

***Walt Disney Treasures* or Mickey Mouse DVDs? Animatophilia, Nostalgia, and the  
Competing Representations of Theatrical Cartoon Shorts on Home Video**

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**Abstract:**

Theatrical-era short animation has often acquired a complex, even contradictory, textual identity: most cartoons were originally produced for a general audience, but were then marketed almost exclusively towards children as repeats on television. The rise of DVD has further complicated the status of these films. On the one hand, the format has facilitated the release of a lot of rare animated material, most notably within a series of multi-volume special editions entitled the *Walt Disney Treasures*, explicitly aimed at the previously marginalized

adult viewer. However, Disney has also produced lower priced, ‘family friendly’ discs featuring many of the same cartoons. Unlike the *Treasures* volumes, the latter sets tend to censor problematic content and generally lack contextualizing bonus features. The choice to watch one of these collections over the other can thus have a significant impact upon one’s interpretation of the collected films. Thomas Elasasser argues that film culture – embodied most fervently by the devoted cinephile (and, for the purposes of this study, the equivalent figure of the animatophile) – has often failed to recognize itself as a product of generational memory. It is frequently implied by such groups that DVD special editions are the most ‘authentic’ because they privilege the original cinematic experience, without acknowledging the degree to which the format itself serves to remediate its contents. For instance, while the *Treasures* discs generally present the films uncut – sometimes ‘restoring’ footage unseen since the 1930s and 40s – these are often prefaced with mandatory disclaimers providing historical context for contentious elements such as racism. The sheer volume of material that these collections provide, including opportunities for binge-watching with ‘play all’ functions, similarly alters the portioned availability of these texts in the theatrical sphere. This article will suggest that both the special edition and ‘family friendly’ DVD options ultimately reflect a nostalgic struggle to appropriate and define the present and future reception of the films, rather than to truly reclaim the past.

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The American theatrical short cartoon has always been an extremely mutable text. At the point of initial release, the films tended to be placed in a marginalised position as support for a (usually live-action) feature. The subsequent decline of the major studios and a shift towards Saturday morning television saw the medium increasingly ghettoised as children’s

entertainment (Mittell, 2003). Recent decades have seen attempts from certain fan groups to reclaim – and potentially rehabilitate – “Golden Age” animation, with the Digital Versatile Disc (DVD) providing a particularly visible battleground for determining meaning. Even on disc, however, the presentation of cartoons has proven surprisingly varied, reflecting the often-contradictory discourses that have amassed around these works. This article will consider the disparity between different home video editions of the same film series, making particular reference to the Disney Studio’s “deluxe” range of DVDs, the *Walt Disney Treasures*, and its numerous “family-friendly” releases. In adopting this strategy, Disney permits its consumers to choose between several competing notions of cinema history, with each version seemingly endorsed by the parent studio. This, in turn, raises questions about whether the DVD – in any of these incarnations – can offer viewers an accurate representation of the past. Does the format ever provide unfettered access to the original text(s), or does this always exist in tension with various forms of nostalgia and the transformational possibilities of new technology?

Thomas Elsaesser (2005) argues that live-action film culture – embodied most fervently by the devoted cinephile – has often failed to recognise itself as a product of generational memory. He suggests that the first decades of post-war cinephilia were marked by a desire to preserve the theatrical experience, with dedicated fans often going to great lengths to track down revival screenings of obscure works. The excitement of such moviegoing practices – tinged, perhaps, also with something mournful – was the fleeting access provided on the big screen: a realisation that one may rarely (if ever) have the chance to watch the film again. By contrast, Elsaesser defines a newer strand of cinephilia – part of what he labels as “take two” – that is less focused on the exhibition of celluloid, instead comprising viewers whose love of movies has blossomed through remediation using emergent technologies such as television, home video, and the Internet. Rather than chasing transient opportunities to view certain works, the “take two” cinephile may assume new roles such as “collector and archivist”, potentially

enjoying a more direct and prolonged engagement with texts than ever before (Elsaesser, 2005: 40).

Disney provides a valuable, and potentially complicating, case study because, as Jason Sperb argues, “since at least the 1950s, [...] the company’s success has been consistently rooted in promoting nostalgia for its own products” as a mainstream – rather than subcultural – activity (2012: 30). Following the profitable theatrical reissue of its first full-length production, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) in 1944, the studio re-released its most celebrated animated features back into cinemas approximately every five to ten years, with each work removed from circulation in the interim (Behlmer, 1982: 59-60). Allen Larson notes that Disney made an “aggressive cultivation” of the VHS sell-through market, well before many other distributors fully embraced this prospect on DVD (2003: 61), but continued the trend of limited releases for its most in-demand works. *Snow White*, for instance, was only issued on VHS in the United States between October 1994 and April 1995, and then finally returned to stores on VHS and DVD in 2001 (before being removed from sale yet again early in the following year). In terms of its features, Disney has continued to exploit a variant of cinephiliac “longing” for absent films – even while simultaneously encouraging a collecting culture on home video – turning each cyclical revival into an “event” in which the film can be re-experienced by older audience members and embraced by a new group of viewers (who will, it is hoped, introduce the film to the next generation upon its subsequent re-release).

The situation with animated shorts, including those released by the Disney Studio, has been rather different. The vast majority of these film series have remained available in some form, although they have frequently been subjected to modifications such as editing and censorship (as will be discussed in more detail later), and often presented with much less ceremony compared to feature-length productions. Reflecting this perceived mistreatment, Mark Langer documents the rise of the “animatophile” in the 1970s – “a taste group [consisting

primarily of educated, adult members] characterised by a high degree of knowledge” about cartoon history – which foregrounded the establishment of animation studies as an academic pursuit (2004: 159). This was achieved largely by embracing the model of “take one” cinephilia, championing previously “unheralded” animators as “auteurial escape artists who wriggled out of straightjackets made by producers like Schlesinger at Warners or Quimby at MGM”, just as cinephiles had previously reclaimed live-action directors such as Alfred Hitchcock and Howard Hawks as something more than mere Hollywood functionaries (Langer, 2004: 162).

The comparatively delayed emergence of the animatophile, however, reflects that many of these early figures grew up during “the postwar baby boom period,” engaging with the films mostly through “recycling” on television and other home-based media (Langer, 2004: 161; Klinger, 2008: 27). For instance, Jerry Beck (a notable contributor to the growth of animatophilia) has spoken of his own experience as a child primarily watching old cartoons “on Saturday mornings and weekday kiddie [TV] shows”. He also notes the – much less researched – activity of films repurposed for purchase on 8mm format for use with a personal projector, often only available as black-and-white, silent versions (regardless of the formal properties of the original texts). The suggestion is that one felt very “lucky” to have the opportunity to see these works “at the movies” during this period (Beck, 2013a). Animatophilia has thus always been rooted in a predominantly “take two” culture, despite the conditions of this access often being subjected to criticism. The desire amongst animatophiles to see short cartoons restored to an “authentic” state – whatever this may be – is arguably one that is, in Sperb’s terminology, “always already nostalgic” for a past mode of consumption that few of these viewers directly experienced (2012: ix).

The impact of such activity upon the reception of short animation has nonetheless been significant, with the canonisation of studio-era cartoon “auteurs” increasingly absorbed as “part

of the dominant culture” (Langer, 2004: 164). By the early-1990s, the existence of Disney and Warner Bros. studio stores (retail outlets dedicated to selling cartoon-focused merchandise), and the rise of cable stations such as Cartoon Network (which, particularly in its formative years, drew extensively from archives of theatrical shorts), offer clear examples of the reinvigoration of mass interest in non-feature animation. However, these new arenas still often served to commodify the properties in disparate ways: for example, Linda Simensky notes that, although the Warner Bros. stores aimed to cater to dedicated fans with high-priced collectibles (such as unique animation cels), some complained about the proliferation of other merchandise perceived to be “gifts for tourists” and other, less dedicated consumers (1998: 190). Similarly, while Cartoon Network did regularly screen obscure examples of studio-era animation, this was generally confined to niche timeslots (“around-midnight”) aimed at an exclusively adult viewer, relative to the “prime time” scheduling given to a more selective (and/or carefully edited) sampling of the same franchises designed to appeal to all ages (Sandler, 2003: 100-101). Although the more nuanced requirements of animatophiles were enjoying greater recognition than ever before, there remained complaints that these were still being marginalised, with a “dumbed down” equivalent offered to the general public instead (Simensky, 1998: 190).

Such debates have continued into the DVD era, which (despite the early success of studios such as Disney in promoting sell-through VHS) has often been credited with turning the practice of collecting – rather than just renting – films into a truly populist hobby (Tryon, 2009: 20). Within a few years of the format’s introduction, American video sales (comprising both new and “archival” releases) were significantly eclipsing theatrical box-office receipts, making home entertainment a much larger focus for many film studios than in any previous decade (Hight, 2005: 4; Garrett, 2002). The accessibility and enthusiastic uptake of DVD led Elvis Mitchell to proclaim in a *New York Times* article that “everyone’s a film geek now”

(2003): a sentiment which has nonetheless generated resistance from certain fan groups. James Kendrick's study of posts to the online *Home Theater Forum* (HTF) in the early-2000s indicates that many members (who self-identified as cultured "cinephiles") saw themselves in opposition to a larger, but less knowledgeable, general consumer grouping (nicknamed "Joe Six-Pack") to ensure that films were preserved on DVD in the "correct" manner. The implication is that "Joe" cares little about historical context, and even demands alterations – from the modification of the aspect ratio to ensure that the picture fills the entirety of the television screen (regardless of its original format), to the elimination of contentious material that could offend the sensibilities of a modern-day viewer. By contrast, for the HTF members, there is an "explicit [...] desire to re-create the theatrical experience as closely as possible in the domestic space. Anything else is a travesty for reasons that are both technological and aesthetic" (Kendrick, 2005: 61). In an era where "take two" collecting has become a dominant activity, then, cinephiles have made greater (if often incongruous) demands for observing "take one" proclivities, essentially aiming to capture something of the analogue celluloid history *within* this new digital, home media (Hediger, 2005: 143; Klinger, 2008: 23).

Jonathan Gray's work on the DVD (developing Gérard Genette's pioneering work on paratexts) has been extremely valuable in highlighting the degree to which the format always serves to reconceptualise, rather than reproduce, its contents. Everything from the box art, the addition of bonus features, and (in the case of series films) the choice of which entries to include within the collection and which to omit, all have the potential to alter – and in some cases even pre-empt – the viewer's interpretation (2010: 106, 5, 23). These elements can be extremely seductive, often implicitly denying the degree to which the work has actually been transformed in the process. Vinzenz Hediger suggests that, instead of truly coming to terms with the complexities of history, loss, and substitution, media distributors (and, perhaps, audiences too) privilege the "rhetoric of the original", a "sleight of hand" that works to accept this optical disc

as an entirely faithful “copy” (2005: 138). To some extent, as Laura Mulvey emphasises, there is “nothing fundamentally new” about this process (2006: 8): indeed, Elsaesser’s key point is that cinephilia of any form “is a crisis of memory,” one that “has always been a gesture towards cinema framed by nostalgia and other retroactive temporalities” (2005: 40, 27). Nonetheless, Mulvey argues that emergent technology has undoubtedly “opened up new ways of seeing old movies” (2006: 8), ones that are – rather problematically – tied to a belief that these formats are more capable than ever before of restoring a preferred interpretation of a film’s history.

The disagreements that have surrounded home video have ultimately had less to do with the realisation that one must “forget aspects of the actual past and substitute a sentimental myth about how things might have been” (Jenkins, 2007: 15), than the difficulty in reaching a consensus about *which* sentimental myth to gesture towards. The physical linearity of the videotape medium, and the comparatively low storage of both VHS and laserdiscs, frequently meant that only one version of any given film could be included. As Laurie Cubbison has shown, distributors often had to make difficult choices when releasing (for example) Japanese anime on VHS, including whether to add dubs or subtitles, and whether to censor films to appeal to younger audiences or to present the text uncut. By contrast, the DVD format has the capacity to include numerous language options, and even use a technology known as “seamless branching” to allow the inclusion of several versions onto a single disc, with the DVD player adding or dropping specific scenes depending on the viewer’s choice, rather than having to store each copy of the movie in full. The lower costs of manufacturing also made the prospect of multi-DVD sets, with separate discs containing different edits of the film and/or special features aimed at different audiences, a much more viable option than on any previous home format (2005: 46-50).

The Disney Studio has frequently seized upon these opportunities for DVD editions of its animated features, usually aiming to satisfy *all* consumers with a single retail package. Tom



Brown's analysis of the 2003 two-disc "Platinum Edition" release of *The Lion King* (1994) proves insightful in this regard. He notes that the collection offers "multiple entry points" for different viewers, with most of the child-focused extras on one disc, and the "more weighty" material on another (2008: 90, 89). This is made even more explicit in the *Vista Series* (2003) two-DVD release of *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (1988, made by Disney's production arm Touchstone Pictures): disc one is identified as the "Family Friendly" edition and is presented in a pan-and-scan format, while disc two is labelled the "Enthusiast" version, and features the film in widescreen coupled with a more comprehensive collection of extra features (Kendrick, 2005: 66). Reflecting Lev Manovich's concept of multimedia products (such as DVDs) acting as user-controlled "databases" rather than fully-prescribed linear experiences, most viewers will likely not watch every piece of content within the overall collection (2001: 215). The provision of two discs with different options means that anyone can buy the set and select the material that suits their desired reading position (while, in theory, just ignoring everything else). Broadly speaking, the average consumer can simply view the movie in a more "accessible" version, without denying the cinephile access to the film in the original aspect ratio, or the opportunity to learn more about the film through copious hours of supplements.

Although these sets highlight the potential to serve different audience requirements simultaneously, the size and profitability of the DVD industry of the early-to-mid 2000s made the production of *separate* editions, which each targeted an individual demographic, an increasingly lucrative prospect. As Craig Hight suggests, studios began to see the potential in making both a higher-priced "special edition" aimed at a "consumer elite", as well as a lower-priced "standard" disc for "regular" audiences (2012: 33). One report indicated that almost a quarter of new theatrical films released on DVD between January and September 2004 came out "in at least two versions" (Arnold and McCourt, 2004: 1, 44). Disney has, again, proven rather ahead of the game in this regard: even in the VHS era, it experimented with this concept

of multi-tiered releases, albeit primarily for its animated shorts.<sup>1</sup> This trend continued – and was significantly exacerbated – by DVD. While Disney has tended to only offer implicitly “deluxe” versions of its animated features on disc, the short cartoons have seen numerous releases – some of which duplicate (at least some of) the same films, but promote the overall package in distinct ways.

The fracturing of the market into disparate releases means that consumers are required to choose, at the point of sale, their “preferred” version.<sup>2</sup> Unlike the aforementioned “all-inclusive” sets, these “differently classed editions [...] offer dissimilar cultural values and viewing pleasures through different appeals to pastness” (Church, 2015: 32). This is visible, for instance, in the disparities between Disney’s treatment of its Mickey Mouse theatrical cartoons in numerous “standard edition” releases, such as *Classic Cartoon Favorites: Starring Mickey* (2005) and *Funny Factory with Mickey* (2005), and the entries in its *Walt Disney Treasures* line, entitled *Mickey Mouse in Living Color, Volumes 1* (2001) and *2* (2004). As Jo T. Smith notes, even the outer packaging for collections such as these often far extends the “functional purpose” of storing and protecting the disc(s), instead aiming to communicate the specific nostalgic intent to the target demographic ahead of purchase (2008: 139). Both volumes of *Mickey Mouse in Living Color* are two-disc sets, consisting of a double-sized DVD case housed within a metal box, sporting a relatively minimalist image of the Mouse, designed to posit the *Treasures* as a luxury item. This is further emphasised by the collection’s scarcity – the first volume was limited to just 150,000 copies (with the item number stamped directly into the tin), while the second had a production run of 175,000 (and contained a “Certificate of Authenticity” within the box) – playing on a corrupted notion of “take one” ephemerality, which Disney has otherwise been inclined to reserve for video releases of its feature films. This contrasts significantly with the *Classic Cartoon Favorites* and *Funny Factory* lines. These consist of a single disc contained within a regular plastic DVD case (with cover art emphasising

a much larger, and more colourful, image of Mickey), which were made widely available in online and retail stores. Both were listed with a suggested retail price (SRP) of \$14.99 per volume, marking them as cheaper alternatives to the *Mickey Mouse in Living Color* sets, which were sold at an SRP of \$32.99 each.

The *Treasures* sets are thus defined as a more extravagant product, in part due to their cost and comparative rarity. The back covers of these volumes contain signatures from both Roy E. Disney – the final member of the Disney family still connected with the studio at the time of production – and film critic Leonard Maltin. These act as further markers of legitimacy, suggesting that the discs meet the exacting standards of the animatophile community, and have been produced with a level of personal care that exceeds the usual corporate interests for a home video release.<sup>3</sup> The packaging also emphasises the value of the extra material in helping viewers to learn more about the films. For instance, the blurb on *Living Color, Volume 1* boasts about

the wide array of special features, including an inside look at the creation of selected cartoons through pencil animation and initial audio tracks. Browse the gallery to see original concept art and theatrical posters, and enjoy an interview featurette with the animators and vintage television clips of Walt Disney himself, discussing the mouse that started it all.

Such marketing devices thus attempt to suggest that consumers are not simply purchasing a collection of films, but rather an “experience” (see Brown, 2008). This continues within the programmed structure of the DVD itself: upon inserting Disc One, the viewer is shown an animated sequence inside an opulent-looking cinema. The evocation of the geographical space of the movie theatre is thus another instance in which the collection aligns itself with the

preferences of “take one” cinephilia, even though it is ultimately just providing a computer-generated simulacrum. The “camera” slowly zooms towards the stage, where the words “Walt Disney Treasures” are visible. One curtain rises, and another subsequently opens – an element of pageantry that implies the entire production will be of cultural significance. This is followed by a video introduction by Maltin, who offers an overview of Mickey’s iconic status, and the trajectory of his star image during the Technicolor years. Only at this point is the viewer finally given access to the DVD menu, which permits the option to play the cartoons in chronological order, or to select a specific entry from a list, again ordered by release date. The cartoons are frequently placed within an historical framework – a trait already established by the packaging, which features a timeline that indicates the date range of the collected films.

The *Funny Factory* and *Classic Cartoon Favorites* collections, by contrast, place an emphasis solely on the enjoyment value that the films themselves can provide to the present-day audience, without any need to read them within any wider cultural context. The packaging for *Starring Mickey*, for instance, claims that the cartoons are “packed with laughs and sure to entertain the whole family over and over again.” There is no pomp and ceremony associated with the opening screens of the discs: instead, each of these collections begins with an explanation of Disney’s FastPlay technology, which then turns on by default unless the viewer chooses to take control within a brief time window. As the studio’s website attests, FastPlay was “designed with families in mind,” particularly young children who may struggle to navigate DVD menus, and the feature simply plays the entire disc’s content from beginning to end without the need for any button presses (Disney n.d.) – a clear indication of the target demographic for these volumes.

With FastPlay enabled, the viewing experience begins with a series of commercials for other Disney merchandise – a recurring trait of the studio’s home video releases since the VHS era.<sup>4</sup> Unlike the *Walt Disney Treasures* sets, where the studio’s marketing of its own brands is

undertaken with more subtlety (and with an implicit focus on education about cinema history), these releases are much more direct in using the already-acquired product as a tool to encourage further purchases. The *Funny Factory* disc, for instance, is preceded with trailers for a range of different home video offerings, beginning with a two-disc set of *The Lady and the Tramp* (1955), before segueing to Disney's then-upcoming direct-to-video sequel *Bambi II* (2006), and a re-release of *Pooh's Grand Adventure: The Search for Christopher Robin* (1997). The advertisements continue in this vein, frequently jumping back and forth to different time periods of Disney production. As Sperb suggests, the studio has increasingly proclaimed its archive to be "timeless" (2012: 44), especially in products intended for a family or child audience: the emphasis is less upon the temporal specificity of a given work, but rather its existence as part of an ever-expanding collection of characters and films that continue to have value for each generation. This extends to the presentation of the actual cartoons that appear on the disc: selecting "Play All" first presents the short *Mickey and the Seal* (1948), followed by *Mr. Mouse Takes a Trip* (1940), *Moose Hunters* (1937), *Mickey's Parrot* (1938), and so on. Neither the *Funny Factory* nor *Cartoon Classics* sets provide the original release dates for the films on the packaging or in the DVD menus – and, as budget releases, there are no in-depth special features – so it is possible that viewers may not even recognise the lack of chronological progression. The only minor acknowledgement of any historical relevance is a vague reference to two films in the *Funny Factory* collection receiving Academy Award nominations, but the specific entries are not identified.

These informational omissions from Disney's more mainstream releases would seem to imply that the *Treasures* line offers a more "authentic" representation of the past, although the latter's focus on history is still very much taken from a retrospective position. Many of the extra features found in the *Treasures* discs present the works in terms of later cinephile preferences, giving particular prominence to the auteurship of Walt Disney as a figurehead, as

well as shining a light on many of the studio's previously-neglected artists: for instance, one volume in the series, *The Adventures of Oswald the Lucky Rabbit* (2007), contains several acknowledgements of Ub Iwerks and his role in (at the very least) co-creating Mickey Mouse, correcting earlier publicity pieces which had seen Walt identified as the character's sole originator.<sup>5</sup> To some degree, then, the "budget" DVD releases – by prioritizing instead the appeal of protagonists such as Mickey and the wider Disney "brand" – may inadvertently gesture more closely towards the original promotion of these films during the "studio era" itself wherein, as Nicholas Sammond suggests, the animators were often treated as "anonymous workers and the characters, the product, were the stars" (2015: 39). In making such a claim, though, it must be emphasised that these volumes still undoubtedly alter the contents just as much as their "deluxe" counterparts.

The seemingly randomised selection of cartoons on the *Cartoon Classics* and *Funny Factory* discs reflect that none of the "standard" collections make any claims for comprehensiveness. As Derek Kompare elaborates, the notion of making the whole of a long-running series (either cinematic or televisual) commercially available is something that has only become a widespread phenomenon on DVD. With the exception of a few notable cult television texts such as *Star Trek* (1966-1969), the limited size of the VHS market (as well as the cost and physical volume of the tapes) meant that series usually were represented on this earlier format in an "incomplete" manner, often involving "best of" compilations that contained "only particularly significant" instalments (Kompare, 2006: 356n19, 343, 341). The choices made by producers in these earlier decades of home video production have thus contributed greatly to the creation of a canon of animated texts, since the limited range of cartoons privileged for release have simply been much more accessible to audiences than others. DVDs have significantly widened the viability of a collector market, with many products offering the opportunity to purchase a series in its entirety. Although these sets are still sold at relatively

high prices, DVDs have been promoted as being significantly cheaper than VHS or laserdisc equivalents, with packaging that takes up much less storage space (Kompare, 2006: 347-351).

The *Treasures* releases are unique in the history of Disney home video – even when considering the past traditions of “deluxe” editions on VHS and laserdisc – in that they have compiled full runs (often spread across several volumes) of many of the studio’s theatrical cartoon series, including Disney’s prestigious *Silly Symphonies*, as well as the strands featuring Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, Goofy, and Pluto. Multi-disc boxsets such as the *Walt Disney Treasures* thus sell the idea of becoming a true expert on the respective franchises. In many cases, the closest that most viewers could previously get to certain cartoons (save for the possibility of stumbling upon an unheralded television rerun) was reading reports of them in fanzines such as *Funnyworld* or books such as Leonard Maltin’s *Of Mice and Magic* (1987), written by the privileged few who had access to private collections and/or the studio archives. As such, the ability to finally see – and own – extremely rare films is undoubtedly where DVD has a strong appeal to cinephile and animatophile audiences, offering the prospect of having “complete” knowledge rather than just seeing the same limited range of cartoons that have already appeared on other formats. Indeed, Maltin’s video introduction to Disc One of the *More Silly Symphonies* collection (2006) emphasises the “great frustration among Disney fans and aficionados” surrounding the previous lack of availability of many of these films, and suggests that the contents of the DVD package will permit viewers not just to be entertained, but also to challenge existing hierarchies: “Because so many of these shorts are unfamiliar, I’m sure you’ll make discoveries and pick out your favourites. Serious animation buffs may find themselves thinking about some of these films as candidates for rediscovery.” Such materials thus help to reframe what might have previously been dismissed as “lesser” entries as “*films maudit*” – forgotten texts that deserve to be seen and discussed. The consumer is also positioned as an

active scholar, whose viewing contributes towards a more complex cultural memory (Tryon, 2009: 32), in this case filling important gaps in the history of Disney.

During the studio era itself, most animation units produced a relatively small number of cartoons within a given series over the course of a year, with new entries released at staggered intervals. The films were generally screened individually, and as a supplementary text. On disc, the cartoons are instead presented as the main event – the reason why the consumer has purchased the product – and many collections offer the potential of watching numerous entries in a single sitting. As Elsaesser suggests, whereas past generations of cinephilia valued the viewing of a rare film not just for its aesthetic qualities but “almost as much for the effort it took to catch it”, DVD creates almost the “opposite” phenomenon: a concern “about how to cope with a flow that knows no privileged points of capture at all” (2005: 38-39). Despite the complaints surrounding the limited “best of” sampling on VHS (and budget DVDs), one could argue that this at least created a manageable canon of works. The adjustment required for complete collections such as the *Treasures* sets, then, is essentially learning “to savour [...] the anachronisms generated by total availability” (Elsaesser, 2005: 38), regardless of whether the content lends itself to such an experience.

At the time of their original production, studio films were generally perceived to have a limited shelf life (Hediger, 2005: 141), and it was not uncommon for animators to duplicate formulas and gag routines from previous works in new releases. Occasional cinematic reissues of older cartoons did occur, but these texts were generally not made with the expectation that the entire series would be screened in rapid succession. For instance, although Tex Avery was recognised as an important “auteur” by the growing animatophile community in the 1970s, many historians have also expressed some frustration – and even boredom – as a result of watching a marathon of the director’s MGM cartoons, due to the prevalence of repetition.<sup>6</sup> One can identify similar sentiments in reviews of the *Walt Disney Treasures* DVD sets, even if this



is often tempered with underlying praise for the “completeness” of the collections (Holt, 2004; Cooke, 2008). Indeed, this is perhaps one of the inherent contradictions in the rhetoric of the cinephile in relation to DVD – there is a perceived value in having access to virtually everything, even if this surfeit of choice can be overwhelming (Elsaesser, 2005: 39).

It is, of course, inappropriate to make definitive claims about how audiences engage with texts, particularly in this digital age. Some DVD owners may only ever watch selected cartoons, or choose to stagger the viewing over a lengthier period of time. The “Play All” function on the *Treasures* discs nonetheless offers a similar experience to the FastPlay feature of the more “casual” releases, albeit with greater comprehensiveness in terms of the available material. In both cases, such options facilitate – and potentially even endorse – a process of “binge watching”, breaking from the portioned availability of the films in their original form. Indeed, it is suggestive to find one reviewer of a *Treasures* disc aligning his viewing to other nostalgic *small-screen* experiences, where the works developed a pertinent history of being portioned together in larger block formats: “Watching a lot of these shorts transports me back to a kid watching these same cartoons on the ancient ‘Cartoon Classics’ VHS tapes and on cable TV during the heyday of the Disney Channel” (Cooke, 2008). Despite the “take one” appeal of seeing “lost” works, collector’s edition DVDs ultimately provide a maximised variant of “take two” culture in making so much (possibly *too* much?) content available all at once.

Beyond dealing with the mere saturation of history, though, a focus on completeness requires engagement with films that have, especially with the passage of time, been deemed “problematic” in other ways. Such concerns have been prominent since the early television era, when (as noted) studios began re-packaging their older theatrical cartoons for broadcast. Paul Wells suggests that animated shorts were already often associated with nostalgia during this period, but there was a growing realisation that these texts could also contain challenging, outdated content (2002: 85). Since then, the general approach has been to edit scenes – and, in

extreme cases, remove films from circulation entirely – in cases where they could be offensive to minority groups, be unsuitable for children, or in any other way damage the wider brand value of the studio. The *Silly Symphonies* short *The Three Little Pigs* (1933), for instance, initially contained a sequence in which the Big Bad Wolf dresses as a stereotypical Jewish peddler. Since 1947, Disney has incrementally altered both the animation and soundtrack of successive re-releases to eradicate these elements (Merritt and Kaufman, 2016: 128).

Although animatophiles became increasingly aware of the pre-censoring tactics of Disney (and, it must be emphasised, similar approaches undertaken with the cartoon libraries of many other American studios as well) throughout the latter stages of the twentieth century (see, for instance, Edwards, 1996), the extent to which this knowledge was passed on to “regular” audiences – especially before the widespread availability of the Internet – is debatable. The “budget” video releases have historically avoided any controversy because of the focus on “best of” compilations: the contents can be selectively determined, and challenging works can simply be omitted, without any sense – due to the eclectic, unchronological nature of these sets – that any particular film *ought* to have been included. In a few instances, cartoons deemed particularly valuable to the studio – such as *The Three Little Pigs* – have continued to circulate, but only in a revised form. One of these appearances is on a disc entitled, somewhat paradoxically, *Walt Disney’s Timeless Tales, Volume One* (2005), another collection which places a broadly ahistorical focus on the supposedly “ageless themes” (in the words of the outer packaging) of the company’s works. There is no acknowledgement that the viewer is seeing a version of *The Three Little Pigs* that deviates from the original 1933 content. Such actions have led numerous scholars to conclude that the Disney Studio tends to “strategically remediate” its franchises, rectifying the controversial “already said” into the seemingly “never said” by placing limitations on how its archival material reaches the public (Sperb, 2012: 21; Sandler, 1998: 6).

The *Treasures* volumes have thus been particularly bold in releasing “troublesome” cartoons in an entirely uncensored form, including many that portray some its biggest franchise stars – such as Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck – in a negative or unflattering light.<sup>7</sup> However, the studio has also been careful to “annotate” these films in numerous ways, creating an even more overt paratextual structure for the viewing experience than elsewhere on the collection. The discs tend to exile any problematic texts from the rest of the materials: they are not included as part of the chronological “Play All” option, and must be chosen individually from a separate menu entitled “From the Vault” (a name which itself hints at the previously suppressed nature of these works). Those attempting to access the “Vault” section – and sometimes following the selection of specific films – must first watch another video introduction by Leonard Maltin. These are programmed to be unskippable by most DVD players and, as such, every time one wishes to view any of the “Vault” cartoons, one must first sit through the required lecture.

In her study of horror cinema, Caetlin Benson-Allott argues that such disclaimers have become relatively commonplace in DVD releases of “difficult” films, serving to establish a “rhetorical difference” between the intentions of the original filmmakers and those of the present-day distributor, deflecting criticism about the latter’s decision to release the product (2013: 177). Indeed, scholarship regarding horror and home video has frequently proven insightful about the difficulties inherent in producing multiple versions – with the DVD format increasingly permitting the release of “uncut” editions, often with the intention of correcting the genre’s traditionally low critical reception, while also attempting to cater for audiences who revel in the “trash” aesthetics and modification of the works on VHS and elsewhere (see, for instance, Egan, 2007; Church, 2015). Even in the cases where these films had previously been censored, though, there was still generally a sense that they were intended primarily for adult audiences. Short cartoons arguably require an even more complex process of negotiation because of the extent to which many of its characters are now considered modern, family-

focused icons – an approach that depends, as indicated earlier, on studios encouraging the “forgetting” of some of the protagonists’ more regrettable past actions. The discussions surrounding horror, therefore, largely surround differing gradations of violence – something rarely, if ever, considered child-friendly – while animation is contending with one perspective which views the works as entirely innocent, compared to another which acknowledges the potential for offensiveness and reactionary content.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the animatophile focus of the *Treasures* sets, then, Disney has been careful to ensure that access to certain works does not disrupt the mainstream (and much more profitable) discourses associated with its properties: as such, the disclaimers move deftly between condemnation of the problematic content of the films, and justification for their inclusion as part of the collection. In the “Vault” introduction to *Mickey Mouse in Black and White, Volume 2* (2004), for instance, Maltin reiterates that the material is simply “unacceptable,” but he also attempts to place the works within a wider context – emphasising that the use of blackface in *Mickey’s Mellerdrummer* (1933) reflected cultural traditions beyond animation. Although true, this statement is undoubtedly valuable in helping to shift the “blame” for these images away from the Disney Studio, which in turn avoids disrupting the depiction of its artists as celebrated auteurs elsewhere in the collection’s extra features. The talk concludes with the suggestion that, while the studio does not endorse the stereotypes, “Disney fans and enthusiasts should be able to enjoy [the films] intact, and concerned parents might use this opportunity to talk about the way things were many years ago and just how far we’ve come since then.” As such, there is an implication that the inclusion of difficult material may actually prove instructive for viewers, and that removing this content could be seen a negative form of censorship – a reading that is emphasised by the apparent authority of Maltin as a populist film historian.

Such examples highlight just how frequently DVDs attempt to guide the viewer’s interpretation from a modern – and seemingly more “enlightened” standpoint – even while

emphasising the importance of restoring and celebrating the past, creating a somewhat mixed message about the way in which the films should be consumed. For instance, every volume of the *Walt Disney Treasures* includes the following phrase on the rear of the packaging: “this is a timeless collection from generations past to generations to come.” Using a similar rhetoric to the “budget” releases, there is an emphasis upon the appeal that these cartoons will have for many different audience groups – including, as the above suggests, even ones who are not yet born! – implying that the works are not just dusty relics. Yet the claims of timelessness sit uneasily against the “Vault” entries, in which the on-screen presenter is forced to concede that certain scenes actually contain alarming reminders that the films were made in a specific time and place. This conflicted marketing strategy is perhaps most evident on the packaging for the *Woody Woodpecker and Friends Classic Cartoon Collection, Volume 2* (2008) – an attempt by Universal to launch its own series of DVDs akin to the *Disney Treasures* – which initially claims that “this outrageous collection is non-stop fun for fans of all ages!”, only to then display a slightly larger text box stating “THIS COLLECTION IS INTENDED FOR ADULT COLLECTORS AND MAY NOT BE SUITABLE FOR CHILDREN.”

There is ultimately a degree of “slippage” in the targeted consumer – it is economically beneficial for studios such as Universal and Disney to attract as many demographics as possible to these higher-priced special editions, but this is counteracted by the potential offence and controversy that certain films in the collection could generate, particularly if shown to younger viewers. The implication is that several of the cartoons need to be watched in quotation marks, by a responsible adult viewer who can apply a degree of critical distance to the more problematic content. Although consumers are theoretically seeing the original, uncensored version of the films as once shown in theatres (restoring material from the “compromised” television broadcasts and selective VHS releases), the DVD nonetheless alters the experience by emphasising the need for historical context. The Maltin “Vault” introductions have

ultimately received a somewhat mixed reception from online cinephile respondents, with negative criticism often deriding the apparent hand-holding (and maybe even hand-wringing) tone of the commentary (see, for instance, Paul X. et al., 2003; Erickson, 2004). Such comments evoke the previously-discussed stereotype of “Joe Six-Pack”, with the suggestion being that the disclaimers are an annoying necessity designed to protect the studio against any “regular” consumers stumbling upon the collection and misinterpreting its contents, rather than being designed for the “true” animatophile. However, even if one rejects the learning opportunity that the disc purports to offer – instead, perhaps, saluting the availability of these texts as a victory over a (perceived) politically-correct media landscape, or simply enjoying the thrill of accessing a previously “censored” film – the viewer is still primarily viewing the cartoons through the lens of this contemporary framework.

A potential benefit to Disney of the “Vault” sections on the *Treasures* DVDs is the ability to essentially contain accusations of misconduct within its past. As Sperb suggests, distributors are increasingly forced to deal with a “muddled, generalising understanding of Hollywood history” that has entered public discourse, “which mistakenly assumes that every film or television show made before the 1960s was either racist, sexist, or both” (2012: 15). By acknowledging that these issues did exist within Disney content, but limiting this admission to just a small handful of works, the discs implicitly infer that everything else that the studio produced during this period is truly as “harmless” as its publicity frequently claims. A cartoon’s placement either within or outside of the “Vault” thus creates an “offensive/non-offensive” binary that, rather than jeopardise the validity of the “family-friendly” DVD releases, may actually serve to strengthen belief in the stated innocence of the vast majority of Disney’s films.

The limited-edition nature of the *Treasures* sets has arguably also been useful in helping to control the number of audience members who will get to see the actual content of the “Vault” cartoons for themselves. In most instances, entries in the *Walt Disney Treasures* line sold out

quickly in the United States after their initial release, and even second-hand copies now regularly command high prices amongst internet resellers, making it an expensive prospect for any latecomers to access these volumes.<sup>9</sup> Although no specific sales numbers for the *Cartoon Favorites* and *Funny Factory* discs have been made available to the public, it is almost certainly the case that the units produced for these lines significantly exceed those of the *Treasures* collection. Indeed, such is the frequent irony of multi-tiered DVD releases: as David Church has argued in relation to horror films, the special editions are often posited as “a privileged node of consumption,” and yet these often compete against “budget-priced, downmarket versions that potentially circulate more widely in the marketplace [...] than their more expensive and prestigious kin” (2015: 57). Disney is perhaps unlikely to designate its standard DVDs as “downmarket” but, through the *Treasures*, it has been able to sidestep accusations of withholding aspects of its history and (broadly speaking) satisfy animatophiles in the process. At the same time, the comparatively restricted availability of these discs has allowed the studio to continue its promotion of a mainstream image that conceives the Disney archive as being suitable for all ages.

The degree to which home video serves to nostalgically “remake” the included film(s) – even when supposedly “restoring” previously-expurgated content – has been well theorised by scholars (see, for instance, Klinger, 2006: 72). As Klinger notes, however, many DVD packages of older movies still generally aim to affix a generic “classic” label to the contents (2006: 66), regardless of whether individual consumers have different needs in terms of audio-visual presentation, or varying levels of interest in contextualising supplements. Successive re-releases of films such as *Citizen Kane* (1941), *It’s a Wonderful Life* (1946), and even Disney’s *Snow White* on DVD and Blu-ray have done little to alter the fundamental interpretive “narrative” surrounding these works (despite often touting hyperbolic “improvements” to elements such as picture quality, in an attempt to convince people to re-purchase a movie that

they already own). This article hopefully further contributes to an understanding of DVD culture by emphasising the often-precarious balancing act undertaken by distributors when dealing with texts – such as short animation – that have several competing “meanings” operating simultaneously. One’s understanding of the Mickey Mouse theatrical cartoon series, for instance, has the capacity to be significantly altered by the choice of whether to watch, say, the *Funny Factory* disc or a volume of the *Treasures*. What becomes eminently clear, though, when considering the polarised requirements of “animatophiles” and “regular” audiences – and the various DVD editions that cater to these demographics – is that we are seeing a struggle to appropriate and define the present and future reception of the films, rather than to truly reclaim the past.

### **Afterword**

By 2008, sales of DVDs had begun to markedly decline, reflecting in part the impact of the wider economic recession (Brereton, 2012: 201; Benson-Allott, 2013: 246n70). As Mark and Deborah Parker suggest, this has had a particularly negative impact on the viability of lavish “special edition” box sets, especially for older films, with many studios citing poor sales and low profits as a justification for stepping away from these product lines (2011: 45). Disney discontinued its *Treasures* sets in 2009 and – although it has continued to release new editions of its historic features on DVD and more recently Blu-ray – there has been comparatively little done with the cartoon shorts since this time. This has been true of most studios who launched “deluxe” animation sets in the early-to-mid 2000s: Universal abruptly ended its *Woody Woodpecker and Friends Classic Cartoon Collection* after just two volumes in 2008, the same year in which Warner Bros. concluded its *Looney Tunes Golden Collection* and its releases of Fleischer/Famous *Popeye* cartoons, in each case failing to make the entire series available on disc ahead of cancellation.



The sale of DVDs has endured to some extent in “big box [American] retailers such as Wal-Mart, Target, and Costco” (Tryon, 2009: 20). As Jerry Beck suggests, however, recent discs from studios such as Warner Bros. and Disney have generally just repackaged previously-released cartoons into new budget offerings, aimed almost exclusively at casual buyers: “they’re not marketing these things to collectors anymore. They would love it if collectors bought them [...but] that’s not their primary audience” (Beck, 2013b). The production of physical media is also being challenged by the rise of online streaming services such as Netflix and Amazon Instant Video, none of which have yet offered a particularly wide range of materials related to animation history. (At the time of writing, for instance, the American Netflix catalogue has only a handful of Disney studio-era shorts, with the selection largely following the tendencies of earlier “standard edition” VHS and disc releases, including the edited version of *The Three Little Pigs*).

The seeming end to this era of animatophile-focused home video nonetheless emphasises just how much was achieved in the previous decade. As Hediger suggests, during this period, the “consumer demands of an apparent minority of historically minded cinephiles” were being given serious, rather than cursory, consideration by major Hollywood corporations (2005: 143). Yet the legacy of the *Treasures* is also rather unclear: despite attempts to bring recognition to a wider range of the studio’s output, and also to raise the shorts to a similar level of respectability as the animated features, Internet distribution and the latter years of DVD production have mostly seen a return towards older, more limited canons. While Disney has, in the past, traded upon the unavailability of certain products as a means of creating anticipation for some future re-release, there appear to be no definitive plans for offering renewed opportunities to purchase some of its most obscure shorts. It is possible, then, as we move into a post-DVD landscape, and the *Treasures* discs become increasingly rare, that the format may become the subject of nostalgia itself: a blend of “take one” and “take two” sensibilities that –

for a short time at least, and in spite of many conceptual compromises – offered unprecedented, and as yet unrepeated, access to studio archives.

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<sup>1</sup> In 1984, for instance, Disney launched a "Gold" series of VHS tapes, which differed from their usual video releases of cartoon shorts not just because of their limited-edition status, but

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also due to the inclusion of an introductory documentary “featuring rare footage of Walt Disney” (Disney, 1984: 27) – an early precursor to the special features now found on DVDs.

<sup>2</sup> One cannot, of course, preclude the possibility that consumers might buy more than one edition (Arnold and McCourt, 2004: 44; Church 2015: 57). This could involve “upgrading” from a standard to a deluxe copy, or responding to a “completionist” mentality – an attitude that has certainly been fostered amongst collectors of animation merchandise, as the numerous books focused on Disneyana will attest.

<sup>3</sup> The “truth” of this claim has been called into question following complaints from online fans about the lack of restoration of several films, particularly those included in a wave of *Treasures* volumes released in 2005. In response, Maltin noted that, despite his role as on-screen host and consultant for the project, Disney did not choose to involve him in pre-screening the materials ahead of their inclusion on the discs (see Lutz, 2005). As such, the signatures on the packaging appear to be largely ceremonial, rather than a true guarantee of quality.

<sup>4</sup> Jill Kipnis and Steve Traiman note, for instance, that the promotion of Disney’s *The Lion King* special edition DVD involved a “two-year plan [...] of pre-sale programs”, which included featuring “inserts and trailers” on a large number of DVD and VHS releases of other studio films (2003: 62).

<sup>5</sup> See Apgar (2015: 50-64) for a discussion of the Disney Studio’s changing account of Mickey’s development, almost always to the exclusion of Iwerks, across numerous 1930s publications. It was only following the rise of animatophilia and animation studies that this narrative was fundamentally challenged.

<sup>6</sup> For a summary of these critical responses, see Curtis, 2011: 211.

<sup>7</sup> Edited films have occasionally been included within the collections, but these occurrences seem to have been by accident rather than design. For instance, *Mickey Mouse in Living Color, Volume 1* presents a redubbed version of the short *Clock Cleaners* (1937), produced in response

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to sensationalist (and inaccurate) claims by the American Family Association in 1996 that Donald uses a curse word in the film (Cohen, 2004: 113-114). However, several “family friendly” DVD compilations – including *Have a Laugh! Volume 2* (2010) – have subsequently reinstated the original soundtrack, suggesting that it is no longer Disney policy to intentionally circulate the modified version of this cartoon. Similarly, the initial American release of the Treasures’ first *Silly Symphonies* volume (2001) contains the “revised” copy of *The Three Little Pigs*, although footage of the Jewish stereotype is included in a video introduction that precedes the film. A subsequent reissuing of the same collection in several other countries, including the United Kingdom in 2004, provides the full cartoon with the original 1933 animation. This again implies that the “censorship” of the American edition of the *Treasures* disc was a result of human error, rather than the deliberate acts found in the “budget” video releases.

<sup>8</sup> Kevin S. Sandler offers an evocative example of this juxtaposition in relation to the Warner Bros. *Looney Tunes* series: in late-1996, Bugs Bunny was recruited by the United States Postal Service as an ambassador for children, just as the Prince Charles Cinema in London was presenting a screening event entitled “The Bad Bugs Bunny Show”, restricted solely to adult audiences, and purposefully advertised as “a feast of politically incorrect cartoons” drawn from the archives of several major American studios (1998: 1-3).

<sup>9</sup> Select entries in the *Treasures* line have been made available in Europe as non-limited editions, providing a cheaper alternative in some instances. However, it is perhaps revealing that certain discs with a particularly large number of “Vault” entries, such as *Mickey Mouse in Black and White, Volume 2*, have only been issued in a small number of territories. “Rips” of the DVD copies have occasionally been uploaded freely online – with individual cartoons at times posted to websites such as YouTube – although Disney has generally been quite aggressive in policing these unauthorised bootleg copies.