

Mickey Mouse and Merry Melodies: How Disney and Warner Bros. Animation Entertained and Inspired Americans During the Great Depression

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ABSTRACT

While the entire country suffered from the worst economic crisis in American history in the 1930s, animated cartoons grew out of humble beginnings to mark the Golden Age of Animation. The two powerhouses of animation—Disney and Warner Brothers—achieved success and set a standard during this decade because of their cartoons' ability to cater to the average suffering American. Animated shorts like *Confidence*, *Three Little Pigs*, and *Porky's Spring Planting* entertained while reflecting and soothing feelings of hopelessness and panic felt throughout the nation during the Great Depression. Many showed hopeless heroes' triumphs, most were family-friendly, some gave adults reasons to laugh at naughty jokes, and some poked fun at other cartoons, political figures, and the news. While Warner Bros. and Disney competed fiercely with one another and with Warner Bros. and Universal often giving cheeky answers to Disney characters and fairytales—the hundreds of cartoon shorts pushed out of these two studios provided cheap, digestible entertainment for millions of Americans looking for a temporary escape from reality.

Keywords: Mickey Mouse, Walt Disney, Warner Brothers, the Great Depression, the Golden Age of Animation, Universal Pictures, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, entertainment, Looney Tunes, Merry Melodies, Three Little Pigs, Oswald the Lucky Rabbit, Porky Pig, Minnie Mouse

Mickey Mouse y Merrie Melodies: cómo la animación de Disney y Warner Bros. entretuvo e inspiró a los estadounidenses durante la Gran Depresión

RESUMEN

Mientras que todo el país sufrió la peor crisis económica en la historia estadounidense en la década de 1930, los dibujos animados surgieron de humildes comienzos para marcar la Edad de Oro de la Animación. Las dos potencias de la animación, Disney y Warner Brothers, alcanzaron el éxito y establecieron un estándar durante esta década debido a la capacidad de sus dibujos para atender al estadounidense que sufre en promedio. Los cortos animados como *Confidence*, *Three Little Pigs* y *Porky's Spring Planting* se entretuvieron mientras reflejaban y calmaban sentimientos de desesperanza y pánico en todo el país durante la Gran Depresión. Muchos mostraron triunfos de héroes desesperados, la mayoría fueron amigables con la familia, algunos dieron a los adultos razones para reírse de bromas traviesas y algunos se burlaron de otras caricaturas, figuras políticas y noticias. Mientras Warner Bros. y Disney compitieron ferozmente entre sí, y con Warner Bros. y Universal a menudo dando respuestas descaradas a los personajes de Disney y a los cuentos de hadas, los cientos de cortos de dibujos animados que salieron de estos dos estudios proporcionaron entretenimiento barato y digerible para millones de estadounidenses buscan un escape temporal de la realidad.

Palabras clave: Mickey Mouse, Walt Disney, Warner Brothers, Gran Depresión, Edad de Oro de la Animación, Universal Pictures, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Entretenimiento, Looney Tunes, Merry Melodies, Three Little Pigs, Oswald the Lucky Rabbit, Porky Pig, Minnie Mouse

米老鼠与《梅里小旋律》：迪士尼与华纳兄弟的动画如何娱乐并激励了大萧条时期的美国人

摘要

20世纪30年代，当整个国家都遭受美国史上最严重的经济危

机时，卡通动画开始慢慢出现，标志着动画制作的黄金时代。两大动画集团—迪士尼和华纳兄弟—实现了成功，并因其动画制作能力能迎合多数受到经济重创的美国人，而在这十年里建立了一个（动画）标准。例如《confidence》、《三只小猪》和《猪小弟的春日种植》（Porky's Spring Planting）等动画短片在娱乐大众的同时，还反映并抚慰了大萧条期间全美上下感受到的无助和恐惧。许多短片展现了无助英雄的成就，绝大多数适合家庭观看，一些短片为成年人打趣粗俗笑话提供了理由，另一些则揶揄其他动画、政治人物和新闻。当华纳兄弟与迪士尼发生激烈竞争—同时华纳兄弟与环球影业时常打趣迪士尼的卡通形象和童话故事时—这两大动画制作商发行的成百上千的卡通短片，为那些寻求短暂逃离现实的千万美国人提供了廉价且易消化的娱乐。

关键词：米老鼠，华特·迪士尼，华纳兄弟，大萧条，动画黄金时代，环球影业，富兰克林·德拉诺·罗斯福，娱乐，《乐一通》，《梅里小旋律》，《三只小猪》
《幸运兔奥斯华》，猪小弟，米妮老鼠

Popular culture's ability to thrive and grow during times of national hardship is clearly reflected in animated feature films and shorts during America's Great Depression from 1929 to 1939. This decade forever changed the economy and overhauled what it meant to achieve the American dream. There was a notable shift in American culture, which seemed to favor popular culture over high culture and "endorsed a commoner's version of American ideals."¹ During this decade, popular culture grew on a larger national scale because of its reliance on showing the "importance of the little folk and the greatness of the American way of life" amid national hardship.² It was the lowest point in the history of the nation's

economy, but the decade marked the beginnings of the Golden Age of Animation. The two biggest powerhouses in animation were born during this decade —Disney and Warner Bros. The animated shorts flowing from these two companies were wildly popular with the American people, who were suffering through economic disaster and personal hardship. Through animated entertainment, these shorts reflected issues and emotions, acted as propaganda for President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, and instilled hope for a more prosperous national future.

Two major factors shaped the experiences of movie-watchers and the purposes of animation during the 1930s: film sound and the Great Depression.³

Before the stock market crash on October 29, 1929, movie audiences enjoyed lavish movie palaces full of middle and upper class splendor and roaring live bands that provided the music for films. Movie houses were styled based on the communities they were in and the people they entertained, and live music encouraged audience participation. Around the same time as the Depression, American workers became more vocal about their economic plights and movie audiences became almost silent. Sound threatened to destroy the “primacy of the image” in the later 1920s, and by the 1930s, “movement and montage gave way to static mise-en-scène.”⁴ Between 1926 and 1931, most theaters were fitted with sound systems. Sound films and the Depression quickly redefined the movie-going experience, shifting from the luxury of a movie palace to the low prices, comfort, quiet, and distraction from worries that came with modern movie theaters. An evening at the movies evolved from something enjoyed only by the upper and middle classes to one of popcorn and soda, indulgences almost anyone could afford.⁵

The changes to movie houses also brought about changes in the ways Hollywood made films. Film studios wanted movies to be the cheap leisure activity people chose first and aimed to establish audience loyalty by creating films that reflected and inspired. Similarly, studios and movie houses—especially small-town theaters—offered premiums like “Depression-ware” dishes and giveaways to attract customers. Walt Disney formed the Mickey Mouse Club in 1929 with weekly meetings and

matinees on Saturdays in specific theaters. These local clubs promoted Disney characters and films with tie-ins for merchandise while Disney himself tried to link local communities to the Mickey Mouse Club.⁶ Movie studios and theaters knew that during the Depression, being poor and working-class was often the dominant local culture in big and small cities and in suburban and rural areas, and studios aimed to cater to that culture. These efforts worked, because from the 1930s and through the end of World War II, Americans spent more on going to the movies than on any other recreation.⁷ Going to the movies became a way for suffering Americans to find a little respite from their worries that was convenient, comfortable, and often reflected their feelings about the national crisis affecting their families and communities.

Conversely, the staggering amount of unemployment during the Depression of the 1930s brought about “a disturbing twist to old worries about the ‘problem of leisure.’”⁸ The economic crisis renewed moralists’ and social scientists’ calls for “the right use of leisure.”⁹ These calls also helped launch campaign for censorship against “commercial amusements, which elites still judged as low-class diversions.”¹⁰ One such example came from Walt Disney in his first feature-length cartoon movie, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. The film garnered praise when it was released in 1937 for “affirming traditional moral values.”¹¹ However, a woman who worked with slum children believed her charges missed “the beauty of this extraordinary film and its lesson.”¹² In-

stead, she said they seemed more interested in the scary trees and violence. At the Warner Brothers studio, co-founder Jack Warner knew the live-action movie *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* would “make us some enemies” with its plot: a decorated World War I veteran ends up in a Southern chain gang for a crime he didn’t commit during the post-war economic slump. When he finally escapes, he escapes right into the Great Depression.¹³

Still, hundreds of animated shorts and films from Disney and Warner Brothers were wildly popular during the 1930s. Disney’s Silly Symphonies and Mickey Mouse cartoons and Warner Bros.’ Merrie Melodies and Looney Tunes were fierce competitors, but they all entertained, provided commentary on current affairs and national emotions, and shared messages with upper-, middle-, and working-class audiences. One of the most poignant shorts that came out of the Depression featured a Disney-created character that was distributed by Universal Pictures, which often co-produced films with Warner Bros. Oswald the Lucky Rabbit was the star of the *Confidence* short released in 1933. Disney and legendary animator Ub Iwerks created Oswald in early 1927 for Universal, but the duo lost the character when they broke from the studios about a year later.¹⁴ Disney as a company wouldn’t regain control of Oswald and the character’s cartoons until 2006.

In *Confidence*, Oswald is a successful and happy farmer until a toxic dump down the road forms a black cloud named Depression that wreaks

havoc on his livelihood. The short features scenes of angry mobs fighting in front of a failed bank, a citizen stashing cash under a mattress, and Oswald seeking a remedy from a doctor for this Depression. The doctor tells him, “There’s your doctor,” while pointing to President Roosevelt. The president then sings about having confidence, smiling, grinning, and laughing out loud.¹⁵ This short, written by Walter Lantz, was released just months after Roosevelt took office and announced his plans for the New Deal.¹⁶

Months before *Confidence*, Disney released *Three Little Pigs*, a “Depression-era fable”¹⁷ that was more of a metaphorical commentary on the first years of the Depression. The “big, bad wolf” was the Depression itself and the foolish pigs—Fiddler Pig and Fifer Pig—who built their houses of straw and twigs, are the children of the fruitful Gilded Age. These two pigs represent the heirs to the bull market and the excesses of the roaring ’20s. Practical Pig prepared for the future and spent more time ensuring the stability of his assets than being outside playing and having fun. Practicality, self-reliance, and not being afraid to get down and dirty to make ends meet are the central themes of *Three Little Pigs*.¹⁸

Three Little Pigs was released in the middle of Roosevelt’s first hundred days in office and expresses the “confident, purposeful spirit of the early New Deal.”¹⁹ The film honors politically conservative virtues of hard work, self-reliance, and self-denial amid the “wolf at the door” metaphor for the economic

Depression gripping the nation. After the release of *Three Little Pigs*, political cartoonists began using the pig to symbolize the overall mood of the Depression.²⁰ The two shortsighted pigs represented “self-inflicted suffering and economic adversity.”²¹ The Practical Pig, who built his house with bricks and ended up saving the other two pigs from the “big, bad wolf,” was seen as far-sighted and representative of Roosevelt and his plans for the country. In the end, it was the pig who exhibited “old-fashioned virtues, hard work, self-reliance, self-denial” who was the successful one.²² The lyrics of the song “Who’s Afraid of the Big, Bad Wolf?” also became an anthem for Depression-era America, a rallying cry promoting the future success of the New Deal.²³

Even before the Depression hit, Disney’s animated shorts were espousing morals and American cultural themes of resourcefulness, finding usefulness in the useless, and finding entertainment and hope in the ordinary, the mundane, and the hopeless. This is especially true in the first appearance of Disney’s Mickey Mouse in 1928’s *Steamboat Willie*. Disney told journalist Harry Carr in 1931 that he couldn’t say exactly how the idea of Mickey Mouse came to be, but that he “wanted something appealing, and we thought of a tiny bit of a mouse that would have something of the wistfulness of (Charlie) Chaplin ... a little fellow trying to do the best he could.”²⁴ That “tiny bit of a mouse ... trying to do the best he could” theme would resonate immediately with the American people and would continue

to inspire and entertain those suffering through the Depression. Animated characters like Mickey championed and celebrated average Americans’ wisdom, dignity, and the ability to survive, and Disney’s films often focused on family, hope, and self-confidence.²⁵

Steamboat Willie premiered about a year before the stock market crash that kicked off the Depression. It featured a dancing, whistling Mickey Mouse piloting a steamboat down a river, thwarting attempts by the nefarious Pete, and genuinely having a swell time with his girl, Minnie Mouse. Resourcefulness and ingenuity are expressed in Mickey’s ability to turn anything into a musical instrument. When a goat eats Minnie’s ukulele and sheet music, they turn the goat into a phonograph by cranking its tail. Mickey also plays the tinging xylophone on a cow’s teeth.²⁶ And when Pete finally puts Mickey back to work peeling potatoes, Mickey gets in one last jab by throwing a potato peel at the parrot laughing at him. The short ends with Mickey laughing again.²⁷

Steamboat Willie premiered to rave reviews. *Film Daily* called the short “a real tidbit of diversion” days after its premiere in 1928.²⁸ *Variety*’s critic Robert J. Landry wrote “giggles came so fast at the Colony (theater) they were stumbling over each other.”²⁹ Carolina A. Lejeune’s article in a December 8, 1929 observer foreshadowed how Mickey cartoons would become reflective of attitudes during the Depression when she described the character as a “wicked commentary on Western civilization.”³⁰ From his beginnings, Mickey

was able to appeal to a wide audience. He catered to “neither the ‘highbrow’ nor the ‘hick,’ but the ordinary intelligent picturegoer.”³¹

Disney produced 198 animated shorts from *Steamboat Willie* until 1939 and saw the release of his first feature-length animated film with *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in 1937. Many popular culture historians believe Disney’s cartoons were so popular because they “provided an escape for audiences stuck in the Depression.” The whole of Hollywood was a “dream factory” and the creator was praised for “whisking the populace from day-to-day drudgery into the bountiful land of childhood fantasy and wish-fulfilling dreams.”³² Disney’s early Mickey cartoons and Silly Symphonies (of which *Three Little Pigs* was one) allowed audiences to be “freed from the burdens of time and responsibility.”³³ Beginning with *Steamboat Willie* and moving through the early 1930s, Disney’s animated shorts portrayed the “cultural mood, the exhilarating, initially liberating, then finally frightening disorder” of the early years of the Depression.³⁴ Many viewed Disney with a “mythic saga” life story that reassured the people that the American dream was still attainable even in the midst of crisis.³⁵ He built his company by isolating himself from other creators, specializing in animation, and avoiding associating with stars, agents, or movie moguls.³⁶ Disney was an independent, self-reliant animator who successfully changed the movie industry and made money through entertainment despite the economic collapse.

The early years of the Depression influenced Disney’s cartoons, however. Many Mickey shorts still contained fantasy but were also imbued with warnings about the rules of the world: “Don’t be too imaginative, don’t be too inquisitive, don’t be too willful, or you’ll get in trouble.”³⁷ These shorts reinforced old values of “individual initiative and enterprise,” which were key in bringing America out of the Depression.³⁸

In *Mickey’s Follies* from 1929, the mouse represents working-class values and shows off an ideal working-class life of work and leisure, pride in labor, and working hard. This short also sees Mickey singing words for the first time and playing his own theme song and dancing to it.³⁹ Mickey performs this in the farm’s talent show and sings of his love for Minnie in “Minnie’s Yoo Hoo.” He claims his heart is “down in the chicken house” with Minnie. In this short, the two “tossed mechanized life and inflated capitalism away and returned to their rural roots.”⁴⁰ In their earliest years, Mickey and Minnie epitomized the “back to the land” movie genre by being “a country couple, finding their adventures among the other creatures of the farmyard and countryside.”⁴¹

The Fire Fighters, also from 1929, explores the fantasy of rescue amid everything burning down along with the promise of a reward. It was one of the earliest cartoons to reflect the economic crisis and the stock market crash with its tragic animated images of city buildings on fire and figures falling from the tops.⁴² This rescue and reward fantasy blots out images of an economy in

collapse. In this short, Mickey is the hero and pulls Minnie out of a burning building, but the rope holding them burns and snaps. In a bit of exaggeration and fantasy, a pair of trousers is turned into a parachute that helps them land safely.⁴³

The Fire Fighters and other Mickey shorts also explore the American government's "incapacity to handle the dynamics of urban life."⁴⁴ Even before the Depression, many lost faith in the achievability of the American dream amid rapid urban industrialization and the farm crisis following the end of World War I. This loss of faith is explored through Mickey Mouse in 1929's *The Plowboy*. *The Fire Fighters* reflects the chaos of crisis and the hope for rescue. Debilitating poverty during the Depression is explored through Mickey's *Good Deed* in 1932, but the "hope emerging with the 1932 presidential campaign and election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt" is shown in *Building a Building* in 1933.⁴⁵

Disney and his animators knew the value of "shock and titillation" among fantasy stories.⁴⁶ The fantasy nature of Mickey Mouse shorts and Silly Symphonies helped free the audiences' minds from "normal expectations of what the world is like"⁴⁷ while also opening up their imaginations to the ways in which "all would be alright eventually" through propaganda of Roosevelt's New Deal and the reinforcement of traditional American working-class values.

Over at Warner Brothers in the late 1920s into the 1930s, creators were making live-action shorts and cartoons

about social problems that "drew stories from the news,"⁴⁸ while also attempting to produce "pictures for the entire family."⁴⁹ Legendary creators, Hugh Harman and Rudolf Ising, crafted Warner Brothers' Merrie Melodies, which evolved into the Looney Tunes we know today. These animated shorts often parodied real life problems and are often considered "the most accurate portraits of an era that the animated screen has ever produced."⁵⁰ Some of the Roaring '20s and Depression-era topics explored include speak-easies (*Goopy Gear*), the vaudeville stage (*You Don't Know What You're Doin'!*), the college football craze (*Freddie the Freshman*), and even Russian mystic Rasputin (*Wake Up the Gypsy in Me*).⁵¹ Music was everything in these shorts, and the jokes and gags were often of the crude, schoolboy variety.

Legendary Warner Bros. creator, Tex Avery, often took aim at an existing film or genre (often Disney-related) and crafted a parody with gags that tended to "explode the fundamental assumptions underlying these genres."⁵² Examples of these include first *Cinderella Meets Fella* in 1938 and later *Little Red Riding Hood* in 1943. In *Cinderella Meets Fella*, the future princess calls the police because her fairy godmother is missing. The fairy godmother is then dropped off in a police van at Cinderella's house, visibly drunk. She's also witch-like and uses pumpkin from a cane to create Cinderella's ride to the ball. Prince Charming is also a dope.⁵³

Cinderella Meets Fella is also one of the earliest cartoon shorts that breaks a bit of the fourth wall and makes the au-

dience feel like they're a part of the story. When her Prince Charming comes looking for her, he finds a note that reads, "Dear Princy: Got tired of waiting, went to a Warner Bros. Show. Lovingly, Cinderella." The scene pans out to show Cinderella has "exited" the film and now sits in the audience. There was often no boundary between animated characters and live audiences viewing Warner Bros. cartoons. These types of shorts harkened back to pre-sound and pre-Depression movie palaces that encouraged audience participation—now seen as a violation of acceptable movie theater behavior.⁵⁴

Another Warner Bros. short that had this vaudeville sensibility featured one of the studios' first characters. *Ride Him, Bosko*, from 1933, featured Bosko as a cowboy riding and singing through the desert. It was an animated musical western that featured fighting, shooting, and plenty of booze. When Bosko's girl is attacked by desperados on her way to see him and then the Deadwood stage is robbed, Bosko rides into the desert to be a hero. However, the cartoon ends by panning out from the screen and showing a trio of animators sitting around talking and smoking. The three clock out for the night with a promise to finish the cartoon the next day.⁵⁵ The short technically never ends; the animators leave Bosko without support or a neat resolution to his story. That lack of a resolution or remedy was a feeling felt by many Americans in the first years of the Depression.

Warner Bros. debuted Bosko with *Sinkin' in the Bathtub* in 1930. The Talk-ink Kid would set the stage for

many more Warner Bros. characters to follow.⁵⁶ He was the original inspiration for Warner Bros. characters, like Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck, who "put into question the very idea of a hero."⁵⁷ In his debut, Bosko is a bit of a parody of Mickey Mouse, using streams of water as instruments and with his bathtub and car being sentient beings. He was Warner Bros.' answer to Mickey and often parodies fantasy musical shorts. One long scene in *Sinkin' in the Bathtub* can be interpreted as an attempt to imbue a bit of hope amid the Depression. At one point, Bosko and his girl are tumbling down a hill, then down a tree trunk, hitting every obstacle on the way, with no relief in sight. When they finally do stop, they land back in the bathtub, ready to sing and play lily pads as drums.⁵⁸

While Disney's cartoons turned to the fantasy world to comment on real-life issues, Warner Bros. "allowed their cartoon characters to interact with and comment on the events and trends of the day" more directly.⁵⁹ In *Holiday Highlights* from 1940, the cartoon traces various holidays throughout the year with some snark. June is graduation season, and as a young man receives his diploma, the presenter tells him he is "now equipped to take your place in society. Good luck!" Still in his graduation garb, the young man marches off stage and immediately into the breadline.⁶⁰ When the cartoon gets to Thanksgiving, two dates are given: one for Democrats and one for Republicans. This was a comment on the 1939 presidential declaration that wanted to shift the Thanksgiving holiday back one week

“in hopes of giving retailers and the economy a boost.”⁶¹ Warner Bros. creators aimed to entertain and provide an escape for their audiences, but they also didn’t want to ignore the world outside of the movie theater.

One of the most poignant cartoon shorts about the Depression created by Warner Bros. was 1938’s *Porky’s Spring Planting*. The story is a spoof of “back to the land” ideas espoused in many other cartoons of the time and “capitalized not only on the characteristics of the genre but also on Porky’s ‘country boy’ background” which made him a “hard working pig of the land.”⁶² Porky represented a parody of the American ideal of being happy, busy, and working hard for ways to improve his life. He’s shown working the land and showing how easy it is to produce a “swell garden.”⁶³ But his wisecracking farm dog Streamline isn’t buying it. Streamline is shown taking a bone and burying it in a locked safe underground, saying “none of this ‘share the wealth’ business from me.”⁶⁴ The “Share the Wealth” initiative was created by presidential candidate Huey Long for those who felt left behind by Roosevelt’s New Deal. But many Americans, like Streamline the dog, preferred to keep their self-reliance—unless the US government offered assistance. Streamline goes on to comment how the new Social Security program didn’t give him the benefits he had hoped for, but in reality, “the promise of assistance after the losses inflicted by the Depression gave many Americans hope.”⁶⁵ *Porky’s Spring Planting* exposed a counter-idea to the “wholesome, innocent world” of the back to the land movie

genre. Through Streamline’s skepticism and pessimism, many Americans could “hear their hopes and their fears echoing back from the movie screen.”⁶⁶

Walt Disney and the Warner Brothers found success amid the economic crisis of the 1930s because of their cartoons’ ability to cater to the average American audience. The lines between economic classes blurred during the Great Depression as the entire nation suffered in varying degrees for a decade. The class lines also blurred when it came to popular culture. The line between the high culture of art and movie houses and the “low culture” of raucous neighborhood theaters almost ceased to exist after the stock market crashed.

While Warner Bros. and Disney competed fiercely with one another—and with Warner Bros. and Universal often giving cheeky answers to Disney characters and fairytales—the hundreds of cartoon shorts pushed out of these two studios provided cheap, digestible entertainment for millions of Americans looking for a temporary escape from reality. Even as entertaining escapes, these quirky characters and silly storylines reflected the mood of America during the Depression. Many showed hopeless heroes’ triumphs, most were family-friendly, some gave adults reasons to laugh at naughty jokes, and some poked fun at other cartoons, political figures, and the news. They set a standard for future movie studios to achieve when it came to giving Americans the entertainment they wanted and needed, and their animated shorts

marked the beginning of the Golden Age of Animation that would continue through the next forty years.

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57 Barrier et al., 131.

58 *Sinkin' in the Bathtub*, directed by Rudolf Ising and Hugh Harman (1930; Burbank, CA: Warner Bros.).

59 Knoell, 35.

60 *Holiday Highlights*, directed by Tex Avery (1940; Burbank, CA: Warner Bros.).

61 Ibid.

62 Knoell, 48.

63 *Porky's Spring Planting*, directed by Frank Tashlin (1938; Burbank, CA: Warner Bros.).

64 Ibid.

65 Knoell, 50.

66 Ibid.