



Nature and Origins of Disney Feature Films

Abstract

It seems that every single person on the planet watched at least one Disney cartoon once in his or her life, and it is completely understandable since it is impossible to resist to the level of magic in the films produced by this company. It is the story and background of the most Disney feature films that is unknown to the wide audience, as people tend to think that these films are created for children and adolescents as the target audience.

To lift the veil of the secrecy surrounding the most popular feature films of the Walt Disney Studios, it was decided to conduct an extensive research on the topic. This research paper aims to address the questions stated above and suggest answers to these questions while highlighting some major facts, establishments, and developments of the Disney Animation Studios as we know it today, as well as analyze some interesting and compelling facts about the origin and nature of the most popular cartoons produced by the studios in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. These goals are achieved due to extensive research of printed and electronic sources to gather the necessary information and evidence for the purposes of this research.

The research paper reviews four most popular feature films produced in the 20th century, such as Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937), Bambi (1942), Cinderella (1950), and The Little Mermaid (1989) to tell several facts about the background of these films that may be unknown to the audience.

Introduction

It is extremely hard not to watch cartoons at all, as they are entertaining, funny, fascinating, romantic, and informative at the same time. We laugh, cry, worry, and cheer with our favorite animated heroes and never get tired of watching these cartoons again and again. And, of course, Disney animated films are enjoyed the most by viewers of all generations since the history of this animation studios is long enough to produce more than 50 animated films. And that's not taking into account numerous blockbuster movies produced by the Disney Studios. We see the Disney logo as the movie or a cartoon starts, and we know that it is going to be something fantastic, like the Disney Company itself. This is how it all feels and looks like from the viewer perspective, but there are a few of us who ever wonder what stands behind the Disney cartoon production, who are people who worked at this or that cartoon and what is the origin and background of our favorite cartoons.

This research paper aims to some major facts, establishments, and achievements of the Disney Animation Studios, as well as share some interesting and compelling facts about the origin and nature of the most popular cartoons produced by the studio in the twenty and twenty-first century. A set of materials has been used to analyze the abovementioned information and come up with the conclusion about the nature of Disney animated films and the main reason why they became so popular.

Research will be performed based on the sources that are available online, as well as on the personal perception of the cartoon by the author of this research paper.

1. Early Disney Animation and Advancement of Animation Techniques

Certainly, Disney Company as we know it today is the story of development, progress, and work of many animators, directors, supervising animators, and many other professionals, but it all started with one man whose name is Walt Disney. He is considered to be one of the most iconic figures in the animation sphere, and it is rather useful to learn what happened to Disney Studios in its early years.

Disney founded his animation studios and got involved into the animation process long before he started creating his Amusement Park. Pallant (21) gravitates to the fact that Disney as an animator was a lucky person as he tended to be at the right time and the right place, and that his late entrance to the sphere of animated feature films production made him well-informed comparing with other great animators of that time. What is meant here is that today many people associate him with the invention of animation, but it is a false argument that went broadcast and was assigned to Disney. Pallant (21) goes on telling that Disney, as well as his Studios, entered on the animation scene after such pioneers as J. Stuart Blackton, Émile Cohl, Winsor McCay, and John Randolph Bray with their inventions and developments, but he and his Studios did great things, taking animation matters into their hands to develop a vast number of important features, elements, and cornerstones of mainstream animation. He managed to understand the importance of progress in the cartoons production and embraced all the inventions to improve what was practiced by many and make it better. The Steamboat Willie cartoon introduced Mickey Mouse with animation and sound effects coming together on screen for the first time in the Studios history, and then there were others that grew and multiplied its fame.

However, short cartoons were popular among the audience. Disney dedicated most of his time to feature films, and "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" became the first such feature-length animated cartoon filmed with multiplane cameras when it was released in 1937 ("Our Films"). It is also necessary to mention that Snow White is one of the first feature animations (released by Disney himself) that contained songs accompanying the action.

The feature got a major success, and that had a strong influence on the cartoon producers to release the original soundtracks that quickly became popular among the target audience. Other cartoons include Pinocchio (1940), Fantasia (1940), Dumbo (1941), and Bambi (1942), and Bambi was nominated for three Academy Awards for the best sound recording, original song, and score ("Our Films"). Starting from 1942 and up until 1950, the studio released no feature films; studio could not release any feature films due to the war outburst all around the world, as well as during the post war period as it lost a lot of money during the war. The only thing the Studio could do was to produce more package films as it did during the previous years, but they brought no relevant investment return in the result. The Studio was almost at the edge of being closed down when Disney risked everything he had to produce another feature film that was considered as the last ray of hope for the studio. It had incredible success and saved the Studio. This feature film is Cinderella, and it is considered as the animation classic among animated feature films (Brunet). Cinderella's success marked another spin of popularity of the Disney Animation.

2. Origins and Background of the Most Popular Disney Cartoons

It is safe to presume that the most part of the population of the planet watched many of the Disney Studios cartoons, but most of Disney fans never thought of what stands behind the attractive picture. Virtually, all feature films produced by the Disney Animation Studios can be viewed as those that are based on nature and animals as leading characters, fairy tales, princess-themed feature films, story or book-based feature films, original ideas-based, and technologically developed animated films. However, the division is imperfect by its nature, as it was developed based on the general idea of these animated films. By conducting an extensive

research, it was decided to limit a number of feature films selected for the purposes of this research paper. The feature films chosen for the paper include Snow White, Bambi, Cinderella, and The Little Mermaid. Here, special attention is given the nature of feature films, a message(s) that these films convey, and plot's background.

Snow White. To know the origin of Snow White and be able to comprehend it, it is necessary to know a fairy tale 'Snow White' by Grimm Brothers in which the Evil Queen, Snow White's stepmother, tried to kill her three times, and she succeeded on the third one, as the Queen hated Snow White for her beauty (Grimm Brothers, 6). It is known that Grimm Brothers gathered folktales and urban legends and published them in their books. The story's origin dates back to the Middle Ages, and this is not the only one version of the Snow White tale; there are other versions that may seem to be even crueler than the Grimm's tale. It is not hard to predict that many of Snow White movie fans know about this striking difference between the tale's printed version and the produced feature film. Walt Disney decided to produce Snow White, despite his brother Roy Disney and Disney's wife tried to reassure him that a feature-length cartoon may become founder at the box office, as people just do not get used to sitting more than ten or fifteen minutes in the theatres to watch a cartoon (Brunet, 2016), but the timing for the animate film production was as perfect as it can possibly be. Walt Disney changed the plot of the Snow White story slightly and made it less cruel and savage so that the audience may enjoy the story as the plot culminates. For example, the Evil Queen dies from jumping over the cliff on the contrary to the original versions in which she danced to death in the heated iron shoes that was a common punishment practice for the Medieval Europe (McGlatheay, 60). Snow White's resurrection in the original versions of the story is quite the opposite. Unlike the version in which Snow White was awakened by the prince's kiss, in the original versions an apple piece fell out of her throat while the prince carried her coffin to his castle (Hart, 2016). The development of color, sound, and soundtrack, in particular, made this feature film special and attractive to all generations of viewers. Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937) has become the first feature film with recorded soundtracks for the movie (Pallant, 25). However, there were some difficulties with filming, drawing, and staging the dwarfs, as Disney intended to shoot the film on his own, but then handed over this role to David Hand. Due to the presence of numerous supporting and leading characters in a particular scene, it was difficult to assign one animator to the one character. To facilitate the staging process, it was decided to break characters into groups of four or three. To make the characters recognizable, individual character poses were created in which some animators, as well as Studio employees, acted as some characters for animators to refine mechanics of characters, if necessary (Pallant, 12). It was risky in all undertakings because Walt Disney invested all the funds he had to produce Snow White, and it was certainly worth it. The first Disney princess film has quickly become a hit, and it has been recognized as a true classic. This is how Snow White was produced, and this is how it has become so popular among all generations of viewers.

Bambi. This feature film is still considered to be as one of the favorite Disney's films (Brunet, 2016), and it is a truly fascinating feature film, as it catches attention of millions of viewers throughout the world even seventy-four years after its release. It's worth mentioning that Disney based the feature film on a book authored by Felix Salten, *Bambi: A life in the Woods*, but the full-length film became more popular than its printed original. Animators did their best to make Bambi's drawings attractive and adored by the audience irrespective of the age and likings. Designers, animators, supervisors, and Disney worked effortlessly to make their audience fall in love with the depicted characters and appeal to human feelings to empathize with Bambi's story (Whitley, 7).

It is also interesting to mention that animators listened to lectures, traveled to the Zoo of Los Angeles and recorded deers' movements, gestures, and behavior in the wild to make sketches and drawings for the film, as well as Disney tried to raise some fawns and made their drawings for the cartoon.

Despite an obvious adorableness of the feature film, Bambi got a poor return in box offices due to America's accession to WW II followed by the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor, and because population in other countries of the world faced serious troubles (Whitley, 8).

There was another problem that Bambi's producers faced once the film was ready to be released. That is not the problem literally, but rather a scandal that ran high immediately after the film premier. The murder of Bambi's mother attracted attention to the issue of animals shooting, and breeds conservation problem that turned out to be an extremely crucial and burning issue. However, there was another side of the coin since hunters saw an obvious threat from the side of the Disney feature to their activity that was acknowledged as legal under certain conditions. Even today, it is the burning issue, but more important is the fact that this film is not about poaching, it is about family, love, loss, and power of friendship.

Cinderella. If "Snow White" is the first princess animated feature film in the Disney History, then "Cinderella" is certainly the most recognized and popular feature film ever. What really should be mentioned is that Disney experienced serious financial problems because of WWII, and the studio needed an instant hit to get back in the business ("Disney's Cinderella Opens"). Therefore, Disney followed an obviously winning path by choosing a story similar to the award-winning Snow White that seemed to be a great choice because of the success of the picture right after its release. The return from the film was so big that Disney managed to hire more production teams and proceed with producing more feature films that Disney had always dreamed about, such as "Beauty and the Beast", "Peter Pan",

"Alice in the Wonderland", etc. Disney established his own distribution company and began constructing Disneyland (Demosthenes, 2016).

The film background is also very peculiar, as it turns out that there were several versions of Cinderella tale in the world history, but Charles Perrault and the Grimm Brothers versions are the most popular. Nevertheless, it is a great luck that Disney used the Charles Perrault version for the cartoon's background since the Grimm Brothers version is much more violent and includes such violent acts as cutting off body parts and pecking out the eyes. The film is considered a Classic Disney and received three Academy Awards in the end.

The Little Mermaid. "The Little Mermaid" was released in 1989 and became the greatest success of the studio. "Snow White" brought the attention to the studio, "Cinderella" saved it from the going bankrupt, but it was "The Little Mermaid" that led the Disney Studio to the era called the Disney Renaissance. This period of feature films production included such legendary releases as Beauty and the Beast (1991), Alladin (1992), The Lion King (1994), Pocahontas (1995), The Hunchback of Notre Dame (1996), Hercules (1997), Mulan (1998), and Tarzan (1999). It is not a secret that The Little Mermaid is the most iconic figure of the Disney World even today. Whitley (21) talks that fairy tale adaptations are archaic, and their narratives are quite simple, but the combination of drama, technology, talent, and the original story makes such adaptations recognizable and adored by all generations of viewers. It is worth mentioning that DS utilized the hand-painted cel animation for the first time in "The Little Mermaid". It is this feature film that tested a newly developed and implemented technique and process called CAPS, which stands for the computer animation production system. The studio received the Academy Award for the CAPS technique in 1992, and the feature film was nominated and won two Academy Awards for the best original soundtrack "Under the Sea" and for the best original score. The most important feature of the film is certainly its background story that was written by Hans Christian Andersen. Disney considered and wanted to make a film or at least a short movie based on the Hans Christian Andersen tale, so the studio had some drawings and sketches of the mermaid and her supporting friends at that time ("Our Films"). The way the underwater world is conveyed is astonishing, as well as behavior and appearance of Ariel and other supporting characters, such as little Flounder, or all-so-mighty Sebastian. The story is all about two realms - water and the above world - that are united in the protagonist named Ariel. It is also the story about the family bound and the bound of love and passion that is impossible to break no matter what challenges await the characters on the way to their happy end. Unlike the original tale written by Hans Christian Andersen, DS plot gravitates toward happy endings at no matter what cost it may take to achieve, so this is exactly what awaited The Little Mermaid. Moreover, producers got the point since critics praised the film, and it was warmly welcomed all round the world. It has found its rightful place among the most adored Disney films ever.

3. Conclusion

All Disney feature films are distinctive no matter what a viewer chooses to watch for the first or tenth time. It is this feeling of being on the edge between the reality and fairy tale that captures attention until a viewer sees the film credits. When *The Lion King* starts, a viewer cannot help but get goose bumps.

Putting together all feature films produced by the studio, it is possible to talk about some distinctive features of Disney films that unite human protagonists, animal supporting characters, magical beings, legends, and technological progress in different variations.

The long history of DS gathered in one place many professionals of their trade from animator assistants to CEOs who know what the Disney's next blockbuster should be to make it iconic.

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