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Smith, Susan and Summers, Sam (2017) Enter Bugs Bunny: Matador and Star in Bully for Bugs [LA ALTERNATIVA DE BUGS BUNNY, MATADOR Y ESTRELLA EN “BULLY FOR BUGS” (CHUCK JONES, 1953)]. *Revista de Estudios Taurinos*, 41. pp. 251-278. ISSN 1134-4970

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Enter Bugs Bunny: Matador and Star in *Bully for Bugs*

In Disney's 1922 *Laugh-O-Grams* cartoon *Puss in Boots*, there's a scene a third of the way through in which the protagonist (named simply 'The Boy'), despondent at the King's disapproval of him as a match for his daughter, is persuaded by his feline friend Puss to visit the local cinema. There, they watch a cartoon billed 'RODOLPH VASELINO In THROWING THE BULL In Six Parts', the title of which unmistakably alludes to Rudolph Valentino's starring role in the silent version of *Blood and Sand* (1922). Here, the cartoonalising of Valentino as Vaselino and the young boy's emulation of this star by becoming a masked matador who ends up having to rely on hypnotic help from Puss to defeat the bull comically deflates this actor's privileged status as human star by re-presenting him within a form (animation) traditionally regarded as the poor relation to live action cinema. As such, this cartoon skit of Valentino in *Blood and Sand* illustrates animation's penchant for 'import[ing] [...] non-animated movie star trappings to re-perform the artifice of stardom', using 'parody and creative re-performances of "straight" stardom'.¹

Whilst it refrains from the sharper caricaturing of live action Hollywood stars that Crafton traces in Warner Bros. cartoons,² Disney's 1922 *Laugh-O-Gram* is nonetheless instructive in highlighting animation's fascination with stardom and bullfighting. However, unlike this cartoon or 1925's *Alice the Toreador* (one in a series of short films featuring child actor Virginia Davis in an animated world), other cartoons devoted to this subject differ in their repeated staging of such a spectacle around well-known animated – not human – personalities: Popeye, Porky Pig, Bugs Bunny, Goofy, Droopy, Tom and Jerry, the Pink Panther, all appear in cartoons where – whether by intention or happenstance – they don the role of matador (or, in the case of Tom and Jerry, matador and bull), mostly, but not always, in the bullring. But are these cartoon personalities entitled to be considered as stars like Valentino? Crafton notes some of the difficulties in mapping star and performance studies approaches onto the study of cartoon personalities. Because much of this work is predicated on a tension between on and off-screen lives, between performed and "real" identities, this creates a problem due to 'the peculiar status of toon bodies'.² As he observes: 'They [toons] are corporeal – [...] through embodiment, agency and proximal liveness – yet they have no physical body, which short-circuits the film theory. If stars must have two bodies, one an artificial construct and one "real," then we must look again at those believed-in beings, the toons.'³ He goes on to add that, 'Achieving stardom ... is challenging for animated beings that don't inhabit physical bodies and therefore lack the performed body/real body umbilicus that so many acting theories insist on.'⁴ Having noted such difficulties, however, Crafton proceeds to 'insist that Betty Boop [to use his own case study] was a movie star' in her own right,⁵ maintaining that the gap between animated and human stars is perhaps less than it might appear given how both are rooted in processes of construction and illusion. Arguing that 'Toon and human stars share the bond of both being highly constructed identities that develop over time, a performativity that extends beyond their acting in any particular film' and that 'the toons had off-screen lives, too, also blatantly designed and

¹ Donald Crafton, *Shadow of a Mouse: Performance, Belief and World-Making in Animation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), p. 85.

² Donald Crafton, 'The View From Termite Terrace: Caricature and Parody in Warner Bros. Animation' in *Reading the Rabbit: Explorations in Warner Bros. Animation*, ed. Kevin S. Sandler (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998), pp. 101-20.

³ Crafton (2012), p. 85.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., p. 86.

⁶ Ibid., p. 84.

fictitious',⁶ Crafton even goes so far as to suggest that 'the whole enterprise of making toon stars is inherently camp in the sense that the performers are living the lives of movie actors vicariously for their fans'.⁷

If performativity, construction and camp are terms central to understanding how stardom operates in animation, then they may also help to explain the short cartoon's recurring association of its stars with bullfighting. In becoming a matador, not only does the cartoon character act out a role (and status) typically assigned to the human star, but in participating in the bullfight this figure enters an arena conducive to the performance and display of his (and it is usually a 'his') star credentials. That one of animation's most popular stars appears in one of the most successful cartoons ever staged around the bullfight is noteworthy in this respect and the rest of this article will be devoted to a detailed analysis of Bugs Bunny in the Warner Bros. Looney Tunes short *Bully for Bugs* (Charles M. 'Chuck' Jones, 1953). By the time this cartoon was released, Bugs Bunny was an established cartoon personality whose screen persona had evolved from the late 1930s, with *A Wild Hare* (Fred 'Tex' Avery, 1940) widely regarded as the first cartoon to define Bugs' character, since it was there that 'Mel Blanc gave him his classic Bronx/Brooklyn accent and Tex Avery gave him his playfully aggressive attitude'.⁸ Following Avery's departure from the studio in 1942,⁹ Bob Clampett, Chuck Jones and Friz Freleng, who led three different directorial units, each gave their own distinctive inflection to the rabbit's personality. During the Second World War, a more sadistic Bugs Bunny 'embodied the cockiness of the country with his unwillingness to back down from the enemy and his determination to do what was right'.¹⁰ Under the creative influence of Chuck Jones in particular, the postwar Bugs Bunny matured into a cartoon character who:

was never "mischievous without reason." He was neither a rebel nor an "innocent bystander" but what Chuck Jones calls a "counterrevolutionary" or what Lloyd Rose refers to as a "gentleman anarchist." Bugs must always be a winner," says Rose, "but a winner in a contest he clearly views as idiotic." He insists on victory if you insist on war.¹¹

Despite these changes to Bugs Bunny's star persona, there are certain elements – such as his frequent recourse to cross-dressing - that remain fairly constant, with Sandler arguing that 'Bugs Bunny's ability to disguise himself as everything, including "woman," accounts for his enormous popularity over five decades'.¹² This potential for gender fluidity, combined with Bugs's ability to subvert (as in all Warner Bros. chase narratives) the predator vs. prey hierarchy through his status as a (working-class) underdog of the forest world who invariably gets the better of his gullible hunter, endows his wise-cracking screen persona with an anarchic quality that is fundamental to his stardom.

On moving onto *Bully for Bugs*, then, our twofold aim will be to consider how this popular cartoon – in which Bugs Bunny accidentally winds up in a bullfighting ring only to be incited to play the part of matador – acts as a star vehicle for this character, and, conversely, how Bugs Bunny's screen persona (with its potential for disruption) in turn impacts on this animated short's presentation of bullfighting. In the process, we will address the following questions arising from this:

⁶ Ibid., p. 87.

⁷ Ibid., p. 92.

⁸ Barry Putterman, 'A Short Critical History of Warner Bros. Cartoons' in *Reading the Rabbit*, pp. 29-37 (p. 32).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Kevin S. Sandler, 'Introduction: Looney Tunes and Merry Metonyms' in *Reading the Rabbit*, pp. 1-28 (p. 7).

¹¹ Ibid., p. 7-8.

¹² Sandler, 'Gendered Evasion: Bugs Bunny in Drag' in *Reading the Rabbit*, pp. 154-71 (p. 171).

Do the specific conditions of the bullfight prompt any significant adjustments or negotiations with regard to Bugs's screen identity? How does the cartoon's status as a star vehicle for Bugs Bunny affect the film's depiction of both bull and human matador? Considering the oft-quoted anecdote that *Bully for Bugs* was motivated by the animators' refusal to accept their producer Eddie Selzer's dictum not to make 'any pictures about bullfighting', on the basis that 'there's nothing funny about bullfights!',¹³ to what extent does this cartoon's non-realist properties (as a work of animation) sanction greater freedom from the realities of bullfighting? And, finally, how is the dramatic sphere of the bullfighting ring inflected in this cartoon, where, in the absence of the wider storyline and romance plot associated with seminal bullfighting movies like *Blood and Sand*, it becomes the exclusive focus of interest and a fictional arena for Bugs Bunny's starring performance?

Enter the Arena: Bullfighting as a Star Vehicle

The opening image of *Bully for Bugs* – a wide shot of the arena from above, as the matador approaches its centre – establishes the two traits of the bullring which have made it an ideal venue for exhibiting the antics of countless cartoon stars: its clearly visible boundaries mark it as an enclosed space, and the presence of the pacing torero and the cheering crowd mark it as a site of performance. Each of these attributes is key to the way Bugs and his cumulative star persona are depicted in the film, and their impact is particularly felt in the way that the rabbit is positioned as a disruptive force in relation to the institution of bullfighting. Firstly, the limited space that the bullring affords to its cartoon combatants offers a suitably minimalist setting to showcase the repetitive back-and-forth attacks that comprise the narrative of the typical chase cartoon. In his extended definition of the chase cartoon, Norman Klein often emphasises the genre's simplicity. He identifies the emergence of the form in the late 1930s as a trend towards "'anti-story", a reaction against cartoon melodrama',¹⁴ and reduces its story to 'the collision of improbabilities meeting on a field where only greed and invasion operate'.¹⁵ This 'field' can take the form of the desert, the woods, or a domestic living room, while the 'greed' most often manifests as the hunger of a predator, who 'invades' the home or habitat of the prey. In the late 1940s, leading up to *Bully for Bugs*' creation, Klein identifies a movement towards 'a more epic variant of the earlier chase, more simplified, even more stripped down, in some cases past the gears',¹⁶ with which he credits Chuck Jones (as well as Tex Avery).

In Jones' work this dedication to minimalism is best exemplified by the Coyote and Road Runner shorts, beginning with 1949's *Fast and Furry-ous*, in all of which the action revolves entirely around the predator chasing his prey through the desert with the help of various 'ACME' contraptions, which inevitably backfire. Jones later revealed a list of rules – 'No outside force can harm the Coyote', 'No dialogue ever', 'The Road Runner must stay on the road' – designed to limit the scope of the action in order to inspire and enhance the comedy.¹⁷ Although some, including

¹³ Chuck Jones quoted in *Chuck Jones Conversations*, ed. by Maureen Furniss (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), p. 140.

¹⁴ Norman M. Klein, *Seven Minutes: The Life and Death of the American Animated Cartoon* (London: Verso, 1996), p. 162.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

¹⁷ Chuck Jones, *Chuck Amuck: The Life and Times of an Animated Cartoonist* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1989), pp. 224-225.

writer Mike Maltese, have claimed that these rules are apocryphal,¹⁸ they nonetheless accurately describe the limitations of the cartoons and provide an insight into Jones' apparent desire to locate his chases in as austere a context as possible. *Bully* is another example of this push for further simplification, in that it removes 'greed' from the equation. Bugs has 'invaded' the space of the bullring, yes, but neither he nor the bull desire anything from one another: they fight simply because that is, as the audience is likely aware, what a brave bull is bred to do in this context. The bullfight scenario is familiar enough in the anglosphere that the conflict requires no detailed explanation; the hostility between matador and bull is as self-evident as that between cat and mouse, or hunter and rabbit, an ideal set-up for a seven-minute cartoon. The arena, as an enclosed, largely empty space, is one of the most stripped-back settings in which Bugs has ever done battle. The film's focus is therefore exclusively on what Klein identifies as the core of the chase cartoon, 'two thinking adversaries taking turns – scheming, dreaming, mixing greed, naivety, sadism, and revenge',¹⁹ with minimal plot, set-up, set-dressing or outside forces to obstruct the back-and-forth exchange around which the comedy is built.



The seemingly closed system of the arena also serves, by the very fact of its permeability, as a symbolic canvas upon which Bugs can wreak anarchy. While J.P. Telotte correctly notes that 'its formal entrances and exits are used to structure the action',²⁰ referring to the fact that a character's position inside or outside of the space is used as a marker of status throughout the short, its *informal* access points are more important in this regard, as the rabbit both enters and exits the stadium via unconventional means before he ever uses its purpose-built door. In particular, the rabbit-hole through which Bugs enters both the ring and the film, a method of transportation synonymous with the character, is used here to signify his incursion into a culture and an institution to which he does not belong. According to Chuck Jones, one 'important rule [of Bugs Bunny cartoons] was that we always started him out in an environment natural for a rabbit'.²¹ *Bully for Bugs'* setting, in a bullring far away from Bugs' woodland habitat, seems to render this impossible, but the cartoon deftly conforms by having the rabbit mistakenly burrow his way into the arena and appear out of his usual rabbit-hole. While some cartoon stars, like Droopy and the Pink Panther²²,

¹⁸ Mike Maltese, interviewed by Michael Barrier in the commentary for *Fast and Furry-ous* (1949) on the *Looney Tunes Golden Collection Vol. 1* DVD (2003).

¹⁹ Klein, p. 167.

²⁰ J.P. Telotte, *Animating Space: From Mickey to WALL-E* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2010), p. 172.

²¹ Jones, quoted in Furniss (ed.), p. 125.

²² *Señor Droopy* (1949); *Bully For Pink* (1965).

begin their onscreen adventures in the bullring employed as matadors, the majority – Popeye, Goofy and Porky, to name a few²³ – are outsiders, entering into the bullfight either by accident or for personal gain, and bringing with them their unique style of humour and mayhem. Bugs’ penetration of the enclosed arena through his ubiquitous tunnel is the quintessential example of the cartoon star’s encroachment onto a foreign institution ripe for parody and subversion, with the rabbit-hole appearing alongside him in almost all of his misadventures as, in Telotte’s words, ‘an underground construct that can transform any place that he surfaces into a set for comic action’.²⁴ In this way, the discrete and conventional image of the bullring that greets audiences in the establishing shot is quickly and clearly undermined by the incursion of the tunnel, its slow emergence lingered upon across two separate shots. This is what Eric Savoy, in a survey of Bugs’ various onscreen entrances, refers to as ‘the elaborate ritual of the hole as tunnel’, in which ‘the panoramic gaze of the camera [...] prolongs our pleasure of expectation’.²⁵ Here, as in many Bugs cartoons, the suspense is broken with the bathetic image of the rabbit, visibly lost and oblivious to the action around him, wondering aloud whether he made the wrong turn at ‘Alber-koik-ee’. It is his genial obliviousness, a mark of his outsider status, which is his undoing, as he is accosted by the bull while asking the terrified toreador for directions. After a brief altercation, the bull catapults him from the arena (an extremely common occurrence in bullfighting cartoons), causing him to leave the space in as unconventional a manner as he entered it. In just over a minute of screen-time, Bugs twice transgresses the once-stringent established boundaries of the arena, foreshadowing his dismantlement of the rituals of the sport.



After being launched beyond its boundaries, Bugs eventually makes use of the arena’s formal entrance, and in doing so signals the beginning of his engagement with the ring as a performative space. Upon declaring, in mid-air, that ‘this means war’, the rabbit is evidently determined to take on the bull within the set parameters of the sport; he re-emerges from a large door marked ‘Cuadrillas’, dressed as a matador and with cape in hand, to the sound of a fanfare and audience cheers. Never mind that his observation of the formalities of bullfighting is short-lived (his cape conceals an anvil, that most archetypal of cartoon weapons, as the bull finds out to his cost); Bugs’ second entrance, deliberate and calculated, is a statement of his intent to subvert the role of the matador by inhabiting it. From the moment of his re-entry, the power balance has utterly shifted and, owing to the status of the arena as a performative space, it has done so in a way which privileges Bugs’ star qualities. In a performative space like the bullring, stardom equals power. The battle between the bull and the matador, and later, of course, Bugs, is a battle for control of the

²³ *Bulldozing the Bull* (1938); *For Whom the Bulls Toil* (1953); *The Timid Toreador* (1940).

²⁴ Telotte, p. 171.

²⁵ Eric Savoy, ‘The Signifying Rabbit’, *Narrative*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (May, 1995), 188-209. p. 196.

audience and of the arena; to be successful is to be cheered, and to fail is to be ejected from the space. To begin with, the bull enters with much cheering and fanfare, more than the matador is afforded, and claims victory when his cowardly opponent climbs over the side of the ring and into the crowd. Similarly, the bull's most embarrassing defeat comes when Bugs tricks him into running out of the arena and into the hills, and both Bugs and the bull are at various times sent crashing through the arena walls. Meanwhile, victory for either competitor is lauded with cheers and the throwing of flowers. The film tends to linger on these latter moments, giving the fighters time to bow and revel in the applause; Bugs even pauses to smell a flower, with a smug sigh of 'Ah, me public!'. It is clear that the adulation of the crowd is as coveted here as success in battle.

If stardom equals power, then, it stands to reason that the assets which have led to Bugs' cartoon stardom also lead to his victory in the ring, in a very literal way. As Paul Wells notes, cartoon characters are 'sustained in their status as signifiers, moving phenomena and symbolic ciphers for dominant and repeating characteristics', and therefore 'effectively become 'types' who must thereafter be adapted to the choreographies of their cartoons, and most explicitly so the case of sporting practices'.²⁶ However, when it comes to a sport – or perhaps, more appropriately, a spectacle – as focussed on ritual, narrative and aesthetics as bullfighting, only minimal 'adaptation' is required to transplant Bugs into the new scenario; his performance as a 'toon and his performance as a matador are inextricably entwined. The audience cheers each time he outwits the bull, and thus his cunning, wiles and charisma have very tangible benefits in and of themselves: in addition to allowing him to physically defeat his opponent, they also help him to win the crowd. His antics, while always in a sense a performance for the real-life viewers, are here simultaneously a performance directed towards the diegetic audience, and the two groups' reactions (theoretically) run parallel to one another. In this way, the bullring is the perfect venue for Bugs to display the attributes which make him a star, perhaps explaining why Chuck Jones might consider it to be 'the ultimate Bugs Bunny film'.²⁷



Bugs and the Bullfight: Masculinity and Morality

²⁶ Paul Wells, *Animation, Sport and Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 66.

²⁷ Jones, quoted in Hugh Kenner, *Chuck Jones: A Flurry of Drawings* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 55.

To return briefly to *Bully for Bugs'* use of the space of the bullring, it should go without saying that the frequent transgression of the arena's established boundaries is in defiance of the rituals of the art, a key premise of which is that the bull itself 'is physically contained, [...] unable to escape – something it might well want to do – and it is therefore forced to defend itself – something it does by attacking those who attempt to engage it'.²⁸ As Telotte notes, 'these repeated movements around, through, and outside the ring obviously send up the formal action of bullfighting, [at the same time] emphasizing the nature of the "set," the artifice of this reality'.²⁹ The bullfight is itself, in his words, 'a stylized performance of reality',³⁰ an artistic display with its own diegesis, narrative, and *dramatis personae*, which Bugs necessarily disrupts by the very fact of his presence. Just as when he inserts himself into the opera, the baseball game, and the gangster film,³¹ the highly ritualised conventions of the format are warped around his persona, finding themselves deconstructed by his mischievous influence, and reconstructed to accommodate his particular characteristics and narrative role. In this case, the main disruptive effects of his appearance are the subversion of the matador's role and the moral realignment of both bull and bullfighter.

With regards to the role of the matador, Bugs' subversive influence is felt even before he enters the film. Introduced in the centre of the ring and with an arch, pompous expression, the bullfighter's central traits are, it is suggested, a deft command of the cheering crowd and an earnest approach to his art, touching on arrogance. Jones claims that the character's appearance is inspired by iconic matador Juan Belmonte,³² but instead of confronting the bull with the deftness that that would imply, he flees in terror, and is reduced to a cowering wreck as the animal pursues him around the arena. The abrasive emasculation of the noble bullfighter, cast in the image of one of the art form's most famous stars, is the first shot fired in the battle between the integrity of the ritual and the pervasive burlesque of the Bugs cartoon. To add further insult, when the rabbit finally emerges, he doesn't seem to recognise the significance of his surroundings, refusing to acknowledge either the threat posed by the bull or the elevated status of the matador. He wanders through the arena obliviously, like the lost tourist he apparently is, referring to the terrified toreador as 'this gent in the fancy knickerbockers', and pausing not to help him but to ask him for directions to 'the Coachella Valley, and the big carrot festival therein'. This should be seen as an aggressive, rather than passive, act: by loudly ignoring the bullfighter's position and plight – and doing so in front of a baying crowd, no less – Bugs actively diminishes his status, effectively removing him from the star-centric ecosystem of the arena and precipitating the rabbit's assumption of his role.

²⁸ Garry Marvin, 'On Being Human in the Bullfight' in *The Animals Reader: The Essential Classic and Contemporary Writings*, ed. by Linda Kalof and Amy Fitzgerald (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2007), pp. 197-208 (p. 200).

²⁹ Telotte, p. 172.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ *What's Opera, Doc?* (1954); *Baseball Bugs* (1946); *Bugs and Thugs* (1954).

³² Jones, quoted in Furniss (ed.), p. 100.



Such 'role play' is one of Bugs' most common recourses in his effort to outwit his enemies, whether disguising himself as an attractive female to disarm his male opponents, or as something completely incongruous as part of a bizarre distraction. Often, as in this case, he adopts the appropriate iconography of the situation in which he has found himself in order to subvert its customs from within. Crucially, however, his star persona persists, and indeed this fluidity and adaptability is a key part of that persona itself. Sam Abel identifies this as an aspect of the rabbit's signature 'camp', noting that 'by slipping in and out of a variety of roles [...] Bugs becomes the critic, the rebel, at once in and out of the social norm. He manipulates identity as a weapon, defiant of the social expectation of identity stability'.³³ Here, he is both toreador and manic trickster, immersing himself in the customs of the bullfight but refusing to play by its rules. In contributing to the emasculation of the matador and subsequently not only inhabiting his role, but investing it with his trademark camp ebullience, Bugs ridicules the earnestness of the entire institution. Included in this is the dignity of the bull, who unlike the matador is afforded an exaggerated masculinity, and allowed to retain it for the duration of the conflict. Although he is introduced as a wild, thrashing animal with few overt signifiers of human gender, as the gleefully anthropomorphic Bugs emerges as his primary foe he too begins to take on human traits. Specifically, he displays the arrogance and showmanship of a champion boxer: he threatens the rabbit as much with his bulging biceps and clenched 'fists' as with his horns, and he celebrates victory by standing and bowing, sporting a smug expression. Though he clings to his dignity, masculinity and courage throughout the film, Bugs repeatedly degrades him by drawing him into his camp displays, engaging the dazed bull in a humiliating dance routine, and casually demeaning him with patronising slaps to the face. In addition to subjecting an ostensibly brave animal, the respected icon of the *corrida*, to extreme ridicule, these routines are thoroughly disruptive of the established ritual of the sport. Not once does Bugs exhibit any recognisable bullfighting techniques, instead queering and otherwise subverting the institution of bullfighting each time he breaks into dance, utilises inappropriate weaponry, or shifts into an incongruous outfit, such as the comically large sombrero he adopts midway through the fight. Indeed, Abel writes that for Bugs, particularly in his more 'camp' iterations, 'triumph results from a complete usurpation of power';³⁴ central to Bugs' persona as a star is the systematic deconstruction of the institutions which he finds himself faced with. Although his entrance into the ring may have been an accident, the emasculation and usurpation of the matador, the humiliation of the bull, and

³³ Sam Abel, 'The Rabbit In Drag: Camp and Gender Construction in the American Animated Cartoon', *Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 29, issue 3, 1995, 183-202 (p. 193).

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

the consistent disregard of the rules and boundaries of the fight are very deliberate steps toward this goal.



Bugs and Warner Bros. further disrupt the bullfighting tradition by complicating – or uncomplicating – its moral configuration, restructuring the conflict between bull and matador to fit the standard template of a Bugs short. In a real bullfight, while the bull is absolutely aggressive and dangerous, the audience is always on some level aware that it has been trained for the purpose of the fight, and that the actions of the toreadors are often designed to agitate it. Thus, the question of who is the ultimate aggressor in this situation is a complex one, if not irrelevant to many of the performance’s spectators. Chuck Jones himself elucidates this complexity when recalling a research trip to a Mexican bullfight:

I went down here prepared to defend the bull, until I saw this matador standing out there all by himself, he’s about 5 ft. 5, and maybe weighed 125 lbs, and this thing opened up and this 3,000 lbs animal came charging out [...] It had these spikes sticking out, razor sharp, and I thought ‘wait just a minute!’³⁵

In reducing the bull to a cartoon character, with no life beyond the frame and an undeniable essential aggression, *Bully for Bugs* effectively ‘flattens’ this complicated moral structure. The bull is literally a two-dimensional character, and his arrogance and rage place him in line with such classic Bugs rogues as Yosemite Sam and the Tasmanian Devil. Bugs specialises in turning the tables on these kinds of foes: Savoy distils the ‘basic paradigm’ of all the rabbit’s cartoons to ‘the intervention of wily trickstering in the obsessive, blindly destructive, desire of his opponents’,³⁶ and an equally recurrent aspect of the Bugs’ typical narrative, as developed by Chuck Jones,³⁷ is that he never initiates the conflict himself, only declaring ‘war’ once he has been sufficiently provoked. The bull is unambiguously the chief aggressor here, with Bugs responding in kind. The casting of Bugs, as initially innocent as ever, in the role of the matador, with the bull as one of his typically aggressive and overconfident adversaries, drastically simplifies the complicated real-world relationship between the two parties, and with it their relative moral standing, as it reshapes them to accommodate Bugs’ star persona and its attendant stock narrative.

³⁵ Chuck Jones, interviewed by Michael Barrier in the commentary for *Bully for Bugs* on the *Looney Tunes Golden Collection Vol. 1* DVD (2003).

³⁶ Savoy, p. 196.

³⁷ Jones, quoted in Furniss (ed.), pp. 49-50.

There is an argument to be made that the conflict in this particular short is more nuanced than it appears, and somewhat more ambiguous than the average bout between Bugs and, say, Yosemite Sam. After all, the rabbit technically strikes the first blow here, striking the bull with a light slap to stop it 'steaming up [his] tail'. More generally, Abel also argues that despite Jones' claim that 'he always begins his Bugs cartoons with the central character minding his own business [...] Bugs's "innocent" behaviour is often fundamentally subversive',³⁸ and while we have seen earlier in this article that this is indeed the case, the two are far from mutually exclusive. Enough focus is placed on the accidental nature of Bugs' arrival and his passive stroll through the ring, as well as the bull's violent attack and the customary declaration that 'this means war', that the subsequent complete travesty of bullfighting as an institution is framed purely as a response to a perceived injustice. Although 'innocence' may be the wrong word, given the glee with which Bugs torments his opponent, this framing preserves his essential morality, and with it his likability. Several other factors serve to compensate for this apparent ambiguity in Bugs' motives. Firstly, Jones seems to be working extra hard here to establish the bull as a viable threat. In addition to its dramatic entrance and the matador's terrified response, the bull manages to inflict, as Telotte puts it, 'an unusual number of lumps' upon Bugs,³⁹ who loses as many 'rounds' as he wins. Jones attributes this to his understanding of the importance of empathy in comedy and the need 'to understand either side', observing: 'That's why *Bully for Bugs* was a particularly good Bugs Bunny, because the losses were equally shared. Bugs had almost as many problems as the bull did'.⁴⁰ The rabbit, who has elsewhere remained calm in the face of vampires, alien invaders, and the business end of a rifle, even seems genuinely frightened for his life as he is pursued by the bull, now endowed with the ability to fire bullets from his horns following a trap gone awry. Further, the fact that the bull is not only drawn but also caricatured and to a degree anthropomorphised creates a potential 'buffer' for Anglophone audiences who may find real bullfights distasteful; as Hugh Kenner points out, 'if we don't think of a bull the cartoon gets trivial, whereas thinking of a beast in pain expels us from the cartoon world. But that is not a beast, therefore not in pain; it's a wondrous arrangement of lines and color and movement'.⁴¹ This view neatly summarises the 'flattening' approach *Bully* takes to the ambiguities of the art form it co-opts for its comedy. Watching a real bullfight one may make the decision, as Jones initially did, to sympathise with or support the bull, or at least to acknowledge the moral complexities and debates surrounding the institution. *Bully for Bugs*, as a cartoon, though, and, more specifically, as a *Bugs Bunny* cartoon, cannot allow for any other reading without compromising the established persona of its star.

³⁸ Abel, p. 192.

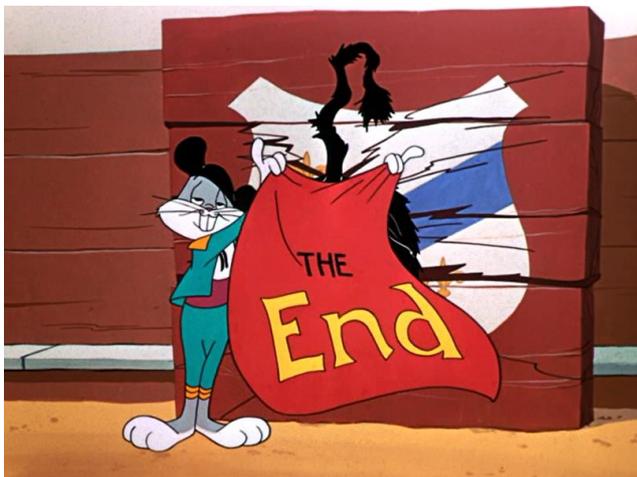
³⁹ Telotte, p. 172.

⁴⁰ Jones, quoted in Furniss (ed.), p. 51.

⁴¹ Kenner, p. 33.



The cartoon depicts the battle between Bugs and the bull, but it is also the site of a conflict between two highly ritualised cultural forms: the bullfight itself, and the Bugs Bunny cartoon, a formulaic narrative built around the persona of its star. Crucial to this formula, however, is Bugs' success, and as such he is granted both the moral high-ground and victory over his enemy. Because his victory must be predicated on the ridicule of his opponents and the subversion of cultural conventions, it necessitates the almost complete dismantlement of the bullfight, with the defeat of the bull being the only point where the Bugs Bunny cartoon and bullfighting narrative converge. In the performative space of the arena, victory is also inextricable from stardom, and so the audience cheer and reward Bugs for his mockery of the art form they have turned out to see. Faced with a baying crowd, Bugs enacts his cartoon star persona, and the bullfight has no choice but to buckle beneath it. The rabbit's control over both the arena and the cartoon is made explicit upon his victory, when he commands the film to finish simply by holding out a cape emblazoned with 'THE END'. The rules of bullfighting, cinema and reality are meaningless to a character whose refusal to conform is his defining trait.



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