

Research Proposal

We Make the Magic: Disney's Role in American Propaganda During World War II

Kyla Yein

Honors 2000-03

12/13/2020

Dr. Dionisio

Abstract

The well-loved characters from Disney animation make up our childhood, from magical princesses to the popular Mickey Mouse, but the use of these characters was not always for entertainment. Walt Disney Studios, commissioned by the US government, produced animated short films centered around its characters, especially Donald Duck. The shorts, integrating messages that promote nationalism and the increase of military funding, served to convince the American citizens to “do their part” during World War II.

This research allows for the exploration of patterns in the history of how media can influence viewers by appealing to a large audience by understanding the events leading up to the propaganda commission and why Disney animation was used to persuade the American viewers. The use of animation and popular characters to promote the messages of the government is prominent today, seen in films such as *Captain Marvel* (2019) and *Animal Farm* (1954). Furthermore, the lasting prevalence of Hollywood’s contribution to military propaganda is investigated by understanding the purpose of Disney’s wartime shorts and their appeal. I would like to research how Disney used Donald Duck for wartime propaganda to explore how well-known characters in media have been utilized to preserve the long-lasting relationship between Hollywood and the government.

Introduction

During the onset of World War II, the United States Government hired Walt Disney Animation Studios to create a series of short films that would reflect the audience’s “pent-up frustrations culturally, especially toward limitations on the home front because of the War”

(Hobbs 191), with messages of nationalistic patriotism and encouragement to pay taxes and save fats to help with the production of ammunition.

In the 1940s, the Disney studio was faced with problems set by Walt Disney. The majority of the animators working for the company were paid significantly low wages, deciding to go on strike after Disney's significantly higher salary was exposed (TIME). Alongside Disney's decision to go public to make up for financial losses, the animators pushed for unionization, which caused Disney to fire his top animator who wanted to join, resulting in a walkout from many of the employees. Walt Disney, in an effort to revive his company due to these factors, accepted the commission from the US government (TIME) and proceeded to spearhead the production of the short films for the American public.

With the ongoing war occurring, audiences turned to cheerful, bright animated stories that provided entertainment and distractions to an anxious nation, because "animation did not just conform to the needs of the American people, it reflected them" (Mollet 5), a pattern Walt Disney and the government noticed, effectively utilizing the power of entertainment by combining cartoons and war propaganda.

Background

Fueled with a government commission to increase support for World War II, Walt Disney and his company created a series of propaganda short films, renamed "psychological productions" (BBC) to sanitize their purpose, that mostly centered around Donald Duck and his "duty" as an American citizen living through an overseas war.

The patriotic theme of shorts such as "Der Fuehrer's Face" and "Donald Gets Drafted" leads to the question of how the numerous factors, from the visuals to the caricatures of the

characters, contribute to the mass propaganda during wartime. The shorts portraying Donald as ultra-patriotic and fighting against the Axis Powers aims to bolster the morale of the public because high enthusiasm for war is integral for the production of weapons, enlistments for the army, and military funding. Moreover, the exaggerated characterizations of the Axis powers (“Der Fuehrer’s Face”) were added into the Disney shorts to turn Americans against the enemies to further encourage fighting in the war or increasing financial contributions for the government.

The focus on Donald Duck, however, is not limited to war scenes. “The New Spirit” focuses on Donald Duck and his reaction to the need for recruits to fight in the war, with the radio announcer explaining it is a “sacrifice” to do his part. The voice mentions how important paying income tax is for the government to use the money for war, military, explosives, and democracy. The short serves as an instruction manual on how to pay taxes and why it is so important to do so for the war to convince Americans to fund the military and its weapons. The driving force that unites the series of short films and the Hollywood films on American soldiers during this time is the emphasis for action to fight the enemy forces, where the Germans were shown as “incurably bad” and the Japanese were “sinister and monstrous”, so the public would be encouraged to donate funds to increase the military budget (Mollet 144). The widespread popularity of films and television shows allowed for mass propaganda to fulfill the goals of the US government to increase war funds and underscore nationalistic views.

Researching how Donald Duck was utilized in these propaganda films needs to be explored because the way popular characters are inserted in films, television, and other media affects how the audience interprets the films, which is taken advantage of in government-backed media.

Methods

The initial step in the research is to collect relevant primary and secondary sources about the use of Donald Duck in the animated shorts, public reaction to the United States entering WWII, Disney propaganda, and the historical events leading up to the films' production. By doing so, the primary sources provide direct insight into the events researched and the secondary sources give outside perspectives and interpretations of the primary sources. During this time, a trip to the Disney Family Museum's *The Walt Disney Studios and World War II* immersive exhibition would be completed to observe how Disney's contributions to the war effort are portrayed by the museum dedicated to him. This exhibit is important for researching this topic because it showcases rare clips, literature, and historical objects, according to the Walt Disney's Family Museum website, providing an investigation of primary sources normally unavailable online and in secondary sources. Next, these sources must be analyzed and interpreted to provide context and to note the author, validity, credibility, and bias, which all contribute to the arguments about the centering of Donald Duck and the impact of using characters to promote a government agenda. After researching and evaluating the sources, a cohesive narrative must be formed by critically using the evidence, analyzing the relationships among the Disney short films, Donald Duck, and the American public during WWII.

Expected Results

Analyzing the propaganda shorts that informed the American public of the nation's resources and ways to contribute, along with the shorts that provided a perspective of the enemies' psyche and compared it to that of Americans' (Bowdoin 41), the focus on the use of Donald Duck means the way the different types of animated propaganda, whether it is to provide

information or entertain, portray this character are studied, and to recognize the uniting factor among these shorts.

As a result, the expected outcome for researching this topic is that Donald Duck centered around Disney's wartime propaganda because he represented the general public's outlook on WWII as he is depicted as struggling after being thrown into war and failing to comply with his authority figures. Disney's characterizations of Donald Duck allowed the audience to relate to him while providing entertainment by adding slapstick humor and lighthearted animation. Using Donald Duck as the icon of these films provided the audience to be able to recognize an "everyday man" character who was prone to making mistakes, unlike Mickey Mouse, who was considered less relatable. An example of this capitalization on relatability is seen when Donald is constantly subjected to food rations and being forced to work overtime in a factory, faced with the impending need for an increase in production, as his authority figures are set as the antagonists ("Der Fuehrer's Face"). As the series of animated shorts about Donald Duck blends elements of slapstick humor and serious realism, the uniting factor is that he is seen as the underdog - unable to complete his tasks in his arduous job, underestimated by authority, and prone to intense emotions when wronged by others. This characterization is seen throughout the propaganda shorts centering Donald, allowing the audience to connect with him and his struggles, able to relate to their reality facing a world war.

Conclusion

The study of historical instances of military and war propaganda in entertainment allows for the investigation of modern media and their purposes. The prevalence of propaganda in entertainment goes beyond the Disney shorts produced during WWII, which had written in

unique storylines and characterization for Donald Duck to adhere to the government's agenda. In more modern films, the government has continued to utilize the audience perception of well-liked characters to promote military activity and public perception of the government.

This pattern can be seen in the animated film *Animal Farm* (1954), based on George Orwell's novel of the same name, where the Central Intelligence Agency bought the film rights after Orwell's death and rewrote the ending to be more evidently anti-Communist to fit the government's message during the tumultuous times during the Cold War (Zuckerman, "How The CIA Played Dirty Tricks with Culture"). Creating this film adaptation to be animated with talking animals, while integrating heavily political messages that are generated by the government is not unlike Disney's wartime "psychological productions." The impact of altering Orwell's intended critiques and work in the guise of a lighthearted, animated film was constructed, intending for audiences to be entertained by humorous caricatures of animals while invested in the doctored storyline.

A more modern example is the military involvement in the production of *Captain Marvel* (2019), where the United States Air Force was providing funding and resources such as extras, authentic jets, air force bases, and training (Barber, "Why 'Captain Marvel' Is a Recruiting Win for the Air Force"). The government's hand in funding and aiding in the production of *Captain Marvel* parallels the same involvement from the government when it commissioned Walt Disney to create animated shorts to instill nationalism while providing good publicity for the military. Both *Captain Marvel* and the Donald Duck-centered animated shorts highlight the journeys of two popular characters whose storylines are written by the government wanting to encourage their messages, thereby seeking to alter public perception of these characters to align with their motive.

From the creation of Disney propaganda centering Donald Duck to government involvement in modern filmmaking, the government's ability to provide needed funds and to use their national power to influence or even alter the stories being told through visual media has been implemented throughout the 20th and 21st century. By using characters such as the hot-headed, yet relatable, Donald Duck, the powerful Captain Marvel, and seemingly comical animals of Orwell's novel, the intended messages controlled by an external figure can influence audiences to conform, encouraging them to follow the heroic journeys of the characters and to "do their part." With this history in mind, awareness of the uses of well-liked characters in media can be increased by exploring the way these characters impact how the audience interprets the messages, much like the American public's exposure to government propaganda, made possible due to Disney's hand in its production.

Works Cited

- Barber, James. "Why 'Captain Marvel' Is a Recruiting Win for the Air Force." *Military.com*, 20 Mar. 2019, www.military.com/undertheradar/2019/03/20/why-captain-marvel-recruiting-win-air-force.html.
- Books, LIFE. "Walt Disney and World War II: Trouble in Toonland." *Time*, Time, 12 May 2016, time.com/4326360/walt-disney-world-war-ii-excerpt/.
- Bowdoin, Van Riper A. *Learning from Mickey, Donald and Walt: Essays on Disney's Edutainment Films*. McFarland & Co., 2010.
- Hobbs, Priscilla. *Walt's Utopia: Disneyland and American Mythmaking*. McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2015.
- Jackson, Wilfred and Ben Sharpsteen, directors. *The New Spirit*. National Screen Service, 1942.
- King, Jack. *Commando Duck*. YouTube, Walt Disney Pictures, 1944, www.youtube.com/watch?v=IWAF3dQxAfQ.
- Kinney, Jack. *Der Fuehrer's Face*. RKO Radio Pictures, Inc., 1942.
- Luske, Hamilton, director. *Food Will Win the War*. Department of Agriculture, 1942.
- Mollet, Tracey Louise. *Cartoons in Hard Times: The Animated Shorts of Disney and Warner Brothers in Depression and War 1932-1945*. Bloomsbury, 2017.
- Sharpsteen, Ben. *Out of the Frying Pan into the Firing Line*. War Activities Committee of the Motion Pictures Industry, 1942.
- "The Draw of War: Walt Disney and World War Two." *BBC Radio 4*, BBC, www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/44119LStFCD0sRIV3Cj0KgF/the-draw-of-war-walt-disney-and-world-war-two.
- Thomas, Bob. *Walt Disney: An American Original*. Disney Editions, 1994.
- Zuckerman, Laurence. "How the C.I.A. Played Dirty Tricks With Culture." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 18 Mar. 2000, www.nytimes.com/2000/03/18/books/how-the-cia-played-dirty-tricks-with-culture.html.

Budget

Sufficient funds would be requested to access an extended selection of secondary sources on Disney wartime propaganda and the significance of Donald Duck. Accessing sources that are usually behind a paywall is needed due to the wider range of perspectives on the shorts, going beyond the interpretations from the limited free sources. Moreover, the funds would be used to purchase physical books that are not available through the Loyola Marymount University online database and are not present in the library. A *Walt Disney Treasures - On the Front Lines* DVD would also be purchased on Amazon.com because this documentary contains first-hand accounts, on-the-set footage, and the full-length feature of “Victory Through Air Power,” providing audio and a visual component as an education source. Also, *Film Propaganda and American Politics: An Analysis and Filmography*, should be bought to use as a literary source to understand how public opinion is shaped by propaganda films, especially to satisfy political agendas. To gain access to a unique historical exhibit showcasing Walt Disney’s contributions to the war effort and his production of animated propaganda films, the funds would be utilized for a trip to The Walt Disney Family Museum in San Francisco, California, because the museum displays rare primary sources such as full-length Disney propaganda shorts, first-hand accounts from animators, and literature.