“With a smile and a song . . .”: Walt Disney and the Birth of the American Fairy Tale

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Marvels & Tales, Volume 27, Number 1, 2013, pp. 109-124 (Article)

Published by Wayne State University Press

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Walt Disney and the Birth of the American Fairy Tale

Following the premiere of Walt Disney's first full-length animated feature, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937, dir. William Cottrell and David Hand), *New York Times* film critic Frank S. Nugent hailed the film as “significant cinematically as D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*” (“One Touch of Disney” 5). Indeed, for a picture that was labeled “Disney's folly” because of the costs the studio had to defend, Disney's version of the fairy tale of the lost princess and seven little men became the highest grossing film of 1938, earning more than $5 million in the first year of its release (Nugent, “This Disney Whirl” 5). Disney was awarded a special Oscar for *Snow White* in 1938, a true testament to its high level of popularity and critical acclaim.

Disney's connection to the fairy-tale world is now well established, with the studio receiving similar levels of acclaim for their productions of *Cinderella* (1950, dir. Clyde Geronimi, Wilfred Jackson, and Hamilton Luske), *The Little Mermaid* (1989, dir. John Clements and Ron Musker), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991, dir. Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise), and their latest installment, *Tangled* (2010, dir. Nathan Greno and Byron Howard), a loose retelling of the Grimms' version of “Rapunzel.” However, despite its many accolades, scholars have struggled with Disney's adaptation of classical fairy tales.

Because of the seemingly innocent nature of Disney animation and its subsequent association with childhood through fairy tales and because of Disney's prominent position within the paradigm of popular culture, scholars have identified Disney films as somehow worthy of special treatment. In their analytical work *From Mouse to Mermaid*, Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, and Laura Sells highlight the challenges faced by those wanting to engage in analysis of
Disney films. They argue that “legal institutions, film theorists, cultural critics and loyal audiences all guard the borders of Disney film as ‘off limits’ to critical enterprise” (3). Steven Watts identifies this tension as a conflict between popularity and critical reception. He argues that “Disney’s enormous popularity has contributed to dismissal in critical circles. Commercial success has been viewed in inverse proportion to cultural significance” (84). The problem with Disney seems to be the paradoxical underlying notion that populist sentiment cannot be viewed in unison with cultural importance. As such, many of the current works on Disney are deductive in nature, analyzing any Disney animated production in exclusive, not inclusive, terms.

However, the tide seems to be turning in favor of constructive scholarship on Disney. Eleanor Byrne and Martin McQuillan’s recent analysis of the later animated productions of Disney introduces a new notion for animation scholars to consider. They argue, “We must not just ask questions about Disney, we must ask questions about the questions we ask about Disney” (3). As our society changes sociologically, economically, and politically, the terms of critical engagement with these texts must also necessarily change.

Douglas Brode was one of the first Disney scholars to examine Disney animation in a positive light and to take these terms of engagement into consideration. In his work From Walt to Woodstock: How Disney Created the Counterculture, Brode highlights an illuminating fact. The evolution of ideology in Disney animation in the 1930s and 1940s was crucial to the formation of a radicalized value system that played a key part in the youth revolution of the 1960s (Brode, Walt 6). The importance of Brode’s scholarship lies in recognizing the underlying importance of the values transmitted through Disney animation and their far-reaching consequences. In his later work Multiculturalism and the Mouse: Race and Sex in Disney Entertainment Brode puts the live-action and animated films of Disney under analysis and argues how these features and shorts actually helped to foster tolerance of diversity in American society. Brode underscores the social consequences of the ideologies relayed through animation within Disney’s narrative frameworks.

Walt Disney’s productions are now being seen as crucial to the construction of modern American society through his contribution to the formation of a new United States nationalism. Nicholas Sammond’s recent work is exceptional, as he connects Disney productions to the formation of a new American childhood. He argues that “Disney was represented as an interceding between an ideal past and an unrealized ideal future, distilling the best impulses of that past into a digestible form that would reappear as the present corrected in that future” (366).

Disney animation is integral to the formation of American character, not just in the past but for the future. Walt Disney’s personal contribution to
animation is now recognized as both ideologically and historically significant. Because of his own personal history and attraction to the world of fantasy and make-believe, Disney used several vehicles to relay his ideology. However, one of the first tools he used was the fairy tale.

Jack Zipes, one of Disney’s staunchest critics, charges that Disney “cast a spell” over the classical fairy tale, capitalizing on American naiveté to infuse his viewers with false hope (74). Zipes intimates that Disney radicalized and Americanized the European fairy tales, casting his own ideology onto the screen and losing the meaning and value system attached to the “original” tale. Similarly, Richard Shickel’s treatise, *The Disney Version*, condemns Disney’s translation of the modern fairy tale, describing the ideology he transmitted as “appealing to the worst aspects of middle class conservative values” (Shortsleeve 2).

In their critiques of Disney, scholars such as Zipes implicitly suggest that each fairy tale, including *Snow White*, is a singular narrative inherently belonging to the folk; this leads to the conclusion that certain types of retellings deviate from the values of the supposed original tale tellers. However, in this essay I take as a premise that there are no “original” values inherent in these fairy tales, because they stem from a long-standing oral and literary tradition in which tales have been retold and rewritten and hence constantly transformed over time. Each retelling or rewriting of a fairy tale thus has its own specific historical frame of reference. Justyna Deszcz observes that Zipes has little problem with viewing the fairy tale as a preservation system for the cultural heritage of any given country but that one cannot apply this to the Disney versions, which are similar reflections of their own period of production (85). Rudolf Schenda’s work on the cultural significance of fairy tales seems illuminating. Schenda argues that fairy tales are “neither timeless nor ahistorical but rather incorporate local color and reference to social conditions” (80).

Far from Frances Clark Sayers’s accusation that “Disney misplaces violence with sweetness” in fairy tales, resulting in the creation of a soap opera “not really related to the great truths of life” (606), in this essay I argue that Walt Disney’s *Snow White* indeed directly engages the culture and ideology of its own time. Michael Shull and David Wilt recently made the case for Disney’s animation to be used as a historical source and analyzed it as such to draw conclusions about the period of the 1930s and the national mood (4). Here, I draw on the new sociohistorical frameworks of Disney animation outlined by scholars such as Brode and Sammond and argue that Disney transformed the fairy tale of *Snow White* to relay new ideas about the American Dream of success to the American people. Through its transformed narrative, *Snow White* infuses hope and positivity into a society struggling with the Depression. In
turn, the success and overwhelming popularity of *Snow White* raise new questions about the power of Disney animation in the formation of prevailing national myths about America, the nature of its people, and their character.

**Disney and the Culture of Depression**

When the Wall Street crash hit America on October 24, 1929, it brought with it an immeasurable depth of economic, social, and cultural turmoil. Five thousand banks failed in 1930, taking with them $7 billion in deposits. One hundred fifty thousand homeowners lost their properties in 1930, with the number escalating substantially to 250,000 in 1932. Thirteen million Americans were out of work by 1933 (Kennedy 163). Although Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal attempted to rejuvenate a despairing society, America experienced an unprecedented cultural dislocation. During the 1920s, American industry prospered, experiencing an economic boom while the war-torn countries of Europe struggled to cope with the increasing demands on their economies.

Warren Susman, in his theoretical study into the roots of American ideology, identifies the culture of the 1920s as one of abundance, leading to the material formation of the American Dream. He argues that “more attention could be paid to gratification of personal needs of all kinds” (179). Focus was on material wealth and possessions. Precedence was given to the success of the individual over that of the community, and no work was more important than that done in the pursuit of wealth. The American myth of success was given material backing; people believed in the dream. With the arrival of the Great Depression, this cultural myth came crashing down on the people of America. With the formation of Fascist dictatorships and the consolidation of Stalin's regime in the Soviet Union, the very facets of American society became unstable. The values of equality and democracy came under attack. The people of the United States looked for answers. Nothing was more influential for providing these answers than the movies.

Robert Sklar, among others, has made the case for the cultural power of the movies in this period (400). During the darkest days of the Depression, movie attendance still averaged 60–75 million people per week, proving both the power and popularity of the cinema. Arthur Schlesinger even commented that “movies in the 1930s were near to the operative center of the nation's consciousness” (qtd. in Cripps 115). Movies offered a new look at what society had become in the 1930s. Film historians have recognized the importance of the fantasy film in the 1930s. People sought deliverance from their black and white lives, filled with unemployment, hunger, and despair, hoping for escape into a colorful utopia. Most clearly this is demonstrated by the success of
Mervyn LeRoy's *Wizard of Oz* (1939), with Dorothy dreaming of her “somewhere over the rainbow” land free from troubles and despair. However, this escapism can be demonstrated more specifically through the fantastical power of Disney's animation.

Despite the undeniable fanciful world of Disney’s shorts, it would be a grave mistake to associate people’s attachment to the Disney brand as nothing more than a desire for escapism. As Andrew Bergman argues, one cannot escape to a place one does not identify with (xiii). Lewis Jacobs, in his contemporary study of the rise of the American film, highlights the cultural power of Disney's animation (500). The Silly Symphony *Three Little Pigs* (1933, dir. Burt Gillett), released at the low point of the Depression, in the midst of Roosevelt’s Hundred Days, struck an emotional chord with the populace. It carried a message of sticking together, emphatic after Roosevelt’s famous appeal to the American people. Furthermore, the short's famous song, “Who’s Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf,” written by Frank Churchill, became a rallying cry for the battle of the public with the Depression. Disney made light of the threat and emphasized the importance of persistence and community spirit to triumph over the evils of the Wolf. *The Three Little Pigs* promised success to the hardworking and honest among Americans. Furthermore, Disney went to great lengths to ensure that each little pig had his own personality, reflecting the ever-changing nature of American society. Using the power of animation, Disney was able to tap into the spirit of the times and reconnect with the idealism of the American Dream of success and prosperity, lost along the highway of the Depression. As Watts argues, from the dislocation of the Great Depression to the traumas of World War II, Walt Disney unknowingly helped America redefine its cultural values (109). These cultural values were reaffirmed and further strengthened through Disney’s first animated feature: *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*.

Disney chose *Snow White* for his first full-length animated feature long before the picture made it to the screen. His enthusiasm for the story can be traced as far back as 1915, when he watched a silent version of *Snow White*, starring Marguerite Clark, in Kansas City and fell in love with the tale of the princess and the seven little men. Although Disney developed several fairy-tale productions in Kansas with his then partner Ub Iwerks, including *Little Red Riding Hood* and *Cinderella*, he recognized that *Snow White* had all the ingredients he would need for success in animation: an appealing heroine, a frightening villainess, and the dwarfs to reiterate the comedy and character of his endearing *Three Little Pigs*. What was more, the story of *Snow White* seemed to illuminate the spirit of the 1930s like no other. Disney felt drawn to fairy tales and the ideal of a “happily ever after” through the struggles he had undergone in his own life.
Trapped under the pressures of a tyrannical father during his childhood, it seems no coincidence that Disney would be drawn to the idealism of happy endings inherent in fairy tales. And in a historical and economic climate that looked to the promise of better days, Snow White was the ideal story through which Disney could relay his own hopes and dreams and appeal to the American public at large.

**Not So Grimm: Disney’s Snow White**

The best-selling nonfiction book of the 1930s, *How to Win Friends and Influence People* by Dale Carnegie, highlighted the significance of values, behavior, and lifestyles in the culture of the 1930s. No longer was importance placed on material goods and wealth; success had to come from the inside. Disney’s Snow White was the personification of this new spirit. Unlike the princess in the Grimm version of the tale, Snow White gains the sympathy of the audience by being cast in the Cinderella mold of every American individual. Disney transformed her into the leading role in the rags to riches story of the American Dream. At the beginning of Disney’s story, we see Snow White dressed in rags, scrubbing the floor of the castle, owned by her Stepmother, the queen. Although we are reminded that Snow White remains the young princess by birthright, she is treated as a slave in the castle she calls home.

But Snow White does not achieve her happiness through the business acumen and cunning individualism that one would associate with a 1920s success story. She is kind, good, and placid and awaits the coming of her prince with patience and virtue. Snow White’s acceptance of her situation recalls the mentality of the American people during the Depression. As noted by a psychiatrist in Studs Terkel’s oral history of the Depression, there was a sense that people accepted the situation and remained quiet (80). However, Disney kept the dream of success alive through Snow White’s ability to dream. She sings of her wish to find the one she loves and for him to take her away from her current plight. The prince appears, and the two sing together of the joys of finding their love.

The American people were saved by Roosevelt’s New Deal. The Federal Emergency Relief Administration was charged in May 1933 with dispensing $500 million of federal relief money. Other agencies, such as the Civil Works Administration, provided jobs for the unemployed and managed to put 4.2 million men and women back to work (Kennedy 134).

Despite the success of his many agencies, Roosevelt was concerned with the extent to which people came to rely on the government for their recovery. Recovery would have to come not from the state but from the people...
themselves. This idea of change having to grow out of the attitude of the people plays itself out in different ways in Snow White. For instance, Snow White is rescued from execution by the Huntsman but is unable to return to the kingdom for fear of certain death. She is sent out into the world with no food, no water, and no place to live, a similar plight affecting millions of people across America. She is left with only her character to make her way in the world. The sweetness of her values and the goodness of her nature become ever more important in providing the tools to her eventual “happily ever after.”

Character takes precedence over all, and Snow White never gives up hope; her dream of success in finding love and happiness remains alive. Even when she meets the dwarfs, she still sings of the day when her prince will come. Disney also emphasizes the importance of true love in society, with the ultimate goal of marriage and procreation. At the beginning of the Depression, facing an uncertain future, young people were postponing their plans to marry and have children. There were 15 percent fewer children per household in 1933 than in 1929 (Kennedy 165). Snow White's union and eventual marriage to the prince is placed at the center of Disney's retelling, infusing society with hope and optimism for its own “happily ever after.” Snow White's preparation for motherhood is also prominent in Disney's retelling, through the way in which she cares for the dwarfs while staying with them.

One of the most remarkable social features of the Depression is the extent to which the American public appeared to blame themselves for their plight and to take personal responsibility for their economic failure. Being unemployed appears to have been experienced more often as a weapon of humiliation and a matter of personal fault rather than the failure of an economic system (Terkel 340). Roosevelt tackled the burden felt by the public in his inaugural address, stating that the only thing the American public had to fear was “fear itself” (Houck 1). This is also addressed and corrected within the narrative of Disney's Snow White. When faced with the frightening trees that turn into monsters and the vicious river logs that turn into crocodiles, Snow White is terrified. But when the woodland creatures are revealed to be sweet and good, Snow White sighs, “You don't know what I've been through. And all because I was afraid. I'm so ashamed of the fuss I've made.”

Snow White's character overcomes the fear addressed by Roosevelt and is able to find herself somewhere to live, achieve temporary happiness with the dwarfs, and ultimately prosper. Similar to trivializing the Depression through music in The Three Little Pigs, Disney makes light of the despair of the Depression through Snow White's patient, self-reliant, and sincere character, keeping the hope alive within Americans that if they remain positive and
hardworking, good will triumph over evil and they will be released from the suffering of their everyday lives.

Whereas in the Grimm version of the tale Snow White's dreaming does not power the plot, her character appears much less important than in the Disney retelling, where the heroine filters the fears and aspirations of the common American during the Depression. In 1930s America the only thing that could ensure Snow White's success, in the absence of material wealth, was the triumph of her spirit and love for the prince over the wicked witch.

**Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Witch? The Characterization of the Wicked Queen**

When conceptualizing the role of the Wicked Queen, Walt Disney insisted that Snow White be based on Janet Gaynor, the Prince on Douglas Fairbanks Jr., and the Wicked Queen on a mixture of Lady Macbeth and the Big Bad Wolf (Thomas 130). Indeed, Disney's Wicked Queen shares considerable traits with both models in her ambitious drive to be the fairest one of all and in her voracious pursuit of Snow White. Unlike Snow White, who exemplifies the 1930s values of decency and idealism, the Wicked Queen places importance on superficiality, greed, and individual ambition, the main components of 1920s ideology that many held responsible for the Wall Street crash. Indeed, the jealousy that drives the story in the Grimm version takes visual shape in the film, through both the commentary of the Magic Mirror and the mirror's green tint when the Queen addresses her own beauty. Already economically exploited by the Wicked Queen in the film, Snow White is also viciously pursued for her beauty by her stepmother, who wishes to inherit the grand title of “the fairest one of them all.” Disney accentuates the difference between the Queen and Snow White further by representing the princess as the scullery maid in the Queen's castle. The Queen thus not only desires to be the fairest one of all but also covets Snow White's wealth as a princess, ensuring that she is also the richest one of all.

In addition, no one else conspires even passively in the Queen's cunning plan to kill Snow White. The father who remains alive but essentially absent in his inability to protect his daughter in the Grimm version is completely eliminated from the film. As such, the betrayal of the parental figure is not at issue in the Disney version. Snow White's father is dead and cannot protect her. By eliminating the figure of the passive father, the film highlights the wickedness of the Queen above all else in the story, casting her as the scapegoat for all that happens to the princess. Furthermore, the Queen, as the personification of the values of the previous generation, most notably in her embodiment of an East Coast aristocratic persona associated with the crash, is the ultimate villainess.
for a 1930s audience. In her greed, heartless ambition, and aristocratic demeanor she recalls the negative representation of robber barons of the Gilded Age. Snow White, however, seems reminiscent of a “Middle American” disposition, making her more accessible as a heroine for the 1930s audience (Inge 134). The Grimm version of the tale foregrounds family jealousy and drama, whereas in Disney the oppression of the poorer Middle American Snow White at the hands of the materialistic aristocrat is emphasized. The social aspect of their relationship takes precedence over their familial animosity.

Furthermore, in the Disney version the Queen, as the hag, is run off the cliff while trying to dislodge a stone to destroy the seven dwarfs. The death is accidental; the character is not subjected to any humiliation. In the Grimm version of the tale the Queen is made to dance in red hot shoes at Snow White's wedding; the emphasis again falls on the bitterness at the core of the Queen's jealousy. However, with Disney's version there is simply a karmic sense to the end of the story, and the emphasis is placed on Snow White's romantic resolution with the prince, as opposed to the needless jealousy of the Queen. Old selfish values (i.e., individual greed and ambition) are not placed at the center of the story, whereas happiness and the evolution of the American Dream of success and social advancement take priority in the form of collective action. The dwarfs fight together for Snow White's honor, heightening the sense of social drama as opposed to personal vengeance. The Queen's selfish individualism is struck by the force of lightning, showing its natural supersession by collective action, which proves to be the ultimate victor in Disney's tale.

The Little Heroes: The Seven Dwarfs and the Common American Man

Grumpy, Doc, Sleepy, Sneezy, Dopey, Bashful, and Happy are now all indelibly associated with the Snow White story. Disney's famous biographer, Bob Thomas, states that it took Disney many years to come up with the final names for his dwarfs (Thomas 117). Part of the reasoning behind Disney's decision to characterize the dwarfs was largely the success of The Three Little Pigs. Each of the little pigs involved in the plot to take down the Big Bad Wolf had different characteristics, all of them relatable to the common American man.

In the same vein, although the dwarfs have different reactions to Snow White's stay at the cottage because of their diverse personalities, they are all able to move from caution to respect when her identity and good nature are revealed. Even Grumpy, the most reluctant of the dwarfs to accept Snow White, eventually embraces her romantic idealism and values. At first, he grunts about the “wicked wiles” of women, representative of an older generation of men, not accepting of the new liberation of women that had taken
place in society throughout the 1920s and 1930s. This was especially evident in the medium of the movies and through society with the rise of the suffragette movement, the right to vote granted to women in 1913, and women's role in the workforce during the 1920s and 1930s. However, Grumpy is among the first to fight for her life after her encounter with the witch and the poisonous apple. But Disney's seven dwarfs have even further appeal than just their wide-ranging personalities. The dwarfs represent the common man of America.

Before the Wall Street crash, President Hoover commissioned a study of U.S. life to form the basis for larger national policies. Titled "Recent Social Trends," one of the study's many aims was to try to identify the life and times of the common American man. This man was described as isolationist, raised in the country but recently moved to the city, and living a more prosperous life than either of his parents. The affluence of the urban worker was very real at the end of the 1920s; the workers enjoyed a good wage, modern commodities, and a high standard of living. This wealth disappeared with the arrival of the Depression, and thus this definition of the "common" American man disappeared. Gone was his association with success, opulence, and individualism. The Depression created a new "common" American man through the shared experience of poverty and unemployment. All men of society, from the Grumpys to the Happys, had to work together to bring about a new prosperity in America. This emphasis on collective action is at the heart of the ideology found throughout Disney's Snow White and was the cornerstone of one of Roosevelt's biggest projects in the New Deal: the Works Progress Administration (WPA). The two key personalities in the formation of this agency, Roosevelt's senior adviser Harry Hopkins and journalist Lorena Hickok, conducted interviews in 1933 that provided the information Roosevelt needed to put people back to work. The WPA employed more than 3 million workers in its first year, and in the eight years of its life put 8.5 million people back to work (Kennedy 252).

Snow White's dwarfs exemplify the community spirit roused by Roosevelt's New Deal. They recognize neither wealth nor prosperity in what they do, reflected by their work song "Heigh Ho," in which they merrily sing, "We dig up diamonds by the score / A thousand rubies, sometimes more / And we don't know what we dig em for / We dig dig dig a dig dig." Yet despite their lack of material motivation, the dwarfs are meticulous, productive, and thorough in what they do, and they arrive and leave work on time, and without grumbling.

Walt Disney also tapped into the social culture of the 1930s by elevating the humble dwarfs to the position of heroes in the story, which is another deviation from the Grimm version. In the Grimms' "Snow White," the heroine's release from the wicked spell of the Queen is almost accidental. In the Disney
version it is the dwarfs who try to protect Snow White and chase the old hag up the mountain where she meets her death. It is the little heroes that triumph in the story. Charles Hearn’s study of the American Dream during the Depression emphasizes the significance of this idea in 1930s society. In the absence of riches and affluence, it seemed more important than ever that the ordinary man could still become extraordinary through his acts, as opposed to through his wealth (113). Despite digging diamonds for a living, the dwarfs lead humble ordinary lives. It is only through their meeting with Snow White and their adoption of her optimistic attitude that they become heroes, uniting to fight against evil in their world.

Rural Idealism: Escape to the Dwarfs’ Cottage

Despite the widespread industrialization of the 1920s, the extent to which America was completely urbanized during this period has often been exaggerated. Forty-four percent of the population was still classed as rural in the 1930s, and half of the states still remained rural in their populations and ways of life. These areas did not experience the economic boom to be found in the cities during the 1920s. Through the results of technological innovation, a widespread agricultural depression took hold in the countryside years before the events of October 1929. Only 16 percent of farm households earned incomes above the national median of $1,500 per year. Their plight simply worsened throughout the 1930s. Income fell from $6 billion to $2 billion (Kennedy 192). What was more, because the main impact of the crash seemed to be felt in the economic sphere of the modern cities, it was this new technical “city” that was largely seen to be responsible for the living struggle facing most Americans (Ekirch 117). As a result, Roosevelt sought to elevate the status of the rural areas to ensure that the third of the nation that had lived in poverty before the Depression was taken care of. David M. Kennedy has gone so far as to argue that no other area of society was as “tenderly coddled” under the New Deal as the agricultural sector (Kennedy 202). New Dealers believed that the farmers held the key to recovery, and through the formation of the Agricultural Adjustment Act, Roosevelt formed the groundwork for a system of farm subsidies, making the agricultural sector a high-interest area of society. The Rural Electrification Administration brought cheap power to the countryside, mostly by midwifing the emergence of hundreds of nonprofit, publicly owned electrical cooperatives. After the energy poured into the agricultural economy, people started fleeing from the city to the country for the first time in a decade. An underlying nostalgia developed for rural society. After its great failings, much of the American public rejected the metropolis, expressing sentimentality
for the simplicity of a life on the land. This is reflected in Pare Lorentz’s documentary films of the period and is further expressed in Disney’s *Snow White*.

As Kevin Shortsleeve illuminates, many Disney films reject the cityscape, embracing a simple, pastoral vision. The plans for a pastoral sentimental utopia are underlined throughout Disney’s history, including his plans for the theme park Epcot Center and the Magic Kingdom Park. Snow White’s safe haven is an idyllic small cottage, self-sufficient, with its own river and shelter under a canopy of trees. In *Snow White* Disney’s escape to the simplicity of rural life even goes so far as to encompass the wildlife of rural “society” through the anthropomorphic transformation of rabbits, deer, birds, and squirrels into Snow White’s companions in her darkest hour. She finds comfort in nature and immediately becomes perfectly attuned to the rural way of life.

Indeed, this yearning for what Bergman has called a Jeffersonian return to the land was a tradition throughout many 1930s films; for example, *Our Daily Bread* (1934) follows a group of workers who form a commune with the ultimate goal of producing their own bread (93). The rural setting of the dwarfs’ cottage in the source, the Grimms’ fairy tale, does not seem relevant to note, as it was a direct reflection of the European geography from whence it came. However, in 1930s America, when the city’s banks failed the nation, the countryside’s prominence in the film, further emphasized by Snow White embracing rural life, is of particular interest. Although the dwarfs’ labor is not necessarily rural and is suggestive of industrialization in the mindless work they perform, as emphasized in their work song, it is nevertheless tied to the land and situated in nature. The film idealizes the simplicity of their idyllic rural cottage, and it is here that the dwarfs’ find contentment.

However, Disney’s *Snow White* did not just make the case for a return to a life on the land. Despite Roosevelt’s heavy investment in agriculture, the economy could not and would not move backward. Industry would eventually recover from its heavy losses. On the contrary, it could be argued that *Snow White* represents a lost culture, lost values, and a loss of the simple life that American society would never be able to recapture. Rural idealism in the 1930s, particularly in the context of a fairy story, ultimately proved to be just that: an ideal and utopian vision that could never and would never be attained.

“The With a smile and a song . . .”: New Values through New Media

Through his retelling of *Snow White* Disney was able to capture the spirit of the 1930s in another way: by utilizing the best of contemporary technology to infuse his film with the modernism of its period of production. The first of these technologies was the way in which *Snow White* used sound to tell its
story. When Warner Brothers released *The Jazz Singer* in 1927, the cinematic landscape was changed forever. Dialogue gave new depth to plots, and music built tension and created sentiment at pivotal story points. Lewis Jacobs’s contemporary study of film in the 1930s singles out Walt Disney as one of the most resourceful producers of the time, using music to enhance dialogue. Disney was one of the first to use song to tell his stories. Music had been used previously, for example, in *Gold Diggers of 1933*; musical numbers accentuated the film’s sense of fun and community.

With the success of “Who’s Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf,” written by Frank Churchill, Disney had found a new way to tap into the spirit of a culture, using song to unite his audience around a common goal. Whereas in *The Three Little Pigs* this goal involves collectively defeating the wolf, in *Snow White* song provides release from a dreary reality, a use of song we also see in such films as *The Wizard of Oz* (“Somewhere Over the Rainbow”) and Disney’s *Pinocchio* (Jiminy Cricket’s “When You Wish Upon a Star”). “Whistle While You Work” provides an example of a different use of song to a collective end. Echoing the community spirit inherent in Roosevelt’s public works programs, the work song is pivotal to *Snow White* and would have spoken to many American spectators in its representation of collective work, whether we consider the dwarfs digging in the mine or Snow White cleaning up the cottage with the help of the animals.

Furthermore, perhaps the most illuminating of Disney’s songs is a small interlude that Snow White sings to the animals after her ordeal with the Huntsman. She asks the birds of the forest what they do when things go wrong and, after hearing their sweet call, exclaims that they sing a song. She croons, “With a smile and a song / Life is just like a bright shiny day / Your cares fade away / And your heart is young.”

This song exemplifies the tale’s appeal to the simple life, to kindness and patience, and overall to success for the future if a positive attitude is maintained. The song puts into words the spirit of optimism and hope the American people had to keep in their hearts in order to prosper. This spirit was absent in the 1920s, but the emphasis on good nature and good will abided in the 1930s and was personified in the character of Snow White. The message is relayed to the American audiences by the sound of her voice. It cannot be denied that this extra dimension of cultural significance derives significantly from the Grimm version of the tale. However, Disney was using a different medium, and this medium offered endless possibilities to connect with his own “readers.” In the same ways that the Grimm brothers used traditions from their own society to connect with their audience, Disney used a focal point in 1930s culture, the tradition of musical film, to rally Americans to the cause of his fairy tale.
Disney was the first in Hollywood to use Technicolor in his animation, gaining an exclusive contract until 1935. Although this innovation did not debut with Snow White but with the short Flowers and Trees in 1932 (dir. Burt Gillett), Disney’s insistence on perfection with his first feature led to further developments in the technology in his studio. Disney used the multiplane camera for Snow White to add extra depth to the animation, increasing its sense of realism for the audience. In the Depression landscape of America, which images and documentary record and in which movies were largely in black and white, the use of color in Disney’s fairy tale added life and character to the story, making it a more poignant and utopian representation of America in the 1930s than many movies of the time. The bright colors of Disney’s animation reflect the optimism of the story and hence ultimately the story’s underlying ideology.

Disney, Fairy Tales, and National Myths

Unlike some of the more sinister of the Grimm fairy tales, Hans Christian Andersen’s Little Mermaid, and to a certain extent Madame Leprince de Beaumont’s Beauty and the Beast, all of Disney’s fairy tales weave into their plots elements that contribute to the reformation of the American Dream: the heroine always dreams of some relief from her current setting, whether it be to a new life on the land, life beyond her provincial town, or a time “once upon a dream” when her prince will save her. The princess is always good, kind, and beautiful and more often than not lives in a rural setting with special connections to animals. These animals are often her protectors and help her through her plight at some point during Disney’s retelling. She can always sing of her fears, hopes, and dreams. She is often optimistic but never presumptuous. And Disney fairy tales always end in a “happily ever after” for the good and in death or banishment for the bad.

In this way Disney fairy tales are not all that different in their moral undertones from their literary predecessors. Yet they are cast aside as Americanized and saccharine, carrying no real relation to everyday life, unlike their counterparts. In this essay I argue to the contrary. In Disney’s first retelling of the traditional fairy tale Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, he draws on the heart of the culture of 1930s America. His heroine, like Americans of the time, suffering under the strain of poverty, economic oppression, and hunger, dreams about a better time but recognizes this can come about only through positivity and goodness, not through any selfish desire for material gain. The dwarfs work hard, embrace Snow White’s values, and are able to prosper as the heroes of the story. By using the rags to riches story, elevating the little hero, accentuating
romance and love, and punishing the greedy, individualistic, and ambitious witch, Disney reignites the American dream, reinvigorating one of America's most poignant national myths that many believed had been lost by the crash of the late 1920s. Disney's version of the tale brings new merits to the idea of the American Dream. Material wealth is no longer important for success in Disney's tale; the emphasis instead is on inner values and manners and on collective action for the sake of a better world for all.

Although it is tempting to dismiss the power of Disney's animation, because of its childlike caricatures and undoubted appeal to the youth of society, Disney himself dismissed the idea that his films were made exclusively for children (Davidson 545). What is more, by 1939, 85 million Americans visited the cinema per week, and Snow White made more money than any other film in 1938. The film's popularity cannot be ignored, nor should its critical acclaim. Americans dreamed of deliverance from their plight, and Disney's animation provided an answer. It was idealistic, utopian, and undeniably impossible in their economic climate, but the hope infused within society through the film's underlying ideology prevailed. Robert Sklar argues that Walt Disney held the power to shape the nation's myths and dreams (400). Using this power, he drew on the commercial and cultural climate of the 1930s to transform the gray depressed landscape of America into a colorful "happily ever after," preempting his extensive involvement in shaping national myths through animation during World War II.

Works Cited


Davidson, Bill. "The Fantastic Mr. Disney." Saturday Evening Post, 3 November 1964: 545.


