**Disney, Walter Elias (b. 5 December 1901, Chicago, Illinois; d. 15 December, Burbank, California)**

Walt Disney, born in Chicago and raised in Kansas City, Missouri, was a film producer and entrepreneur who built an entertainment empire on the foundation of his animated cartoons. Most other animation studios tried to emulate or, at times, revolted against his style and production model.

After early business failures, Disney gained worldwide success with the release of the first sound Mickey Mouse cartoon, *Steamboat Willie* (1928). The Mickey cartoons’ huge popularity permitted Disney to launch the Silly Symphonies series as experiments in animation techniques, leading directly to his first cartoon feature, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937).

Disney films are known for their Midwestern sensibilities, sentimentality, and a realistic style that aspired to creating the “illusion of life”. Disney used works by European artists and illustrators, including Honoré Daumier, Gustave Doré, Heinrich Kley, Arthur Rackham, and John Tenniel, to inspire his staff. He also arranged for them to take drawing classes from Chouinard Art Institute.

Disney developed a stratified factory system for producing animated films, controlled chiefly through the studio’s story department. The studio’s technical innovation and experimentation spanned decades. His 1920s “Alice in Cartoonland” series combined live and animated characters in the same image. In the 1930s, he obtained an exclusive contract for Technicolor’s three-strip colour process, and his technicians developed the multi-plane camera which gave the illusion of depth to cartoon backgrounds. Special roadshow screenings of *Fantasia* (1940) featured the multiple (sixty-eight) speaker audio system Fantasound. *A Hundred and* *One Dalmatians* (1961) established the practice of photocopying animators’ pencil drawings directly onto cels rather than having inkers trace them, thereby preserving the quality of the drawings’ original lines.

Disney productions anticipated many of the critically praised modernistic elements of UPA (United Productions of America) cartoons. *Fantasia* presented visual accompaniment for classical music. *The Reluctant Dragon* (1941) not only gave audiences a detailed and demystifying explanation of animated cartoon production but also provided an early example of limited animation in its “Baby Weems” section. The Disney studio later adopted UPA’s flat figure design and minimal backgrounds for certain special informative releases such as *Toot, Whistle, Plunk, and Boom* (1953).

Disney often employed artists whose styles differed from the Disney norm to design his films, though their work seldom reached the screen in its original form. Visual music pioneer Oskar Fischinger worked on the “Toccata and Fugue” segment of *Fantasia*, and Salvador Dali created images for a planned *Fantasia* re-release. During the 1940s and early 1950s, Mary Blair, a California School water colourist, painted vibrant, flat, abstract pictures for the colour and styling of many Disney films. But it was only when Disney, wanting to prove animation could be high art, insisted that *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) retain art director Eyvind Earle’s angular, stylized designs that a Disney feature included modern looking characters.

During World War II, the Disney studio produced many war-related cartoons from military training films to films encouraging viewers to buy bonds and pay their taxes on time. Theatrical propaganda releases *Der Fuehrer’s Face, Education for Death,* and *Reason and Emotion* (all 1943) attempted to explain the psychology of Nazi Germany.

In 1949, Disney began releasing nature documentaries, and in 1950 *Treasure Island* became his first completely live-action feature drama. In 1954 the *Disneyland* television series premiered, with Disney himself hosting; and in 1955, the Disneyland theme park opened, surrounding visitors with a completely engineered environment based on his film productions. In 1961, Walt Disney founded the California Institute of the Arts. He died of lung cancer in 1966.

**References and Further Readings**

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**Selected Filmography\***

*Alice’s Wonderland* (1923)

*Steamboat Willie* (1928) Directed by Walt Disney.

*The Skeleton Dance* (1929) Directed by Walt Disney.

*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937)

*Fantasia* (1940) Directed by Samuel Armstrrong, JamesAlgar, and eight others.

*The Reluctant Dragon* (1941) Directed by Alfred Werker.

*Der Fuehrer’s Face* (1943) Directed by Jack Kinney.

*Education for Death* (1943) Directed by Clyde Geronimi.

*Victory Through Air Power* (1943) Animation supervisor, David Hand.

*Reason and Emotion* (1943) Directed by Bill Roberts.

*Seal Island* (1949) Directed by James Algar.

*Treasure Island* (1950) Directed by Byron Haskin, based on the Robert Louis Stevenson novel.

*Toot, Whistle, Plunk , and Boom* (1953) Directed by Charles Nichols and Ward Kimball

*Man in Space* (1956) Directed by Ward Kimball.

*Mars and Beyond* (1957) Directed by Ward Kimball.

*Our Friend the Atom* (1958) Directed by Hamilton Luske.

*Eyes in OuterSpace* (1959) Directed by Ward Kimball.

*Sleeping Beauty* (1959) Supervising director, Clyde Geronimi. Design by Eyvind Earle. Shot in Technirama 70mm.

*A Hundred and* *One Dalmatians* (1961), Directed by Wolfgang Reitherman, Hamilton Luske, and Clyde Geronimi.

\*A filmography of just the Oscar-nominated Disney films made while Disney was still alive would be too extensive for this entry. For a complete list of Disney films made prior to his death, see Hollis and Sibley (1988) *The Disney Studio Story.*

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