On the influence of Walt Disney

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Introduction

"Until a character becomes a personality it cannot be believed. Without personality, the character may do funny or interesting things, but unless people are able to identify themselves with the character, its actions will seem unreal. And without personality, a story cannot ring true to the audience." – Walt Disney

Walt Disney was the master at creating a character with a well-rounded personality and bringing it to life. He knew how important it was to animate a character in a correct way to achieve as much immersion as possible in the fantastical worlds he envisioned. Another thing he acknowledged is how important suitable music is in creating a believable world. What were the innovations that established his name as one of the most important people in the entertainment industry in the 20th century, a name that makes people think instantly of animation movies?

Mickey Mouse

In terms of artistic innovations, a very important step in establishing Disney as the most famous animation studio of our times was the birth of Mickey Mouse. The famous mouse was created as a replacement for Oswald the Lucky Rabbit, because Disney didn't own the rights to Oswald, and Charles Mintz of Universal Studios demanded a budget cut for the series the rabbit featured in. Instead of accepting this, Walt Disney decided to finish the last Oswald stories he was obliged to do, end the series and come up with a new character that his studio fully owned.

In 1928 Ub Iwerks, an employee of the Disney studios, was asked to design this new character. He came up with several characters, among which a female cow and a male horse, who would later turn up as Clarabelle Cow and Horace Horsecollar. The characters Iwerks designed were unfortunately not to Walts' liking. The inspiration for the mouse-like Mickey came from a tame mouse Walt Disney used to have as a pet. An old drawing of mice around the

Mickey Mouse, one of the most iconic characters in animation

photograph of Walt Disney from the hand of Hugh Harman inspired Ib to draw the new Disney character, who Walt initially named Mortimer Mouse, but he changed the name to Mickey Mouse because his wife Lillian convinced him to do so. Another possible inspiration for the name Mickey Mouse is the actor Mickey Rooney, who met with Walt Disney during his Mickey McGuire days. Walt Disney had this to say about the character Mickey: "We felt that the public, and especially the children, like animals that are cute and little. I think we are rather indebted to Charlie Chaplin for the idea. We wanted something appealing, and we thought of a tiny bit of a mouse that would have something of the wistfulness of Chaplin — a little fellow trying to do the best he could.

When people laugh at Mickey Mouse, it's because he's so human; and that is the secret of his popularity. I only hope that we don't lose sight of one thing — that it was all started by a mouse."
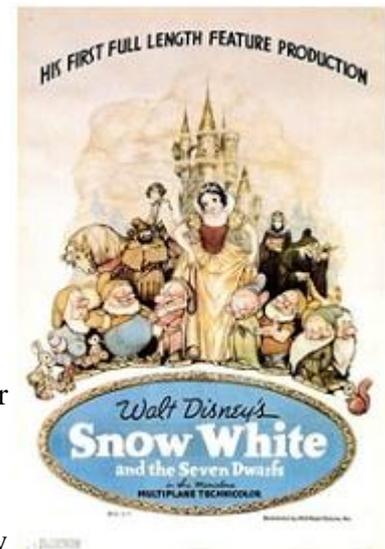
Mickey had his first successful debut in the animated short Steamboat Willie, which was first released on November 18th, 1928. Of note is the fact that Walt Disney directed, produced and voiced the short all by himself. Steamboat Willie is also important to the history of Mr. Mouse because it established the look of Mickey Mouse as we know him now, by simplifying his appearance, most notably by depicting his eyes as large dots. An important "first" for this piece of animation is the usage of a soundtrack synchronized to the action, which underlines that Walt Disney knew how important music is for successful immersion in a movie. Mickey is still an important animation character to this day, and can be seen as an icon for Disney.

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs

Another important artistic innovation by the hands of Walt Disney is the first commercially successful animated film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, based on the novel *Snow White* by the Grimm brothers, which was released in 1937. Convincing others of the potential of a full-length motion picture proved to be difficult for Walt Disney. His wife told him that "no one's ever gonna pay a dime to see a dwarf picture," and the press mockingly referred to the film as "Disney's Folly" while it was in production.

The original theatrical poster for Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs

Despite all the criticism, Walt Disney knew he had to innovate in order to achieve success: animation motion-pictures had to be made longer in order to get noticed by the major public, short comics just weren't cutting it. The quality of the animation had to go up as well, as top-notch animations are necessary to create characters people can identify themselves with. His faith in the success of Snow White is shown by the fact that he mortgaged his house to help pay for the production costs, nearly $ 1.5 million, an outlandish amount at that time.

A key decision leading to the success of the motion picture was putting heavy emphasis on humour, next to making the characters of the dwarfs more developed than in the novel by the Grimm brothers. Mr. Disney encouraged everyone on his team to help form the frivolous story, by offering five dollars for each contributed gag (humorous visual element). The names of the dwarfs were chosen in such a way that each dwarf is named for a distinguishing character trait. Although Walt Disney's original idea was to make the Queen a comical character as well, he later made the character of the Queen more serious, as he thought that a too comical approach would lessen the plausibility of the characters.

As with all Disney films, music was a major element of Snow White. In fact, this movie is the first movie ever with an official soundtrack. Before Disney's 1937 film, no film studio ever released the soundtrack of a movie as an audio album, because people wouldn't be interested in listening to the music of a movie separately. But with Snow White's memorable songs, such as "Heigh-Ho", "Some Day My Prince Will Come", and "Whistle While You Work", Disney dared to release the soundtrack, and with success, as the singles the songs originally released on all became Top 10 hits.

Another first for Snow White was the use of the multiplane camera: it was the first animation movie to do so. The camera, which was invented for Disney by William Garity, allowed up to seven individual layers of artwork to be stacked together on screen, and is used in order to create an illusion of depth. Technically, it was ahead of other multiplane cameras, like the ones from Iwerks or Fleischer, as it could be used in a much more sophisticated way.

Pioneering on so many aspects paid out in the end for Disney: the film was a huge success, and grossed $3.5 million on its original release, four times as much as any other movie in 1938. The press was also thrilled: The New York Times said "Thank you very much, Mr. Disney". Walt Disney won several awards for the movie, among which an Academy Honory Award "[for Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs] as a significant screen innovation which has charmed millions and pioneered a great new entertainment field". Today, the film is still one of the top ten American film moneymakers of all time, with the incredible lifetime gross of almost $200 million.

The Multiplane Camera

An important technical innovation by Walt Disney is the use of a multiplane camera for his full-length features. Walt Disney wanted to make animations as realistic as possible, to create maximum immersion in the story and the universe. In the 30's, he discovered a problem with animation: characters seem three dimensional, because they can move towards and away from the camera, by drawing the characters bigger or smaller. Backgrounds, however, seem flat, as when the camera zooms in on a background, all objects that make up the background appear larger, while they are not all placed at an equal distance from the viewer, so the different objects should actually increase in size independently.

To illustrate this problem, Walt described a scene where you see a farm and a moon in the sky. As the character walks towards the farm, the camera will zoom in on the scene to indicate character movement, resulting in a bigger farm and moon. In reality though, the farm will appear bigger as you walk towards it, but as the moon is so far away, it will not appear to be bigger, but stay the same size. In order to solve this problem the background was divided into multiple planes. Each plane contains elements that have the same distance to the viewer. In the example of the moonlit farm the farm would be on the first plane, and the moon would be on the second plane. With a multiplane camera setup what happens when a character walks towards a scene is that instead of zooming in with the camera, the planes are moved towards the camera individually, at different speeds, to create the illusion that not all objects are equally far away from the camera. This allows for much more realistic and dynamic backgrounds than with a single plain background.

As you can imagine, filming with a multiplane camera setup takes up a lot of time. With a traditional setup of one plane for the background and one plane for the character, for each frame a new character drawing has to be put on the background, and the background has to be shifted to show character movement. With multiplane technology though, for each frame up to seven background layers have to be shifted, and a new character drawing has to be placed on top of the background. Due to the increased time that is needed per frame, filming with this technique is extremely expensive, and as such Walt Disney only used it for his full-length features, and not for his short animations.

Conclusion

Without Walt Disney the animation industry would not have been where it is today. Due to Walt's continuous strife for realistic animation, as well as his persistence to finish projects where others had long thrown the towel in the ring, the animation industry has seen a huge leap forward over the last century. Without him, the use of animation might still have been restricted to short comics, instead of being used for wonderful films like Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, The Lion King and Jungle Book. You could argue that without him video games might not have existed today. But more importantly, without him many childhood memories worldwide would have been very different.

Sources

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