

Panel H3

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Discourses on Animation Authors

Susan Ohmer

Walt Disney in *Vogue*: Celebrity, Animation, and Modernity



In his study *Disney Discourses* animation scholar Eric Smoodin drew our attention to the ways in which the public image of Walt Disney was constructed in mass-circulation magazines during the 1930s and 40s. Publications such as *Life*, *Look*, and *Popular Mechanics* circulated articles about Walt Disney the man, the studio he founded, and the animated cartoons produced there that constructed an image of Disney as representative of the American dream of individualism and entrepreneurship. Scholars have, however, not examined the images of Walt Disney, the studio and its films that circulated in more specialized magazines during this period, magazines aimed at discrete segments of readers interested in new developments in the arts.

This individual talk will examine the construction of Walt Disney--the man, the films and the studio—that circulated in *Vogue* during the 1930s. Still published today, *Vogue* during the 1930s featured articles on fashion, modern art, music and literature aimed at an elite, wealthy audience of tastemakers in major metropolitan areas such as New York and Los Angeles. An expensive magazine, *Vogue* constructed and appealed to readers who were interested and involved in current trends. The magazine both celebrated and helped to create an image of modernity that brought new groups of writers, artists, musicians, and designers to the forefront of American culture. Looking at how the magazine presented Walt Disney, Disney films, and the Disney studio during this period enables us to understand more fully how Disney emerged as a celebrity during this era and how the studio's films became emblems of modernity among influential tastemakers of the time.

Disney and the studio's films were the only animated works mentioned in the magazine during this time. In articles, reviews and even illustrations, *Vogue* positioned the man and the studio as being part of new modernist trends in the arts. Walt Disney himself appeared in groups of caricatures that included writers such as Dorothy Parker and musicians such as George Gershwin, thus linking him to contemporary developments in other art forms. The magazine also celebrated the character of Mickey Mouse as an icon of modernity and a new form of celebrity. Review of Disney films highlighted their novel juxtapositions of music and image and linked the films to other developments in cinema during this period. Both Disney the man and Disney films celebrated a relaxed form of amusement and entertainment that shared characteristics with jazz and modern art in the 1930s.

Examining the representations of Disney the man, the studio, and the films is possible because of newly available electronic databases. Richard Abel and others have noted how the mass digitization of newspapers enables us to study connections and influences that we would not have been able to track so easily before. Similarly, the digitization of the *Vogue* archive makes it possible to trace the magazine's inclusion of Disney across articles, interviews, illustrations and ads, creating a broad intertextual matrix that connects Disney more broadly to other movements of the time. A final goal of the talk, then, is to consider the implications for research and analysis of new forms of datamining that electronic databases now make possible.

Biography

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Susan Ohmer teaches classes in film and television history and culture, including "Film and Digital Culture," "Media and Presidential Elections," and "Walt Disney." She is the author of *George Gallup in Hollywood* (Columbia University Press, 2006) and is completing a book on the Disney studio during the 1940s. Her research focuses on the industrial and organizational aspects of media companies and has appeared in journals including *Film History* and the *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* and in the anthologies *Funny Pictures: Animation and Comedy in Studio-Era Hollywood* and *American Cinema of the 1930s*. As an administrator, she has served as a Provost's Fellow (2007-2009), as Assistant Provost (2009-2011), an Interim Director of the Hesburgh Libraries (2010-2011) and from 2011-2013 led Digital ND, a campus-wide initiative to streamline and strengthen digital work at Notre Dame.