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Making it Disney's *Snow White*

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Since the 1930s, the name – the word – 'Disney' has become rather more than just the name of a studio or of the brothers who founded it. 'Disney' can be invoked (and often is) as an adjective – largely as a catch-all, generic term – that implies a particular kind of cuteness and innocence, one that its detractors might prefer to describe as a 'saccharine' quality that highlights the sentimental falseness of a Disney entertainment product, but which is undeniably popular with large portions of the public. For many animation fans and scholars, 'Disney' denotes top-quality animation and might even be used to describe and compliment (in its adjectival form, 'Disneyesque') a non-Disney animated film that is of a particularly high visual and/or narrative standard. The sum of these two ideas, then, is that Disney is habitually used as both a compliment *and* as an insult, depending on how and to what it is applied. But historically, and especially for those working in the US animation industry, it has meant a very specific – and yet oddly difficult to pin down – approach to filmmaking that is so recognizable, some even speak of it as if it were a genre, despite numerous changes and evolutions in Disney's look, style and subject matter throughout its history. In looking at Disney's first animated feature-length film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (David Hand, 1937), the goal of this chapter is to attempt to locate what it is that we mean when we talk about its 'Disney' qualities. How is Disney's interpretation of the ancient folk tale of 'Little Snow White' uniquely *Disney*? What is the trait, or pattern, or technique, or technology, or 'magic touch' – or, perhaps, the ratios for each of these – that identifies *Snow White* as a product specifically of Walt Disney Productions other than its title card? This chapter may attempt to answer these questions, but it is unlikely to do so. After all, critical accounts of the history of the American animation industry reveal that multiple individuals at multiple

studios have sought, at one time or another, to capture a bit of that Disney magic for their own films, hiring Disney animators and borrowing Disney production techniques, only to find that their effort to emulate Disney had not succeeded.[1] Having celebrated *Snow White*'s eightieth anniversary in December 2017, the 'Disney factor' (not unlike the so-called 'It factor') that makes Disney's *Snow White* a uniquely 'Disney' film is still a struggle to determine – I doubt very much that I have succeeded in doing so in this chapter – but the discussion is nonetheless an important one, and hopefully will contribute in some way, big or small, towards determining what we mean, ultimately, when we describe something as being 'Disney'. In my attempt to uncover what the 'Disney factor' is, I have decided to identify Disney in terms of its themes/narratives, its aesthetics (both artistically and industrially/technologically, as each of these informs the other, particularly at the studio during the 1930s) and how, in an ideological sense, Disney has always walked a narrow path between Modernity and Nostalgia – two competing ideas that Disney has long vied between, and which (I argue) it combines in such a way as to create a popular and successful brand identity out of the tensions that lie between these two opposing concepts.[2]

Is it subject matter and/or narrative and/or character development?

Walt Disney presented movie audiences with adaptations of folklore, mythology, fables and fairy tales almost from the very beginning of his career as a filmmaker. We see this in the Laugh-O-Gram 'Jazz Age Fables' of 1922 (among them, 'Cinderella', 'Puss in Boots' and 'The Four Musicians of Bremen'), and we see it in particular a decade later in the *Silly Symphonies* series that ran from 1929 to 1939 and which depicted such traditional stories as *Mother Goose Melodies* (Burt Gillett, 1931), *King Neptune* (Burt Gillett, 1932), *Three Little Pigs* (Burt Gillett, 1933), *Father Noah's Ark* (Wilfred Jackson, 1933), *The Pied Piper* (Wilfred Jackson, 1933), *The Goddess of Spring* (Wilfred Jackson, 1934), *The Grasshopper and the Ants* (Wilfred Jackson, 1934) and *The Wise Little Hen* (Wilfred Jackson, 1934). Of the seventy-five or so *Silly Symphonies* made during this ten-year period, at least twenty-nine are based on traditional tales of one type or another. It is clear (and well documented) that the *Silly Symphonies* served the Disney studio in part as training ground that led to *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, both visually and narratively; how Disney told a story – how the studio structured a narrative – was devised over the course of the *Silly Symphony* series, and the basic structures of story and character development found in the *Silly Symphonies* are likewise found in Disney's early narrative-based features, especially *Snow White*, *Pinocchio* (Ben Sharpsteen and Hamilton Luske, 1940), *Dumbo* (Ben Sharpsteen, 1941) and *Bambi* (David Hand, 1942).

This approach to character development is discussed by Russell Merritt and J.B. Kaufman in their book *Walt Disney's Silly Symphonies*, as they link the eponymous child characters of *Pinocchio* and *Dumbo* to such *Silly Symphony* characters as the leads in *Elmer Elephant* (Wilfred Jackson, 1936), *Ferdinand the Bull* (Dick Rickard, 1938) and both versions of *The Ugly Duckling* (released in 1931 and 1939) when 'the child "proves" himself by becoming a rescuer or an avenger'.[3] Ultimately, or at least by their narrative's end, these are characters who (to slightly paraphrase Merritt and Kaufman, and to borrow a bit from Billy Joel) like themselves just the way they are, even if they began their narratives feeling either out of step with their peers or unsure of their own worth (except for Ferdinand, of course, who was always happy to sit just quietly and smell the flowers). For these films, both shorts and feature length, characters spend their narratives engaging in some activity/solving some crisis that helps them and/or those around them to realize their own strengths and worth, and thereby develops the character's personality in service of emotional realism. This idea is further supported by comments made by Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston in their seminal work *The Illusion of Life* (1981). Here, they note how Disney's thoughts about story underwent a fundamental change during the production of *Snow White*:

> Prior to 1935, [Walt's] storymen had been trained to look for the fresh, the unexpected, the different, and to think in terms of caricature and exaggeration – which they interpreted as meaning bizarre, wild, and impossible. The more outlandish, the better they liked it. To them, anything real or sincere meant 'straight' and automatically would be dull. Now [by 1935, during *Snow White*'s pre-production phase], since the animators could do so much more, Walt had to pull his storymen back and teach them new values of warmth and believability. He still wanted fresh situations and funny predicaments, but he also wanted his characters to achieve maximum identity with the audience.[4]

This is enormously significant and shows one of the key characteristics that set Disney apart from its competition. Whereas many animation studios in the 1910s–1930s (such as Bray, Terry and Fleischer) favoured rather looser structures when it came to story, plot and the actual craft of animation, Disney as a studio very quickly became more concerned with story development than was to be seen elsewhere in the animation industry. Though narrative had always been important at Disney, this further tightening and compartmentalizing of the animation process as a whole becomes apparent with the formation of a defined Ink and Paint department (created by Hazel Sewell in 1927). Later in 1932, a distinct Story department further emerged at Disney thanks in part to the work of Ted Sears and Web Smith, whose roles as gag men eventually became more defined once they claimed a permanent office, rather than relying on

finding temporary/occasional space in various music rooms.[5] This emphasis on story was significant, as seen in the quotes above, when it came to how Disney thought about animated film production as a whole. Improving the quality of their stories – which inherently meant improving their approaches to character development, as character development is central to how Classical Paradigm narrative structure functions – meant that Walt and his animators saw an increasing need to improve their skills as artists in order to allow the images on screen to carry the narrative and depict believable characters. Increasingly in the early 1930s, what we can see from an examination of the *Sillies* is the growing conviction that 'believable' meant a combination of both how a character looked and also – or, perhaps, more importantly – how a character *felt* to the audience. Certainly, when it came to the story, narrative and character development for their version of *Snow White*, Disney went to unprecedented lengths to get everything right. This is documented not least by the ongoing Story Conference meetings that took place throughout *Snow White*'s production, which continued well into 1937 and which constantly examined and re-examined every aspect of the story so that it was as focused as possible. This has been discussed extensively in Johnston and Thomas's *The Illusion of Life* (1981), Michael Barrier's *Hollywood Cartoons* (1999) and Kaufman's *The Fairest One of All* (2012). The upshot is that Disney's story department strove to create a lean, simple narrative that was rich in understated emotion. As Walt himself put it during a Story Conference meeting for *Snow White* on 22 December 1936,

> In our version … we follow the story very closely. We have put in certain twists to make it more logical, more convincing, and easy to swallow. We have taken the characters and haven't added any. The only thing we have built onto the story is the animals who are friends of Snow White. … We have developed a personality in the mirror and comic personalities for the dwarfs.[6]

This is a kind of *emotional* realism that is even more significant, ultimately, than the strides being made towards a form of visual realism at Disney during this period. The realism of emotion can be attributed largely to the character and narrative development Disney was engaging with at least as much – I would argue more – than the visual realism Disney was beginning to incorporate by the early 1930s.

But … saying that, is it the style of visual realism that Disney developed?

It is stating the obvious to say that, visually, Disney's animation changed extensively over the course of the 1930s. The animation produced at the end

of the decade was so radically different that it might well have come from another studio entirely. Though there are many potential ways to illustrate this argument, I think the best approach is to compare the two adaptations of 'The Ugly Duckling' that were produced for the *Silly Symphonies*: the first was released in 1931 (and directed by Wilfred Jackson), the other in 1939 (directed by Jack Cutting and Clyde Geronimi). The 1931 version was made before Disney's approach to animation production begins to differ (at least to any great degree) from that of its competitors. The 1939 version – coming as it does at the end of a decade which saw Disney's animation production methods depart from those of both its competitors and itself at the start of the period – is the work of a group of artists and technicians who approach animation differently in every possible way and shows how shorts production had likewise benefitted from the many advances made in the service of producing *Snow White*. This is the only instance where we see the Disney studio producing a remake of one of its earlier animated films and so makes the perfect case study for discussing Disney's revolution in visual realism. This can likewise be said of its narrative realism and emotional realism. Ultimately, it is artificial to separate these aspects of the films, but it is useful as part of our discussion of what makes Disney – and *Snow White* – *Disney* if we look at these aspects separately as well as together. The 1931 short, among other things, is black and white, with a very flatland aesthetic. There is the kind of classical use of plasticity (for instance, rubber-hosing) that characterizes most American animation in the 1920s and 1930s (though this will begin to fade from Disney animation during the early 1930s). The setting is a Midwestern barnyard; we can assume it is the Midwest given the fact that a tornado arrives to give us various visual gags and to give the Ugly Duckling and his would-be adoptive family, a small flock of chickens, the necessary crisis that allows the Ugly Duckling (who, in this version, is literally a duckling) to become the hero and win his family's affection. The 1931 short's narrative ultimately bears only passing resemblance to Andersen's 1843 tale; this story is played largely for laughs, and though the Ugly Duckling is generally a sympathetic character, the audience are never really invited to invest in him emotionally. By the time the 1939 remake was released, however, we get a cartoon so different that the only things they have in common are their title and their mutual association with the *Silly Symphony* series (Figure 5.1). In the later short, we have a sophisticated use of Technicolor on display; though the multi-plane camera is not utilized, the imagery is nonetheless rich, with a greater illusion of depth and complexity – not to mention beauty and artistry – than was employed in the 1931 short. The main character – who this time is an actual cygnet – has a far more expressive face, and faces a journey that is characterized with enough trauma, rejection and heartache that, far from simply laughing at the character's mishaps, we are also moved to feel his pain and disappointment. This is so that, when a mother swan and her cygnets arrive and adopt him into their bevy, the mother's embrace of the orphan is sufficiently emotionally

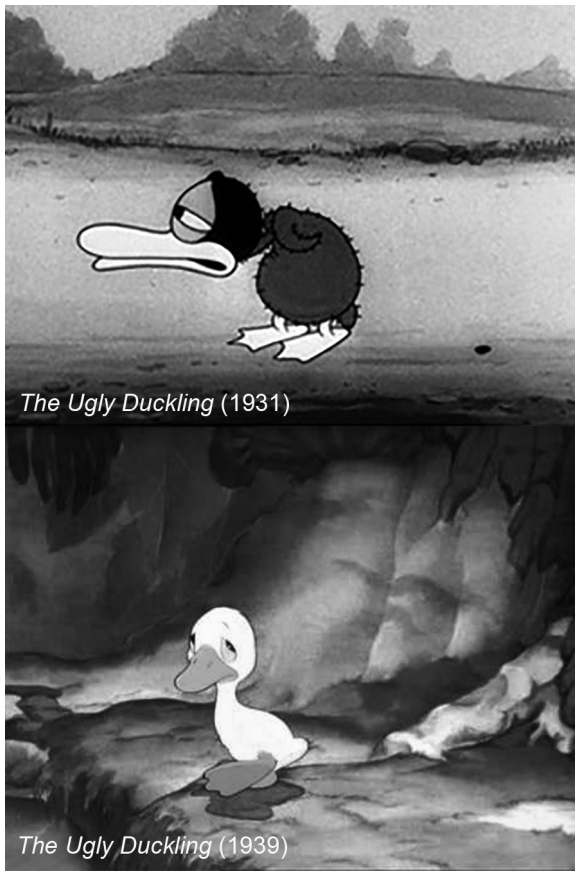

FIGURE 5.1 Comparison of *The Ugly Duckling* (Wilfred Jackson, 1931) and *The Ugly Duckling* (Jack Cutting and Clyde Geronimi, 1939).

heightened as to move the audience (a reaction likewise emphasized by the music). Though Disney placed enormous emphasis on the story and characters, Walt and his artists certainly believed that, for a full emotional impact, the visual realism of their films was hugely important.

Disney's commitment as a studio to improving the artistry of animation is most visible when looking not just at how Disney focused on honing its animation but also by examining how Disney's competition demonstrated no real interest in their animators' skills nor in the beauty or narrative complexity of their films. One way of thinking about what makes Disney unique is to think about their competitors and how the studio's approach to its work differed from that of the other studios. In the 1930s, this means looking primarily at the Fleischer studio. Max Fleischer began working in

the animation industry when he was hired by Bray sometime around 1917, but soon formed his own studio (along with his brother, Dave Fleischer) in 1921.[7] Over the course of the 1920s and 1930s, the Fleischer studio produced several successful series (including Koko the Clown shorts/*Out of the Inkwell* series, the *Betty Boop* series and the *Popeye* series). Although Max Fleischer would invent a number of new technologies/animation processes (to include the Rotoscope, patented in 1917, and the Setback, patented in 1933), there was no interest at Fleischer in moving beyond the kind of rubber-hose character animation typical of the era. Indeed, in contrast to Disney, those overseeing the studio's animation production were more likely to discourage staff from pursuing further training and artistic innovation than they were to encourage (let alone incorporate) innovation. As one former Fleischer employee remembered it,

> Those people who were quite content with the raw, peasant humor, the bad drawing, the kind of not-too-thought-out timing, and the simpleminded stories … that bunch stayed [at Fleischer]. The more adventurous, who wanted to learn to do a better movie, left. Every one of them. Nobody stayed who had that urge, because there was no way to make such a picture in New York.[8]

Even by the mid-1930s, as Barrier notes,

> For all that the Fleischers emphasized a sort of cartoon engineering on the screen, they were reluctant to embrace advances that were more than just mechanical. For instance, they did not allow animating on twos until sometime after 1935, even though Disney's [*sic*] and other studios had long since realized that the uniform projection speed that came with sound meant that many scenes could be animated on twos without risking jerkiness on the screen.[9]

This is not to imply that Fleischer was interested in new devices/technologies more so than Disney. Disney, too, adopted and implemented numerous technological devices intended to enhance its films' visual impact, including its adoption of emerging sound technology in 1928, the then-new 3-strip Technicolor (which it began using in 1932 in a three-year exclusive deal with Technicolor, debuting with its short *Flowers and Trees* (Burt Gillett, 1932) that same year) and its refinement and use of the multi-plane camera beginning in 1937 (which debuted in its Oscar-winning short *The Old Mill* [Wilfred Jackson, 1937]). In addition to the differences in production approaches and priorities between Disney and Fleischer, there are further contrasts: the settings of Disney tend to be rural or suburban, whereas Fleischer tends to favour more urban settings. The ways that characters are structured, as well as the kinds of characters chosen, are likewise very different. Whereas

Disney tended to rely primarily on anthropomorphized animal characters, Fleischer's stars were human: Koko the Clown, then Betty Boop, then Popeye.[10] Furthermore, most Fleischer character designs tend to be cartoony/caricature in nature, without any evidence that they were interested in the kind of 'Realism' that came to characterize Disney during this period. Max Fleischer started out in animation thanks to his inventing the Rotoscope (certainly Koko was a rotoscoped character in his earlier/solo years), and he eventually embraced a more Disney-esque style of animation beginning with the feature film *Gulliver's Travels* (Dave Fleischer, 1939). By the time *Gulliver's Travels* was released, its form of visual realism seems to evoke the Disney style of animation, particularly in the designs for Princess Glory and Prince David, designed and animated by Grim Natwick, who was hired (from Iwerks' studio, to which he'd been enticed from Fleischer) to work on *Snow White* before being lured back to Fleischer to work on *Gulliver's Travels*.

Ultimately, however, the thing that most separates Disney and Fleischer at this time was the freedom – or lack thereof – as well as the respect that each gave to their animators and artists, particularly when it came to allowing animators to work on their skills and not only maintain but also continuously improve their animation. Charles Solomon notes that

> Most studios [during the 1930s] required animators to produce about thirty feet (or about 20 seconds of screen time) per week. At Disney, the footage requirements were much lower, and Walt paid bonuses for exceptional animation. Natwick recalls getting a $600 bonus for his work on 'Alpine Climbers' (1936); [Art] Babbitt received $1,500 for his animation on the title character in 'The Country Cousin' (1936).[11]

This is in marked contrast to the restrictions placed on innovation and improvement at Fleischer. Barrier quotes a lower-ranking animator at the studio, Ed Rehberg, who described Fleischer director Seymour Kneitel as having 'a stock formula for walks and runs, and you either did it his way or it was wrong. There was never any experimenting. He'd say, "You're stupid if you do it that way. Don't you have any more sense than that?" He was that crude.'[12] By comparison, Walt Disney's support – both moral and remunerative – for experimentation made Disney's staff want to push themselves in ways that made them both artistically and technically capable of producing a film as complex and demanding as *Snow White*. Fleischer (and Iwerks) studio alumnus Natwick, who came to work at Disney beginning in late 1934 and was part of the team working on *Snow White*, would paint a very different picture of working at Disney than the situation he had experienced at his previous studios. In a 1988 interview where, in part, he talked about his experience of *Snow White*, Natwick described the early-stage work on the animation for the film:

> The first scene Walt gave us, he said, 'Take a whole month on this one scene. Just [take your time]. Everything you find that doesn't work tell us and we'll change it.' … He [Walt] gave us a whole month, and we didn't ever have to submit one inch of animation to go into the picture. We could work them over or do anything we wanted to.[13]

Barrier's research on Fleischer studio working practices supports this: 'What had become central to Disney animation by the late thirties, the exploration of character through animation, was incidental at best in the Fleischer scheme of things because of the threat it posed to the steady flow of production.'[14] Later in the 1930s, when Fleischer, in the midst of production on its first feature, *Gulliver's Travels*, had on its payroll animators who had worked at Disney (such as Natwick), the studio still seems to have incorporated Disney's production techniques only in a half-hearted way, which demonstrates Fleischer's failure to understand either the usefulness of these techniques or the notions that lay behind them. In short, it shows a lack of genuine commitment to improving animation as a cinematic art form and is the reason why, ultimately, *Gulliver's Travels* is inferior to *Snow White* both visually and – most crucially, I would argue – narratively.

Behind all of this is the greater willingness to spend time on the pre-production planning that narratives enjoyed at Disney, a fact which was crucial to *Snow White* in both its pre-production and production phases. Barrier, in his discussion of Disney during the early 1930s, quotes Ben Sharpsteen's descriptions of when he first joined the Disney staff, saying that 'Working at Disney's "was just a complete reversal" of his New York experience.' Sharpsteen noted that 'This business of planning and having exposure sheets that spelled out to the very drawing, that was entirely new. And the synchronization of sound.'[15] Barrier goes on to note that, as early as 1930, Walt was making a point of hiring people (some of them Fleischer studio alumni such as Ted Sears) who were known for their strong story ideas and skill in shaping narratives for animation. Likewise, the practice of using what they called 'pencil tests', where rough animation was photographed onto film and the negative film then played to check over the animator's progress on a particular movement or sequence, was likewise instrumental, according to Barrier, in giving the animators a method through which they could, via trial and error, find ways of rendering more complex movements. In his discussion of the work for the short *Just Dogs* (Burt Gillett, 1932), for example, Barrier discusses how these pencil tests allowed for much more complex movement – movement which carried with it a stronger feeling of realism – than could be seen previously. He argued that:

> *Just Dogs* was the first Disney cartoon to benefit from advances in animation and drawing of exactly the kind that could be expected to flow from the use of rough pencil tests. … [Norm] Ferguson's earlier

> animation, although more lifelike than the animation that proceeded it, did not invite direct comparison with real life; the animation in *Just Dogs* did.[16]

Another lower-ranked animator at Fleischer, Bob Bemiller, had no recollection, according to Barrier, of Disney-style 'pencil tests', for example, becoming anything like standard practice at Fleischer: 'If you had some kind of an action that you weren't sure about, they'd let you make a test on it.'[17] The implication is that such techniques, used for problem solving rather than general improvement, refinement and innovation, were deemed to be largely superfluous to standard production methods. Likewise, general attitudes towards their work seem to have stood in marked contrast. In his 1988 interview with David Johnson, Natwick talks about a tour of the Hyperion studio Walt gave him in 1934 just before Natwick joined the Disney studio (by this stage, Natwick had been working at Ub Iwerks' studio since 1932, having been enticed there from Fleischer with the promise of more money):

> [Walt] stopped in on a couple of animators and showed me what they were doing – working on Mickey – particularly an animator who finished his work beautifully. I was always kind of a slapstick man. I liked to rough things out quickly and roughly. But this guy was a brilliant clean-up man [Dick Huemer]. … I thought: 'Christ, if I have to draw like this …' I'd been knocking out Flip the Frog and stretching him and flattening him out and doing things with him but, golly, it pretty near scared me, actually. But I thought I would risk it.[18]

These descriptions of the contrasts between Disney and Fleischer (and even between Disney and Iwerks' studio, from what Natwick implies was tolerated there) illustrate clearly that, beyond the training that came to characterize Disney thanks to the classes run by Don Graham and Phil Dike beginning in late 1932, the Disney studio gave much greater freedom – and much greater respect – to its artists than could be found elsewhere. This respect, as is supported by many accounts of the studio in this period, led its employees to work even harder and strive for newer, better techniques and approaches to all aspects of their film production methods, from story, to character animation, effects animation (which evolved as a separate specialization at Disney during this period), to the creation and/or modification of various forms of animation and film technologies (such as sound/music, colour and the camera equipment used to photograph the cels). This attitude pushed Disney forward and, in contrast, is what made its competitors look increasingly behind the times when it came to the look and feel of their films. Disney's visual style in the 1930s took on a very distinctive look and feel. This happened as a result of the work on *Snow White*, coupled with Walt's willingness to allow his artists to experiment,

to take their time and to improve their abilities as animators, as storytellers and how they incorporated sound, voice and music.

Or … is it how Disney combines the tensions between Modernity and Nostalgia?

'Disney' has often been understood as the perfect blend of Nostalgia and Modernity. Certainly, this element of Disney's cultural identity has been discussed by Richard deCordova in his essay 'The Mickey in Macy's Window' in relation to the popularity of Mickey Mouse.[19] It is not difficult to see these two seemingly opposite qualities embodied in the visuals of *Snow White*. Indeed, the very contrast between the ancientness of the story itself and the Art Deco aspects of the visuals is one site where Modernity and Nostalgia cross paths in Disney animation of the 1930s. After all, what we get with *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* is an ancient story being told in the form of an animated film, which is itself very much a modernist medium (especially in the 1930s). Even in its more mainstream incarnations, Animation is in fact a surrealist art form, and the most familiar of animated shorts and films can deal heavily in fantastic, surrealist qualities. Yet this Modernity (or the Modernist aspect to *Snow White*) is undercut by a number of devices employed by the film: it begins (following the opening credits) with a shot of a (live-action) book, which opens to reveal (and thereby ushers in what functions as) an opening title sequence for the film, written in a calligraphic-style print meant to echo a medieval illuminated manuscript. The text itself sounds very much like a classic story book, beginning with 'Once upon a time, there lived a lovely little Princess named Snow White.' We even get a page turning so that, as the overture music ends and the screen fades to black before the animation begins, we in a sense are entering into a storybook. Also, the text in these pages already hints at the story's moralistic elements (an idea typically associated with the fairy tale), particularly as regards the 'vain and wicked Stepmother the Queen' and the jealousy of Snow White's beauty that leads her to dress 'the little Princess in rags and force … her to work as a Scullery Maid'. In other words, the structure of the film, right from its opening shots, strives to bring a very traditional feel to the story. Once the animation begins, the levels of artistry and detail in the animation have the feel of storybook illustrations coming to life. The first two scenes of the film are of what we have just read in the 'storybook' pages that introduce the film's narrative to the audience. In other words, *Snow White* may be a Modernist technological and artistic achievement for the Disney staff in 1937, but its formal elements give it the feel of traditional storybooks as well as traditional tales, complete with the

moralistic and didactic elements considered essential to the fairy tale since at least the nineteenth century.

Another way that Modernity and Nostalgia function together in *Snow White* is the contrast in the discourse on the innovative technologies and modern entertainment surrounding the film (and Disney animation as a whole in the 1930s) with the ways that Disney films of the period echo what were, by this time, traditional elements of childhood toys and children's book illustrations. As deCordova noted in his discussion of the merchandising of Mickey Mouse in the early 1930s, the linking of animals and childhood – so key to much of the merchandising that surrounds Disney shorts (and *Snow White*) in this period – goes back to the Romantic era and is part of a rejection of the sociocultural changes brought on by the Industrial Revolution. This idea – and its linking of childhood innocence with nature/animals – is an 'ideology implicit in the iconography of toys, an iconography shared by animation'.[20] Merritt and Kaufman likewise note the many similarities in the colour *Silly Symphonies* with the colour illustrations of the American children's book artist Harrison Cady.[21] While a reliance on anthropomorphic animal characters is an important part of animation in the 1920s and 1930s and happens for all sorts of reasons, it is nonetheless important to stress that, even though *Snow White* was significant as an early animated film attempting to depict 'realistic' (as opposed to 'cartoony' or caricatured) human figures, animal characters are to be found throughout the film despite the fact that they are nonessential to the film's plot. True, the animals do help Snow White to find the Dwarfs' cottage, and later they alert the Dwarfs when the Wicked Queen arrives at the cottage and gives Snow White the poisoned apple, but other ways to do this could have been found. I argue that, regardless of whether or not those involved in *Snow White*'s production thought about it consciously, the fact remains that the presence of the cute bunnies, birds, deer, racoons, chipmunks and turtles (among others) serves to highlight Snow White's innocence while simultaneously undercutting the (for the time) heightened use of technological and artistic innovation that characterize the production of *Snow White*.

Yet Snow White's innocence was itself a contentious point during the film's production. In the Grimms' version of this very ancient tale, Snow White is very young – hardly more than a child – yet by the end of the tale, after some time (how much time, one can speculate) has passed, she marries the prince. Naturally, by the 1930s, making Snow White of a plausible age to marry meant that the character needed to begin the story as at least a teenager. It is important to bear in mind that a young woman still in her late teens being married was acceptable during the 1920s and 1930s; according to US census figures, the median age for women to marry in 1930 was 21.3, which indicates that many women would have married at ages 17 to 19.[22] In his book *The Fairest One of All* (2012), Kaufman discusses the contradictions inherent in Snow White as a character, in particular the so-called 'Girl/

Woman' tensions she possesses. As Kaufman notes, these tensions can be found in various aspects of the character, most prominently in her visual depictions – as animated by Hamilton Luske and Natwick – and in her voice, particularly when the childlike voice performed by Adriana Caselotti is singing about Snow White's longing for her prince. Kaufman discusses this at some length, arguing that whereas Luske's animation – which Walt favoured overall – depicted a more childlike character, Natwick's animation gives us a more womanly, comparatively mature figure. Though Kaufman ties this with the idea of the Girl/Woman character type so popular in the 1920s (as can be seen in performances by actresses such as Mary Pickford and Marguerite Clark, who played the role of Snow White in the 1916 live-action film directed by J. Searle Dawley for Paramount), he claims that the popularity of this character type had largely faded by the 1930s.[23] Though Kaufman concludes his discussion by stating (without supporting evidence) that Disney's Snow White retained this Girl/Woman dichotomy because Margaurite Clark's performance had made this 'an inextricable part of Snow White's cultural legacy', I would argue that there are potentially other factors at work here.[24]

Walt Disney wanted his studio's film to stick to the basics of the Grimms' version of 'Snow White' as much as possible, and no doubt this desire played an important role in shaping Show White as a character. But Kaufman's claim that the Girl/Woman character had largely faded by the 1930s is problematic given the popularity of such actresses as Shirley Temple, Judy Garland and Deanna Durbin. Durbin was even considered at one stage to voice Snow White, though ultimately she was rejected because her voice was deemed to be 'too mature'.[25] But more importantly, the Girl/Woman functions in many respects as a sanitized version of the Madonna/Whore dichotomy, an ancient idea of womanhood found throughout culture, including Hollywood cinema. Indeed, one might point out that, by the late 1930s, the Girl/Woman and the Madonna/Whore were everywhere in cinema, and Disney was no exception in incorporating such a depiction of Womanhood. Snow White and the Queen replicate the Madonna/Whore, and the sexual innocence that can be part of some versions of the Madonna is suitably expressed by the ever-popular Girl/Woman type. By invoking these archetypes in ways that so obviously reference popular Hollywood stars of the period, Disney once more plays out the tensions between the modern – the New Woman, the Emancipated Woman and the Twentieth Century's version of the Girl/Woman – and the ancient Madonna/Whore and (in the evil Queen) the Femme Fatale.

Ultimately, this balancing act between Modernity and Nostalgia in all its forms – the cultural, the technological, the narrative and the archetypal – has come to characterize many of Disney's cultural products throughout the studio's history, beginning with the juxtaposition of a child's dreams with modern technology in the *Alice Comedies* (1923–7), through the rise

of Mickey Mouse and his crew, the favouring of folklore and fairy tales in cinematic forms, up to and including its theme parks beginning in 1955 with the opening of Disneyland. After all, the theme park concept was well positioned by the mid-1950s to take up the mantle of modernity in entertainment just as cinema generally – and animation specifically – had begun to lose its feeling of newness as more and more people had no memory of a time before the existence of cinema. As Dorene Koehler notes in describing how the Disney parks appeal to their audience, '[Disney] balances itself on the tightrope that is the tension between tradition and invention.'[26] The same can be said of television and Disney's engagement with it as a modern technology that allowed the studio to bring audiences, in its first television special (*One Hour in Wonderland*, broadcast on NBC on Christmas Day, 1950), reminders of *Snow White* and glimpses of *Alice in Wonderland* (Clyde Geronimi, Wilfred Jackson and Hamilton Luske, 1951), the studio's animated version of the beloved Victorian novel, via what was at the time the latest in entertainment technology: broadcast television. We still see it in the theme parks (in the forms of entertainments utilized if not in the concept of the theme park itself, now well over half a century old), but we likewise see these same ideas at work in Disney's more contemporary films, its acquiring of such franchises as the Star Wars and Marvel universes, and in its use of the latest tablet and smartphone technologies to interact with its fans and customers. That this interplay between the old and the new – between Nostalgia and Modernity – continues to play itself out within Disney shows what an effective – and intrinsic – component it is to characterizing what makes something *Disney*.

Conclusions … such as they are …

As to the question of what it is that makes Disney's animation inherently *Disney*, and specifically what makes *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* inherently *Disney* – what we now might refer to as 'Disney Magic' – ultimately, the only thing that can be stated definitively is that there is no single element that can be identified as the secret factor in the equation. Certainly the first to search for Disney's 'secret' were his competitors in commercial animation in Hollywood's Golden Era studios, all of whom went so far as to lure Disney animators away in the hopes that these Disney alumni would bring the 'Disney Touch' – not unlike the Midas Touch – with them. For various reasons, as has been discussed, it never worked. During the 1930s, Disney's most serious competitor was the Fleischer studio in New York City (later in Miami). As the Fleischers' involvement in their studio ended and Paramount took it over, the animation units at Warner Brothers and MGM rose to prominence, in particular with their *Bugs Bunny* (WB) and *Tom & Jerry* (MGM) cartoon series in the early 1940s. But aside from Fleischers'

(comparatively modest) successes in feature-length animation with *Gulliver's Travels* and their two-reelers such as *Raggedy Anne & Raggedy Andy* (Dave Fleischer, 1941), ultimately Fleischer never equalled Disney's quality or its success. Despite their own eras of prominence, neither did either Warner Bros or MGM; unlike Disney and Fleischer, neither Warner Bros nor MGM ever engaged with feature-length animation during the Golden Era.

Though various reasons can be posited as to why Disney's competition never succeeded in capturing its magic, the real question here is not why other studios could not replicate Disney; rather, the question is what it is that makes Disney's earliest animated features – specifically its first feature, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* – inherently and unquestionably *Disney*. I argue, ultimately, that it was how Disney conceptualized story selections, narrative structures and character development; how it combined those in the 1930s with the emerging cinematic technologies of sound and colour (technologies it helped to shape); as well as technologies such as the multi-plane camera that were specific to animation production. These factors came together to create an aesthetic that, though not new in and of itself, was revolutionary in a cinematic context, given that it relied upon the familiarity of the aesthetics of late-nineteenth-/early-twentieth-century children's book illustrations and ancient, well-known stories to counterbalance the modernism that was cinematic entertainment in the 1930s. But what I struggle with are (1) Were there other factors that have not yet stood out as important? (2) In what ratios did the factors discussed here come into the equation? Was one of these more important than the others? Did they all weigh equally into the outcome? As we approach Disney's centenary in October 2023, we can now look at this question – this series of questions – from an advantageous position not available to those who sought to find out back in the 1930s what it was that made Disney different from its competitors. But as animation historians, Disney studio historians and scholars of film aesthetics, we can come together to debate the importance and weight of these (and other) factors. Whether we can finally pinpoint what it is that makes Disney … *Disney* … well, that remains to be seen. Hopefully, others will join in with the discussion.

Notes

1 In *Hollywood Cartoons: American Animation in Its Golden Age*, Michael Barrier notes several instances of Disney's rivals luring away his animators (often with promises of larger salaries and/or greater authority) in the hopes of tapping into the source of Disney's success for themselves. Just a few key examples of this are when Hugh Harman and Rudolf Ising went with Charles Mintz and George Winkler to form the short-lived Winkler Studio in 1928 (p. 153); when Pat Powers signed up Ub Iwerks in 1930 (pp. 63–7);

and when Burt Gillett (best known for directing *Three Little Pigs* [1934]) went to work at Van Beuren in 1934 (pp. 169–70). For more, see Michael Barrier, *Hollywood Cartoons: American Animation in Its Golden Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

2 I am using the word 'Modernity' here in its usual sense of 'the contemporary', rather than as a specifically animation studies meaning (which, for some, has become associated with the idea of the 'Hollywood Flatlands', but which somehow – and peculiarly – divorces the idea from the twentieth-century notions of an aesthetic and philosophical movement that are crucial to Esther Leslie's arguments). For Disney, I would argue that 'Modernity' means a continuing reference to the Contemporary/the Modern. This can be seen literally, for example, in their naming their flagship 1971 hotel at Walt Disney World the Contemporary Hotel, and can also be seen figuratively (and even more recently) in the ideologies that lie at the heart of their most recent films and television shows, such as the emphasis on female leadership in *Moana* (Ron Clements and John Musker, 2016) (2016, the year most believed the United States would get its first female president, until it didn't) and its self-reflexive commentary on its princess characters (among many other things) in the 2018 film *Ralph Breaks the Internet* (Rich Moore and Phil Johnston, 2018).

3 Russell Merritt and J. B. Kaufman, *Walt Disney's Silly Symphonies: A Companion to the Classic Cartoon Series* (Glendale: Disney Editions, 2016), 12.

4 Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston, *The Illusion of Life: Disney Animation* (New York: Hyperion Press, 1981), 376.

5 Barrier, *Hollywood Cartoons*, 93–5. On page 94, Barrier notes that, before late 1932, the gag men, who had 'moved like gypsies from one music room to another, now had an office of their own'.

6 Extracts from Story Conference Notes Relating to *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in the Disney Archives, Burbank, California. Copied by David R. Williams, August 1987, and held in the Collections of the British Film Institute Library, London, 21.

7 There seems to be a lack of certainty as to when Max Fleischer went to work for the John R. Bray Studio. Dates in various publications, including Donald Crafton's *Before Mickey* (1982) and Michael Barrier's *Hollywood Cartoons* (1999), seem to range between 1916 and 1918, though the first instalment of his *Koko the Clown* series would not premier until September 1919.

8 Leonard Maltin, *Of Mice and Magic: A History of Animated Cartoons* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1980), 83.

9 Barrier, *Hollywood Cartoons*, 186.

10 While of course you do get characters such as Betty Boop's friend Bimbo (who seems to be a dog, but also humanoid), the overwhelming majority of central characters in Fleischer tend to be humans, as do many of the secondary characters who feature in the *Betty Boop* and *Popeye* series.

11 Charles Solomon, *The History of Animation: Enchanted Drawings* (New York: Wings Books, 1994), 50.

12 Barrier, *Hollywood Cartoons*, 295.

13 David Johnson, 'Interview with Grim Natwick', in *Snow White's People: An Oral History of the Disney Film Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, ed. Didier Ghez (USA: Theme Park Press, 2017), 63.

14 Barrier, *Hollywood Cartoons*, 295.

15 Ibid., 60.

16 Ibid., 81.

17 Ibid., 294.

18 David Johnson, `Interview with Grim Natwick', 60.

19 Richard deCordova, 'The Mickey in Macy's Window: Childhood, Consumerism, and Disney Animation', in *Disney Discourse: Producing the Magic Kingdom*, ed. Eric Smoodin (London: Routledge, 1994), 203–13.

20 deCordova, 'The Mickey in Macy's Window', 211.

21 J. B. Kaufman, *The Fairest One of All: The Making of Walt Disney's Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (London: Aurum Press, 2012) 12, 16, 229–30.

22 By 1940, the median age for women at the time of their first marriage had risen only marginally, to 21.5. By the late 1940s, however, this number had dropped to 20 years, where it would remain until the early 1970s. Figures found at https://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/hh-fam/tabMS-2.pdf.

23 Kaufman, *The Fairest One of All*, 48–9.

24 Ibid., 49.

25 Ibid., 48.

26 Dorene Koehler, *The Mouse and the Myth: Sacred Art and Secular Ritual of Disneyland* (East Barnet: John Libbey, 2017), 137.