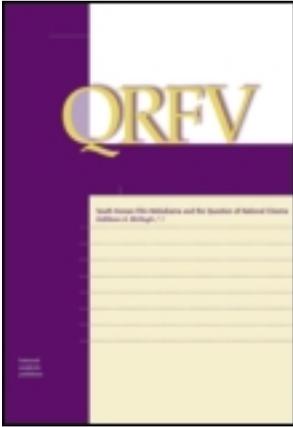


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### Snow White: Critics and Criteria for the Animated Feature Film

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## ***Snow White: Critics and Criteria for the Animated Feature Film***

JONATHAN FROME

*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) is one of the most-discussed films in animation studies, and one of the most historically significant films of all time. Leonard Maltin notes, “There is no way to overstate the effect of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* on the film industry, the moviegoing public, and the world in general.”<sup>1</sup> The film single-handedly created a new genre, was the biggest moneymaker of all time after its initial run, and has been re-released in theaters more than any other feature film. The standard historical account of the film’s reception is as follows: It was unanimously hailed by critics and the public alike.<sup>2</sup> The innovative technologies used in the film’s production, including the multiplane camera, led the film to be “widely embraced . . . for its realistic effects.”<sup>3</sup> However, the animation of the human characters, particularly Snow White herself, was widely criticized.<sup>4</sup> Some scholars have qualified this account, claiming that while the film was both critically and commercially successful, it was still seen as “a simple cartoon”<sup>5</sup> and an aesthetic success only “within the unpretentious and childlike sphere of fairy tales.”<sup>6</sup>

For a film with such historical significance, the standard account is frustratingly general. Given the wide variety of film reviewers, publications, and individual tastes, is it possible that critics were, indeed, unanimously positive about the film? If so, were critics unanimous in *what* they praised about the film? Since there had never before been a widely reviewed, full-length animated feature, what criteria did critics use to evaluate *Snow White*?

Historical discussions of the film usually mention the film’s reception only briefly. The exception is Annette Kuhn’s recent, useful essay on the film’s reception in 1930s Britain, which concentrates on the film’s “A” rating in Britain (preventing children from seeing the film without an accompanying adult), the film’s pre-release publicity, and the film’s representation of “home.”<sup>7</sup> *Snow White*’s reception warrants further investigation, however, due to this article’s geographical limitation. Also, Kuhn’s article only briefly addresses the film’s critical reception and follows the standard account described above.

In this essay, I seek to provide a detailed account of *Snow White*’s critical reception upon its initial release, based roughly 180 printed notices about *Snow White* that were published in 1937 and 1938.<sup>8</sup> These writings include both articles, which primarily offer information about the film’s production and exhibition, and reviews, which concentrate on evaluating the film’s aesthetic qualities. Roughly two-thirds of these collected writings are articles and one-third are reviews. Since this essay aims to explicate the critical reception of *Snow White* from an aesthetic point of view, I will concentrate on the fifty-nine reviews in my collection of writings about the film. These reviews were published in both magazines

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and newspapers, with a fairly even split between the two. The newspaper reviews are from seventeen different papers representing fifteen American cities. Nine of the reviews are British; the rest American. These reviews vary significantly in terms of length, writing style, and intended audience. Although I will discuss general trends, due to the wide variety in the reviews, even the evaluative topics most commonly mentioned in these reviews still appeared in only about half of them.

Surprisingly, many of these writings resist clear categorization. One factor is that 1930s film reviews seem significantly less standardized than those today. A more significant factor, however, is the Disney studio's publicity machine, whose press materials often blurred the line between information and evaluation. The Disney studio sent large amounts of press materials about *Snow White* to exhibitors, along with suggestions on how to get the articles published in local newspapers in order to generate advance interest in the film.<sup>9</sup> Kuhn writes that the "breadth, scale and range of *Snow White* promotional material was unprecedented."<sup>10</sup> Many articles at the time mention details such as the film's \$1.5 million budget, or the film's production requiring two million drawings and sketches, 250,000 photographed cels, a \$75,000 multi-plane camera, and 80 musicians (although, interestingly, the number of animators is reported in significantly varied amounts, including 400, 560, 570, 600, and 760, perhaps as Disney hired more artists over time).

A frequently mentioned aspect of *Snow White* in both articles and reviews is the individual personalities and characteristics of the dwarfs, who were not differentiated in the original Grimm fairy tale. The Disney studio heavily publicized this issue through articles and interviews that highlighted the challenge of developing the dwarfs' characters in a way that was both entertaining and comprehensible to audiences, as each dwarf had to be both similar to the others yet easily identified as a particular character. One long article distributed to several newspapers discusses the challenge to "develop the personality of each dwarf so that he would stand out positively as a character in himself and be distinguished by some quirk—facial, sartorial, temperamental—from his diminutive fellows."<sup>11</sup> The article goes on to describe in detail the most prominent features that were used for this purpose, such as posture ("Doc always stands back on his heels, his hands pressed behind . . . Bashful's back is slightly arched in and his stomach is out") and facial features ("Happy . . . is the only dwarf with beetling eyebrows. Bashful's eyes are the biggest").

Although this article on the dwarfs is reprinted verbatim in these newspapers, other articles reflect barely-veiled cribbing of Disney press releases, such as these two paragraphs about the use of color in differentiating the dwarfs:

In "Snow White" Disney uses color to explain his characters. For instance, Doc and Grumpy, the two dominant dwarfs, wear a russet jerkin and a dull magenta one, respectively, in contrast with the grey and tan garments of the others. Doc wears the warm russet shade because he is a cheery individual, while the magenta definitely brands Grumpy as an irritable "wet blanket." Because Snow White is the star, she is done in lighter color values so she may stand out against any background.<sup>12</sup>

and

Differentiation in the characters of the dwarfs was accented by color; Doc and Grumpy, dominant characters, wore russet and dull magenta jerkins as contrasted with the gray and tan of the others, and the claim is advanced that these mark Doc's cheery character and Grumpy's "wet blanket" individuality, while Dopey's saffron-yellow doublet and gray-lavender cap is reputedly an indication of his comic and irresponsible nature. "Snow White," being the star,

was done in brighter colors to stand out against the background of trees and animals and the other characters.<sup>13</sup>

Since these observations can be gathered solely by viewing the film, without any knowledge of its production, it would not be obvious to a reader of either newspaper that the articles are closely based on Disney press materials. We can identify their origins only due to their appearance in different articles by different authors in different newspapers. Although the latter article's wording subtly indicates that the claims are not the author's, the former article's wording does not. The impact of Disney publicity on research about the film's reception is particularly problematic regarding statements that are primarily evaluative rather than informational. Consider these two quotes about the film from two different articles in *The Dallas Morning News*:

Daylight finds broad rays of sun slanting through the trees, the effect so expertly done that it is almost impossible to think paint had a hand in it.<sup>14</sup>

and

The vision of the turreted castle, the quaint hodgepodge wherein the dwarfs dwell, the dank, dark shadows of the forest are among the atmospheric miracles achieved in this medium.<sup>15</sup>

Neither quote would appear to be typical publicity material. However, the first comment appears not only in *The Dallas Morning News*, but also verbatim in an otherwise wholly different article published in *The Oregonian* and is presumably pulled directly from Disney's press kit. The second comment is from the actual film review in *The Dallas Morning News*, which I believe to be an independent critical evaluation. By distributing press releases that make aesthetic evaluations of the film, with this type of relatively sophisticated prose, the Disney studio's publicity department has increased the difficulty of accurately gauging the film's initial critical reception. The large number of articles collected for this study provides enough data that we can infer with some confidence which of the aesthetic judgments about the film originated with an article's author as opposed to a Disney publicist. Pieces of writing that seem to provide primarily evaluative discussion of the film based on the opinion of their authors (rather than Disney-provided material) constitute the fifty-nine reviews used as a basis for this article's conclusions.

The standard account that *Snow White* was universally considered a masterpiece is generally accurate; the reviews were extremely positive about the film overall, and it is a safe bet that *Snow White* is the best-reviewed film of all time; this is likely true in terms of the ratio of positive to negative reviews, but is almost certainly true in the degree of adulation the film receives from its most complimentary commentators. However, the reviews reflected a significant range of responses to the film, a fact rarely mentioned in existing discussions of the film's reception. On the positive end, the reviews for *Snow White* include reviews that must be among the most enthusiastic reviews for any film in history. The most praiseworthy include *The Washington Post* review, whose headline reads, "'Snow White,' at RKO-Keith's, is a Screen Miracle . . . Walt Disney Proves Self Genius in First Full Feature in Color."<sup>16</sup> Readers of the *Louisville Courier-Journal* were told that to miss seeing the film "would be to lose an experience which comes once in a lifetime."<sup>17</sup> One recurring theme was the inability to describe one's response to the film in words. One reviewer states, "For once the advertising writers—who say that the picture is too beautiful to describe—are not guilty of over-statement. There is no capturing in mere words the exquisite imagery, the delicate charm and the breathtaking beauty of the film."<sup>18</sup> Another

reviewer, after calling the film “a miracle” says that “it would be futile to try to communicate in print the enchantment” of the film. He continues by saying,

It seems to me that if Mr. Disney and those who worked with him do not mind our muscling in, to that extent we all should claim and acclaim this moving picture film as a national achievement, because no other country on earth has produced anything that is even comparable, and any other country that did would be bursting its buttons with national pride.<sup>19</sup>

Some reviews are so positive in their praise that, from a modern context, the writing risks self-parody, such as the *Los Angeles Times* review that describes the film as “an evocation of magic—of that magic which can only exist in imagination and the mind. It is untrammelled by human equation. In the purest sense of creation it is Being.”<sup>20</sup> These comments, while seemingly over-the-top, are actually quite telling in contextualizing how unusual the experience of watching an animated feature was for the film’s initial audience. The film was genuinely something the likes of which they had never seen.

Not all reviews, however, reflected this degree of awe. There were many positive reviews that had a more down-to-earth perspective on the film. The trade publication *Harrison’s Reports* recommends the film by saying “this animated color cartoon of Grimm’s fairy tale . . . is entertainment that should be enjoyed by everyone . . . the story has charm, plentiful comedy, and romance.”<sup>21</sup> Gilbert Seldes, a prominent cultural commentator in the 1930s and a supporter of the aesthetic value of animation, writes:

*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* is an enchantment; it is the culmination so far of all Disney’s talent and intelligence; it has all the surface charm and baffling magic of his early pictures; and in addition, the solid structure and the length itself of the picture make it impressive.<sup>22</sup>

High praise to be sure, but still nowhere near that of the most enthusiastic critics. One of the most restrained positive reviews is one with the headline: “Critics’ Raves Likely to Over-Stimulate Audience Anticipation.” The writer says that the film’s has been so hyped that “some measure of disappointment is almost certain to follow.” Of his own reaction, he writes, “Wouldn’t have missed it for the world, but only want to see parts of it again.”<sup>23</sup>

*Snow White*’s box-office success is in large part attributed to the fact that it appealed to both adults and children. Since the film was based on a fairy tale, it was initially presumed to be primarily for children. Upon its release, however, this presumption rapidly disappeared. Publications across the board describe the film as appealing to both adults and children. The *Boston Herald* describes the film as for “for all ages and all tastes;”<sup>24</sup> while the children’s magazine *Boy’s Life* adds lively detail in stating, “everyone from 6 or 7 or 9, up to 60 or 70 or 90, is bound to hail *Snow White* as magnificent screen entertainment.”<sup>25</sup> The trade press agreed. *Film Daily* writes that the film is “a sure-fire sensation . . . its appeal being to adults and children alike,”<sup>26</sup> and the British trade *Kinematograph Weekly* describes the film as bringing “unalloyed joy to all classes, all ages and both sexes.”<sup>27</sup> One critical essay extended praise of the film’s universal appeal even further: “*Snow White* is common ground for high and low, old and young, Russian and Jap [*sic*], priest and crook.”<sup>28</sup>

Although it is conventional wisdom that *Snow White* appealed to all, it is very rarely noted that several reviews of *Snow White* went further in describing the film’s appeal to adults, arguing that only adults could truly appreciate its merits. The aspects of the film thought to be over the heads of children include “the mechanical ingenuity” required for the

film's production, which "intelligent adults will marvel at."<sup>29</sup> The humor was said by some to be "as hugely diverting to the grown-ups as it is to children," but "the deft and subtle humor may escape the children."<sup>30</sup> Thus, while children will "love it," one critic writes, "I believe the fullest appreciation of its delicate art and delicious humor will be possible only to the adult mind."<sup>31</sup> Another reviewer argues that the film's dramatic aspects lift the film above the realm of children's entertainment:

It is a mistake, of course, to consider a Disney cartoon as child's play. It is too replete with sophistication and broad drama. "Snow White" works up a man-sized suspense more than once—in the threatened assassination, the terror of the forest night, the attack of the dwarfs, the sorcery of the Queen and her pursuit and death. These are first-class theater—melodramatic episodes that give the picture its strength.<sup>32</sup>

As referenced earlier, *Snow White* is often considered historically significant due to its effect "on the film industry, the moviegoing public, and the world in general."<sup>33</sup> But one surprising aspect about the film's historical status is that it is not considered significant due to a retrospective evaluation of its impact; critics described the film as a watershed immediately upon its release, even before it began drawing record audiences and broke box-office records. One reviewer is prescient in saying that "it may be that 50 years from now the movie year of 1937 will be marked by film historians principally because it brought to the screen a picture called *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*."<sup>34</sup> Another also looked to the future in writing that the film "is a great screen contribution, not only for today, but for tomorrow. It will play often during Christmas seasons. It will be loved in Europe, the Orient, the Antipodes, right round the world."<sup>35</sup>

The film critic for the National Board of Review wrote that the film was "a landmark, of a significance hardly to be calculated, in the development of the motion picture."<sup>36</sup> It was called "a classic, as important cinematically as *The Birth of a Nation*." More than one reviewer likened the film's premiere to that of the mainstream debut of the sound film, with Alan Crosland's *The Jazz Singer* in 1927, a decade earlier: "I dare say that not since the advent of sound in picture has there been such a revolutionary change in the screen art as is this Disney offering." This latter comparison was also suggested in an article ostensibly written by Disney himself; in it, he states that "all reports indicate" that *Snow White* "is causing about as much of a furor within the picture industry as the advent of sound did a decade ago."<sup>37</sup>

One reason that *Snow White* was immediately considered to be a landmark film was the widespread agreement that it broke new ground aesthetically. As an animated film, *Snow White* was sometimes discussed not as a variant of the live-action feature but as "an entirely new medium of expression,"<sup>38</sup> with one reviewer saying that the film was "so exorbitantly rich in every element of joyous diversion that it stands apart from any conventional dramatic form. There is nothing with which to compare it." An even more ambitious claim is made in a short essay in *Sight and Sound*:

They have hailed his first full-length colour film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, in America as if it was something new in history, and it is possible that for once they are right . . . Here, surely, is something incalculable—perhaps as important as the first poem or the first painting scrawled roughly in the corners of a cave.<sup>39</sup>

Despite this hyperbolic praise, nearly one-third of the reviews cited here note weaknesses with the film's plot, comedy, or animation. Of these reviews, most offer criticisms within an overall positive evaluation, but it is worth noting which aspects of the film were seen in a negative light, particularly since such criticisms are rarely discussed in current accounts of the film. As mentioned earlier, one aspect of the film that was frequently noted in reviews was the fact that the dwarfs had been differentiated in personality and appearance. Most critics loved the dwarfs, particularly Dopey, with several saying that the dwarfs were the best part of the film. One review calls the dwarfs "the picture-stealers to end all picture-stealing" and notes that "Dopey is now this department's favorite actor."<sup>40</sup>

However, some critics faulted Disney for his handling of these characters. Gilbert Seldes, while a very big fan of Disney, felt that "there is a little too much exploitation of the special characteristic of each dwarf—the sleepiness of one, the bashfulness of another, the drowsiness of a third; to establish seven simple ruling passions and then to repeat them at stated intervals becomes a little tiresome."<sup>41</sup> Other aspects of the film's humor also drew some criticism. Otis Ferguson, also a historically important film reviewer, criticized the film's attempts at humor by saying that he was "disappointed to see the comedy faltering at times here. Such things as running into doors and trees on the dignified exit, the jumbled consonant (bood goy, I mean goob doy, I mean . . . ), headers into various liquids, etc., are short of good Disney."<sup>42</sup> Another reviewer makes a similar criticism that the film's "comedy sequences are repetitive in their sadistic violence, and they sally too often into the sterile field of comic sneezing and double-talk."<sup>43</sup>

Pacing was mentioned as a problem in some reviews, with critics calling the narrative "imperfectly proportioned," asking for "less of the antelopes and more of the Prince."<sup>44</sup> One reviewer thought that "the dwarfs take a bit too long in discovering who has moved into their woodland home."<sup>45</sup> Several critics discussed the differences between the film and the original Grimm fairy tale, with one observing that the film omits the first two attempts on Snow White's life included in the original story, using a corset and a poisoned comb. These omissions are cited as poor choices; the "queen should have had more things to do and less time in which to do them. She was the only one of Mr. Disney's creatures who even approached being tiresome."<sup>46</sup> These are mild criticisms that take care to tread lightly on the film (e.g., calling the narrative "imperfectly proportioned" rather than "slow in places").

Some British critics were particularly hard on the film. Although the British reviews were positive about *Snow White* overall,<sup>47</sup> a 1938 review in the British magazine *Current History* noted, "The English critics have greeted the film with much less enthusiasm than the American."<sup>48</sup> That review itself is certainly less enthusiastic than the average American review:

At least a third of the film is boring, needlessly and pathetically and uncondonably boring. Anyone with critical sense or sensitivity should have realized that here was a cinema which could have been a masterpiece if it had been 'cut' in half, or perhaps better still into a quarter of what it is.<sup>49</sup>

The British critic Basil Wright, although strongly recommending the film, also makes a number of pointed criticisms: "The depiction of the human figure is not Walt Disney's forte . . . Disney's draughtsmanship cannot remove Snow White and her friends from the auntish competence of a second-rate picture book."<sup>50</sup> C.A. Lejeune, the long-time critic for London's *The Observer*, states that the film is "sometimes, frankly, badly drawn," and writes that the character of "Snow White is a compromise between the chocolate box millions and the few who love line and form and integrity."<sup>51</sup> *The London Times* review (parts of which

were reprinted in an essay in the *Cleveland Plain-Dealer*) states that the film is magical entertainment and “without equal” in film history, but also pointedly notes that:

the same roughness of humor . . . enters now into [Disney’s] treatment of Snow White’s seven dwarfs. The drawing of their faces is coarse and fleshly, they are faces designed to appeal to the easy humor of fat men in their stalls . . . Snow White herself . . . has been given a face which is unworthy of the legend—a rigidly ‘pretty’ face with scarlet lips and gaping eyes of the kind that one may find any day in the comic strips.<sup>52</sup> [ellipses in original]

British critics also faulted *Snow White* more than American critics for containing frightening scenes “unsuitable for young and nervous children.”<sup>53</sup> Famously, the British censor board gave *Snow White* an “A” rating, meaning that children under sixteen could not see it without an adult.<sup>54</sup> The film’s potential to scare young children was mentioned on both sides of the Atlantic, with numerous critics using strong language in describing the film’s “terrifying situations.”<sup>55</sup> However, most critics agreed with the sentiment printed in *The New York Times*: take your kids because the film is “worth a nightmare or two.”<sup>56</sup>

Above are some examples of the one criticism of *Snow White* that is included in the standard account of the film’s reception: that its human characters were poorly animated. This aspect of the standard account began very early, being codified in Lewis Jacobs’ influential 1939 book, *The Rise of the American Film*. Jacobs dedicates an entire chapter to Disney (“Walt Disney: Virtuoso”), in which he writes, “The film’s most obvious fault was the attempt at making the human characters realistic,” and “because we associate them with real people” they seem to move “choppily. We cannot believe in them.”<sup>57</sup>

In 1942, the book *The Art of Walt Disney* gave a harsher description: “*Snow White* was a success—although it was pointed out, with a great deal of perspicuity on the part of those few rare souls whose academic backgrounds gave them insight into such matters, how badly the Prince was animated and that Snow White herself was awful.”<sup>58</sup> The notion that the animation of *Snow White*’s human characters was poor has subsequently been assimilated into the standard account of the film.<sup>59</sup> This notion is so prevalent in animation studies that scholars are comfortable asking, “And what of Snow White, so criticized by contemporary reviewers?” without citing any sources.<sup>60</sup>

Do *Snow White*’s reviews support this claim? In fact, only about one-fifth of them criticize the animation of the human characters. In comparison, half of the reviews argue for the film’s universal appeal. One small group held the position that the problem with *Snow White*’s animation of the human characters is that it was too realistic. The famous caricaturist Al Hirschfeld wrote an essay in the *New York Times* in which he complained that “the characters Snow White, Prince Charming, and the Queen are badly drawn attempts at realism: they imitate pantographically the actions of their counterparts in factual photography.”<sup>61</sup> His criticism was not that Disney’s attempts at realism were “badly drawn,” but rather that Disney was aiming for realism at all; Hirschfeld believed that cartoons should aim for non-realistic caricature and exaggeration.

Similarly, in *Sight and Sound*, Lawrence Wright argued that “animation, characters, and draughtsmanship are best treated formally and non-realistically.”<sup>62</sup> The sentiment that cartoons should avoid realism can be traced to the dominant film theoretical sentiments of the 1920s and 1930s, most famously defended by Rudolph Arnheim, which argued that film is artistic to the degree that it departs from reality in a meaningful way.<sup>63</sup> In this light, animation that aims to be realistic is less artistic than animation that embraces its ability to represent the world with a touch of exaggeration.

More common, however, were complaints that the animation was not realistic enough. Five reviews note that the human animation is choppy or “jerky,” others complain that the human characters are “doll-like,”<sup>64</sup> seem to “waver,”<sup>65</sup> or are “unreal.”<sup>66</sup> These varied criticisms are similar in that they all point to a lack of realism in the human characters; the criticisms implied that animation of *Snow White* and the Prince failed to the extent that they did not look as smooth, solid, or fluid as real actors. Finally, some critics knocked certain aspects of *Snow White*’s human animation while praising others. An essay in *Sight and Sound*, for example, describes the human characters by saying “although their movements are jerky, they are marvelously complete and life-like.”<sup>67</sup> Similarly, a *New York Times* review acknowledges that “in some of the early sequences there may be . . . a jerkiness in the movements of the Princess” but states that “it is corrected later and hand and lip movements assume an uncanny reality.”<sup>68</sup>

On the other hand, there are also a number of reviews that specifically praise the animation of the human characters. One describes “the dance of *Snow White* and the dwarfs” as “the finest example of lyrical motion on the screen in this department’s experience.”<sup>69</sup> Most reviews of the film do not single out the human animation for comment in any way, and these reviews almost always praise the film’s animation in general. It seems, therefore, that the standard account is technically correct in saying that the most-frequently criticized aspect of *Snow White* was the animation of the human characters. The statement is misleading, however, in the sense that a number of critics specifically praise the human animation, and the great majority of praise the animation overall, with no specific mention of the human characters as a weakness.

Significantly, those who criticized and those who praised the animation widely agreed that the film’s animation should strive to be realistic. Many animation historians have noted Disney’s trend towards more realistic character movement through the 1930s, and although there were some reviewers who were unhappy about this trend, such as Hirschfeld and Wright, the great majority of reviewers who commented on these matters enjoyed realistic animation and felt that *Snow White* was successful in achieving it.

In fact, realism was a primary criteria by which *Snow White* was evaluated, and most reviewers thought it to be highly successful at achieving an “intense and inescapable realism.”<sup>70</sup> “To all intents and purposes,” *Kinematograph Weekly* states, “the film is real.”<sup>71</sup> The film’s technological advances were invoked by those who believed that the “the backgrounds, uniformly beautiful, are as real . . . as though photographed from life.”<sup>72</sup>

Several critics highlighted the disconnect between the seeming realism of the film, in which “the camera sweeps across scenes and into close-ups as though it were recording real figures against real backgrounds,”<sup>73</sup> and “the fact that the story is a concoction of pen, ink and brush.”<sup>74</sup> The film was said to be “so convincing” that it was “difficult at times to realise that one is watching the painted figments of an animation-table”<sup>75</sup> Along the same lines, almost half of the reviews that explicitly discuss the realism of the film note that shortly after the film begins, the audience “forgets it is looking upon animated drawings;” consequently, the film “becomes as real as any picture performed by human actors and much more fascinating than many of them.”<sup>76</sup>

The comparison between the film’s characters and real actors is another very commonly mentioned theme in the reviews. As one review suggests, *Snow White* may have been compared to live-action films because it seemed so different from other animation:

Unlike Mickey Mouse, which is at all times cartoon, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* is something vastly different; once it casts its story spell over you, you forget that you are watching animated cartoons but rather actual characters,

real humans, and animals, too, as natural as those photographed from real life by the movie camera.<sup>77</sup>

Another reason that the film's characters were thought to be so real is that they "have personality and give you drama, thrills, romance and comedy equal to any found in flesh-and-blood screen players."<sup>78</sup> In other words, the film elicits emotions of a depth and breadth previously achieved only by live-action films. About one-quarter of the reviews mention that *Snow White*'s characters are as effective or more effective than live actors; Gilbert Seldes, for example, says that "Mr. Disney has also created human characters much more credible at times and frequently more moving than those portrayed on the screen by living players."<sup>79</sup>

Similarly, one-quarter of the reviews (most of which do not make the comparison to live actors) mention the breadth of emotions created by the film, stating that it contains "drama, romance, pathos and genuine heart interest that is both charming and beautiful."<sup>80</sup> The film was also frequently praised specifically for evoking seeming opposing emotions, with critics noting that "although the film is replete with moments of hilarious comedy, it is unique because" it combines them with negative emotions such as "suspense."<sup>81</sup> Other reviews mention the film's juxtaposition of "terror" and "captivating humor"<sup>82</sup> or "tears and cheers."<sup>83</sup>

These discussions of *Snow White*'s merits were, like so much of its coverage, primed by Disney studio publicity. An article attributed to Walt Disney states that the film contains "comedy galore, romance, pathos, excitement and suspense," and notes that the "future of the full-length animated picture is practically boundless" because "all the limitations of human actors are entirely missing."<sup>84</sup> Nonetheless, in this case, I believe that it would be a mistake to dismiss the reviewers' comments as press release reprints; reviewers may have been pointed to the breadth of emotions in the film, but emotional reactions are a common part of film reviews in any case, and reviewers could have easily chosen to describe the film otherwise.

The most revealing comments about *Snow White*, however, are those that praise it for combining narrative and stylistic elements; e.g. "Breathtaking in its beauty, endearing in its quizzical humour, profound in its dramatic spectacle, and incredibly life-like in its quaint character drawing, it is a miracle of draughtsmanship, a musical and vocal phenomenon."<sup>85</sup> These comments speak to more than *Snow White*; they speak to the criteria used to evaluate 1930s films in general. That this combination of features was considered at the time to be a primary criterion for cinematic greatness is demonstrated by the fact that other aspects of the film mentioned by many reviewers are not tied to claims of artistic achievement. Reviewers do not say that *Snow White* is "a solitary example of what may be accomplished in the way of entertainment" because it has universal appeal or because it is groundbreaking; they give it this level of praise because it successfully combines "imagination, beauty, humor, tunefulness, drama, and color."<sup>86</sup> In other words, it is the broad combination of emotional, narrative, and stylistic features that, in the minds of 1930s reviewers, gave it, "from an artistic standpoint, importance."<sup>87</sup>

But *Snow White* was considered more than a brilliantly entertaining film. *Snow White* was also considered to be "among the genuine artistic achievements of the country,"<sup>88</sup> in large part due to its ability to combine the factors mentioned above. The *Cincinnati Enquirer* makes this clear in its comment that "the main reason for the appeal of the Disney masterpiece is that it is a complete work of art—musically, dramatically, and pictorially."<sup>89</sup> Thus, the claim that the film was "seen as [a work] of genius within the unpretentious and

childlike sphere of fairy talks rather than within the arena of ‘high art’” is not borne out by the evidence.<sup>90</sup>

Consider the headlines from the film’s reviews in the *Los Angeles Times*: “‘Snow White’ Achievement in Film Art,”<sup>91</sup> and the *Seattle Daily Times*: “‘Snow White’ Is Fascinating Art.”<sup>92</sup> Similar sentiments are shared in a number of the reviews, such as one that states, “‘Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs’ is, above all else, a dramatic and moving work of art.”<sup>93</sup> Disney himself was frequently referred to as an artist, and the famous documentarian Pare Lorentz, writing for *McCall’s*, states that when he calls Disney an artist, “I do not mean to use the word loosely.”<sup>94</sup> The notion that *Snow White* was considered to be art is bolstered by the fact that production art for the film was exhibited in numerous museums and galleries around the country, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.<sup>95</sup>

Looking at a large number of reviews of *Snow White* alters our understanding of the film’s reception in several ways. Although the film was indeed hailed by critics, the praise was not unanimous, and among those who did praise the film, there was significant variation in enthusiasm. The film’s human animation was not the only aspect of the film that was criticized; several reviewers reported other problems with the film, including complaints about its plot and humor. Although the film’s human animation was its most-criticized aspect, in general, the film’s animation was admired as realistic.

These fifty-nine reviews also shed light on a rarely discussed subject: what criteria were used to evaluate *Snow White*? What was it praised for? While the reviews most often mention its universal appeal and landmark nature, it is *Snow White*’s combination of a humor, drama, suspense, technical excellence, and beauty that led critics to consider it a true artistic achievement—an achievement that allowed the film to escape the presumption that it was for children alone, and situate it in the realm of cinematic art.

## Notes

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