

Conference Paper

(SLIDE – WALT DISNEY)

Americans in the 1930s experienced major changes in their lifestyles when the Great Depression took hold. Despite the economic situation, movie attendance remained strong during the decade.¹ Americans attended films as a way to escape from their everyday lives. While many notable live-action feature-length films like *The Public Enemy (1931)*, *It Happened One Night (1934)*, and *The Wizard of Oz (1939)* delighted Depression-era audiences, animated cartoon shorts were also growing in popularity. The most important contributor to the evolution of animated cartoons in this era was Walt Disney, who innovated and perfected ideas that drastically changed cartoon production.² Disney implemented new and experimental film technologies like synchronized sound and music, full-spectrum color, and the multiplane camera. With his contributions, cartoons sharply advanced in maturity and professionalism during the 1930s. The ultimate proof came with the release of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in 1937. The massive success of *Snow White* showed that animation could not only hold feature-length attention but tell a captivating story backed by impressive imagery that could rival any live-action film. However, it would take nearly a decade of experimentation at the Disney Studios before a project of this size and scope could be feasibly produced. While Mickey Mouse is often solely associated with 1930s-era Disney animation, many are unaware that alongside Mickey ran another popular series of shorts, the *Silly Symphony* cartoons.

(SLIDE – SILLY SYMPHONY COLLAGE)

The series ran from 1929-1940 and the subject matter covered everything from fables to original stories and even conceptual mood pieces. This presentation argues that while Mickey is culturally important and served as the cornerstone for Disney's growing studio, it was the *Silly Symphony* series that was the most essential in advancing and elevating animation during the decade. The *Symphonies* acted as a testing ground for Disney and his animators to try out experimental techniques that they were unwilling to risk on Mickey. Not only were these advances essential in the production of *Snow White*, but they revolutionized the animation

¹ David E. Kyvig, *Daily Life in the United States, 1920-1940: How Americans Lived Through the Roaring Twenties and the Great Depression*, (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2002), 99.

² Leonard Maltin, *Of Mice and Magic: A History of American Animated Cartoons*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1980), 29.

medium and became part of the standard production of cartoons still utilized today. The *Symphonies* also contributed to the maturation of story-telling in animated cartoons, an essential component of the medium's gathering respect and acceptance in the film industry.

(SLIDE – POSTERS)

This presentation will trace the *Symphonies*' influence through the analyzation of four cartoons: *The Skeleton Dance* (1929), *Flowers and Trees* (1932), *Three Little Pigs* (1933), and *The Old Mill* (1937). The positive critical and audience responses to these cartoons show the changing attitudes toward animation as well as the artistic progression of Disney's cartoons through the 1930s. Also, the encouraging national reception to the risks taken with the *Symphonies* showed American audiences' openness to new ideas in cartoons and their developing trust in Walt Disney. Each of these aspects made the bold undertaking of *Snow White* much less of a gamble and ensured its box office and critical triumph. It is important to recognize that *Snow White* effectively launched the animated film industry, and without the existence of the *Symphonies*, this may not have been possible. This film and the technological development surrounding it showed Disney to be the dominant force in the game. His successes encouraged other animation studios like Warner Brothers and MGM to improve and compete which led to the creation of popular characters like Bugs Bunny and Tom and Jerry.³ Following Walt Disney's innovations in the 1930s, the animation industry expanded exponentially in the mid-twentieth century and spawned the creation of many of the characters immortalized in American collective memory. Ultimately, this presentation proves the undeniable impact of the *Symphonies* on the field of animation and their significant contribution to the study of American popular culture.

(SLIDE GERTIE THE DINOSAUR)

Motion pictures were not new in the interwar years, but the industry grew and changed significantly during the period. By the 1920s, the motion picture industry was well established, and the cinema had become a popular place for Americans to enjoy cheap entertainment.⁴ While cartoons had been a consistent element of print media, animated cartoons did not appear until

³ Maltin, *Of Mice and Magic*, 219, 275.

⁴ *Daily Life in the United States, 1920-1940: How Americans Lived Through the Roaring Twenties and the Great Depression*, (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2002), 92.

decades after the invention of film. The earliest examples of animated cartoons were products of intense labor. At sixteen frames per second, it would take nearly one thousand drawings for a single minute of action. The labor element discouraged early twentieth-century entertainers from trying their hand at the medium.⁵ Newspaper artist Winsor McCay experimented with the idea of animated cartoons, and in 1914, McCay organized an innovative vaudeville routine around an animated dinosaur named Gertie. McCay appeared as Gertie's trainer and interacted with her on stage. After *Gertie the Dinosaur*, more newspaper cartoonists tried their hand at animation, seeking new methods to produce cartoons quicker and with higher quality. Cartoonist Earl Hurd pioneered a significant change in 1914 with the creation of the celluloid or "cel" method in which artists paint an entire stationary background scene on paper with moving elements layered on top using clear celluloid sheets.

(SLIDE – CELLULOID)

Using this method, artists only had to animate the part of the scene that moved. The creation of the animation cel was the most important change in early cartoon production, and the method is still used for hand-drawn animation today.⁶ With the creation of this time-saving technique, more artists became interested in animation in the 1920s. Cartoons were growing more common as they showed alongside newsreels as a preshow to the feature film. It was at this moment in animation that a young Walt Disney joined in the movement, excited to explore the art form's infinite possibilities.

(SLIDE – YOUNG WALT/ THE ALICE COMEDIES)

An avid cartoonist from an early age, Walt Disney saw potential in the medium and was fascinated by the combination of drawing and technology. According to biographer Neal Gabler, Walt* saw animation as a way to make his mark because "so few people were doing it and so few people had expertise in it, and the idea of being the best...clearly appealed to him."⁷ In 1922 Walt produced his first theatrical cartoons, "Laugh-O-Grams" with fellow cartoonist Ub Iwerks out of Kansas City, Missouri. While the cartoons enjoyed some regional success, the studio went bankrupt. Broke, Walt moved out to Hollywood to explore new opportunities and join his brother

⁵ Leonard Maltin, *Of Mice and Magic: A History of American Animated Cartoons*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1980), 2.

⁶ Maltin, *Of Mice and Magic*, 9.

* In theater and film production, *mise en scène* is the arrangement of the scene.

⁷ Neal Gabler, *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), 50.

Roy who was convalescing from tuberculosis. After finding a distributor for his new series, the *Alice Comedies*, a series in which a live-action girl lives in a cartoon world, Walt and Roy established the Disney Bros. Studio in 1923. The *Alice Comedies* were a chance for Disney to experiment with story-telling and to refine animation techniques. However, Walt's obsession with perfection led to a strained relationship with his animators.

(SLIDE OSWALD/ UB IWERKS)

Beginning around 1926, Walt struggled with his staff. Financial pressures, the burden of his distribution contract, and his perfectionism caused him to become demanding. Around this time, Iwerks created Disney's newest star character, Oswald the Lucky Rabbit, in 1927. The Oswald series was a hit with audiences and praised by critics. However, Walt's cartoon distributor, Charles Mintz, saw Oswald as an opportunity to edge Disney out. Mintz hired Walt's frustrated animators to produce the cartoons for Universal Studios through him. He upped the production cost significantly and forced Walt to let go of the character he and Iwerks had created. Low on money and out of both his star character and staff of animators, Walt had to come up with something quickly if he wanted to remain a player in the animation game.

(SLIDE – STEAMBOAT WILLIE)

There is much myth surrounding what happened next, but what is known for sure is that Walt and Iwerks created a new character out of desperation. The first Mickey Mouse cartoons, *Plane Crazy* and *Gallop in' Gaucho*, were animated by the efforts of Iwerks alone in 1928. Walt screened these preliminary cartoons to potential distributors, but he could not find a buyer for Mickey. However, with the recent release of the first "talkie" picture, *The Jazz Singer*, an opportunity to make Mickey stand out presented itself. Walt knew that making a synchronized sound cartoon would make him unique, so he poured the last of his resources into the creation of *Steamboat Willie*. The cartoon debuted on Broadway in New York on November 18, 1928, and the reaction was astonishing. Walt then converted all Mickey projects to sound and never looked back. Rival animation studios raced to catch up to Walt Disney, but it would be a year before other studios were producing sound cartoons with the professional fusion displayed by the Mickey cartoons. Mickey quickly became a national phenomenon.

(SLIDE – WALT/IWERKS/STALLING)

Steamboat Willie was the first to provide dialog to animated characters, but it was also the first to introduce the concept of a musical cartoon. With this innovation, Walt began work on another series of cartoons without a central character. They would be different enough so that they could run in competing theaters alongside Mickey and provide the studio with another source of revenue.⁸ Walt's composer on *Willie*, Carl Stalling, first came up with the concept of the *Silly Symphony* series. A *Symphony* would be a musical piece, a cartoon that *began* with a musical track and then had the action animated to it. Stalling also proposed the subject for the first installment in the series: dancing skeletons.

(SLIDE – SKELETON DANCE VIDEO)

Iwerks animated the cartoon in which four skeletons dance in a moonlit graveyard, using their bones as musical instruments. The piece masterfully combines comedy with the macabre, and the musical accompaniment makes it delightfully spooky without being scary.

While distributors were devouring Mickey cartoons, Walt struggled to find a distributor for *The Skeleton Dance*. The difficulty made sense; the cartoon was a daring idea. Unlike every existing cartoon series, it featured no familiar characters and was “neither a story nor a vehicle for comedy gags, but a mood piece.”⁹ Manager of the prestigious Carthay Circle Theater, Fred Miller, enjoyed the cartoon and agreed to show it at his theater for a limited engagement. The cartoon was received enthusiastically by audiences and critics everywhere. A reviewer from *Film Daily* called the cartoons an “unusually clever demonstration of ‘cartoonatic’ ability...Even frozen faces will crack under its infectious fun.”¹⁰ Audience reception and positive critical reviews encouraged the Disney studio to continue with the series.

The Skeleton Dance is significant not only because it launched the *Silly Symphony* series, but it showed Walt Disney as a competitor in the animation game. The cartoon showed that Disney could produce more than gag-based cartoons that centered around a recurring character and linear storyline. The reception of *Skeleton Dance* also showed that audiences were open to new ideas and concepts in animation.

⁸ Gabler, *Walt Disney*, 129.

⁹ Leonard Maltin, *Of Mice and Magic: A History of American Animated Cartoons*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1980), 35.

¹⁰ Kann, “Clever,” *The Film Daily*, July 25, 1929.

(SLIDE – MICKEY MOUSE CLUB?)

The *Symphonies* ran alongside Mickey cartoons in the early 1930s, while Mickey Mouse quickly became a national film star. Cinemas across the country fervently bought up and traded Mickey reels, and it is estimated that one million separate audiences saw Mickey in 1930 alone.¹¹ Meanwhile, Columbia Pictures picked up the *Symphony* series at the encouragement of one of their directors, Frank Capra, who was impressed at a screening. Despite the success of Mickey Mouse and the rumblings over *Skeleton Dance*, theater owners worried that the new kind of cartoons would not be well-received by their audiences. So, *The Skeleton Dance* and the subsequent *Symphony* cartoons released under the byline: “Mickey Mouse Presents a Walt Disney Silly Symphony.”¹²

(SLIDE – EARLY SYMPHONY POSTERS)

The first few *Symphonies* lacked a central focus, but they continued to attract positive attention. The reviews and attendance were encouraging, and Walt designated his best animator, Iwerks, to head up the *Symphonies* unit of the studio. It is significant to note Walt’s decision to devote time and effort to developing the series. It would have been much easier to exploit Mickey for all he was worth, but Walt persisted with the *Symphonies* because they gave his animators an opportunity to extend their range of subject matter.¹³ With the *Symphonies*, Walt was setting up his staff and the studio for the future.

(SLIDE – IWERKS)

In 1930, the *Silly Symphony* series hit a bump when both Iwerks and Stalling left the studio. Ub Iwerks felt that he had been living in Walt’s shadow and was not receiving credit for creating Walt’s most famous characters.¹⁴ So, when Walt’s former distributor, Pat Powers, offered Iwerks his own animation studio, he took the offer. Carl Stalling shortly came forward with complaints of back pay. While Stalling left the studio to work on music for the Warner Brothers’ *Looney Tunes* and *Merrie Melodies*, Iwerks would return to Disney after ten years to develop processes that combined live-action and animation as seen in films like *Song of the*

¹¹ Gabler, *Walt Disney*, 150-151.

¹² Christopher Finch, *The Art of Walt Disney*, (New York: Abrams Inc., 1973), 77.

¹³ Christopher Finch, *The Art of Walt Disney*, (New York: Abrams Inc., 1973), 77.

¹⁴ Neal Gabler, *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), 144.

South (1946) and *Mary Poppins (1964)*. During the 1960s, Iwerks would help create some of Disneyland's classic attractions like *it's a small world* and *Great Moments with Mr. Lincoln*.¹⁵ For now, Walt scrambled to gather a new team after the Oswald debacle and Iwerks's departure.

(SLIDE – ANIMATORS: NINE OLD MEN – SYMPHONY STILL?)

In the wake of the economic downturn, he sought out and hired several experienced and professionally-trained animators who were out of work. Walt hired animators who would later become Disney Legends, including Les Clark, Marc Davis, Ollie Johnston, and Ward Kimball.¹⁶ The cartoons produced at the Disney studio were narratively different from their early 1930s competition because they had a polished storyline and continuity while other studios would link gags haphazardly.

(SLIDE – SYMPHONY CHARACTERS)

Disney characters had identifiable personalities that fit with the logical storyline. The cartoons captured viewers because they explored an animated universe of the “plausibly impossible” in which they stretched natural laws without breaking them.¹⁷ Importantly, each defining element of Disney animation added to the illusion of realism. In Walt's continued quest for alternative reality in animation and to further distance himself from the competition, the next step was color.

Color had appeared in films dating back to the late teens, but these early films showed a limited color spectrum and were expensive to produce. In 1932 Technicolor announced a new three-strip color process that created a full-spectrum with truer to life tones. The company approached Walt Disney and discussed the use of their new process in a Disney cartoon. Technicolor was eager for the partnership because they were struggling to convince live-action studios to bear color's tremendous cost.¹⁸ Backed by Technicolor, Disney Studios converted its next black-and-white *Silly Symphony, Flowers and Trees*, to full color.

(SLIDE – FLOWERS AND TREES)

¹⁵ “Ub Iwerks,” D23, Disney, Accessed December 1, 2019, <https://d23.com/walt-disney-legend/ub-iwerks/>.

¹⁶ “Listing of Legends,” D23, Disney, Accessed December 1, 2019, <https://d23.com/listing-of-legends/>.

¹⁷ Neal Gabler, *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), 170-173.

¹⁸ Gabler, *Walt Disney*, 178.

Flowers and Trees released on July 30, 1932, at Grauman's Chinese Theater. Beautiful and absurd, *Flowers and Trees*, is a film about two trees who fall in love but are almost thwarted by a jealous stump who sets fire to the forest. According to film historian Leonard Maltin, the film exemplifies the qualities of anthropomorphism and personification used in all other *Silly Symphonies*. The full-spectrum and the artistic use of color dazzled audiences. *Flowers and Trees* contributed to the continued elevation of the art of animation. The cartoon was a technical and artistic experiment and it served to test out audiences' reception to color.

Flowers and Trees not only served as a test case for the Disney Studios but the entire film industry. In a savvy business move, Walt Disney agreed to produce the next thirteen *Symphonies* in full-color if he could have exclusive animation rights to the Technicolor three-color process for the next two years. The move shut down other studios' hopes of catching up. However, Mickey would remain in black-and-white for the time being, as they saw no reason to tamper with success. With the adoption of color animation in the *Symphony* cartoons, the Disney animators would have years to develop their craft and refine their artistic abilities before its large-scale use on films like *Snow White* and *Fantasia*.

(SLIDE – THREE LITTLE PIGS)

By 1933, the *Silly Symphonies* rivaled Mickey Mouse in critical reception, and Mickey's image continued to paint the American consciousness. While Disney Studios was reveling in their achievements, the Great Depression had continued to worsen. Amid the suffering, Disney released its newest *Symphony*, *Three Little Pigs*, in May of 1933, unaware of the effect it would have on the country. The film was a smash hit. It played in theaters week after week. The New York *Daily News* reported it as "the most talked about picture ever made...playing more return engagements than any flicker ever produced."¹⁹ The short took hold in more ways than one.

During the development of the film, Walt suggested director Frank Churchill add a little song. "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?" swept the nation, becoming a best-selling single in 1933.

(SLIDE – WHO'S AFRAID SONG)

¹⁹ Sidney Skolsky. "TinTypes," *Daily News* (New York, NY), Nov. 2, 1933.

One could rarely escape hearing the tune over the radio or whistled down the street. The song was cultural phenomenon that served as a New Deal anthem, while social commentators and critics increasingly saw the film as a fable for the Depression that somehow ameliorated anxiety. Many authors and historians entertain this as a possibility, but creator, Walt Disney, never presented the film as having any deeper meaning. Nevertheless, many looked to *Pigs* as an archetypal representation of their struggle and as hope for their eventual hard-working triumph over the Big Bad Depression.

(SLIDE – PIGS)

Three Little Pigs was a benchmark for Disney's development of personality animation. As in any form of story-telling, audiences reacted to the cartoon because they related to the characters. *Pigs* went far beyond any of the other *Symphony* cartoons in terms of plot and character development.²⁰ The short marked a developing acceptance of animation as a serious artistic medium. Each pig conveyed a distinct personality even though each looked almost identical. With a runtime of about eight minutes, the quick establishment of fully-fleshed out personalities speaks to the power of animation and Disney's unmatched skill in doing so. However, at this point, Walt saw little future in shorts if he wanted to grow his business. On the heels of the pigs' success, Walt Disney would finally be able to afford his dreams.

(SLIDE – SYMPHONIES POSTER)

Walt Disney's success fueled plans for *Snow White* as early as 1933, but Disney needed to bridge the final gaps between animation and reality before he could confidently release the film. As work began on the project, Walt "relied more and more on the *Symphonies* to give his crew a chance to develop new techniques."²¹ However, in full-color, *Symphonies* were expensive to produce, costing around \$30,000 and needing at least \$100,000 to turn a profit.²² Disney released several notable and beautifully animated *Symphonies* after the *Three Little Pigs*, including *The Wise Little Hen* (1934), *The Tortoise and the Hare* (1934), *Who Killed Cock Robin?* (1935), and *Music Land* (1935). However, ticket sales from both the *Symphonies* and *Mickeys* would not be enough to continue funding work into the feature-length film.

²⁰ Christopher Finch, *The Art of Walt Disney*, (New York: Abrams Inc., 1973), 89.

²¹ Leonard Maltin, *Of Mice and Magic: A History of American Animated Cartoons*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1980), 51.

²² Neal Gabler, *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), 214.

With the impending release of Mickey's first full-color cartoon *The Band Concert*, a new opportunity for studio capital presented itself to Walt and Roy Disney. A merchandising executive named Herman "Kay" Kamen approached the brothers and set out to reinvent the merchandising arm of Disney Enterprises.

(SLIDE – MICKEY MERCHANDISE)

By licensing Mickey's image, the studio saw an increase from \$10,000 to \$200,000 in royalties in the first year. The profit increase from toys, games, clothing, and other products would be enough to bankroll all of Walt's ideas and fund the continued work on the *Symphonies* as the animation department further experimented and poured their increasing talents into *Snow White*. In early 1937, the film was nearing completion, but there was still an element missing that held it back from achieving more realism.

Walt, considering the amount of time the viewer would spend on the film, feared that eighty minutes of flat animation would be too much. Just as in live-action film, he wanted to achieve more visual variety in a cartoon.

(SLIDE – MULTIPLANE CAMERA – THE OLD MILL)

Backed with the money made from the Mickey merchandise, Walt put in for the development of a \$70,000, 14 ft-high "multiplane camera," a camera that looks downward through a series of stacked animation planes to achieve depth and dimension. Disney employed the use of the camera on a nearly finished *Silly Symphony* entitled, *The Old Mill* (1937).

There is nothing groundbreaking or particularly different about the story of *The Old Mill*, but the mood accented by the visuals courtesy of the multiplane camera captured the attention of audiences.

The *Democrat and Chronicle* of Rochester, New York, described *The Old Mill* as a fine painting with many scenes "as beautiful as old Dutch masters."²³ The film follows the story of a group of animals who live in a dilapidated windmill and must survive a frightening thunderstorm. The film even grabbed the Academy Award for Best Short Subject, and its reception showed that

²³ "Six Disneys," *Democrat and Chronicle* (Rochester, NY), Oct. 31, 1937.

audiences could be swept up in the capturing visuals and seamless marriage of music and action without the assistance of a defined storyline.²⁴

(SLIDE - MULTIPLANE CAMERA EXAMPLE) - In these examples you can see the effect produced by the multiplane camera. It gives the audience a feeling of moving through the scene.

Disney used the multiplane camera to rework shots in *Snow White*. The importance of the multiplane camera in *Snow White* cannot be overstated because, like the color palette, musical score, personality animation, and perfected storyline, the multiplane shots elevated the film. Without the ability to test the new camera on a *Silly Symphony*, the animators may not have been able to work the advanced shots into *Snow White*. The camera was a vital piece of the Disney animation repertoire used up until 1989 until computer animation could produce the same effect.

(SLIDE – SYMPHONY PICS)

From 1929 to 1940, Disney released seventy-five *Silly Symphony* cartoons. Through the decade of the 1930s, the cartoons served to elevate the animation medium from silly gag-based cartoons with weak story structure to fully developed and respected cinematic artistic expressions. While Walt Disney did not invent the animation medium, he defined it. The *Silly Symphony* cartoons, although largely forgotten next to Mickey Mouse, are important to recognize for their vital, if not chief, role in this process. By providing a creative outlet separate from their primary moneymaker animators could experiment and develop their artistic skills. The audience appreciation and adoration of the *Symphony* cartoons proved that more serious artistic examples in the animation medium could be successful and ensured the studio that American audiences would respect a project like *Snow White*. The, combined with the escapist atmosphere of the Great Depression, allowed animation to take hold in popular culture. Diversification and technological advancement of animation provided continued success for Walt Disney and held him in a permanent position as a leader in entertainment. The *Symphonies* existence helped encourage rival studios to produce better cartoons and create some of the most memorable characters in history. While the *Symphonies*' life ended with *Snow White*, having served their purpose, Walt would continue to innovate throughout the twentieth century and effectively established an empire. Without the existence of the *Silly Symphony* series, it is unclear if Disney

²⁴ Neal Gabler, *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), 258.

would have found the path to eventual success. Although Mickey Mouse has retained his place as the most well-known and successful cartoon character ever created, the American animation industry would not have developed as it did without the assistance of some skeletons, trees, three pigs, and an old mill.

(INITIAL READ – 24:45)