Monochrome Mickey: Modern Nostalgia Texts and the Animated Star Image

David McGowan

Abstract:

This article considers a recent trend for Disney to produce modern texts that evoke Mickey Mouse's pre-Technicolor days. Unlike James Bond and Batman, Disney still continues to market Mickey as a star (rather than a long-running character), with the sense that there is (somehow) coherence to be found.

In the first episode of Walt Disney's first anthology television series, *Walt Disney's Disneyland* (1954-1958), entitled "The Disneyland Story" (27 October 1954), the eponymous host claims that "it was all started by a mouse." This statement has essentially set the tone for a version of Disney history – reiterated by the studio for much of the latter half of the twentieth century and beyond – which sees the creation of Mickey Mouse, and particularly the short *Steamboat Willie* (1928), as the opening chapter of modern animation production. Although *Steamboat Willie* was actually Disney's third cartoon featuring the mouse, following the production of *Plane Crazy* (1928) and *The Gallopin' Gaucho* (1928), it was the first to be released to the general public, and the studio's first to contain a recorded soundtrack. In 2007, Walt Disney Animation Studios debuted a new motion logo, which has been presented ahead of each of its feature and short film releases to the present day. This reproduces "black-and-white" footage from the opening scene of *Steamboat Willie* in which Mickey is whistling a tune (figure 1): a sequence which had been carefully constructed in the late 1920s to showcase the quality of Disney's synchronization of image and sound. Paul Grainge argues that such repurposing of film history ought to invite "questions not only about the nature of corporate branding in post-classical Hollywood, but also about how logos [and other pervasive – but perhaps rarely studied – paratextual forms] act upon, and can give meaning to a film" (*Brand Hollywood* 71). At the time of writing, Mickey is about to enter his ninetieth year of existence. It can be assumed that most individuals who saw *Steamboat Willie* in theaters back in 1928 have since passed away. Yet the original incarnation of Disney's mouse still exists in some form within popular memory and has actually become an increasingly marketable icon in its own right, alongside other recent productions which place Mickey squarely within the twenty-first century. This article will investigate the nostalgic and commercial intent behind the

creation of a modern monochrome Mickey, and how this serves to deepen or complicate our understanding of the past.
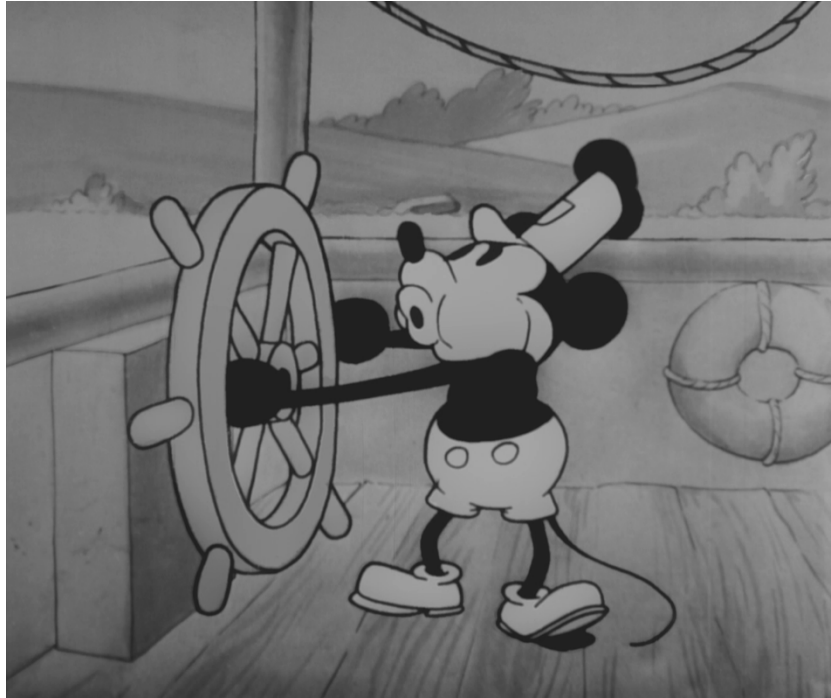
Figure 1. Mickey Mouse in *Steamboat Willie* (1928).

Academia has already considered a number of popular characters, such as Sherlock Holmes, James Bond, and Batman, who have endured for many years. The thesis put forward in many of these studies is that coherence has essentially become impossible, with the protagonists rebooted and subjected to "multiple narrativizations" (Collins, 164), often in an attempt to meet the tastes of different generations and audience groups. In the last decade alone, Sherlock Holmes has been evoked in several major film and television projects that have variously seen him living in the Victorian era (such as the Guy Ritchie-directed feature *Sherlock Holmes* [2009]), brought forward to the present day (the BBC's *Sherlock* [2010-]), and even sleuthing in New York with a female companion – Joan, rather than John, Watson (the CBS series *Elementary* [2012-]). The

continuity offered by each production contradicts the others, making it impossible to conceive of a singular Sherlock Holmes fictional universe. Instead, these different Sherlocks exist separately, albeit with some overlap in terms of narratives and characterization (often drawing from the original Arthur Conan Doyle stories).

An animated creation such as Mickey Mouse would appear to offer a similarly complex variety of meanings. Following the discontinuation of his original film series in 1953, Mickey has been given a number of "comeback" roles, including TV host (in series such as *The Mickey Mouse Club* [1955-1959] and *House of Mouse* [2001-2003]), children's educator (*Mickey Mouse Clubhouse* [2006-2016]), and even some brand new comedic projects (such as the theatrical short *Runaway Brain* [1995] or the direct-to-video feature *Mickey-Donald-Goofy: The Three Musketeers* [2004]). Even in his initial theatrical cartoon appearances of the late-1920s and 1930s, Mickey's situation could vary greatly from film-to-film. In their analysis of Batman, however, William Uricchio and Roberta A. Pearson make a brief, but important, distinction for studio-era cartoon protagonists:

> […Figures] such as Bugs Bunny and Mickey Mouse, though similar to the Batman in being multiply authored and not bound to a particular medium, urtext or period, differ from the Batman in that they function as actors/celebrities rather than as characters. Bugs Bunny can appear in an opera, a Western, a Sherwood Forest adventure, a science fiction film, or even, as "himself" at the Academy Awards. In each case, he plays a role within the narrative as well as constantly remaining Bugs Bunny, in a similar fashion to such flesh and blood counterparts as Groucho Marx (185).

For Mickey, the discontinuities found in each new text are essentially built in to his persona as a movie (and now sometimes television) star, separate from his existence as a character in any specific cartoon. The fact that the mouse is a hot dog vendor in one film, and a firefighter in another, or that Mickey and Minnie are sometimes dating and sometimes not, adds to rather than detracts from this idea of an actor "performing" each role. As an animated creation, Mickey also largely avoids the disruption inherent in "rebooting" a long-running franchise with new cast members. Batman has been played at various times by Adam West, Michael Keaton, Christian Bale (and so on), and James Bond has been portrayed by Sean Connery, Roger Moore, and several others. In each instance, the underlying character is at least partially transformed because of his/her embodiment by a different human being, and the extradiegetic meanings brought with each new star persona (Bennett and Woollacott, 45). Mickey, by contrast, has always been presented as the same underlying figure.[1] As Michael Eisner, then the chief executive officer of Disney, posited in 2003, the studio playfully conceives of the Mouse as having a linear and unbroken history, even at times when his on-screen credits have been fairly sparse: "sometimes he gets work, sometimes he's retiring, and sometimes he's coming back" (quoted in Verrier).

From as early as 1931, Disney has publicized Mickey's "birthday" as taking place in 1928, and the date was eventually standardized to November 18, the day on which *Steamboat Willie* was first screened to the public (Korkis 19). Although this was essentially a ploy to remonetize old releases, as theaters were often encouraged to hold Disney-themed events and screen a wide selection of the mouse's past adventures, it also had the benefit of reiterating Mickey's ongoing existence, tied to a static point of origin. This has become even more prevalent in later decades, when the character has reached certain milestone years. Mickey's fiftieth birthday prompted a huge range of tie-in products, including the airing of a ninety-minute special as part of the TV series

The Wonderful World of Disney (1969-1979). "Mickey's 50" (transmitted 19 November 1978) features tributes from many contemporary celebrities – including Peter Sellers, Anne Bancroft, Mel Brooks, and even Kermit the Frog – reiterating this idea of the mouse as a real-life star. It also features an overview of Mickey's major productions, beginning with clips of monochrome works such as *Plane Crazy*, *The Gallopin' Gaucho*, and *Steamboat Willie*, before moving on to the introduction of color in *The Band Concert* (1935), and beyond. Another special made in the following decade, "Mickey's 60th Birthday" (transmitted 13 November 1988) begins with a similar potted history. In anticipation of Mickey's seventieth year, a children's book was marketed as his "autobiography", offering a decade-by-decade account, in which the mouse expresses his delight at having "the chance here to relive so many of those great memories" (Mouse and Schroeder, 7). In each of these texts, there is a focus upon the ongoing nature of Mickey's life and "career", emphasizing his black-and-white origins, moving up to the present day, and predicting his continued success.

A potential danger of these celebratory retrospective accounts is that they often position the mouse as the beginning of the story. While the character was quickly adopted as an exciting emblem of the new possibilities of sound filmmaking, one can identify aspects of his films that also draw from earlier traditions, both aesthetically and narratively. As Donald Crafton's seminal book *Before Mickey* emphasizes, there was a wealth of production in the United States and elsewhere that existed well before the emergence of the mouse (xviii). By 1928, even Walt Disney had been experimenting with animation – with varying levels of success – for almost a decade. The development of Mickey occurred hastily because of an unexpected rights issue which saw Disney lose permission to continue with his existing series, based around the character Oswald the Lucky Rabbit. The mouse reflected something of a new start, from which point "Disney resolved

never to relinquish ownership of his films or creations again" (Maltin, 34), but Mickey was actually much more of a transitional figure than many of the anniversary tributes (arguably most concerned with promoting the studio's *active* intellectual properties) have tended to acknowledge.

The Disney studio would establish its own influential principles of animation in the 1930s, but the earliest *Mickey* cartoons are animated in the "rubber-hose" style: an approach developed within several New York cartoon studios in the late 1910s, which treats the character (and often the surrounding world) as malleable, capable of elaborate transformation and exaggeration. Mickey was not yet fully established as a personality, and – in the rush to capitalize on the interest generated by *Steamboat Willie* – numerous shorts took inspiration (and sometimes full comedic routines) from other works, including Disney's earlier *Alice Comedies* and *Oswald the Lucky Rabbit* releases (see Kaufman). For the first couple of years, then, the mouse was often shown engaging in activities that reflected the sensibilities of silent animation, playing with the flexibility of the cartoon body and occasionally delving into crude humor. As the character became more famous, and the films started attracting a broader middle-class audience, such content threatened to become a liability.

One of the most troublesome gags involved the suggestive presentation of cow udders, with the extravagant rubber-hose animation often gleefully implying an association with "sexual organs" (Griffin, xiii). The *Mickey* series inadvertently courted scandal when an Ohio censorship board banned the cartoon *The Shindig* (1930), due to a sequence in which one of Mickey's costars, Clarabelle Cow, is shown in her barn "implicitly 'naked'" and reading Elinor Glyn's notorious erotic novel *Three Weeks* (Telotte, "Disney's Cows" 220). The story quickly escalated into national news, and was reported in several film journals and even the *New York Times* ("Mickey's Morals"; "The Censor!"). It was soon announced that Disney, and several of his contemporaries,

planned to excise representations of cow udders in future works to avoid controversy ("Regulated Rodent"). The impact on the *Mickey* series was ultimately more severe: over the next few years, the mouse moved out of the countryside and into the suburbs, with many of his barnyard friends – such as Clarabelle and Horace Horsecollar – slowly replaced by newer characters. These included Pluto and Donald Duck, who were better positioned to fill screen time now that Mickey's own rebellious tendencies had been curbed. The publicity surrounding the character also shifted in tone, seemingly trying to "forget" the bad behavior of some of the early productions, since it risked undermining the safer version of the mouse that the studio was now presenting (see McGowan, *Animated Personalities* 68-72).

The recirculation of cartoons on television from the 1950s, and the increased tendency to market such programming toward children, created new concerns about the content of some of these older titles – not just in terms of sexual references, but also placing a greater focus on elements such as violence and racial representation. As the journalist Frank S. Nugent noted in a contemporary article, Mickey "indulged in some cruelties and crudities that would shock fans today – like pulling a cat's tail and using a goose as a bagpipe while playing a one-man band" during his iconic performance in *Steamboat Willie* (60). Disney thus tended to be selective about the films it chose to broadcast on the small screen. Although the black-and-white shorts were by no means identified as the only offenders, these early works also suffered as a result of the studio's aggressive pursuit of color broadcasting – a significant factor in the shift of Disney's anthology series from the ABC to NBC network in 1961 (Telotte, *Disney TV* 16-19) – which placed a greater focus on newer archival content that had been produced for cinemas in Technicolor.

The rise of animation studies from the 1960s provided a platform for certain viewers to lament the "loss" of the older version of Mickey Mouse (even though such discussion was initially

mostly confined to those within the subculture). The author Maurice Sendak, for instance, claimed that "Mickey sold out […]. He got to be a superstar and then became completely boring. I only love his childhood. I don't love his adolescence; and his middle age bores me blind" (quoted in Merritt and Merritt, 59). This countercultural rebellion against the apparent safeness of modern Mickey coincided with a period of "corporate stagnation" at Disney, following the death of its figurehead, Walt, in 1966. The economic revival of the studio is often perceived to have occurred following the appointment of Michael Eisner in 1984, who refined the "strategies of cross-fertilization, or synergy" (Grainge, *Brand Hollywood* 47-49). Much of Disney's renewed success came from reestablishing nostalgic links to its past works, including reactivating Mickey Mouse, who had largely been consigned to the role of studio icon rather than star over the past couple of decades. Although the mid-1930s Technicolor version of the mouse was particularly prized for his appeal and family-friendly attributes, the Eisner era placed an emphasis upon the need to "exploit and extend the 'totality' of the brand" (Grainge, *Brand Hollywood* 50). The increasing recognition of the animatophile as a viable demographic – "a taste group characterized by a high degree of knowledge about animation" (Langer, 159), often comprising adult consumers with disposable income to devote to the hobby – encouraged studios such as Disney to find creative ways to revisit some of the more obscure, and sometimes troublesome, areas of the archive.

While the entire range of Ian Fleming *James Bond* and Arthur Conan Doyle *Sherlock Holmes* stories have remained more or less in print throughout the decades, the full canon of *Mickey Mouse* cartoons have been less easy to come by, often shown in terms of representative samples, sculpted carefully by the studio. The only opportunity to purchase a complete set of Mickey's monochrome adventures occurred with the release of two volumes in the *Walt Disney Treasures* DVD line in the early 2000s: a deluxe, limited-edition collection aimed at adult

animation fans, which quickly sold out and has not been reissued. Disney's recent home video releases – like its television broadcasts – have otherwise tended toward a limited range of the Technicolor shorts, with only occasional examples drawn from Mickey's early career.[2] The most significant "black-and-white" collection aimed at "mainstream" audiences is a single-disc DVD set entitled *Vintage Mickey* (2005), which contains just nine monochrome shorts. Of these, only *Plane Crazy* and *Steamboat Willie* are available to watch freely online via the official Walt Disney Animation Studios *YouTube* account. A restored version of *Steamboat Willie* was also provided as a special feature on the DVD and Blu-ray *Diamond Edition* (2009) release of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), as part of a collection of shorts designed to showcase Disney's technological progression from its early experiments with sound to the studio's first feature film. Most of the early *Mickey* works have thus been relatively inaccessible to consumers – especially in an unedited form – for some time. *Steamboat Willie* is perhaps the only cartoon from the era that could be considered truly well-known, and even this may have more to do with its repackaging as part of anthology shows, as studio logos, and other materials that extend beyond the film itself.

In his study of *Song of the South* (1946), Disney's controversial feature which has not been officially rereleased in the United States for several decades, Jason Sperb notes that while the full film may have been consigned to the studio vault, it has not truly "disappeared; it simply dissipated throughout a universe of paratexts that quietly replaced it" (*Disney's Most Notorious Film* 198). Audiences may still know the song "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah" through its circulation as part of the opening theme of the *Wonderful World of Disney* anthology TV series, or be able to recall several of *Song of the South*'s animated characters due to their appearance as part of the Splash Mountain ride at the Disney theme parks, but these elements have been "strategically remediated" to avoid the "complicated histories of racial difference and inequality" found in the original work (Sperb,

Disney's Most Notorious Film 1, 198). The same has arguably been true of monochrome Mickey: while none of the cartoons have been "banned", the Disney studio has in recent years shown greater willingness to offer *alternative* opportunities to interact with the early form of the mouse. Such actions reflect Henry Jenkins' conception of "convergence culture", characterized as "the flow of content across multiple media platforms […] and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want" (2). For those seeking an engagement with monochrome Mickey, then, the original films may no longer be the most prominent source of access.

The world of videogames has proven particularly open to referencing the early stages of the mouse's existence. One of the first major texts in this regard is *Mickey Mania: The Timeless Adventures of Mickey Mouse* (1994), initially conceived to celebrate Mickey's sixty-fifth birthday, but which ultimately released in the following year. Like many of the film and television anniversary tributes that preceded it, the game is presented as a linear journey through selected moments of the mouse's cinematic career. Each level is based upon a specific cartoon, beginning with *Steamboat Willie* and ending with Mickey's (then) most significant recent production, *The Prince and the Pauper* (1990). The emphasis upon historical progression is particularly significant, with an introductory screen before the level clearly identifying the name of the film, and the specific date of release. The premise is that the "present day" Mickey is revisiting these experiences, a fact starkly illustrated by the designers presenting the beginning of the *Steamboat Willie* level in monochrome, with only the mouse himself shown in color. The sequence contains numerous allusions to characters and spaces from the original short, suggesting the degree to which *Steamboat Willie* is considered a canonical entry with recognizable iconography. The player almost immediately encounters the goat (who in the film consumes Minnie's sheet music), and

then traverses the bridge of the vessel, having to dodge the steam emanating from the three whistles (another memorable demonstration of sound synchronization in the 1928 cartoon). The monochrome version of Mickey is even shown operating the ship, and the player can choose to initiate a brief scene in which the two versions of the mouse interact (fig. 2). In the Sega CD edition of the game (which has the advantage of greater storage capacity for audio files compared to the cartridge versions), the modern Mickey states "you look awfully familiar" upon meeting "Willie." At the end of the level, when Mickey has completed the objectives and won over his past self, he finally exclaims "gosh, I remember you!"

Figure 2. Modern and Monochrome Mickey meeting in *Mickey Mania: The Timeless Adventures of Mickey Mouse*.

A similar approach can be found in the *Kingdom Hearts* gaming franchise, which allows players to explore a world based on a number of Disney properties, although the series tends

toward the better-known features, such as *Peter Pan* (1953) and *Aladdin* (1992). In *Kingdom Hearts II* (2005), however, the protagonists briefly journey to a location called "Timeless River". The space is presented in monochrome, and transforms the modern characters' bodies to make them appear "old-fashioned", complete with white gloves and rubber-hose limbs. The primary reference point within the level is, once again, *Steamboat Willie*, and there is even a cut-scene on the boat itself, with Donald (rather than Mickey) pulling the cord and making the whistles come to life. During the gameplay, the characters learn that "Timeless River" is a "portal to the past," and find themselves transported through short stages based on a number of early Mickey cartoons, such as *Building a Building* (1933) and *Gulliver Mickey* (1934).

In *Epic Mickey*, released for the Nintendo Wii console in 2010, the modern Mouse is transported to the Cartoon Wasteland, a home intended for failed characters. In the Wasteland, Mickey meets his predecessor Oswald the Lucky Rabbit, who blames the mouse for his loss of fame (and for causing severe damage to the Wasteland due to an accident that occurred several decades previously).[3] Mickey also encounters a number of his costars from the early cartoons, such as Horace Horsecollar and Clarabelle Cow, who (as noted earlier) had been largely phased out by the mid-1930s. Once again, Mickey fails to remember his association with these figures. When Clarabelle excitedly lists some of her credits alongside the mouse – including an appearance in *Mickey's Mellerdrammer* (1933) – he politely goes through the motions of attempting to recall her, but is clearly struggling. It is likely that many players would respond in a similar manner, as *Mickey's Mellerdrammer* has rarely been distributed by the Disney studio in recent decades, due to a sequence in which the mouse dons blackface in order to stage a theatrical version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The game does not address this controversy directly, instead having Clarabelle simply conclude that "I guess no one sees those [old movies] anymore." In order to travel between

the different locations in the Cartoon Wasteland, however, the player must jump through projector screens and traverse a short two-dimensional platforming level based on an existing Disney cartoon. Although a few of these stages refer to the studio's subsequent work in Technicolor – such as *Thru the Mirror* (1936) and *Plutopia* (1951) – the majority are based on monochrome texts, including Mickey cartoons such as *Ye Olden Days* (1933), *Mickey's Mechanical Man* (1933), and – as expected – *Steamboat Willie*. There are even some based on Oswald cartoons, such as *Trolley Troubles* (1927) and *Oh, What a Knight* (1928).

In each of the above games, the player is encouraged to experience aspects of Disney history that initially appear to be obsolete, emphasized through the lack of color. As Grainge suggests, "black and white [can be seen as] a strategic mode, deployed intertextually and from specific institutional/critical positions to visualize a new sense of American memory, heritage, patrimony, and past" (*Monochrome Memories* 6). This aesthetic shift may initially be seen as strange or even traumatic. In *Mickey Mania*, for instance, the first response from the monochrome "Willie" is to run in terror from the modern version of the mouse, apparently "surprised to see how he'll look in color" (Sony Imagesoft, 10). In *Kingdom Hearts II*, the protagonists appear disorientated by the "déjà vu" experienced in "Timeless River", with Goofy noting that the grayscale version of Mickey – who sporadically appears when foes are defeated – "seems kinda different somehow". Ultimately, though, the narratives serve to reconcile the boundaries between old and new. The Sega CD version of *Mickey Mania* contains a sequence during the final *Prince and the Pauper* level in which all of the different incarnations of the mouse – including "Willie" – collaborate together to defeat the villainous Pete. In *Epic Mickey*, the strained relationship between Oswald and the mouse is resolved, and the characters collaborate as partners in the game's sequel, *Epic Mickey 2: The Power of Two* (2012).

The theme of accepting and celebrating the past is also frequently emphasized in Disney's Saturday morning television series *House of Mouse*. This could perhaps be viewed as the ultimate example of studio convergence and "brand totality", as it involves a nightclub (run by Mickey Mouse), which is attended by a vast range of characters from Disney animated shorts and features, from Snow White to Winnie the Pooh to Pocahontas. One notable episode is "Dennis the Duck" (transmitted 18 May 2002), in which the club observes "Black-and-White Day". The announcement receives rapturous applause from the assembled crowd. The sole dissenting voice is Donald Duck, who claims that this period of animation was "not funny" and clashes with one of the invited monochrome guests, the eponymous Dennis the Duck. Unlike the examples above, which draw on the history of existing films and characters, Dennis is a fictional construct specifically created for this episode. His presence nonetheless serves to highlight Donald's skepticism surrounding black-and-white comedy – an attitude that may well have been shared by some viewers, given the series' usual focus on the Disney studio's newer, full color properties. By the end of this installment, though, Donald has come to see the value of such works, establishing a consensus that the period deserves not to be overlooked.

The degree to which audiences are truly being permitted to remember the monochrome years of animation is, however, open to question. If the player chooses to obtain a large number of optional collectibles during the side-scrolling platforming stages of *Epic Mickey*, it is possible to unlock two full-length black-and-white cartoons to watch within the game's menu – the Mickey Mouse short *The Mad Doctor* (1933) and the Oswald the Lucky Rabbit cartoon *Oh, What a Knight*. The *House of Mouse* episode "Dennis the Duck" screens the short *The Whoopee Party* (1933) *almost* in its entirety (with just a brief, unacknowledged edit to remove a blackface gag). The episode also contains extracts from the film *Pioneer Days* (1930), although the cartoon's title is

not identified, and the clips seem to have been carefully chosen to avoid some of the problematic racial humor found in the original work. Beyond this, however, almost all of the experiences within these texts involve mediated versions of the past, either in terms of virtual reconstructions of original cartoons as playable levels in the videogames, or entirely new narratives that masquerade as historical artefacts.

The most prominent examples of the latter tendency can be found in "Mickey and the Goat Man" (2002), which was featured as part of the "Dennis the Duck" episode of *House of Mouse*, and *Get a Horse!* (2013), a short screened ahead of the Disney animated feature *Frozen* (2013). Both are modern productions that are presented in monochrome, and attempt to convince the viewer that they are productions which actually date from the late 1920s. Both approximate the title cards used by Disney during the period, identifying the film as "a Mickey Mouse Sound Cartoon" and claiming that the "Powers Cinephone System" has been used to present the soundtrack (figs. 3-5). Of course, neither work actually utilizes this long-superseded technology, although *Get a Horse!* does repurpose sound recordings of Walt Disney as Mickey Mouse from the early cartoons in an attempt to suggest greater authenticity. Many of the initial *Mickey* works were animated by Ub Iwerks – a figure now often believed to be, at the very least, the co-creator of Mickey Mouse – until he left the studio in 1930. "Mickey and the Goat Man" reproduces the "By Ub Iwerks" credit found on the original films, even though Iwerks personally had nothing to do with the production of this new short. While the "Dennis the Duck" episode did not receive a great deal of specific publicity, *Get a Horse!* was carefully marketed by the Disney Studio "in the months [leading] up to *Frozen*'s release as a long-lost short from the early days of sound cartoons" (Sperb, *Flickers of Film* 3). This even included the production of a poster, designed in a similar style and font as the advertising for many of Disney's actual films of the period (Luperchio, 39).

The poster shows signs of water damage, and a pronounced paper fold in the bottom left corner, implying that it is a reproduction of a real physical artifact from the era, which only survives in less than ideal conditions. Both *Get a Horse!* and "Mickey and the Goat Man" also feature simulated print deterioration (such as scratches and dirt), overlaid onto the image, again to infer that the cartoon truly has endured across the decades.

Figure 3. A pastiche of a 1920s title card in *Mickey and the Goat Man*.

Figure 4. A pastiche of a 1920s title card in *Get a Horse*!

Figure 5. An original 1920s title card from *Steamboat Willie*.

The budgetary limitations placed upon made-for-television animated series production mean that the main section of "Mickey and the Goat Man" arguably struggles to convincingly emulate its point of reference. Beyond the obvious use of monochrome, there is a recurring trait of illustrating and exaggerating an emotion by having lines temporarily surround the subject's head – a graphic indicator common in 1910s and 1920s animation (and a lingering reminder of the influence of the comic strip during the formative years of the medium). However, the cartoon is much more dialogue-heavy than would have been common for a *Mickey* film of the intended era, and in this regard most obviously betrays its small screen origins.

Get a Horse!, by contrast, makes a more concerted effort to pass as an actual text of the period. Although not a direct remake of any specific cartoon, it draws upon several familiar tropes from silent and early sound monochrome animation. The film begins with Mickey whistling, directly recalling the mouse's now-famous introduction in *Steamboat Willie* – a link already emphasized by the aforementioned Disney studio logo that precedes the film. The parallels with

Steamboat Willie continue: *Get a Horse!* involves Mickey making music while traveling – in this case riding a hay wagon driven by Horace Horsecollar – and even features a sequence in which Minnie is running late and has to board the vehicle while it is in motion. The notion of Pete as antagonist, and his kidnapping of Minnie, runs through numerous entries of the original *Mickey* series. The animation style of *Get a Horse!* is also heavy with rubber-hose gags. When Mickey jumps onto the wagon and Horace lifts his hat in greeting, the mouse literally pulls off the top of his head to perform a similar gesture: a joke repeated from Disney's earlier work *The Karnival Kid* (1929). As Minnie is running to catch up with the vehicle, Mickey turns his leg into a set of stairs for her to climb. This refers back to cartoons such as *Oh, What a Knight*, in which Oswald creates a moving escalator out of a rope attached to his horse's tail, and *Plane Crazy*, in which a sausage dog turns into a rigid object that allows the mouse to board the aircraft.

The film incorporates variants on the risqué humor found in Disney's *Oswald* cartoons, as well as the initial *Mickey* entries. In *Get a Horse!*, the mouse's excitement to join his friends causes him to accidentally jump out of his shorts, leaving him nude. His abandoned clothes – in another example of the rubber-hose tendency to endow life to almost anything – refuse to sidle over to him as he takes refuge behind a strategically-positioned gate. Gags involving the male characters in a state of undress can be found in several of Disney's 1920s films – Mickey has his garments removed by an army doctor in the cartoon *The Barnyard Battle* (1929), while his predecessor Oswald experiences a moment of embarrassment when his shorts fall down in *Oh, What a Knight*. Suggestive jokes about underwear were also fairly commonplace, and *Get a Horse!* contains a sequence where Minnie utilizes her "bloomers" as a parachute – an act previously performed by Oswald's girlfriend Ortensia in several shorts (including the aforementioned *Oh, What a Knight*), and for the first time by Minnie herself in *Plane Crazy*. *Get a Horse!* finishes with the back flap

of Pete's overalls falling open to reveal the words "THE END" – a visual pun that is similar to the concluding title cards of Disney's *Oswald* cartoons. The film also brings back Clarabelle Cow, and frequently indulges in variants of gags that had caused controversy for Disney in the early 1930s. For instance, Clarabelle hopes to join the others on the wagon and seductively hitches up her skirt to reveal her udders. This appears to be a (slightly anachronistic) reference to the famous hitchhiking scene in the live-action feature *It Happened One Night* (1934) in which Claudette Colbert exposes her leg and immediately attracts a passing motorist. In Clarabelle's case, however, her luck is closer to that of Clark Gable's character within Capra's film, and the wagon simply drives straight past. She is forced to run after the vehicle, and only gains access when Mickey is trying to allow Minnie – the film's "acceptable" love interest – onboard.

Discussing the live-action feature *Far From Heaven* (2002), which operates as a pastiche of 1950s melodramas (particularly those directed by Douglas Sirk), Richard Dyer notes that it "could hardly work as a mainstream film if it depended on so precise a knowledge of Sirk. […] There is almost certainly a hierarchy of knowledge at play. At a minimum, anyone would recognize that the film does not work in the ways other recent films do that deal with domestic dramas" (175). *Get a Horse!* also does not seemingly expect most viewers to be able to identify every single film that is being repurposed (especially since, as noted earlier, many of the referenced works have not been widely circulated in recent decades). It utilizes a bricolage of rubber-hose gags instead to position the film in a specific way: to adapt Dyer's argument, the animation style does not work in the ways of other recent cartoons, including the dominant computer-generated approach of the accompanying feature *Frozen*. For an audience attending Disney's latest musical blockbuster, the monochrome visuals and subject matter immediately distinguish *Get a Horse!* as something different.

Dyer emphasizes that, as part of this endeavor, "pastiche deforms the style of its referent: it selects, accentuates, exaggerates, concentrates" (56). This is perhaps most visible in *Get a Horse!* with the use of udder jokes involving Clarabelle. While the potential outrageousness of the organ was hardly lost in some of Mickey's earlier appearances – the Clarabelle prototype in *The Plowboy* (1929), for instance, essentially "flips off" the mouse with her udders after he angrily dismisses her – the sexual references were, for the most part, introduced in a "repressed" form, hinted at but never fully confirmed. Even in the controversial sequence from *The Shindig*, Clarabelle's secret activity is linked to a sense of shame, an allusion to something transgressive but ultimately needing to be hidden from the other characters in the film (Telotte, "Disney's Cows" 229, 221). In *Get a Horse!*, Clarabelle's revelation of the udder is undertaken with a great deal of confidence, and is intended to be alluring, even if none of the characters in the film actually share this opinion. This is emphasized when Pete is shown ogling Minnie Mouse as she performs a shimmying dance, with the direction of his sight shown to the viewer by means of a dashed line. Mickey, angered by Pete's behavior, decides to swap Minnie with Clarabelle, who is shown joining in with the band, blowing into her tail and squeezing her udders as if they were bagpipes. When Pete realizes the substitution, he recoils in horror, and his on-screen line of sight, previously so rigid, suddenly goes limp. This is itself a variant upon a suggestive gag found in a number of silent and early sound cartoons – in Disney's *Oswald* entry *Great Guns* (1927), for instance, a cannon becomes flaccid after shooting its ammunition, and in *The Gallopin' Gaucho*, Mickey's sword suddenly flops to the ground during combat. The implication is perhaps made a little more overt in *Get a Horse!*, since it is explicitly linked to the male gaze, to an apparently pleasing and then unappealing image of a female body. The material is thus partly transformed from works of the late 1920s because the modern film has been made with an awareness of the studio's subsequent history. The original presentation of

Clarabelle was "innocent" of (or, at least, naïve about the potential for) the scandal that followed. *Get a Horse!*, by contrast, seems to self-consciously revel in the possibilities offered by explicitly revisiting this earlier period.[4]

As James Chapman has argued in relation to the *James Bond* movies, the series has occasionally adopted a "back to basics" approach, sidestepping perceived missteps (such as an overreliance on humor, or exaggerated special effects) in part by promising a return to the spirit of Ian Fleming's novels and the initial films (241). Although, as noted, Mickey has never been wholly "rebooted", many modern productions have gestured back to previous generations in an attempt to make the mouse seem relevant, and to diffuse criticisms that he had become *too* safe and boring. In publicity for the series *Mickey MouseWorks* (1999-2000), a precursor to *House of Mouse*, the co-executive producer Roberts Gannaway noted that "for inspiration, we looked to the '30s Mickey, the more mischievous Mickey" (quoted in Solomon). Similarly, Warren Spector (the creative director for *Epic Mickey*) claimed that "I wanted him to be able to be naughty – when you're playing as Mickey you can misbehave and even be a little selfish" (quoted in Barnes). However, while these new works may flirt with a slightly more "edgy" sensibility, they generally avoid the overt mean-spiritedness that occasionally surfaced in the original cartoons. In *Epic Mickey*, it is made clear that the mouse's partial destruction of the Wasteland was an accident. Although the player is allowed to make some dubious moral choices which affect the game's ending, the narrative still broadly presents Mickey as a hero. *Get a Horse!* is also careful to associate most of its risqué humor with Clarabelle rather than Mickey himself. While the mouse seems to enjoy his punishment of Pete in the latter half of the film, Pete is clearly presented as the aggressor who set these events in motion. Chapman emphasizes, then, that the promises of going

"back to basics" are often more concerned with the forward momentum of a franchise than a true representation of the past (242).

The major difference between *Get a Horse!* and Disney's other nostalgic productions is that the narrative involves the monochrome Mickey being thrust into the present day, rather than a modern version of the mouse re-experiencing the past. Despite the careful pre-release buildup of the short as a "lost" work from the 1920s, the illusion is shattered when Pete causes Mickey and Horace to burst out of the cinema screen, and discover that they were part of a film being watched by a twenty-first century audience. Although *Get a Horse!* begins in monochrome and in a window-boxed aspect ratio (akin to the shape of the image in Mickey's early sound cartoons), the "present day" action expands to use the full extent of the 2.35:1 widescreen frame, switches to color, and the characters' bodies transform into three-dimensional computer-generated models. The film thus creates a clear divide between the (pastiche of the) monochrome work and the subsequent modern setting, with the barrage of technical effects in the latter half potentially inferring that newer is better. As with titles such as *Mickey Mania* and *Epic Mickey*, however, *Get a Horse!* ultimately strikes a more reconciliatory tone, with much of the humor in the final moments involving the characters jumping back and forth from the 1920s world to the present, taking advantage of the opportunities offered in *both* spaces.

In his insightful analysis of the original monochrome *Mickey* cartoons, J. P. Telotte argues that the mouse is often caught at a crossroads between the past and the future. Many of these films show the character resident in an impoverished rural community, having to come to terms with the possible disruptions of new technology. *Plane Crazy*, for instance, sees him attempting to channel Charles Lindbergh and master the act of flight, albeit utilizing a plane crafted rather modestly from the materials available in and around the farm. In *The Barn Dance* (1928), Mickey plans to escort

Minnie to a party using a horse and cart, but she is lured away by the promise of a ride in Pete's new car. The vehicle breaks down, however, and Minnie decides to place her trust in Mickey's antiquated, but seemingly more reliable, choice of transportation. Telotte notes that "this sense of conflict, of being pulled towards rather different worlds, might have been one of the reasons for [Mickey's preliminary] success, a chord struck with an audience struggling to determine its own relationship to the modern" ("Disney's Cows" 230).

Get a Horse! reproduces some of this thematic playfulness, albeit now with a much greater divide between the two time periods that are pushing against each other. Reiterating the "back to basics" approach, the film begins by finding value in the seemingly innocent, homespun activities undertaken by Mickey and his gang, as they travel in the old-fashioned hay wagon and enjoy the simple pleasures of playing music together. Their fun is interrupted by Pete, who is driving an automobile (just like in *The Barn Dance*), and who is immediately frustrated by the leisurely pace of the wooden vehicle in front of him. He starts furiously honking his horn, which then comes to life and screams "make way for the future!" The joke ends up on Pete, however, as his celebration of 1920s "modernity" suddenly appears rather ridiculous when considered against the achievements of the twenty-first century. By contrast, the mouse proves extremely adjustable to these new circumstances. After a brief moment of surprise at his new computer-generated body – and the redness of his shorts – Mickey springs back into action to save Minnie. Horace, too, quickly embraces his new surroundings: he reemerges carrying popcorn and Milk Duds, wearing a *Captain America* T-Shirt (a symbol of Disney's recent corporate tendency to acquire valuable intellectual property and franchises such as Marvel), and carrying a cellphone. Mickey adapts this technology to his advantage, using the phone to call Pete – who is revealed to have a rotary device in his jalopy – and to shoot the contents of a fire extinguisher down the "line" (fig. 6). As the film continues,

Mickey also learns to manipulate the cinema screen – slowing down time, spinning the image upside down – to subject Pete to further indignities. Although this is supposedly a version of Mickey from the late 1920s, the narrative makes it abundantly clear that the mouse is just as relevant in the present day. Whereas Pete's engagement with the "modern" brought out a sense of superiority and impatience, Mickey stays true to himself, able to have fun in whatever circumstances are thrust upon him.

Figure 6. The adaptability of Monochrome Mickey in the modern day in *Get a Horse*!

The monochrome iteration of Mickey Mouse has been more prevalent in the last two decades than he has been at any point since the 1930s, and yet most of these appearances occur in newly-produced texts. As Jonathan Gray emphasizes, this is becoming an increasingly modern phenomenon: one may spend "significantly *more* time with […] spinoff- or promo-related items" than with the original work itself (4). Although Disney has been accused since the 1950s of using TV and other media forms to guide viewers "towards a more pervasive sense of textuality, one that encouraged the consumption of further Disney texts, further Disney products, further Disney

experiences" (Anderson, 155), it has arguably been rare for the source material to be quite so inaccessible relative to the paratexts. The studio may generate a significant income on *Snow White* storybooks, soundtracks, and other paraphernalia, but this profitability at least partly relies on the audience's continued interest in the 1937 animated feature, which is periodically reissued on DVD, Blu-ray and other platforms to reach new demographics. These modern monochrome Mickey productions draw credibility from the fact that an actual 1920s and early 1930s version of the mouse existed, but increasingly appear to offer a *replacement* for this past history rather than a gateway to experience it firsthand. For the last couple of decades, Disney has lobbied for an extension to copyright laws in order to prevent *Steamboat Willie* and other early productions from falling into the public domain (Grainge, *Brand Hollywood* 51). While the studio will be able to retain an overriding trademark on Mickey Mouse, individual works may eventually fall outside of its control, potentially within the next decade. Moving forward, then, we may see more of these "pastiche" works not just as a way of avoiding some of the problematic content of Mickey's past adventures, but also as a means of continuing to monetize the early version of Mickey, at a time when *Steamboat Willie* is no longer a viable revenue stream for Disney on its own terms. It remains to be seen if Mickey's textual history will ever be officially reset, as it has been numerous times with characters such as Batman, Sherlock Holmes, and James Bond. What is already clear, though, is that Mickey's monochrome existence is no longer confined solely to the beginning of his on-screen career, and a significant part of the mouse's modern star image now involves complicating (if not directly contradicting) the linearity that so prominently featured in previous anniversary celebrations.

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[1] The mouse has admittedly had several different voice actors over the years, but this has rarely formed a significant part of the publicity surrounding the character.

[2] For more information on Disney's home video release strategies, see McGowan, "*Walt Disney Treasures* or Mickey Mouse DVDs?".

[3] Oswald's appearance in the game is possible because, in 2006, Disney reacquired the rights to the character from NBC/Universal, bringing him back under the studio's control for the first time in almost eighty years (see Bossert, 24-26). Although not a great deal has been done with the character since – the *Epic Mickey* videogames still mark his most significant modern appearances to date – Oswald complicates the previous versions of the Disney story that tended to start with the mouse. As Lisa K. Dusenberry notes, however, *Epic Mickey* "glosses over Oswald's years as the product of another company. In doing so, and in allowing the game narrative to implicitly acknowledge superiority, the game sells short the influence Oswald played in Mickey's development" (194). While the studio has promoted the existence of the 1927-1928 Oswald cartoons much more heavily in the last decade, there have not been too many opportunities for the general public to actually view a large selection of these works (beyond a single, limited-edition release in the *Walt Disney Treasures* DVD series).

[4] This is not to imply, of course, that the short was intended to be overtly subversive. The inclusion of *Get a Horse!* as part of the theatrical screenings of *Frozen* did nothing to threaten the feature's PG rating from the MPAA (and one assumes that this would have been a requirement imposed upon the production from the outset). The gags in the film are couched in innuendo that could easily fly over the heads of a younger audience and, like the originals, aim to maintain at least some plausible deniability. Part of the film's humor – perhaps in an attempt to diffuse some of the more sexualized readings of these images – stems from the suggestion that Clarabelle's belief in her visual appeal is ultimately ridiculous. The Disney studio had also already explored some of this humor, without too much controversy, in the animated feature *Home on the Range* (2004) in which the character Maggie Cow (voiced by the comedian Roseanne Barr) is shown with visible cow udders. Maggie even briefly states to the audience "yeah, they're real. Quit staring."