

Exploration in Imagination: The Walt Disney Silly Symphony Cartoons and American Animation in the 1930s

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In the 1930s, Americans experienced major changes in their lifestyles when the Great Depression took hold. A feeling of malaise gripped the country, as unemployment rose, and money became scarce. However, despite the economic situation, movie attendance remained strong during the decade.¹ Americans attended films to escape from their everyday lives. While many notable live-action feature-length films like *The Public Enemy* (1931) and *It Happened One Night* (1934) delighted Depression-era audiences, animated cartoon shorts also grew 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 expanded on the simple gag-based cartoon by implementing film technologies like synchronized sound and music, full-spectrum color, and the multiplane camera. With his contributions, cartoons sharply advanced in maturity and professionalism. The ultimate proof came with the release of 1937's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, the culmination of the technical and talent development that had taken place at the studio. 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. The series ran from 1929-1940, and the subject matter covered everything from fables to original stories and even conceptual mood pieces. This paper argues that while Mickey was culturally important to 1930s Americans and 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

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.

animation medium and became part of the standard production of cartoons still used today.

While the *Symphonies* were essential in the technological respect, they also contributed to the maturation of storytelling in animated cartoons, an essential component of the medium's growing respect and acceptance in the film industry. This paper will trace the *Symphonies'* influence through the primary 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 imperative 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 American animation game. His successes encouraged other animation studios like Warner Brothers and MGM to improve and compete, which led to the creation of other 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 study proves the undeniable impact of the *Symphonies* on the field of animation and their significant contribution to the study of American popular culture.

Motion pictures were not new in the interwar years, but the industry grew and changed significantly. By the 1920s, the motion picture industry had established itself, 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 decades after the invention of film. The earliest examples of these animated cartoons were products of intense labor. The animator had to draw entire scenes repeatedly for each sequence of the action in the manner of a flipbook. 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 new medium.⁵ Newspaper artist Winsor McCay experimented with the idea of animated cartoons, and in 1914, McCay organized an

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

⁴ Kennedy, *Daily Life in the United States, 1920-1940*, 92.

⁵ Maltin, *Of Mice and Magic*, 2.

innovative vaudeville routine around an animated dinosaur named Gertie. McCay appeared as Gertie's trainer and interacted with her on stage. The dinosaur reacted to her master's remarks, commands, and even caught a pumpkin thrown into her mouth. According to film historian Leonard Maltin: "McCay breathed life into an inanimate character...many men who started working in animation during the teens were inspired to do so by this film. One might say that Gertie launched an entire industry."⁶

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. Hurd created what is known as the celluloid or "cel" method in which artists paint an entire stationary background scene on paper with moving elements layered on top using transparent celluloid sheets. Using this method, artists only had to animate the part of the scene that moved, saving hours of drawing and creating more consistency in the unchanging *mise en scène*.⁷ With the creation of this time-saving technique, more artists took an interest in animation in the 1920s, and cartoons grew more common as they ran in addition to 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.

An avid cartoonist from an early age, Walt Disney was first interested in animation in 1919 while creating film ads for animated cartoon features. He saw potential in the medium and was fascinated by the combination of drawing and technology. According to biographer Neal Gabler, Walt⁸ 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."⁹ 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. Out of money, Walt moved out to Hollywood to explore new opportunities and join his older brother Roy who was recovering 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 hired a team of animators. They established the Disney Bros. Studio in 1923 and convinced Iwerks to join them out in California. The *Alice Comedies* were a chance for Disney to experiment with storytelling

⁶ Maltin, 5.

⁷ In theater and film production, *mise en scène* is the arrangement of the scene.

⁸ From this instance forward, Walt Disney will be referred to as "Walt" or "Walt Disney" as not to be confused with the Disney company or his brother and business partner, Roy Disney.

⁹ Neal Gabler, *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), 50.

and to refine animation techniques. However, Walt's obsession with perfection would lead to a strained relationship with his animators.

Beginning around 1926, Walt struggled with his staff. Financial pressures, the burden of his distribution contract, and his perfectionism caused him to become demanding and almost abusive.¹⁰ Around this time, the *Alice Comedies* had run their course, and 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 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.

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. Just as the *Jazz Singer* had sent shockwaves through the film industry, so did *Steamboat Willie*. Walt then converted all Mickey projects to sound and never looked back. Rival animation studios raced to catch up, but it would be a year before other studios were producing sound cartoons with the professional fusion displayed by the Mickey shorts.¹¹ Walt's foray into sound cartoons, not only gave him a marketable star character but allowed him to diversify his art.

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 a new series. The shorts would be different enough so that they could run in competing theaters alongside Mickey while providing the studio with an additional source of revenue.¹² Walt's composer on *Willie*, Carl Stalling, first came up with the concept of the *Silly Symphony* series. Cartoons usually began with the animation then had music composed to match the action. Instead, a *Symphony* would be

¹⁰ Gabler, *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*, 101.

¹¹ Gabler, 128.

¹² Gabler, *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*, 129.

a cartoon that *began* with a musical track and then had the action animated to it. In this way, the studio could use original compositions, public domain instrumentals, or excerpts from classical works. Stalling also proposed the subject for the first installment in the series: dancing skeletons. Iwerks then animated the cartoon in which four skeletons dance with unified precision in a moonlit graveyard, playing off one another and using their bones as musical instruments. It is an imaginative piece that masterfully combines comedy with the macabre, and the musical accompaniment makes it delightfully spooky without being scary. *Skeleton Dance* set the tone for the lighthearted musical stylings of the series.

While distributors were devouring Mickey cartoons, Walt struggled to find a distributor who would take a chance on *The Skeleton Dance*. The difficulty made sense; the cartoon was a bold 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.”¹³ Luckily, the manager of the prestigious Carthay Circle Theater, Fred Miller, enjoyed the cartoon and agreed to show it at his theater for a limited engagement. According to the *LA Times*, *Skeleton Dance* was a “sensational success, taking about as much applause on the occasion of the premier as the feature [film] itself.”¹⁴ The cartoon was received enthusiastically by audiences and critics everywhere. A reviewer from *Film Daily* found the ravings justified calling the cartoon an “unusually clever demonstration of ‘cartoonatic’ ability...Even frozen faces will crack under its infectious fun.”¹⁵ Audience reception and positive critical reviews encouraged the Disney studio to continue producing *Symphonies*.

The Skeleton Dance is significant not only because it launched the *Silly Symphony* series, but it showed Walt Disney as a top competitor in the animation game. Disney could produce more than gag-based cartoons that centered around a recurring character and linear storyline and find success. The reception of *Skeleton Dance* also showed that audiences were open to new ideas and concepts in the genre. It also opened the door for Disney to expand and diversify their work. In this way, they could avoid hitting a creative roadblock with Mickey and suffer the fate of cartoons like *Felix the Cat*. Felix was the original animated star before Mickey Mouse, but creator, Pat Sullivan’s resistance to change encouraged by the Disney sound cartoons allowed for his character to decline in popularity and virtually disappear into obscurity.¹⁶ Diversification would prove to be one key to the Disney company’s long-lasting influence in entertainment. Because of their willingness to seize new opportunities in multiple areas, including film,

¹³ Maltin, *Of Mice and Magic*, 35.

¹⁴ Muriel Babcock, “Talkie Idea Strikes Animated Cartoons and Film Antics Turn Vocal,” *The LA Times* (Los Angeles, CA), Aug. 11, 1929.

¹⁵ Kann, “Clever,” *The Film Daily*, July 25, 1929.

¹⁶ Gabler, *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*, 138-139.

television, merchandise, and themed entertainment, they would continue to find success in the industry.

The *Symphonies* ran alongside Mickey cartoons in the early 1930s, while Mickey Mouse quickly became a national superstar. 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.¹⁷ Meanwhile, Columbia Pictures picked up the *Symphonies* 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."¹⁸ It is unknown how many theaters picked up *Skeleton Dance*; however, Columbia Pictures signed on to purchase one *Symphony* per month in the wake of the cartoon's release. They offered Walt Disney \$5,000 advance without even viewing another *Symphony* cartoon as no others had yet been produced.¹⁹ The first few *Symphonies* lacked a central focus, but they continued to attract positive attention. *The Film Daily* review of *Springtime* (1929) exemplifies the praise, saying that the "cartoon work is about the best that has ever been seen in the animated field...unusually clever while true to life."²⁰ The reviews and attendance were encouraging, and Walt designated his best animator, Iwerks, to head up the *Symphonies* unit of the studio. Author Christopher Finch notes the significance of Walt's decision to devote time and effort to developing the series. According to Finch, it would have been much easier to exploit Mickey for all he was worth; however, Walt persisted with the *Symphonies* because they gave his animators an opportunity to extend their range of subject matter.²¹ With the *Symphonies*, Walt was setting up his staff and the studio for the future.

In 1930, the *Silly Symphonies* hit a bump when both Ub Iwerks and Carl Stalling left the studio, but a breakthrough in technology would soon change the future of both the series and the entire animation industry. Ub Iwerks felt that he had been living in Walt's shadow and was not receiving credit for creating his most famous characters.²² So, when Walt's former distributor, Pat Powers, offered Iwerks his own animation studio, he took the opportunity to leave. Stalling shortly came forward with complaints of back pay. While Stalling left the studio to work on music for the Warner Brothers'

¹⁷ Gabler, 150-151.

¹⁸ Christopher Finch, *The Art of Walt Disney*, (New York: Abrams Inc., 1973), 77.

¹⁹ Gabler, *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*, 138.

²⁰ "Springtime," *The Film Daily*, Nov. 3, 1929.

²¹ Finch, *The Art of Walt Disney*, 77.

²² Gabler, *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*, 144.

Looney Tunes and *Merrie Melodies*²³, Iwerks would return to Disney after ten years to develop processes that combined live-action and animation, as seen in later films like *Song of the South* (1946) and *Mary Poppins* (1964). During the 1960s, Iwerks would also help create some of Disneyland's classic attractions like *it's a small world* and *Great Moments with Mr. Lincoln*.²⁴ For now, Walt scrambled to gather a new team after the Oswald debacle and Iwerks's departure.

In the wake of the economic downturn, he sought out and hired several experienced and professionally-trained animators who were out of work. Walt brought on men who would later become Disney Legends, including Les Clark, Marc Davis, Ollie Johnston, and Ward Kimball.²⁵ Their collective experience only increased the quality of the Miceys and the *Symphonies*. The cartoons produced by these seasoned animators were well-drawn, but they were also narratively different from their competition. Disney shorts had polished storylines and continuity—while other studios linked gags haphazardly—populated by characters with identifiable personalities that fit with the logical narrative. They could capture viewers by exploring an animated universe of the “plausibly impossible” in which they stretched natural laws without breaking them.²⁶ Importantly, each defining element of Disney animation added to the illusion of realism. The element of realism was essential for these shorts' success because it allowed them to compete with traditional live-action films. In Walt's continued quest for alternative reality in animation, all while further distancing himself from the competition, the next logical step was color.

Color had appeared in films dating back to the late teens, but these early examples 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 an enthusiastic Walt Disney—who was interested in color even before sound—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.²⁷ So with the support of Technicolor, Disney Studios converted its next black-and-white *Silly Symphony*, *Flowers and Trees*, to full color.

Flowers and Trees premiered on July 30, 1932, at Grauman's Chinese Theater and was the first commercially released film that used the three-strip Technicolor process. Beautiful and absurd, the short is about two trees who fall in love but are almost

²³ Both series' titles obviously influenced by Disney's *Silly Symphonies*.

²⁴ “Ub Iwerks,” D23, Disney, Accessed December 1, 2019, <https://d23.com/walt-disney-legend/ub-iwerks/>.

²⁵ “Listing of Legends,” D23, Disney, Accessed December 1, 2019, <https://d23.com/listing-of-legends/>.

²⁶ Gabler, *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*, 170-173.

²⁷ Gabler, 178.

thwarted by a jealous stump who sets fire to the forest. According to Leonard Maltin, the film exemplifies the qualities of anthropomorphism and personification used in all other *Silly Symphonies*. He also notes that the film's use of color is impressive because the artists "went beyond mere color-keying to find expressive and challenging ways to use the new medium."²⁸ The full-spectrum and the artistic use of color dazzled audiences. The significance of the public response to *Flowers and Trees* cannot be overstated. A September 6th *Film Daily* review captures this importance, claiming the film to be a "genuine novelty that bids fair to put the cartoon on a new plane of importance...it looks as if color has definitely scored in the animated field."²⁹ *Flowers and Trees* contributed to the continued elevation of the art of animation. The cartoon was a technical and artistic experiment and served to test out audiences' reception to color.

It was clear that audiences and reviewers were not only open to color but hungry for more. *Flowers and Trees* not only served as a test case for the Disney Studios but the entire film industry. In a later article, *The Film Daily* states that the cartoon was "made to touch out the public reaction to color in an animated short feature," and that Walt Disney continued the use of Technicolor based on cartoon's successful premiere.³⁰ In a savvy business move, Walt 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. The Mickey cartoons would later be produced in color as well, but at the advice of Roy Disney, Mickey would remain in black-and-white for the time being. Always the logical counter to Walt's imagination, Roy saw no reason to tamper with success.³¹ With the adoption of color animation in the *Silly Symphony* cartoons, the Disney animators would have years to develop their craft and refine their artistic abilities before implementing its use on a larger scale in films like *Snow White* and *Fantasia* (1940).

By 1933, the *Silly Symphonies* rivaled Mickey Mouse in critical reception, while Mickey's image continued to paint the American consciousness, but Disney was about to enjoy its biggest commercial success yet. While Disney Studios was reveling in their achievements, the Great Depression continued to worsen. Thirteen million Americans were jobless by 1933, with a national unemployment rate of 25 percent.³² Pervasive feelings of sorrow encouraged Americans to cling to the escapism in films and animation more than ever. Amid the suffering, Disney released its newest *Symphony*, *Three Little Pigs*, in May of 1933, unaware of the effect it would have. Surprisingly, the short was a national smash hit and played in theaters week after week. The New York

²⁸ Maltin, *Of Mice and Magic*, 40.

²⁹ Phil M. Daly, "Flowers and Trees," *The Film Daily*, Sept. 6, 1932.

³⁰ "Mickey Mouse in Color May Follow Symphonies," *The Film Daily*, Sept. 17, 1932.

³¹ Gabler, *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*, 181.

³² Kennedy, *The American People in the Great Depression*, 163.

Daily News reported it as “the most talked about picture ever made...playing more return engagements than any flicker ever produced.”³³ However, the short took hold in more ways than one.

During the development of the cartoon, Walt suggested director Frank Churchill add a little song. The catchy tune, “Who’s Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?” also swept the nation, becoming a best-selling single in 1933. One could rarely escape hearing the song over the radio or whistled down the street. “Who’s Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?” was not just a musical phenomenon but a cultural one that played constantly.³⁴ While the song was a New Deal anthem, 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. However, its creator, Walt Disney, never presented the film as having any deeper meaning with no intentional reference to the Great Depression.³⁵ ³⁶ Nevertheless, many looked to *Pigs* as an archetypical representation of their struggle and as hope for their eventual hard-working triumph over the Big Bad Depression.

Three Little Pigs was a benchmark for Disney’s development of personality animation. According to Finch, the cartoon’s impact reflects the fact that *Pigs* went far beyond any of the other *Symphony* cartoons in terms of plot and character development.³⁷ Dan Thomas of the Newspaper Enterprise Association wrote on the cartoon after an interview with Walt Disney. According to Thomas, *Pigs* “changed the moviedom’s whole outlook on animated cartoons...Prior to the making of this picture, cartoons were regarded by theater managers more or less in the light of fillers...[today] animated cartoons have become very definite parts of theater programs...” with *Three Little Pigs* “becoming almost as important as the feature picture itself.”³⁸ These kinds of reviews display the acceptance of animation as a serious artistic medium. 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. Each pig conveyed a unique personality even though they looked almost identical. Importantly, the establishment of distinct characters is an element that would appear in *Snow White*. The reflections of techniques used in *Pigs* are seen among the seven distinct personalities of the dwarfs echoing the short’s direct influence and showing the connection between the short and film. Even with the astounding triumph of *Three Little*

³³ Sidney Skolsky, “TinTypes,” *Daily News* (New York, NY), Nov. 2, 1933.

³⁴ Gabler, *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*, 183.

³⁵ Finch, *The Art of Walt Disney*, 89.

³⁶ Gabler, *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*, 185.

³⁷ Finch, *The Art of Walt Disney*, 89.

³⁸ Dan Thomas, “How the Three Little Pigs Came to Market,” *The LaCross Tribune* (LaCross, WI), Dec. 1, 1933.

Pigs, at this point, Walt saw little future in shorts if he wanted to grow his business.³⁹ On the heels of the pigs' success, Walt Disney would finally be able to afford his dreams.

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."⁴⁰ In full-color, *Symphonies* were expensive to produce, costing around \$30,000 and needing at least \$100,000 to turn a profit.⁴¹ 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.

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. By licensing Mickey's image, the studio saw an increase from \$10,000 to \$200,000 in royalties in the first year, and as early as 1934, Walt claimed he made more money on the merchandising rights than the cartoons.⁴² 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* and Mickeys as the animation department further experimented with color and character development while simultaneously pouring their increasing talents into *Snow White*. In early 1937, the film was nearing completion, but Walt felt that there was still something missing.

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 with a cartoon. His animators first experimented in creating an illusion of depth in a *Silly Symphony* called *Three Orphan Kittens* (1935), but Walt wanted to push it even further. 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. In a February 1938 article for the *American Cinematographer*, William Stull describes the technologically complicated operation of

³⁹ Gabler, *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*, 214.

⁴⁰ Maltin, *Of Mice and Magic*, 51.

⁴¹ Gabler, *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*, 214.

⁴² Gabler, 198.

the camera, stating that the “problems of perspective, proportion, and timing in these multiplane scenes can be incredibly complex...The range of adjustments permitted by this intricate photographic set-up is incredible.”⁴³ After a preliminary test on the seven dwarfs’ cottage, 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.”⁴⁴ The narrative follows the story of a group of animals living in a dilapidated windmill that must survive a frightening thunderstorm. It is subtle and closely related to the type of cartoon pioneered by *The Skeleton Dance*. The film even grabbed the Academy Award for Best Short Subject, and its reception showed that audiences could be swept up in the capturing visuals and seamless marriage of the music and action without the assistance of a defined storyline.⁴⁵

Although it would require more time, money, and risk, Disney used the multiplane camera to rework shots in *Snow White*. According to Neal Gabler, Walt Disney was not concerned; he knew that the multiplane camera would push the film “beyond animation to where it could challenge and even surpass live-action films.”⁴⁶ 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 when computer animation could produce the same effect.

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 essential 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

⁴³ William Stull, “Three Hundred Men and Walt Disney,” *The American Cinematographer*, Feb. 1938.

⁴⁴ “Six Disneys,” *Democrat and Chronicle* (Rochester, NY), Oct. 31, 1937.

⁴⁵ Gabler, *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*, 258.

⁴⁶ Gabler, 259.

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 *Symphonies*, 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 the permanent position as a leader in entertainment. While the *Symphonies'* life ended shortly after *Snow White*, Walt would continue to innovate throughout the twentieth century, effectively establishing an empire. Without the existence of the *Silly Symphonies*, it is unclear if Disney 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.