covers and lamps dance in Fleischer cartoons like “Bimbo’s Initiation” (1931).

Crumb and fellow artists and musicians Bob Armstrong and Al Dodge took this fascination with the thirties further forming the Cheap Suit Serenaders, an acoustic band that specialized in string versions of period tunes. Armstrong and Dodge provided the “strange, gallopy” music for “Quasi,” and for Cruikshank’s “Make Me Psychic” (1978) as well.

It took Cruikshank two years to create all the artwork for “Quasi,” and another four months to shoot and edit it. She screened it at the Los Angeles Film Exposition, and commercially at theaters around the Bay Area. Later, the film was distributed by Serious Business, a Berkeley company, and also by Picture Start.

Viewers who watched “Quasi” when it first came out may have found it easier to connect the film to underground comics, as well as the Fleischers, whose Betty Boop was undergoing a rediscovery. Out of necessity, “Quasi” abandoned the qualities and restrictions of classical animation. Like many underground comic artists, Cruikshank adopted a “do-it-yourself” attitude that existed outside the corporate boundaries of a Hanna-Barbera cartoon. Initially, animation festivals shunned the film.

“Quasi’s” storyline and characters share with early Fleischer films the same propensity to change shapes, to distort, evolve, and revert in time to music. “Animation is sort of this open door to fantasy land,” Cruikshank said in an interview. “You’re only limited by what you can draw.”

She admired that her characters could “look really weird on individual frames.” “I take a lot of liberties,” she added. “You can get the personality of the character expressed through distortion...instead of just opening and shutting their mouths.”

Technique can't salvage a poor script; fortunately, "Quasi" is overflowing with ideas, from a character with wheels named Rollo to a punning shot of an angry Anita (a sort of upright female dog who acts as an antagonist in Quasi's films) shooting real daggers from her eyes. Cruikshank introduces a succession of carnival sideshow rides and exhibits, including a segment with fun-house mirrors that echoes Winsor McCay's "Little Nemo" (1911). But Cruikshank goes a step further by suggesting that some changes are irrevocable, like a peepshow that moves time backwards.

The success of "Quasi at the Quackadero" enabled Cruikshank to raise the budget of her next film, "Make Me Psycho" (1978). This film received even wider distribution than "Quasi," opening in San Francisco with the feature "The China Syndrome." As she put it, "The future seemed wide open." With a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, she began work on a proposed feature, "Quasi's Cabaret." Cruikshank also spent years trying to finance "Love That Makes You Crawl," a feature that in collaboration with director Joe Dante that would combine live action and animation. Neither project moved forward.

After making "Face Like a Frog" (1987), Cruikshank animated and produced almost twenty pieces for "Sesame Street." Animated to songs by Fats Waller, Betty Carter, and others, these function as the equivalent of music videos for kids. "I'm Curious," for example, follows a walking lizard who shifts sizes while exploring the world. "Island of Emotion" uses reggae music to help show feelings like sadness and love. Cruikshank's use of surrealism and free-form fantasy turns out to be wonderfully appropriate for children.

Cruikshank has also contributed animated sequences to feature films like "Twilight Zone: The Movie" (1982), "Ruthless People" (1986), and

“Mannequin” (1987). Her influence is unmistakable in the work of performers like Pee-Wee Herman (Paul Reubens), who employs a dancing easy chair in his act reminiscent of the one in “Quasi.” “Futurama,” the cartoon sitcom by Matt Groening and David X. Cohen, featured a clip from “Quasi” in an opening sequence.

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“Quasi at the Quackadero” was added to the Library of Congress National Film Registry in 2009.