

## PAWEŁ SITKIEWICZ

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2039-9154>

University of Gdańsk, Faculty of Languages, Institute of Culture Studies, Division of Film and Media  
ul. Wita Stwosza 55, 80-208 Gdańsk; e-mail: pawel.sitkiewicz@ug.edu.pl

# The First Wave. Some Aspects of “Disneyfication” in the 1930s

## Abstract

Although the terms *Disneyization* or *Disneyfication* in the modern sense were not yet used in the 1930s, when Walt Disney was still a young and independent filmmaker, the beginnings of the Disneyfication of mass culture and animated films could already be observed. However, this phenomenon was perceived differently than in the 1950s or 1990s, when critics and academics focused mainly on the negative or disturbing aspects of this process. The article reconstructs some aspects of the so-called “first wave” of Disneyfication, when Disney films were a positive and shockingly new example of animated cinema as a medium and as a new model of mass culture product. Since the article touches on very broad issues, it is an introduction to the subject. It focuses mainly on those aspects of Disney’s activities that after WWII would become a reason for criticism of the “Disney Magic Kingdom.” These are in particular: the industrialization of film production and the perception of animated films as a new artistic discipline.

Walt Disney; Disneyization; Disneyfication; animated film; film culture in the 1930s



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## 1.

In the 1930s, the terms *Disneyization* and *Disneyfication* (I prefer the second one) were not yet in use. They are later, and, furthermore, despite superficial similarities, they mean something different and relate to separate issues. Briefly speaking, *Disneyfication* means the transformation of an object “into something superficial and even simplistic”; it’s also a “bowdlerization of literature, myth, and/or history in a simplified, sentimentalized, programmatic way,” or “sanitizing culture or history” (see Bryman 2004: 5). Meanwhile, *Disneyization* is “the process by which the principles of the Disney theme parks are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as the rest of the world” (Bryman 2004: 1). Both terms refer to the culture of the post-war era, when, with the development of family entertainment, comic books, television and theme parks, Disney’s influence on the global market became so pronounced that it provoked academic discussion in the fields of sociology, political science and cultural studies.

Using any of these terms in reference to the 1930s is therefore a fallacy of ahistoricism. Following Ockham’s razor principle, I decided not to invent another concept (this could be perceived as misleading), but to use one that already exists, but in its colloquial meaning. Therefore, for simplicity, I will understand *Disneyfication* as the transformation of visual culture and animation in the Disney manner, but without the negative associations that the term acquired in later decades.

It is no secret that in the 1930s, the overwhelming influence of Disney films, comics and gadgets on cinema, politics and social phenomena was recognized, but no one precisely defined this process. Importantly, this influence — despite the criticism that intensified over the years — was assessed positively overall, despite differences in opinion. And this aspect surprised me the most. Today, *Disneyfication*, both in the colloquial and academic sense, is associated with negative cultural processes such as consumer manipulation, the commercialization of literary tradition, the aggressive Americanization of pop culture, the destruction of artistic elements in art for children, intrusive merchandising, or the escape from the problems of the modern world and

the pressure of censorship. However, in the 1930s, during the so-called Golden Age of Disney animation, no one thought so.

Disney's influence on culture and politics must therefore be assessed in a narrow time frame. Otherwise, misunderstandings arise. The attitude of audiences and critics towards Disney entertainment was different in the 1930s, the decade of the Great Depression, than, for example, in the 1950s, when the first amusement parks were being built and Disney's influence on the masses began to be associated with aggressive Americanism.

My intention is not to whitewash the Disney corporation or to argue with the critical approach to its legacy, which in many aspects does indeed deserve such criticism. I would only like to recall how the first wave of the Disneyfication of popular culture was assessed. This in turn will help us understand the extraordinary complexity of Disney entertainment, in which there is a place for both invention and repetition, art and kitsch, wise education and intrusive propaganda.

To conclude these introductory remarks, I would like to emphasize that this article tackles a problem so vast that it would merit a 300-page book. The Disneyfication of the 1930s was already a global phenomenon, entangled in political, ideological and artistic disputes. Aware of the scale, I treat my text as either an introduction to the topic or a footnote to the overall history of the Disneyfication (hence the title: *Some Aspects...*).

## 2.

In the spring of 1940, Disney moved into a new studio in Burbank, which he had built after the box office success of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937). The studio was organized in a corporate manner. People worked in separate rooms, with a rigid structure and strict division of labour. Work hours were measured by a clock. Disney's office, once open to everyone, was now inaccessible. In this way, Disney was moving away from the idea of the studio as a family or artists' commune toward a comfortable, air-conditioned, but still a factory (Barrier 2004: 159). A similar organization dominates contemporary mainstream animated film studios.

However, in the 1930s, films were made in a different location, on Hyperion Avenue in Los Angeles. The studio was likened in memoirs to a beehive. Employees of different levels shared a common space, which facilitated the exchange of experiences and ideas. There was no factory clock or sectors built according to the corporate hierarchy. Disney rarely sat in his office, which was cramped and sparsely furnished, and more often moved between the various departments of the production line (Schickel 1989: 172–174).

For ten years, the Hyperion Avenue studio was considered the best place to work in the animation industry. There was an enthusiasm for work, because everyone from the directors to the office staff felt that they were creating something innovative together: the cinema of the future. Standout artists received bonuses, and creative ideas flowed freely between the studio's various departments. There were also downsides: much of the crew was underpaid and had to work late, and, worse, Disney was reluctant to pay overtime. But the competition still offered much worse working conditions.

In this such favorable space, all of Disney's films of the 1930s were animated, including the Mickey Mouse cartoons, *The Silly Symphonies*, and *Snow White*. Many

consider these to be the most beautiful and innovative cartoons in the history of the medium. The lack of corporate discipline therefore had a positive impact on the creative process. In that decade, Disney was not yet perceived as a greedy capitalist, but as an independent creator, operating on the fringes of Hollywood, and especially as a man who wisely used his separate position. It was only after WWII that, as Schickel (1989: 29) wrote, he became “The Last Mogul, the last chief of production who had to answer to no one — not to the bankers, not to the board of directors... not to the stockholders.” At that time, Disney was still considered a man at the beginning of his career who had not yet succumbed to the pressure of his own success. As the influential critic Gilbert Seldes wrote: “he is too young to have had a history, too young to have developed oddities and idiosyncrasies. He is a simple person in the sense that everything about him harmonizes with everything else; his work reflects the way he lives, and vice versa” (Seldes 1931: 45).

Moreover, he was not dependent on any major studio, such as Warner Bros. or MGM, where cartoons were also made, so his activities were not subject to the laws of the market to the same extent. Disney could increase budgets at will, invest in new technologies, such as Technicolor or the multiplane camera. He had a free hand in choosing the subject of his films and licensing them to the manufacturers of gadgets and toys. “We’re an organization of young men. We have licked every mechanical difficulty which our medium presented. We don’t have to answer to anyone. We don’t have to make profits for stockholders. New York investors can’t tell us what kind of picture they want us to make or hold back. I get the boys together and we decide what we want to do next,” he said in an interview in 1938 (Kent 1938: 9).

Disney was not the originator of the modern animated film production system. The whole process had been invented and popularized by his great predecessors, notably John Randolph Bray, Earl Hurd, Raoul Barré, and Pat Sullivan.<sup>1</sup> He was also not the first animator to use merchandising and franchise. But in the early days of sound cinema, he improved the existing system so effectively that it was imitated not only in the United States but all over the world. This was Disney’s most significant — and at the same time positive — influence on the film culture of the 1930s: the popularization of a new work culture in the animated film business. In this sense, Disneyfication meant professionalization in an industry in which there was seemingly no space for investment. As a French critic wrote, Disney maintained “a balance between the weight of industry and the lightness of creativity” (Moen 2013: 12). Disneyfication was therefore associated with innovation and not — as today — with a conservative business model.

### 3.

Paul Terry, a Disney competitor, compared the production of animated cartoons to running a restaurant: “When you go to a restaurant for a meal and they serve you bread and butter before the meal, that is fine, but you don’t go to the restaurant for the bread and butter” (Hamonic 2017: 159). In the 1920s, cartoons were generally primitive, cheap, poorly made, often improvised and based on simple gags. They were shown as extras before feature films. Industrial production methods only served to

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<sup>1</sup> The literature on this topic is vast, see e.g. Kristian Moen (2015), Donald Crafton (1992).

reduce costs, so they generally destroyed any artistic effect. The shallow market and low rates offered by movie house owners and distributors discouraged taking up new challenges. As Terry used to say: "It's a very lucrative business if you're right. It's very disastrous if you're wrong" (Hamonic 2017: 191).

As late as the mid-1930s, American studios, which were considered better organized than European or South American ones, operated chaotically just to maintain continuity of production. The Disneyfication of animated cinema changed this business irreversibly. Disney began a financial and technological "arms race": he increased film budgets (in extreme cases even by several hundred percent), introduced color and the illusion of depth, improved the technology and visual style, and replaced the gag series with a classic plot line and a higher level of realism (Collignon, Friend 2021). Disney cartoons ceased to be an insignificant addition to the feature film, and became an anticipated blockbuster that distributors desired. Competitors, often with great resistance, had to adapt to the new pattern (Langer 1991; Hamonic 2017: 168), which ultimately had a positive impact on the art of animation, which — metaphorically speaking — moved out of the ghetto towards the mainstream.

The most important aspect of the first wave of Disneyfication was therefore connected with the elusive process of stabilizing animated film as a medium. It began in the 1910s, but it definitely ended thanks to Disney's commercial and artistic successes. In the 1920s, and even in the previous decade, animated film was often confused with trick film, cinema of attractions, or special effects cinema (Gauthier 2011). Disney not only imposed a new organizational structure on the studios, but above all codified the language of animated film and defined animation as a new form of art, not something like a comic book in motion.

In the 1920s, the short cartoon was not seen as an art form. It was valued most for its ability to comment on social changes, current events, lifestyles, and, most often, for its wit and lightness. When Gilbert Seldes published his acclaimed book *The Seven Lively Arts* in 1924, in which he attempted to argue that despised entertainments such as jazz, comics, and vaudeville deserved recognition as new disciplines of American art, he had not yet mentioned animated cartoons.

Ten years later, Disney films were considered either, as Dorothy Graftly wrote, "folk art of a sophisticated century," or a type of modern art, but one that do not distort reality but appeal to the tastes of the mass audience (Watts 2001). Until WWII, drawings from Disney films were frequently presented in art galleries, both in the United States, Europe, and Canada. Disney himself received honorary diplomas from art schools around the world as a person who creatively combined art with technology. In 1936, in his book *Art and Prudence*, Mortimer Adler aptly summarized the attitude of the intellectual elites to Disney films at the time. He placed Disney cartoons in opposition to academic art for connoisseurs, calling them "lively art that also reaches greatness." He wrote: "Great and lively art have this in common: they are able to please the multitude" (Adler 1937: 581).

Most importantly, Disney films achieved ennoblement in the art world not because of their popularity among the masses, but precisely because of their unique graphic form. The first to try to define it using professional terms was the Soviet director Sergei Eisenstein, who was a great admirer of Disney's talent and devoted much space to him in his theoretical writings. In 1932, in his personal notebook, he wrote about the flexibility of

form and “the first factual dynamic drawing” in the history of art (Eisenstein 1988: 69). For Eisenstein, Disney cartoons were helpful in solving fundamental issues of the creative process, and especially in analyzing the phenomena of animism and totemism in art.

Disney films were already perceived as strictly American art (alongside jazz or comics), and even art promoting the idea of Americanism. Years later, it was this aggressive Americanism, associated with the imperialist policy of the USA, that would become the reason for the critical approach to products bearing the logo of The Walt Disney Company (see Kunzle 1990: 159). However, in the 1930s, Americanism, as an idea in the Disney version, did not yet have such negative connotations. Once again, Disneyfication was associated with a positive approach to the world. Both in the “Roaring Twenties” and in the 1930s, the decade of the Great Depression, Americanism was related to the triumph of rationalism, the dynamism of change, the spirit of progress, the pace of city life and a flexible economy (Brockway 1989). In 1935, Disney received the League of Nations Award, and Mickey Mouse was presented as “an international symbol of good will” (Schickel 1989: 168–169).

On the other hand, Disney films of the 1930s are deeply rooted in European culture, from which Disney drew without hesitation (see Allan 1999). It was in Europe that he sought inspiration, and it was most likely in Europe that he decided to start producing an animated feature film. It was during his 11-week journey through Europe that he had the opportunity to test audience preferences, to understand that his cartoons were not an “appetizer”. Finally, this positive reception in Europe solidified Disney’s image as an artist, not just a businessman. Here we come to a less obvious aspect of the Disneyfication of popular culture in the 1930s. Disney built a bridge between the tradition of American entertainment (technically perfect, egalitarian and promoting the “American way of life”) and the tradition of European folk art, which he adapted to the requirements of the world market (in a way that was controversial at the time).

From today’s perspective, the Disneyfication of fairy tales and literary classics means censoring and infantilizing the original content for commercial purposes, but at that time Disney films such as *Three Little Pigs* (1934) or *Snow White* were considered too adult and too scary for children, and Disney himself distanced himself from didactics and defended cinema that channels the audience’s emotions through fear (Disney 1933; McCord 1934).

This brilliantly conceived combination of fairy tales and modern didactics became an inspiration for animators around the world. Disney taught his imitators how to combine national culture with the universal conventions of animated cinema and a discreet educational mission. This type of Disneyfication can be seen, for example, in the Soviet Union (to which I will return in a moment).

#### 4.

In the 1930s, the Disneyfication of animated films became a global process.<sup>2</sup> As a result, a new style of animation that could be called classical (analogous to classical Holly-

<sup>2</sup> Since describing the whole Disney’s influence in such a short article is an impossible task, I had to choose examples for case studies. While an Italian, German, or even Asian perspective would be incredibly valuable, I deliberately chose two countries from Central and Eastern Europe — due

wood cinema) quickly emerged. However, in most countries, filmmakers imitated the Disney model in a superficial and inept way, without the necessary investments, without a training program for cartoonists, without deep reflection on the essence of the Disney graphic style. Despite this, the results were surprisingly good.

Polish cinema can serve as an example — small and peripheral, but typical of Eastern and Central Europe. Włodzimierz Kowańko, exaggeratedly called the "Polish Disney" by the press, attempted in the 1930s to build a film studio based on the American model, assuming that in his home workshop he would be able to approach the level of Disney films if he replaced the work of a large team with his own inventiveness. In the press he could read only encouragement, such as the following: "[W]hy shouldn't we produce our own Disney? We can afford brilliant cartoons. We can show the world a whole collection of fabulously colourful... fairy tales, Christmas plays, humorous odysseys of various fantastic creations. Then Disney himself will turn pale with envy, and we will finally stop lamenting that we lack a sixth sense for cinema" (Ciechanowiecka 1936: 4).<sup>3</sup>

Disney films were appreciated in Poland not only for their masterful form, but also for they attempt to translate avant-garde and experimental animation patterns into the language of popular cartoon (Bossak 1938: 6). Film critic Adrian Czermiński called Disney's *Old Mill* (1937) "a symphony of colours, sounds and lines, expressed in movements" and "something like an abstract film" (acz. 1938: 11).

Although Kowańko never reached the technical level of Disney films, in just a few years he learned to animate in a realistic Disney style on celluloid sheets (so-called full-animation), built a small studio, switched to sound and color, developed his own technique of 3-D animation (analogous to Disney's multiplane camera), and on the eve of WWII he began preparations for his first feature animated film (see Sitkiewicz 2012: 64–79). Maintaining such high standards in Polish cinema was extremely difficult, but Kowańko understood an important thing: an animated film had to look like Disney wanted it to, otherwise there was no point in making such films at all. Following the example of his master, he tried to combine the American design with the Polish cultural model. His most important film was *Pan Twardowski* (*Mr. Twardowski*, 1934), a screen adaptation of a Polish legend.

At the other end of the spectrum of the Disneyfication in the 1930s we will find the Soviet studio Soyuzmultfilm. Attempts to Americanize the entire industry were initially very controversial, because in the Soviet Union there was a different tradition of animated films: based on political caricature and propaganda posters. Moreover, the mechanization of production was associated with an approach typical of capitalism, where profits were maximized at all costs. Although Disney films aroused genuine enthusiasm, they were accused of defending the bourgeois order, which is why they could not aspire to the status of true art (Skytev 1936: 44). At the same time, they were never condemned as hostile propaganda.

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to their shared cultural heritage and similar scale of technical challenges, but also because the Disneyfication of Polish and Soviet animation is a less obvious phenomenon than, for example, the Disneyfication of German animated film, which has been comprehensively described by Laqua (1992) and Giesen, Storm (2012).

<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise noted in the References, all translations of quotations — P.S.

Since Disney films were shown on Soviet screens (for the first time in the early 1930s), the animation industry, initially fragmented and lacking technological support, gradually began to transform into a single large studio. The ease with which compromises were made in terms of style, subject and corporate management only proves that Disneyfication was a process that worked even in radically different socioeconomic conditions.

Boris Shumiatskii, at that time the head of the Main Administration for Cinema and Photo Industry (1933–1936), had the opportunity to visit the studio on Hyperion Avenue in Los Angeles with an official delegation. In his book *Cinema for Millions*, published in 1935, he praised the Disney style for its conciseness, economy of form, “clarity of drawing and movement,” beautiful colors, and high sound quality (Pozner 2021: 356–357). Shumiatskii was an advocate of the Disneyfication of Soviet animation, despite strong opposition. The All-Union Animation Workers’ Conference of April 1935 was mainly devoted to Disney, who was then considered a role model for the entire animation industry (Pozner 2021: 355–356).

Contrary to what Shumiatskii believed, the greatest controversy was caused by the Disney style which derived from the tradition of the American comic strip and was so alien to Soviet culture. Despite doubts, it was decided, at a high political level, that this style would be the basis for Soviet cartoons (so-called *multiplikatsye*), because only Disney’s manner, based on clear lines and lifelike design, allowed the conventions of animated cinema to be adapted to the directive of socialist realism. In the Soviet film press of the 1930s, we can find much evidence that Disney films were meticulously studied in terms of design, dramaturgy and technique.

The Soyuzdietfilm studio, renamed Soyuzmultifilm in 1936, eventually became a model Disney studio, and Soviet animated films of the 1940s and 1950s, such as *Snegurochka* (*The Snow Maiden*, 1952) by Ivan Ivanov-Vano, surpassed the films of Walt Disney himself in terms of realism, production precision, fluidity of movement, and classical construction. The Soviet example proves that Disneyfication was not a theoretical concept, but a directive in an industry that sought ideological support for film production.

## 5.

The 1930s are unique in the history of The Walt Disney Company. It is a decade of great commercial, industry and artistic successes. Over the course of several years, Disney undergoes an extraordinary metamorphosis: from an unknown cartoon producer he transforms into a semi-mythical figure. His name becomes a trademark, and products bearing his name are copied or imitated all over the world.

This extraordinary advancement, however, comes at a price. What was considered an innovation, a bold experiment, and a smart combination of art and technology in the 1930s, was presented a decade later as a death trap for mass culture and animation.

In the 1940s, the opinion that Disney films have nothing in common with true art begins to dominate, and the extraordinary achievements in the 1950s animation (both in Europe and the USA, thanks to studios such as Zagreb Film and UPA) only confirm this belief. Around the same time, the first critical texts are written, for example by thinkers from the Frankfurt School, who attack Disney films as entertainment for the dumbed-down masses. After WWII, when the world is divided into two hostile camps,

Americanism takes on a different shade of meaning: it no longer evokes the same positive associations as in the 1920s. Also, the industrialization of the process of producing animated films and the corporate order in the new Burbank studio seem to suggest that economics has taken precedence over art, and Disney has transformed from an independent producer into a Hollywood "mogul" at its worst.

When Disney officially opened his first theme park in 1955, he probably did not expect that the word *Disneyfication* would soon enter dictionaries, but would rarely be associated with the bright spirit of the 1930s. It would become a synonym for conformism, not radical progress.

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