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Cartoons On the Frontlines:

How Disney Treated WWII

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Animation 3253

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In the time before the U.S. officially joined the war to the surrender of Nazi Germany, Disney reflected the major changes that occurred in society during WWII. This can be seen in the many manifestations of propaganda and war-themed animations the studio provided for the Allied effort. Within these films, Disney utilized the social, emotional, and conceptual realities of the war to transcend traditional perceptions of animation. These realities varied in tone and intended visual perception from one cartoon to the next, but Disney generated this variety in several basic elements of film.

Initially, Disney treated the war as an opportunity to expand the usability of animation as a medium. Disney's first contribution to the European conflict came in the form of an instructional video on flush riveting. *The Four Methods of Flush Riveting* opens with a paragraph that states that the purpose of the film is a demonstration for "the quickest & cheapest method whereby the animation medium can be applied to national defense training" ("Four Methods of Flush Riveting", 0:00-0:15). Coinciding with this claim, *The Four Methods of Flush Riveting* features animated riveting tools that were emphasized and elucidated as necessary by various technical labels and symbols. Excluding the narrator, who takes the audience through the technical processes of the film, there are no characters. In terms of comedy and storyline, this film starkly contrasts its predecessors (Blount). In fact, historian and film critic Neal Gabler remarks the film "hardly rivals Snow White or Pinocchio in entertainment value" (54). This, though, was precisely what Disney was striving to achieve, but they didn't entirely abandon their roots as an entertainment studio.

In films that followed, there is a blend of instructional and entertaining animation. *Stop That Tank!*, a twenty-two-minute film on operating anti-tank rifles, begins with a three-minute comedic short of a crude and overemotional Adolph Hitler fleeing from anti-tank rifles before

transitioning into the instructional portion (0:35-3:25). Similarly, *The Thrifty Pig* offered few contributions as a stand-alone short film. The narrative portion of the film is almost entirely lifted from Disney's 1933 film *Three Little Pigs*, save for the addition of the wolf wearing Nazi regalia and the brick-laying pig advertising war bonds. However, a propaganda piece for war bonds follows it. Once again, a title card takes the audience out of the cartoon world before transitioning into an educational sequence that applies to the real world. Film scholars Michael Shull and David Wilt specifically praise Walt Disney for having "been one of the few top executives to grasp the idea that cartoons could be used for political as well as entertainment purposes" (60). By isolating animation from its typical elements of humor or enthralling narrative, the studio singled-out the visual appeal of the medium. With the global pressure of WWII growing, Disney utilized this turbulent time to prove the ability for animation to be used to educate audiences rather than solely entertain them.

The lack of traditional elements did not last long, though, as Disney began to treat the war with greater immediacy by making it a major subject in its animation. Just before the attack on Pearl Harbor, and the U.S.'s subsequent declaration of war, Disney's war films came as a brief interruption to Disney's normal cycle of predominantly Donald cartoons (Blount). As addressed earlier, *The Four Methods of Flush Riveting* was void of any true characters while *Stop That Tank!* and *The Thrifty Pig* used figures that pre-existed in the real-world and the Disney stock footage collection, respectively. The major animated characters were untouched by the effects of WWII. This changed once the U.S. declared war on Japan, and *The New Spirit One* became one of the first films to both showcase a fresh animation sequence about the war and star an established Disney character. Much like the first character films, *The New Spirit* was a propaganda effort to educate audience members on the importance of making a specific

contribution to the war, in this case, paying the federal income tax. The film diverges from the other efforts by blending the comedic characterization of Donald Duck with an educational intention. Donald Duck's character, a naturally pugnacious personality with an eager attitude, seems to be a perfect fit for a world at war. He showcases emotions felt by audience members as he becomes disgruntled by the idea of paying taxes yet desires to support his country. With this film, WWII and the issues that arise from it entered the realm of Disney's major stars and rejoined the animated world with the real one. In this way, Disney used WWII as a method of bringing realism to the world of its animated characters.

Coinciding with this familiarity, the war changed how Disney approached audiences with animation. As the war progressed, Disney's cartoons divided consumers into groups based on their roles in the war. With their cartoons no longer having to abide by elements of entertainment, the studio made war-themed films from two different viewpoints: civilians and servicemen. The National Museum of American History summarizes the extent of this division:

At the beginning of World War II, Disney's most famous product was animation, which logically was put to patriotic use in educational shorts and training films—and it even played a role in international diplomacy. Animated shorts were used for many different purposes. *The New Spirit* helped explain income tax laws enacted in 1942 to help fund the war, while *Fall Out—Fall In* provided entertainment aligned with current events and promoted patriotic service, as exemplified by Donald Duck. (Bemis)

For the soldier, training films such as *The Four Methods of Flush Riveting* and *Stop That Tank!* appealed to their interests as recruits preparing for combat. *The New Spirit* focused on the domestic roles of war life because the intended audience was on the home front, facing the conflict between the burden of the income tax and their expected duty as supportive civilians.

Furthermore, both audiences became more involved in the process of encountering the cartoon. With the war calling upon both groups to take on specific tasks, some of Disney's cartoons addressed audiences as if they were present in the animated world. The narrator of *The Four Methods of Flush Riveting* speaks directly to the audience as a professor might do with his class, introducing a summary of the video by saying "now, let's review the four methods of flush riveting just demonstrated" (7:58-8:04). He uses the inclusive contraction "let's" and recognizes the presence of the viewer. It is a look of outward regard that goes beyond a side glance or brief quip and makes the audience a part of the animation's performance. Due to the effects of WWII's division of the population, Disney war films became tailored to multiple audiences rather than a collective whole and expanded the role of audiences in the viewing process.

Disney's relatively unique approach to depicting the events of WWII influenced the visual and tonal style of their animation. Even among their war animations, what began as overall light-hearted and pleasant compositions became the crazed images of surrealism and dark narratives. For example, *The Thrifty Pig* remained visually consistent throughout the story despite the pressures from the Nazi wolf, never losing the story-book imagery of its source. *Der Fuehrer's Face*, however, veers from its goofy comedic sequence into a fast-paced climax with expressive colors and warped images. At the end, when Donald awakens from his apparent dream in his modernistic yet patriotic room, it is clear the surrealist element was used to visualize the oppressive insanity of life under Nazi rule. The difference between these cartoons is two years and the U.S.'s involvement in WWII (Blount). It seems that once the U.S. went to war with Nazi Germany, the visual depiction of the political structures of WWII became more involved in Disney's animation.

The trend of political involvement continued in Disney's tonal approach to animation when the studio used several film elements to manipulate the tone of their films. In one of the more drastic approaches to showcasing a tonal shift in their animation, Disney released *Education for Death*. Unlike previous films, *Education for Death* veered from spirited propaganda of WWII and focused on some of the darkest realities of the political conflict. One publication describes the topical difference between this cartoon and earlier efforts:

Education for Death lacks the humorous element of *Der Fuehrer's Face*. This intense cartoon took a far more serious tone. Adapted from a book by Gregor Ziemer, Disney studios escalated their cartoons to dealing with difficult war topics. In this cartoon, he shows how the Nazis warped the minds of children and the harshness and brutality of the Nazi state. (Thompson 6)

In a format that resembles a documentary film, the story follows the life of a German boy, Hans, as he is groomed to be the typical Nazi soldier. Even beyond the somber visuals and depressive narrative, *Education for Death* greatly utilized sound to depict the tone of the narrative. With character dialogue, apart from the narrator, being entirely in German, the tonal changes were cued by an instrumental soundtrack. In perhaps one of the greatest demonstrations of tone in the film, Hans is ushered out to war shackled to hundreds of other newly raised Nazi soldiers. The music, a spirited march, quickly dies to a mournful drone as the army's image fades into rows of tombstones. The closing card fades to black to the high-pitched cry of a string instrument and a menacing blare of trumpets (10:11-11:18). This is a stark contrast from the jovial marching band performance that concluded *Der Fuehrer's Face* (7:38-7:55). The Allied power's interpretation of a malignant Nazi Germany created these stylistic changes in Disney's animation. Whether the

propaganda effort was for a satirical or harsh depiction of the war, Disney determined the tone of the animation based on the political events of WWII.

Though there are many indications that Disney used the war as a metaphorical sandbox for animation innovation, some of the studio's most ambitious work was driven by the war itself and the fact that the studio's homeland was a part of it. In other words, Disney viewed WWII as the momentous event that it was and dedicated its services to the support of its country. *Victory Through Air Power* was the fruit of this idea. An hour and ten-minute long theatrical release, *Victory Through Air Power* documented the history of air combat with an emphasis on the value of aviation strategic bombing. According to the Walt Disney Family Museum, *Victory Through Air Power* was Walt Disney's contribution to the war:

There can be little doubt that (Walt) Disney's chief motivation here was patriotism. The subject matter was not really of a commercial nature, but, more significantly, Walt, who always preached timelessness in his pictures, was with *Victory Through Air Power* violating one of his firmest principles. After the war the film would be virtually useless. Moreover, as one Disney scholar pointed out, "For a man whose financial standing was rather shaky, and whose studio was thriving on military assignments, it was a bold move." (Shale)

The notion that Walt Disney dedicated so much time, money, and animation effort into making a non-commissioned war film further reveals the emotional impact WWII had on the studio head. The length of the film itself was the studio's sacrifice on the scale of other domestic war-aiding efforts. The war was a means for Disney to combine his talents with his passion for his country. This translates clearly through the animation as *Victory Through Air Power* uses visually stable

images, a few comedic elements, and an upbeat conclusion. Ultimately, the war surfaced as a meticulously thought out subject of animation so Walt Disney could convey his own efforts for aiding the Allies.

Though Disney's efforts whole-heartedly supported the perspective of the U.S. and Allied powers, the studio treated WWII as a medium for showcasing the visual and conceptual flexibility of animation. The war provided a safe space for experimental risks in the distribution of the artistic elements of animation and audience engagement. Nevertheless, Disney never lost sight of the traditional appeals of animation during this time. The studio further extended the normalcy of a turbulent society by incorporating the footprints of a warring nation into the animated realm. It is clear that Disney valued the intrinsic significance of the war, whether artistically or opportunistically, and sought to bring that level of importance into their animation.

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