OF MICE AND BRIDES: SURREALISM AND THE UNCANNY IN WALT DISNEY'S FAIRY-TALE CARTOONS

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Abstract: Was Walt Disney a surrealist? And did his popular forms of fantasy actually possess a secret avant-garde affinity reaching out beyond Hollywood's model of the fantastic? This paper re-examines some of the famous full length animated feature films adapted from European literary fairy tales such as Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937), Pinocchio (1940) and Cinderella (1950) in relation to Surrealist aesthetics and the Freudian Uncanny. The paper will consider how the re-evaluation of Disney as a 'sentimental surrealist' sits with the prevailing academic notion of 'Uncle Walt' as the philistine promoter of bourgeois conservative American ideology based around the suppression of sex, violence and political struggle. By teasing out the Surrealist and uncanny content of the films (which is often masked by their deceptively 'comforting' surface aesthetic), the paper will seek to bring to light some of the ideological and aesthetic contradictions embodied in many of Disney's best-loved films.

The mind which plunges into surrealism relives, with glowing excitement, the best part of its childhood…From childhood memories, and from a few others, there emanates a sentiment of being unintegrated, and then later of having gone astray, which I hold to be the most fertile that exists. (Breton, 2010: 39-40)
Andre Breton, 'The Manifesto of Surrealism', 1924

Over at our place we're sure of just one thing – everybody in the world was once a child. We grow up, our personalities change but within every one of us something remains of our childhood. It knows nothing of sophistication and distinction, it's where all of us are simple and naïve, without prejudice and bias we're friendly and trusting…So in planning a new picture we don't just think of grown-ups and we don't think of children, but just of that fine clean unspoiled spot deep down in every one of us that the world has maybe made us forget and maybe our pictures can help recall. (Disney, 2006: 14)
Walt Disney, Radio Interview with Cecil B. De Mille, 1938

Shortly after the release of his first feature film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), Disney pronounced his famous mission statement. And—like Freud— he was 'certain of just one thing,' that 'everybody in the world was once a child'. Still, it seems odd that these joyful Edenic terms should attach themselves to *Snow White* (a story of conspicuous Oedipal strife and no small degree of cruelty)—or that images intended to provoke nostalgia should so closely resemble Freud's description of the uncanny (a whole array of resurrected primitive beliefs from animism to the evil eye and the omnipotence of thought).

1937, the year of *Snow White*'s release, was also the year in which André Breton – a very different twentieth-century fantasist – conjured a fairy-tale symbol. In his novel *l'Amour Fou* (1937) he wrote of an object he had asked Alberto Giacometti to sculpt for him, an ashtray in the shape of a glass slipper, his *Cendrier-Cendrillon* or 'Cinderella Ashtray'. Breton's concept speaks of the Uncanny – semantically of the image of death (*cendres/ ashes*) located in the image of romantic desire (*Cendrillon/ Cinderella*). As Hal Foster observed: 'if the experience of the uncanny is not foreign to the surrealists, the concept of the uncanny is not familiar'; and 'when they do intuit it, they often resist it, as its ramifications run counter to the surrealist faith in love and liberation' (Foster, 1997: xviii).

It is a more risky argument that Disney, like the Surrealists, also 'intuits the uncanny'—given the sunny, cuddly optimism that seems to define his fantasy world. As Freud himself insisted, the *heimlich* (the homely) is in some ways a species of the *unheimlich* (the uncanny) (both terms pertaining in some sense to 'what is concealed and kept hidden') (Freud, 2003: 132). Though Freud himself did not acknowledge it, the uncanny is also a species of 'the modern'—for like much of 20th century avant-garde activity it evokes the return of the primitive in an apparently secular and rational context. The uncanny surfaces in Disney through an unconscious attraction to the language of the avant-garde.

THE LOVE BETWEEN THINGS

Most early animators, including those in the commercial business of making cartoon films in Hollywood and New York, rejected naturalistic modes of drawing in favour of dream-imagery and metamorphosis. The work of the Fleischer Brothers, for example – whose version of *Snow White* (1933) predates the Disney film by four years – may be couched retrospectively in terms of the surrealist manifesto, of Breton's advocacy of 'psychic automatism in its pure state,' his belief 'in the superior reality of dream' and the 'disinterested play of thought' (Breton, 2010: 26). Disney on the other hand sought to curb the plasmatic tendencies of the cartoon form. The artistic style he favoured was that of 'realism modified by abstraction' or 'sentimental modernism,'

a style that 'secured nonlinear, irrational, quasi-abstract modernist explorations comfortably on the cultural map by utilizing certain tropes from the Victorian past – an exaggerated sentimentality, clearly defined moralism, disarming cuteness – as familiar artistic signposts' (Watts, 2001: 104).

Such a style was bound to appear highly inauthentic (when mediated by the treacherous plasticity of cartoon form). The methods used to 'rationalise' the cartoon medium, in the extent to which they relied on overly-technical approaches to simulation, failed to free it from unconscious or 'surrealistic' influence but merely exposed it to a different order of the uncanny. Disney's censorial efforts were thus doomed to failure. The medium in which he worked was profoundly transformative, characterised by a sense of plasticity and mutability and far more conducive to the expression of unconscious drives than physical or moral stability.

The important point is not that Disney lapses out of rationalism into 'quasi-abstract modernist explorations' (during transformations and dream sequences), but that the 'realist' images themselves develop an incipient modernity through their over-reaching verisimilitude and uncanny failures of mimesis. In *Pinocchio* (1940), for example, the toys made by Geppetto the woodcarver are persuasively drawn to appear as both convincingly machine-like and intricately narrative. This is the height of Disney's self-reflexive powers. The toys (as objects of technical ingenuity and infantile diversion) are metonymic of the cartoon films in which they appear, thereby highlighting the *inauthentic* nature of Disney's realist project (a form of expanded automation achieved through an elaborate mechanical process). Disney's verisimilitude has moreover a tendency to self-destruct, though in a subtle manner close in visual affect to that of the clockwork toys portrayed in *Pinocchio*—to shimmer and jerk as though on the verge of collapse. We are reminded of one of Ernst Jentsch's salient conditions for an experience of the uncanny: 'doubt as to whether an apparently animate object really is alive and conversely, whether a lifeless inanimate object might not perhaps be animate': 'the impression made by waxwork figures, ingeniously constructed dolls and automata' (qtd. Freud, 2003: 135).

Disney's vision is then undoubtedly modern—the 'Pre-Raphaelite' aspects of his visual style are misleading in this respect. For, though the films are dressed up to resemble some medieval bucolic paradise, what they truly depict is the urban American dream, a thoroughly mechanised fantasy world of technologies that breathe and commodities that 'think' (to echo Marx's famous phrase). And though magic appears as sinister and disruptive when practiced by malevolent witches, it more usually translates the capitalist values of production and expansion as a delightful profligacy of images**.** Like the fairy tales on which they are based, Disney films derive magic from everyday things; in such a world as they depict, objects organically grow and change,

seeming to body-forth other objects, like the marching brooms in *Fantasia* (1940) or the enchanted furnishings in *Beauty and the Beast* (1991).

This feeling of pervasive yet *libidinal* artificiality extends to the narrative structure, which relies on a mechanical excess of cliché; from *Snow White* to *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), Disney's fairy tales are characterised by the same narrow mechanical schema, endlessly repeated. In this they resemble another famous 'love machine', Marcel Duchamp's *The Large Glass* or *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelor's Even* (1915-23), which portrayed courtly love as a frustrated dialogue between masculine and feminine components. Disney most obviously parallels Duchamp in his taste for comic scenarios involving a single female object of worship (the 'bride') and multiple suitors or 'bachelors' (most famously of course in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*). Disney, however, effects a curious modification of Duchamp's basic premise. Though separated by adverse circumstance, the mutually desiring protagonists are united at the end of each film, attaining (via a metonymic kiss) the consummation denied to Duchamp's imprisoned 'auto-erotic' machines. Robert Hughes saw in the *Glass* a 'peculiarly modernist hell of loneliness and repetition' (Hughes, 1991: 55). Disney, who is perhaps—in cultural and aesthetic terms—Duchamp's perfect antithetical double, imagines a 'peculiarly modernist hell' of mass-produced desires, and mechanical narrative certainties.

DEAD THINGS

According to Freud the uncanny was 'not unambiguous'. The word 'heimlich' he argued 'belongs to two very different sets of ideas, which are not mutually contradictory…the one relating to what is familiar and comfortable, the other to what is concealed and kept hidden.' The term 'uncanny' (*unheimlich*) applies to everything that was intended to remain secret, hidden away, and has come into the open (Freud, 2003: 132). In Disney, the aesthetic of 'the homely and comforting' is rendered ambiguous, not least because it derives its excess of emotion from kitsch, an aesthetic defined by its *fake* simulation of authentic feeling. It is not often remarked that the creatures providing solace to the heroine in her plight tend to be vermin, like the mice in *Cinderella* (1950), whose presence in domestic space indicates a state of natural entropy, of cultural progress arrested by decay. The 'ruin' was one source "the marvellous" as defined by André Breton—the other was the 'mannequin' (Breton, 2010: 16). For Hal Foster, both images confuse the animate with the inanimate, 'a confusion that is uncanny' precisely because it evokes 'the conservatism of the drives, the immanence of death in life' (Foster, 1997: 21).

Disney simply conflates both sources of the Bretonian *merveilleux*. For all intents and purposes, Disney's romantic heroine embodies the politely dissembling forms of the uncanny-commodified,

the shrink-wrapped *unheimlich* of the commercial world. Hers is 'the sex appeal of the inorganic' (Benjamin, 1999: 19), at once abject-animalistic and sepulchral-synthetic. As Susan Buck-Morss writes, in her extrapoliation of Walter Benjamin's *Arcades*: 'Fashion is the medium that '"lures [sex] ever deeper into the inorganic world" – the "realm of dead things." It is "the dialectical switching station between woman and commodity – desire and dead body"' (Buck-Morss, 1989: 101). In Disney too fashion plays a role in the *mortification* of the feminine, the commodification of an unconscious desire perceived as 'fragmentary, fluid, feminine' (Foster, 1997: 119). In other types of generic narrative, the princess is rescued from enchanted sleep – literally (in Freudian terms) a rescue of the unconscious by the reality-principle—or *prince*.

We may remember that, for Freud, 'an uncanny experience occurs either when repressed infantile complexes have been revived by some impression, or when primitive beliefs that have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed' (Freud, 2003: 155). The *unheimlich* is not an *original* acquaintance with primitive beliefs, but a *relived* experience of those beliefs in an apparently modern and rational context. Like the Freudian neurosis, the uncanny rises out of repression and sublimation. It is just this set of conflicts and ambiguities that Disney's cartoon versions of fairy tales play out. Consider Ariel's mortifying—and very public—return to abject shape when the Prince fails to kiss her.

THE REALITY PRINCE

Above all, the hero in Disney can never function, as he does in Laura Mulvey's 'Lacanian' cinema, as the more glamorous, more powerful 'ego-ideal' of an invoked masculine spectator. The cartoon medium (more apt in its tendency towards metamorphosis for depicting various forms of monstrosity and 'otherness;) tends to render him more lifeless—more puppet-like—than the mechanical 'monstrous-feminine' he notionally rescues from death. Of all Disney's fallen heroes, Pinocchio is perhaps the most prone to uncanny readings, because his animist function as a 'live puppet without strings' recalls the scary trope of the doll in Surrealist painting and photography, notably in Hans Bellmer's *Poupées* (c.1935). He is however subject to much abuse—for example by the cruel puppet-master—and witnesses the enslavement of his human peers to capital in the film's most traumatic scene. Ironically this 'Pleasure Island', this simulacral hell-place where children are captured and sold to industry (once deprived of language) and where Pinocchio himself undergoes partial transformation into a zoomorphic state, is just such a dystopian theme park—a Disneyland *avant-à-lettre*.

THE UNSPOILED SPOT

What emerges from this hell-place is the prospect that Disney's faith in nostalgia is jeopardized by the very language in which it is articulated. If innocence—the ideal of the 'fine clean unspoiled spot'—relies on *stillness* to be maintained (as the frozen chastity of Snow White's corpse, nullified in its Duchampian 'glass cage' suggests), then the very process of 'animating' involves a visual rhetoric at odds with Disney's stated aims. It is not surprising that much of his energy was devoted to strategies for resolving this paradox. In seeking to limit the visionary potential of his medium, he cultivated that most slippery of sublimatory states—the *heimlich*, which in Freud's analysis lay ambiguously close to its 'modernist' opposite, the *unheimlich* or uncanny. This 'simulation' of innocence (this innocence founded on regulation) is not only manifestly inauthentic. It is perversely enjoyable *because* it is manifestly inauthentic. The uncanny *requires* a condition of repression in which to manifest itself, but once articulated expresses the dark-side of the unconscious—the death drive, the compulsion to repeat, the confusion of animate and inanimate form. Ultimately then, Disney's own brand of pre-lapsarian innocence should be modified with a little help from the American critic Leslie Fiedler, writing about another archetypal American text, *Huckleberry Finn*. 'How truly wonderful it is to remember our childhood; and yet we cannot recall it without revealing to ourselves the roots of the very terror, which… has driven us nostalgically to evoke that past' (Fiedler, 1960: 591).

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