

DEMYSTIFYING DISNEY

A HISTORY OF
DISNEY FEATURE ANIMATION

CHRIS PALLANT



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Introduction

Tangled (2010) was a landmark film, becoming the fiftieth animated feature film to be theatrically released by Disney. No other studio can match this record of consistent feature animation production. Furthermore, few bodies of film have such universal appeal; it is almost certain that readers of this book will have a favourite Disney animated feature. Yet, beyond this level of engagement, how accurate and detailed are popular conceptions of Disney – be that the man, the studio, or the animation?¹ This book seeks to remedy such uncertainty by providing a discriminating, and at times revisionist, perspective on Disney’s feature animation. But first, it is important to identify the conditions that have hindered the average viewer from developing a more discerning understanding of Disney.

Walt Disney once stated: ‘I only hope that we never lose sight of one thing – that it was all started by a mouse’ (Smith and Clark 2002, 1). However, before *Mickey Mouse* (1928–99) there was *Oswald the Lucky Rabbit* (1927–43), and although Oswald the Rabbit may not enjoy the worldwide fame that Mickey Mouse now does, his significance in Disney’s formative development should not be overlooked. After Disney’s *Alice Comedies* (1923–27), an early live-action/animation series, began to falter, he started to develop the Oswald character. In 1927, with the encouragement of his financial backers and distributors (Charles Mintz and Universal Pictures), Disney produced the first of his *Oswald the Lucky Rabbit* shorts, *Trolley Troubles* (1927). To the delight of everyone involved, the cartoons ‘quickly gathered a popular audience and even began to attract the attention of animators in New York’ (Watts 1997, 29). In addition to providing a ‘steady flow of profits’ that helped solidify ‘the studio’s financial situation’, Oswald broke new ground, becoming ‘the first Disney character to generate merchandise’ (Smith 2006, 515).

Then, in 1928, ‘just as everything seemed to be going so well, came one of the most devastating episodes in Walt Disney’s life, an episode

¹ From this point forth, to reduce the inelegant repetition of Disney when used in a possessive context to denote the Disney studio, Studio – with a capitalized ‘S’ – will be used as a substitute when necessary.

that would haunt him throughout his career' (Gabler 2006, 106). Mintz, after seeing the fledgling Studio develop in size with a host of animator appointments, began to question how important Disney was to the production of *Oswald the Lucky Rabbit*, wondering whether he could stage a potential coup. After quietly signing many of Disney's staff members, Mintz gave Disney an ultimatum: 'come with me and be paid a generous salary, or lose everything' (Watts 1997, 29). Unfortunately for Disney, 'under the terms of his contract Oswald was the sole property of Universal Pictures and [he] had no rights in the character his studio had created' (Holliss and Sibley 1988, 14). After a difficult confrontation with Mintz, Disney stated to his wife Lillian: 'Never again . . . will I work for somebody else' (Holliss and Sibley 1988, 14). Mickey Mouse, developed shortly after Disney's meeting with Mintz, brought worldwide acclaim and proved an immediate fillip after the Oswald episode. Yet, from this point forth, Disney's attitude towards the control and management of his Studio and its products changed irrevocably, resulting in the creation of a carefully regulated self-image.

Crucially, readings of this image have, in many ways, been guided by Disney itself. Volumes such as *The Illusion of Life: Disney Animation* (Thomas and Johnson, 1995), *Walt Disney: An American Original* (Thomas, 1994), *Work in Progress: Risking Failure, Surviving Success* (Eisner, 1999) and *Walt Disney's Nine Old Men and the Art of Animation* (Canemaker, 2001), released by Disney's Hyperion and Disney Editions publishing houses, valorize the efforts of the Studio's imagineers and management. The family-sanctioned biography *The Story of Walt Disney* (1956), by Diane Disney Miller (written in conjunction with Pete Martin), while originating from a non-Disney publisher, provides perhaps the earliest example of this trend.

Similarly, editions such as *The Art of The Lion King* (Finch, 1995a), *The Art of Hercules: The Chaos of Creation* (Rebello, 1997a), *The Art of the Hunchback of Notre Dame* (Rebello, 1997b), *The Art of Mulan* (Kurtti, 1998), *Treasure Planet: A Voyage of Discovery* (Kurtti, 2002) and *The Art of The Princess and the Frog* (Kurtti, 2009) extend this strategy in a film-specific manner. While these texts do provide a range of excellent concept, pre-production and production stage stills, because of their fan orientation they do not engage critically, for any length of time, with the material presented.

This strategy of control is also visible in the Studio's VHS, DVD and now Blu-ray release strategies. Unlike most mainstream Hollywood studios, Disney chooses to limit when specific titles re-enter circulation and for how long they will remain available. This strategy serves a dual

purpose, both increasing the exclusivity – and prestige – of a title and also ensuring demand for the product when it is finally released (usually in the lead-up to a major holiday season). Additionally, Disney recently produced the DVD series *Walt Disney Treasures*, which, while offering an opportunity to view rare, early animations, also provides a way to re-commodify titles that would otherwise lie dormant in the Studio's media archive. The presence of film historian Leonard Maltin, who introduces each of the *Walt Disney Treasures* editions, also serves to validate the series critically.

Lastly, access to Disney's comprehensive archive in Burbank, California, is severely restricted at present – a significant hurdle for any current Disney researcher. In recent years, only those working on sanctioned studies (such as Neal Gabler's *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination* [2006]) have been granted entry. Certain documents, Michael Barrier writes, 'are not yet available to researchers who have the company's blessing. Roy Disney's papers, made available to Bob Thomas for his biography, remain closed to most writers, as do materials with continuing legal significance (in what are called the "main files")' (2008, xii). Furthermore, Barrier postulates, if such a thing 'as a "definitive" biography of Walt Disney is even possible, it will be decades before it can be written' (2008, xii).

In the absence of independent access, the regulated texts, *The Disney that Never Was: The Stories and Art of Five Decades of Unproduced Animation* (Solomon, 1995), *Before the Animation Begins: The Art and Lives of Disney Inspirational Sketch Artists* (Canemaker, 1996), *Paper Dreams: The Art And Artists Of Disney Storyboards* (Canemaker, 1999) and *Walt Disney Animation Studios, The Archive Series: Story* (Anonymous, 2008), provide the best glimpse into the Disney Archives. Whereas the Disney-sanctioned books, carefully calculated release strategy and archival DVD compendiums promote and protect a coherent concept of Disney animation, by contrast, independent scholarly research pertaining to Disney remains uneven.

Perhaps the most worrying consequence of this strategy of control and self-promotion is the Disney-centric appreciation of animation, and animation history, which has found purchase within popular culture. Online media, in many cases circumventing editorial processes and peer review, have multiplied assertions about Disney's perceived parentage of animation as an art form. Search engines, which feed off these statements, effectively reinforce this misconception; a Google search of the phrase 'father of animation', performed on 1 September 2010, returned 'Quotes

from Walt Disney: The Father of Animation', as the most relevant result. Similarly, the Studio's contribution to the development of sound and colour technology, within the medium of animation, is often overestimated and misinterpreted. Janet Wasko writes: 'Only a few of Walt Disney's biographers attempt to establish any context for the company's achievements. Indeed, many profiles give him so much credit for animation innovations that one would think that animation originated with Walt Disney' (2001, 21).

By focusing primarily on the Studio's feature-length animation, namely the fifty, theatrically released, animated features identified on the 'History' page of the official *Walt Disney Animation Studios* website (see the Filmography subsection 'Disney's Animated Features' for a complete list of these 'prestige' releases), this book represents a critical intervention that seeks not only to interrogate the aforementioned misconceptions, but also to bring scholarly definition to those aspects of contemporary Disney (such as the Disney 'Renaissance' and the 'Neo-Disney' period) that remain relatively neglected. Furthermore, given the multifaceted nature of Disney, discussion will be necessarily multidisciplinary, combining economic, cultural, historical, textual and technological approaches.

This book, therefore, is divided into three parts: *Re-examining Disney*, *Early and Middle Disney Feature Animation* and *Contemporary Disney Feature Animation*. In the first part, Chapters 1 and 2 seek to provide the reader with a more nuanced understanding of Disney authorship and Disney's contribution to the development of animation technology and practice, with particular emphasis placed on sound, colouration and the multi-plane camera. In *Early and Middle Disney Feature Animation*, the focus shifts to rethinking how Disney is perceived. It has been said that mass culture relies on replication, that 'content, ideological schema, the blurring of contradictions – these are repeated, but the superficial forms are varied' (Barthes 1975, 41). Disney's animated features, which are often taken as microcosmic reflections of this disposition, have come to be viewed homogeneously as a canonical body. Chapter 3, therefore, develops a critical alternative to the now overdetermined term 'Classic Disney', by introducing the concept of Disney-Formalism, which provides a new theoretical and historical framework with which to read Disney feature animation. Chapter 4 provides both a historical and textual analysis of the surrealist short *Destino* (2003) – a short which problematizes homogeneous readings of the Studio as a producer of purely conventional and conservative animation. Concluding the part, Chapter 5

examines the evolution that took place at the Studio during the 1970s and 1980s – a factor that is sometimes deemphasized in contemporary studies of Disney. In *Contemporary Disney Feature Animation*, the emphasis is placed on bringing definition to recent Disney. Chapter 6, therefore, provides an analysis of the Disney Renaissance, which, despite being an established concept (signifying a body of artistically revitalized films that spanned the years 1989 to 1999), does not yet occupy a prominent position in studies of Disney. Moving beyond this, Chapter 7 focuses on the artistic deviations that characterize the Studio's post-millennial productions; this Neo-Disney period, as it is termed, is perhaps the most marginalized of all the phases in Disney's evolution. Lastly, Chapter 8 discusses the Disney–Pixar relationship, considering to what extent the latter's films and personnel have helped shape the former's creative direction.

Part 1

Re-examining Disney

Chapter 1

Disney Authorship

Introduction

The Sorcerer's Apprentice is one of Disney's most iconic animated sequences. It tells the story of an impetuous apprentice – Mickey Mouse – who seeks to use his master's magic to make his domestic work easier. After seeing the sorcerer leave for bed, Mickey dons his master's hat, interpreting it as the source of his powers, and proceeds to bring a wooden broom to life. Having done so, Mickey then instructs the broom to fill the basement's basin with water from an outside fountain; witnessing the broom's mastery of this task allows Mickey to relax, which quickly sees him fall asleep. However, while he rests, the broom continues to fill the indoor basin until it begins to overflow. Panicking, Mickey tries, ineffectively, to stop the broom, eventually attacking it with an axe. Unfortunately, the broken splinters become new brooms that, in turn, form a water-carrying army which relentlessly fills the basement with water. As Mickey floats upon the Sorcerer's spell book, frantically searching for an incantation to stop the brooms, his predicament becomes increasingly perilous as a whirlpool begins to pull him beneath the surface. At this moment the Sorcerer appears at the basement entrance. Gesturing, he parts the water and descends. With the water receding, Mickey bashfully returns the magic hat to his master and continues with the housework by hand.

Most viewers would probably identify Mickey Mouse as the sole perpetrator of this chaos. Such a response, however, reveals the difficulty of studying authorship. Romantic notions of authorship, such as William Wordsworth's definition of poetic authorship as a 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' (1984, 598) recollected in tranquillity, no longer offer a satisfactory account of the authorial process. Roland Barthes' essay, 'The Death of the Author', provides perhaps the most famous counterpoint, arguing that a 'text is a tissue of quotations drawn from

the innumerable centres of culture' (1995, 128). Although Mickey may be the most visible authorial force in the aforementioned sequence, this belies the numerous converging factors that both support and are shaped by his vision – most notably the broom, the hat and the Sorcerer.

Disney's role in the 'authorship' of his animated features is no less complex. As Sean Griffin notes, 'Walt Disney so successfully performed authorship of his studio's output during his lifetime that many customers thought Walt drew all the cartoons himself' (2000, 141). Worryingly, this oversimplified appreciation of Disney authorship can still be seen today, perpetuated, as noted in the Introduction, through internet forum posts and similarly critically unregulated spaces. If we return once more to *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, it is possible to view the short allegorically, representing specific tenets of Disney authorship: Mickey reflects Disney's desire to innovate, to find new ways of producing animation; the broom, a paragon of hard work, which, in its fractured state, becomes an efficient work force, symbolizes the hierarchical evolution that occurred at the Studio as Disney pursued an industrialized model of cartoon production; the hat, emblematic of the Sorcerer's magic, functions much in the same manner as Disney's name, serving to prime audience expectation; and lastly, the Sorcerer, a figure of power, mirrors Disney's omniscience during his Studio's 'Golden Age'. Given this complexity, it will be useful, in this opening chapter, to detail how 'Disney's' authorship evolved during his stewardship, and to explore the possibility that other figures within the Studio might hold competing claims to authorship of 'Disney's' animated features.

Authorial Evolution

Clearly, Disney constitutes a rather unconventional authorial figure. The collaborative nature of film, which in recent years has come to represent the biggest challenge to the auteur concept, is even more pronounced when discussing feature animation. In addition to the compartmentalized nature of animation production, in which hierarchically and topographically separate artists work towards a unifying goal, the Studio, by 1935, 'had more than 250 employees' (Barrier 2008, 110). However, this vision of Disney production, which problematizes a simple attribution of authorship, is reconciled by Disney himself: 'I think of myself as a little bee. I go from one area of the Studio to another, and gather pollen and sort of stimulate everybody . . . that's the job I do' (Schickel 1997, 33).

Central to this ‘bee’ analogy is Disney’s disengagement from the actual physical act of animation, which had been a facet of Disney production since the late 1920s. Disney has himself remarked on this transition:

I started as an artist in 1919. And I actually did my first animated films in early 1920. And at that time I drew everything, painted every background and things. And I carried along as an animator and an artist until about the time of Mickey Mouse. Now when Mickey Mouse came along there was such a demand – he made quite a splash – it was necessary then for me to give up on the drawing in order to organise and run the organisation. (Wells 2002b, 78–9)

This was how Disney functioned for the majority of his stewardship, operating as, to borrow Paul Wells’s definition, an extra-textual auteur; while Disney did not draw the key frames and in-betweens, or even ink the image, he was the ‘person who prompt[ed] and execut[ed] the core themes, techniques and expressive agendas of a film’ (2002b, 79). The production of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) provides a good example of this type of authorship in action.

Michael Barrier observes that although ‘Disney had started the year planning to direct *Snow White* himself . . . he was by the fall of 1936 delegating to [David] Hand a supervisory role over the whole of *Snow White*’ (1999, 212–13). Given that much was resting on *Snow White*’s ability to return a profit, the election of Hand to effectively direct the project was a calculated decision. Hand ‘approached the director’s job in the spirit of a business executive, farming out detail work . . . to subordinates and concentrating instead on broader issues, which at the Disney studio entailed primarily an intensive reading of Walt Disney himself’ (Barrier 1999, 134). Barrier uses ‘reading’ as a way of alluding to Hand’s need, and ability, to gauge how best to please Disney. However, Hand’s proclivity towards a broader level of control over *Snow White*, and his reluctance to involve himself in the daily artisanal tasks of the project, resulted in certain aspects of the film becoming fragmented.

One such issue revolved around how the dwarfs were to be realized. While it had been common practice in the years leading up to *Snow White* for animators to be assigned a particular character to animate (for example Art Babbitt’s animation of Goofy), this appropriation of resources was impractical given the scale of *Snow White* and the numerous overlapping characters. Hand once remarked, with reference to the dwarfs, ‘There were so many of the damn little guys running around, and you couldn’t always cut from one to the other . . . We had to cut to groups of three and

four, so it became a terrific problem of staging' (Barrier 1999, 244). Early in 1936 Hand came up with an alternative to the one-animator-to-one-character model, breaking the animation down, more or less, by sequence. To combat the lack of continuity inherent in this procedure, Hand called for 'each dwarf [to have] obvious mannerisms, so that they would be recognisable even in the least accomplished animation' (Barrier 1999, 214). Babbitt, however, argued against such superficial mannerisms as a way to define character, calling for animators to adopt a Stanislavskian mindset: 'You have to go deeper . . . You have to go inside – how he [the character] feels' (Barrier 1999, 214). Ultimately, the solution to this conflict came via live action. By filming actors (and Studio staff) to form unique character 'maps' for each dwarf, when individual animators were called to animate a particular dwarf, they had a quick reference point, which could refresh the specific mechanics of that character.

While this situation was effectively resolved by a handful of the Studio's more senior personnel without Disney's direct intervention, this belies the authorial influence he did exert. This can be seen, first and foremost, in the fact that continuity of appearance *was* such an important issue. Disney's insistence on carefully planned scenarios and industrially executed animation constitute key predicates on which *Snow White* was made, and an absolute insistence on continuity is one of the most visible ways in which Disney's animation differs from earlier examples of 'straight ahead' animation (see Chapter 2). Secondly, and perhaps most significantly, the key animators' awareness of Disney's insistence on believability would have guided them, as Babbitt remarked, to get 'inside' the dwarfs' minds. This insistence on 'verisimilitude in . . . characters, contexts and narratives' (Wells 1998, 23) during the production of *Snow White* effectively established the blueprint for what would become the Disney-Formalist style (see Chapter 3) – a style that dominated the Studio for several years.

Given that Disney's name now connotes and promotes much more than just squash-and-stretch animation, Wells has also argued that the 'Disney' name be redefined 'as a metonym for *an authorially complex, hierarchical industrial process, which organises and executes selective practices within the vocabularies of animated film*' (2002c, 140). This appropriation of 'Disney' is a particularly appealing one considering the persistence and mutability of Disney's authorship, beginning in the 1920s, running throughout the 'Golden Age', and continuing after his death in 1966. Furthermore, 'Disney' has become a signifier for a particular way of reading 'a film, or series of films, with coherence and consistency, over-riding all the creative diversity, production processes, socio-cultural influences and historical conditions