Minnie Mouse Across the Multiverse: The Symbolic Annihilation of the Everyday Woman

Senior Seminar in Film Studies Thesis

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With her polka-dot skirt, canary-yellow heels, and dainty giggle, Minnie Mouse is the picture of femininity. Since her first appearance in the short film *Steamboat Willie* in 1928, Minnie Mouse has been Mickey's long-time girlfriend and devoted sweetheart. As his girlfriend, she is as iconic in American media as her boyfriend Mickey or Walt Disney himself, even earning her own star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

But unlike most characters in the American consciousness, Minnie Mouse has morphed into hundreds of different characters with the progression of society. Over the past century, Minnie has donned a variety of personalities and outfits, from damsel in distress to scorned lover, or from frilly dresses to pantsuits. Minnie Mouse is not a static character, with a personality and design restricted to her initial appearances in the '20s. Instead, there exists a multiverse of Minnie Mouses: whether she be a camel-rider in Arabia (*Mickey in Arabia*), a box lunch distributor on a construction site (*Building a Building*), or a Faye Wray in a Disney-reenactment of King Kong (*The Pet Store*), it is clear that her character exists in a variety of parallel worlds that could never reasonably intersect. In each short, a new Minnie Mouse is reborn — undoubtedly Minnie Mouse every time, but invariably differing in occupation, appearance, or even personality.

Animation, and Disney Animation in particular, is a unique medium in that it primarily targets children but can be universally enjoyed by all demographics. In a journal of organization studies, the writers argue that Disney's animations "also have a pedagogical dimension: as cultural artefacts they represent certain versions of 'the world', particularly, perhaps, to young girls" (Griffin et al. 873). This "animation as cultural artifact" can be clearly proven by Minnie Mouse's evolution as a character, which closely correlates to the various waves of feminist movements over the past 100 years. Throughout her tenure, Minnie Mouse has been a product of

the cultural contexts from which her creators come (which, until recently, has mostly been white men). In turn, the result is a feedback loop that supplies other Americans with the creators' idealized image of femininity. While this may not have much effect on adults, who have already had years to form their own conceptions of gender, this cultural artifact likely affects young viewers as they navigate their own gender identity construction. While this is true of many forms of media, Minnie Mouse is distinctive in that her multiversality, or differences throughout the ages, creates a complex network of conflicting messages for this gender construction.

This paper will explore how, in the canon of the Walt Disney Animation Studios' multiverse, Minnie Mouse's many lives provide a complicated psychoanalytical framework for young viewers in their construction of gender identity. To do so, this paper will 1) establish how Minnie Mouse serves to represent the "Everyday American Woman", 2) analyze the symbolic annihilation of Minnie's character, 3) explore the implications of contemporary depictions of Minnie, and 4) relate all of the above to the psychoanalytical construction of gender identity. Minnie may seem like a small part of Disney's overall canon, but the effects of her character are both intentional and widespread.

Minnie Mouse as the Everyday American Woman

At the time of Minnie Mouse's inception, there were a few other women who appeared in animated shorts or cartoon narratives. Most notable are Olive Oyl and Betty Boop, who were both initially introduced as girlfriends. At first glance, Olive Oyl and Betty Boop, though human, were created with the same underlying ethos that led to Minnie Mouse. Olive Oyl, most popularly known as Popeye's girlfriend since 1929, is coy and fickle with her affections

— something exhibited in Minnie's character, to be elaborated upon later in the discussion of *Plane Crazy*. Furthermore, Olive Oyl is a constant damsel in distress who is kidnapped by Bluto in various schemes, similar to Minnie's constant kidnappings by Black Pete. The earlier sketches of the two women even pose similarly, with their hands folded delicately and hips jutted out coquettishly. Betty Boop, appearing as Bimbo's girlfriend in 1930, behaved similarly to Minnie and Olive Oyl. Designed purposely as a 16-year-old with an infantile-oversized head, the basis of many of Betty's stories include her inadvertently seducing various men with her girlish charm. This often leads her to fall victim to unwanted sexual advances, hence her famous song "Don't Take My Boop-Oop-A-Doop Away", only to be rescued from sexual assault at the last minute by Bimbo.

Olive Oyl differs slightly from Minnie, however, in her wifely image. As mentioned, these female characters are manifestations of society's expectations and conceptions of women, which is why Olive Oyl's character is the embodiment of the centuries-old "angry wife" joke. The Popeye fandom site describes her as "quite bossy and possessive, always wanting to make Popeye do what she wants, but the quick witted sailor usually manages to find a way to avoid his lover's wrath"[1]. Such wrath is well-associated with "unreasonable wives", such as in Israhel van Meckenem's painting The Angry Wife, c. 1495/1503, which is also alternatively titled "La femme maltraitant son mari" (the woman mistreats her husband). Her character reinforces a misogynistic but common stereotype that level-headed men are victimized by their unjustifiably angry wives. This "wife" imagery that Olive Oyl plays is perhaps best exemplified in this 1999 Newsweek announcement for the release of a new Popeye comic book.

> **After dating for most of the century, Popeye and Olive Oyl already act like a married couple: they're always together and they bicker. But to celebrate his 70th birthday, the one-eyed spinach-munching sailor will finally wed his lanky, inky-haired sweetheart in a special comic**

[1] https://popeye.fandom.com/wiki/Olive_Oyl#Personality

> **book to be released next month. Popeye finally commits when Olive's old beau tries to get her back. It just proves anyone can change-even a guy whose motto is "I yam what I yam." ("Is That Virgin Olive Oyl?")**

While Minnie also exhibits many of these characteristic traits, to be elaborated in the next section, there are a few key aspects to her character that distinguish her from Olive Oyl's wifeliness. As the Newsweek blurb states, the idea that Olive Oyl is Popeye's wife is given rise due to their constant bickering, the mark of a jaded wife after years of marriage. While Minnie can be just as fickle and similarly challenges Mickey to win her affection, there are equal or more shorts in which Minnie is incredibly smitten with Mickey. Her unwavering servitude in other shorts imply a more teenager-like infatuation, and in turn suggest that her bouts of anger are a reflection of immaturity rather than jadedness. And while Minnie ends up playing many wifely duties, especially in the later shorts from the '40s or '50s, there are just as many shorts where she is a random woman that Mickey is attempting to woo. Every short non-linearly marks a different point in the timeline of the Mickey and Minnie love story, to the point where viewers must use context clues of the given short in order to determine who they are in relation to each other. Whereas Olive Oyl and Popeye are commonly assumed to be the old, married couple, Mickey and Minnie's romance is ageless.

On the other hand, Betty Boop's exoticized sexuality also marks a difference between her and Minnie Mouse. While Minnie certainly hints at her sexuality with her flappy skirt and high heels, it is the pinnacle of modesty compared to Betty Boop's ultra-short skirt and heavy cleavage. The sexualization of her character, however, is not senseless. Much of her character design and humor, including her dark, curly hair, is based in New York's Lower East Side Jewish immigrant neighborhood. Amelia S. Holberg coins Betty Boop as a "Yiddish film star", arguing that her being the object of sex and violence places her in the world of "people with little money who lived on top of one another" where hiding sex and violence was impossible (Holberg 295).

Beyond her Jewish origins, one of the most sexual depictions of Betty Boop is her appearance in *Betty Boop's Bamboo Isle*, where she is topless save for a lei that covers her breasts — and depicted with tanner skin, serving to emphasize the "ethnography" of her body. This sexualized representation "draws on the trope of the 'ethnographic body', exemplified in the spectacle of the exotic woman caught on film for the educational pleasure of an assumed white male audience" (Annett 568).

In contrast, Minnie's chastity reflects the puritan values of the American genteel of that era. Although she might tease, her sexuality is only ever directed to one man (Mickey), as opposed to the many who Betty Boop allures. Her small torso and fluffy skirt also conceal any of the womanly curves that are so characteristic of Betty. When men look up Betty's skirt, she bats her eyelashes bashfully or giggles demurely, but when it happens to Minnie, she becomes indignant and offended at the transgression. Even more, Minnie is fully covered by the distinctly American bloomers that she wears under her skirt. There is also the consideration that Walt Disney as a brand, of which Minnie is the face of, considers itself quintessentially American. For example, Disneyland, which is divided into areas with names like "Main Street, U.S.A.", "Frontierland", and "New Orleans Square", relies on American imagery and promotes nostalgia for an idealized America. When the Fleischer brothers emphasized Betty's sexuality with racialized exoticism, Disney responded with a relatively chaste woman to build this idea of an "American" woman. Both are misogynistic in their own rights but the two characters serve as a foil to each other in the way that animated women were used to promote/demote concepts of sexuality.

In other words, Minnie Mouse stands out from other animated women of her time because she is uniquely ageless and distinctly American. There are many similarities between

Minnie, Olive, and Betty, that reflect the white and male society's vision for women of that time. However, Olive and Betty are portraits of a very *specific* woman — older, in Olive's case, and exoticized, in Betty's — and point to *a* perspective of femininity. Minnie Mouse, on the other hand, is generalized and non-specific in a way that she can represent *any* American woman. Minnie's occupation, comportment, and relation to Mickey change constantly, each of which marks a different maturity level and renders her ambiguously ageless. This allows a woman at any point or milestone of her life to relate to at least some depictions of Minnie. And her emphasized Americanness and lack of racialization do not carry the same otherization that Betty Boop's character has. Together, all of these components make Minnie Mouse the ultimate everyday American woman.

The Symbolic Annihilation of Minnie Mouse

As mentioned earlier, Minnie Mouse's character is a reflection of the cultural context in which she was born. As one writer states, "it is clear that television's portrayal of the sexes in cartoons does not accurately mirror real world events but it does reflect real world *values* concerning traditional sex-role assumptions" (Levinson 568). This portrayal of Minnie as the everyday American woman is not only meant to serve as an ideal for young women to aspire to, but the use of symbolic annihilation upon her then justifies the way American society treats women.

The above quote clearly demonstrates the reflection theory, upon which Gaye Tuchman's idea of the *symbolic annihilation* is based upon. According to her work, television reflects societal values, which are then portrayed via "symbolic representations of American society, not

as literal portrayals" (Tuchman 43). The fictionalized representation "signifies social existence", or "announces to audience members that this kind of family (or social characteristic) is valued and approved" (Tuchman 43). It thus follows that an absence, condemnation, or trivialization is a symbolic annihilation of the represented subject. In effect, negative representations of a subject give approval to view and treat that subject negatively outside of the television screen, in real life. Seeing as Minnie Mouse has taken on so many different roles and inhabits such varying representations, the symbolic annihilation of her character can be separated into three separate eras: Minnie Mouse as 1) a sexual tease, 2) a damsel distress, and 3) an invisible wife.

In her earliest appearances in the Disney Animation shorts, Minnie is not yet explicitly Mickey's girlfriend. Her first ever appearance is in the short *Plane Crazy* (1928), months prior to *Steamboat Willie*'s first screening in 1928. *Plane Crazy* begins with Mickey trying out his new plane. Halfway through the short, Minnie hands him a horseshoe for good luck, prompting him to invite her onto the plane. They have a beautiful plane ride and Minnie is obviously impressed — she continually bats her eyelashes and simpers anytime Mickey gives her attention. But this all changes when he asks her for a kiss. Not only does she refuse multiple times, adamantly shaking her head, but she ends up slapping him when he forcibly kisses her. Although contemporary audiences may consider her actions justified, Mickey is incensed by the slap and gleefully punishes her by taking her on a chaotic plane ride that has her shaking and screaming. Minnie ends up jumping off the plane to escape, using her bloomers to save herself. When the bloomers deflate over herself, Mickey points and laughs boisterously at her ridiculous outfit, getting the last laugh as she storms away dramatically.

In terms of Tuchman's reflection theory, Minnie's behavior in this short reflects the societal concept that women are fickle sexual teases. In being flirtatious, Minnie invites sexual

advances and should be prepared for such situations — if not, she should be prepared for retaliation for her unfair withholding. The short film effectively punishes her for tempting a man that is not her boyfriend, for "biting off more than she can chew". By getting into his plane, yet another wrongdoing on her part, Minnie is completely at Mickey's mercy. When she shows her own initiative to escape from Mickey's terrors, the action is admonished by the "embarrassing" manner in which she does it. Her sagging bloomers, despite saving her life, are portrayed as dowdy, humiliating, and a cause for shame. At best, Minnie is a silly woman who gets overly dramatic on a plane ride. At worst, Minnie is an antagonistic tease who treats Mickey unjustly. The short film demands that she makes a choice — if she is not a staunchly chaste girl who keeps tight principles, then she must submit to the "consequences of her actions" lest she appear contradictory or difficult.

Demonstrating the multiversal aspect of Minnie Mouse's world, her second appearance is as a dancer at a bar, *Cantina Argentina*. Despite being romantic with Mickey in *Plane Crazy*, which was screened six months prior, Mickey and Minnie are complete strangers to each other in *Gallopin' Gaucho* (1928). As Minnie tangoes around the room, she swivels her hips sensually, puffs out her breasts, and bats her eyeshadow-clad eyes while Mickey leers at her over a beer. She continues to gaze at Mickey lavisciously, her eyes heavy-lidded with pleasure, before she finally entices him to get on the dance floor and twirl her around. Unfortunately, this also attracts the attention of Black Pete, who ends up snatching her up while drooling over her body. He grabs her by her bloomers, obscuring her face and thus begins an intense chase scene between Mickey and Black Pete, with Minnie in hand and Minnie's buttocks flapping around. Black Pete ends up locking her in chains against his bedroom wall.

The impetus of her kidnapping could have been motivated by a number of events, or the director could have established Black Pete's villainy prior to the snatching. Instead, the film props the sequence of events to clearly show that it is Minnie's flashiness and overt sexuality that attracts this unwanted attention. Even more, her character serves purely as a sexual object of desire in the entire short — first, for Mickey's enjoyment, then for Black Pete's greed. Even when being kidnapped, her facial expression and voice are completely obscured by her bloomers or she hangs on the wall like a painting to be retrieved. The other characters in the short, then, are also motivated by their desire for a woman. Mickey stops in the *Cantina Argentina* because he had spotted the beautiful mouse, with Black Pete kidnapping her for the same reason, and Mickey's rescue efforts culminate in a rewarding kiss from Minnie. Although slightly different from *Plane Crazy*, the central message is the same: sexuality begets sexuality. "Unlawful" sexuality, such as its initiation outside of marriage or the overt flaunting of the body, inevitably leads to punishment for women. Unless there is interference from a man, Minnie's biggest doom is her sexuality and she must take measures in understanding how to give or take such sexuality.

After *Gallopin' Gaucho*, Minnie as the damsel in distress eventually becomes a genre of its own within the world of Disney shorts. For example, in *The Fire Fighters* (1930), Mickey is a local fireman who responds to a large fire at a nearby building. Hundreds of townspeople evacuate the building, whether it be sliding down poles or jumping to the ground, while Mickey attempts to find ways of putting out the blaze. This mission is interrupted, however, when Minnie awakens from her slumber and notices the fire. As the only person left in the building, she starts screaming for help until she inhales too much smoke and simply passes out in the window. Consequently, Mickey braves the inferno and tactfully figures out a way to get to

Minnie, who is unconscious on the highest floor. When he finally reaches her and saves her, she suddenly revives and kisses him out of appreciation.

At this point in the Disney canon, many more of the shorts are showing Mickey and Minnie as an already-established couple, rather than strangers or in their early stages of dating like in the beginning shorts. In the damsel in distress shorts that span across the ‘30s, Minnie becomes a passive vehicle for which Mickey is able to show his heroism. As seen in *The Fire Fighters*, she is incapable of doing what everyone else was able to do and wholeheartedly relies on Mickey to provide. Whether it be another kidnapping by Black Pete or some other catastrophe, Minnie oscillates between two emotions: fear and gratitude. She has no other agency nor personality traits, which makes her a flat character defined by little more than her reliance on Mickey. Her constant dramatics and excessive acting, with shuddering sobbing and delicate fainting, also serve to establish her as a very emotional woman. Although other characters like Mickey also experience fear during moments of crisis, it is only Minnie whose emotionality renders her completely useless when it matters most. The damsel in distress trope creates a model in which women are expected to rely on their boyfriends for help, because it is the boyfriend who knows what to do and how to fix everything. The woman’s only role is to reward him at the end with kisses and affection, as her help can only sabotage rather than help.

Lastly, as Mickey and Minnie’s relationship progresses across the decades, Minnie Mouse becomes symbolically annihilated as the invisible wife. With the addition of Mickey’s friends, like Donald Duck or Goofy, Minnie’s appearances became less frequent and less central from the late 1930’s to the 1980’s. Take *Mickey’s Birthday Party* (1942) for example. The iris opens on Minnie, staring out the peephole with her long eyelashes, who then corralls all of Mickey’s friends to hide as he approaches the house. While they hide, she rushes off to the

bathroom, applies a fresh coat of lipstick and fluffs her hair. Then Minnie scampers to the door, where she adjusts her hair ribbon, pulls down her skirt, and greets Mickey at the door who tries to smother her in kisses while she pushes him away and giggles. After the initial surprise, Minnie reveals Mickey's gift and plays the piano for him to dance. For the rest of the short, the various guests show off their individual moves and cartoon dancing, with the only cutaways featuring Minnie being the moments where she is either providing the background music or checking on Goofy's progress with the cake.

The switch from "damsel in distress" to "invisible wife" cannot be seen as merely coincidental or arbitrary. In any of the shorts that Minnie from the early '30s, she is always the victim of a violent kidnapping, whether it be by Black Pete or a ravenous gorilla. Tuchman remarks that women "are more likely to be victims than aggressors" when violence is involved, and Minnie certainly faces many instances of violence at the hands of men (Tuchman 45). She concludes then that "television violence reveals approval of married women and condemnation of single and working women", which would certainly explain the violence Minnie faces as a restaurant dancer in *The Gallopin' Gaucho* or as a single homeowner in *The Fire Fighters*. It is further along in her relationship with Mickey when she starts to fade in the background of Mickey's life in the later shorts. Coincidentally, this is also when the damsel in distress plots start to disappear. Instead, she mostly plays a supporting role, such as the wife who checks on the cake, and is never involved with the central conflict of the story. Tuchman describes television's condemnation to be more lenient on "women who do not work for money outside the home" as they "are most likely to escape television's mayhem and to be treated sympathetically" (Tuchman 45). In *Mickey's Birthday Party*, Minnie is no working woman — instead, the short takes extra efforts to open and clearly show that Minnie has been preparing the home while Mickey returns

from work — and thus, this saves her from the ensuing chaos that occurs in the living room. In other words, it is Minnie's distancing from her single status and autonomy that brings her peace and safety.

In other words, Gaye Tuchman's symbolic annihilation is not a theoretical exercise — they translate to real tropes that code viewers to accept or reject a certain view of women. Her finding that "television most approves those women who are presented in a sexual context or within a romantic or family role" (Tuchman 45) aligns well with Minnie Mouse's appearances as a sexual tease. In the early Disney shorts, she is the only female to be featured amongst the numerous male characters, and almost always in an exclusively sexual context. As for Minnie Mouse's appearances as the Damsel in Distress, Tuchman also finds that female roles are often "trivialized [...] symbolized as child-like adornments, who need to be protected or they are dismissed to the protective confines of the home" (Tuchman 43). When Mickey discovers that a vicious gorilla has escaped the local zoo, he calls Minnie in a panic — who comforts him by singing and playing the piano, only to be captured by the gorilla moments later (*The Gorilla Mystery*, 1930), Minnie is presented as naïve and inane while danger lurks right around the corner, which brings her to an ultimate downfall that necessitates Mickey's rescue. Lastly, Minnie's invisibility points to one of the largest issues in entertainment's history. While stereotyped depictions of female characters can be harmful, the complete nonexistence tells audiences that women are not worth watching or not worth speaking, and are only useful in support roles for the advancement of men.

As Gaye Tuchman argues, mass media uses symbolic representations to convey endorsed messages. In Minnie's case, the message to young women is crystal clear — find a husband, trust him with your life, and you will live a happy existence.

Contemporary and "Woke" Portrayals of Minnie Mouse

Despite all of these negative depictions of Minnie Mouse, Walt Disney Animation Studios has made a noticeable effort in the past few decades to create more modern depictions. Aside from the revamping of the roles and diversity of their Disney princesses, the Walt Disney Company as a whole has continued to produce new content in Mickey's universe, all of which feature Minnie as a major character. Her time on *Mickey Mouse Clubhouse* (2006–2016) led to a spin-off called *Minnie's Bow-Toons* (2011-present), in which Minnie Mouse is the founder and owner behind a bow-making boutique. In later seasons, along with Daisy Duck, Minnie opens a pet grooming salon, creates a party planning business, and embarks on international business trips. It is not until 2013, however, that the Walt Disney Company creates a new series, simply titled *Mickey Mouse* (2013–2019), that the slapstick shorts return. *Mickey Mouse* and its successor, *The Wonderful World of Mickey Mouse* (2020–present), are the most modern comparisons to the earlier mentioned shorts and will form the basis of the following argument.

The first and most obvious reversal of the former symbolic annihilations is Minnie's strong presence throughout these shorts. Nearly half of these modern shorts are mostly focused on Mickey and Minnie's adventures as a couple, while others solely star Minnie. Mickey is completely absent from *No Reservations* (S3E16), in which Minnie Mouse tries to get her friends Daisy and Clarabelle a table at the hottest restaurant in town. When a snobby maitre d'hôtel tells them that they have no reservation, despite Minnie making one months ago and double-checking the morning of, Daisy and Clarabelle become completely dejected. Minnie, however, is incensed and proclaims that she will get them into the restaurant no matter what the cost is. She

brainstorms at least three different failed plots, getting kicked out by the maitre d' each time, before she flies into a fit of rage. "I am not giving up!" she shouts, as she shoves a construction worker into a can and kicks it into the air, miles away, in order to hijack his pulley system. "And that bully maitre d'—" she turns, her teeth bared and fist raised, "Oh, don't even get me started!" They end up getting into the now-emptied restaurant after creating a downpour of milk from Clarabelle's udders, and Minnie serves up a platter with the maitre d' on it. She giggles with her friends as the maitre d' dashes out of the restaurant and gets hit by a car.

Not only has Minnie become the heroine of the episode, without even a single mention of Mickey, but she has clearly undergone a personality change. This Minnie Mouse is no longer demure, flirtatious, or helpless. Instead, she is assertive, determined, and even inflicts violence upon the only two male characters of the episode.

Number of Appearances

	# of Mickey Appearances	**# of Minnie Appearances**	**# of Minnie as the Protagonist**
***Mickey Mouse* (96 episodes)**	88	50	28
***The Wonderful World of Mickey Mouse* (24 episodes)**	24	16	2

As such, Minnie Mouse is no longer the classic damsel in distress that audiences saw in *The Fire Fighters*. In fact, Disney even revisits this plotline in *Fire Escape* (S2E2), where Mickey Mouse spots Minnie's apartment burning at the top floor of the building. On his way up to save her, Mickey informs the buildings' many residents that there is a fire and is detoured each time by their requests for help. When he is finally able to reach Minnie's apartment, he is flabbergasted to see that *Minnie* is the one who has created the fire. She is nonchalant as a fire roars in her pan, creating black smoke over the entire apartment, and cooks joyfully next to a

book that is titled “How to Cook for Beginners” and advises that “nothing can be overcooked”. “Dinner’s almost ready!” she tells Mickey gleefully, and horror music clangs as she serves him a hairy, bubbling, black chicken that’s been burnt to a crisp. Though the two shorts have very similar plots, the differences in Minnie’s actions and temperament between *The Fire Fighters* (1930) and *Fire Escape* (2014) are profound. Whereas Minnie is unconscious and therefore inactive in most of *The Fire Fighters*, her actions directly cause the impetus to the entire plot of *Fire Escape*. In *The Fire Fighters*, her reaction to the fire is sappy, dramatic, and over-emotion, while her reaction in *Fire Escape* is insouciant because she knows more than everyone else — including Mickey and the viewer themself. Even her distinct lack of ability to cook, with the pile of dirty dishes and food splatters all over the walls, reject previous notions that Minnie is Mickey’s feminine caretaker and domestic housewife.

In a similar vein, this also means that Minnie is no longer purely seen as a sexual object, or source of desire. Although one might not describe these stories as damsel in distress episodes as the genre once existed, the plotline in which Minnie is kidnapped by some evil man has not completely disappeared. In *Road Hogs* (S3E8), Mickey inadvertently angers a biker gang of hogs, who end up kidnapping Minnie in revenge. Minnie, who believes they are taking her to Mickey, sits in the side-car calmly. In the early 1930’s shorts, all of these kidnappings involved some variation of Minnie being chained (*Gallopin’ Gaucho*), gagged and bound (*The Gorilla Mystery*), or pulled by her bloomers. In *Road Hogs*, there is no sexual connotation to these hogs’ intentions with Minnie — they pay her no mind as they speed off, ignoring her as she declares their motorcycles to be “pigsties” and starts vacuuming. In fact, she ends up antagonizing them by vacuuming off one of the hogs’ tattoos and wiping his glasses while he’s driving, causing him to thrust Minnie back to Mickey and crying out: “Take her! She’s nuts!”. Unlike the previous

shorts, Minnie's kidnapping is not a punishment for her sexuality or promiscuity. There is no indication that the hogs paid her any mind, other than finding her irritating, or trying to touch her excessively. Instead, the kidnapping is as a punishment to Mickey, therefore justifying that it is his responsibility to be the hero of the episode — except for the fact that it is Minnie who ends up saving herself, rather than needing Mickey at all.

Now that Disney animators have opted for a much "woker" version of Minnie Mouse, it may be tempting to say that the symbolic annihilation has been reversed. Gone are the days where Minnie is relegated to this traditional idea of femininity, where one must either be in service to men or otherwise voiceless. However, it is this understanding that Minnie is the "Everyday American woman" and her immortality as an ageless animated character that places her in a unique position. All of these variations of Minnie Mouse are in conversation with each other, and together, they present a very interesting message for the gender identity construction of young viewers.

Minnie Mouse as a Gender Identity Construction Model

Recent, more "woke" portrayals of Minnie Mouse may suggest that Disney Animation has grown past its flaws, diversified in its understanding of gender, and indicated a broader trend of better representation for women in the film industry. These can be true to some extent. However, Disney animation is uniquely different from its live action counterparts in its simultaneity. The story of *Snow White*, initially released in 1937, still actively lives in the American consciousness. Reiterations, reenactments, and theme park attractions maintain the popularity of decades-old animations, even amongst new generations. Many of the shorts mentioned above are readily available on the streaming platform Disney+, which has over 70

million subscribers, and all can be found easily via YouTube. In other words, the Minnie Mouse damsel in distress of *Plane Crazy* (1928) can be simultaneously consumed along with the assertive and slightly violent Minnie of *No Reservations* (2016). This provides a confusing framework for gender identity construction.

Feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey provides a psychoanalytic perspective on the inherently gendered viewing of film, which provides a valuable framework for the discussion at hand. Mulvey divides the act of looking between active/male and passive/female, in which the "determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly" (Mulvey 808). In an argument based off of the Freudian concept of castration anxiety, the male gaze aims to offset this anxiety when viewing the woman, who lacks a penis, either by 1) punishing or degrading the image (voyeurism) or 2) turning the image into something pleasurable, rather than dangerous, by eroticizing her (fetishistic scopophilia). In other words, it is the man who creates the look and the woman who is the bearer of that look. The meaning of her character is entirely borne out of the male gaze.

The early Disney shorts that symbolically annihilate Minnie Mouse utilize both voyeurism and fetishistic scopophilia to bring visual pleasure for the viewer. The entire damsel in distress trope doubles as an outlet for the sadistic voyeurism that Mulvey proposes, in which audiences are constantly watching Minnie struggle and beg for her life. Present in nearly all of Minnie's kidnappings are the camera shots up her bloomers, which reveal her distinct lack of penis and thus reinforces the castration anxiety. The male gaze is able to then quell that anxiety by watching the images of Minnie's pain, many of which are sexually coded, as her male kidnappers chain, bind, and gag Minnie. Fetishistic scopophilia is also present throughout the shorts, with Minnie's long eyelashes and short skirts. There is no question that she is the main

object of desire, whether it be for Mickey or the kidnappers, and her sugar-sweet voice and ultra-sexualized body movements allow the male viewer to see the pink mouse as a source of reassurance and joy, rather than disgust and fear. Voyeurism and fetishistic scopophilia may seem contradictory in that they serve to bring opposite feelings — punishment vs. pleasure — in one character. But the early Disney shorts seamlessly employ fetishistic scopophilia (Minnie as a Sexual Tease) to bring about voyeurism (Minnie as a Damsel in Distress), and vice versa. Their various methods of symbolic annihilation pave the way for a singular gendered viewing and interpretation of Minnie.

Mulvey's theory relies upon the idea that viewers take on a transference of identity from the male protagonist in an act of ego libido. The male viewer is able to combat this castration anxiety by taking on the gaze of the male protagonist (Mickey, in this case), and watching him subjugate that upon the female character. But this gaze must be taken on by *any* viewer, not just the male, because the writing, filmmaking, and very core of the story is entrenched in the gaze. As such, female viewers are forced to suspend part of their own identity in order to take on the gaze of the film. At least for the duration of the film, female viewers must accept the image of the woman in the acts of sadistic voyeurism and fetishistic scopophilia. While this can create feelings of disorientation or conflict in any grown woman, *who* Disney Animation intends to be their audience must be taken into consideration. Unlike the general history of film as a medium, Disney Animation was not streamed to a room full of men smoking cigars in a French salon. Instead, Disney Animation is primarily understood to be for children — who are young, impressionable, and do not yet have a solid sense of self identity.

However, to say that Disney Animation uniformly targets children is far too simplistic. How can that explain the record rates of family co-viewing or the prominence of "Disney

adults"? Although epic sagas about princesses in faraway lands seem to cater to children, it is undeniable that something about Disney Animation holds a universal appeal regardless of age. For the average American, Disney Animation brings about a nostalgia that allows everyone, no matter the age, to create a sense of belonging over the animation. These images that populate our earliest memories "make crucial contributions to our most important discourses of the self" and thus the "nebulous happiness in which we encase them is a membrane assuring their coherence as a vital organ of cultural continuity" (Bell et al. I.5). Like fables or folktales, which many Disney films are, children who hear the stories grow to be adults who then tend to disseminate those same stories to other children. The conglomeration has grown so successful as a pillar of American tradition that adults have built a trust and inclination towards Disney Animation for their own children, both as pedagogical tools or pure entertainment. It goes beyond brilliant reviews or empirical studies — the adult has a stake and ownership in Disney Animation stories, having built parts of their identity in their own childhood.

In other words, there is a multitude of dynamics enacted upon the child when they consume Disney Animation material. Regardless of gender, children are entering a "complex and ambiguous stock of lore that has both representational and performative power [which] may underpin and transmit taken-for-granted expectations, images and ideals of organizational life" (Griffin et al. 871). That is to say, even if Disney may not always be right in its teachings or lessons, their stories carry an omniscience that suggests otherwise. And even if past, older stories are criticized or debunked in its harmful messaging, nostalgia drives parents to "take a grain of salt" when re-screening these films to new generations. Young American girls are no longer encouraged to aspire for marriage to a man, but how effective are disclaimers against that when showing a 3-year-old girl *Cinderella?* How can a child pick apart what lessons should and should

not be taken from *Pocahontas?* Whereas adults often retire the stories of their childhoods to an inner-box of nostalgia and remembrance, Disney Animation is unique in the American culture's willingness to regurgitate century-old content to the next generation.

This is where the confusion sets in. Nowadays, it is plausible that a young girl can watch and consume both *Frozen* and *Sleeping Beauty* in one sitting. In one story, young girls are encouraged to grow into their independence and understand that men bear no impact on their own journeys or growth. In the other, young girls are told that they are voiceless unless a charming prince decides otherwise. Now, the discomfort of consuming content as a female viewer is no longer restricted to being forced to take on sadistic voyeurism and fetishistic scopophilia under the male gaze. There is an added layer of a totally contradicting message, where girls should be strong, independent, and heroic. There is no longer a prince dashing off for rescue — the solution can only be found in herself. The image of the woman being rewarded for her passivity becomes ingrained, but so does the necessity of relying on oneself rather than a man.

In the case of Minnie Mouse, consider the messages to be learnt from any Disney short prior to the 21st century reboots. The shorts in which Minnie is a sexual tease shows how women can and should be punished for extramarital or excessive sexuality. The shorts in which Minnie is a damsel in distress demonstrate how women are unable to help themselves and the situations they create, necessitating the help of the man. And the shorts in which Minnie is an invisible wife show that women can only truly find peace when they become the dutiful, silent wife. The newer shorts do not dismantle these lessons per se — instead, they expand Minnie's roles and contexts in which she appears so that these are not the *only* messages delivered to young girls. Minnie is still quite flirty but it no longer gets her into trouble. Minnie can still be a damsel in

distress, but she usually finds a way to escape before Mickey can even conceive of a half-baked plan. And Minnie is still a sweet and caring partner, but she also has a life beyond Mickey as a proprietor and friend to Daisy. Thanks to symbolic annihilation, the coded approvals and disapprovals of female behavior is very explicit in the early Disney shorts. And while the newer shorts could easily concoct storylines that acknowledge this past messaging, finding ways to denounce these earlier lessons, they instead choose to create parallel Minnie Mouses that never have to confront her past. Rather than negating the past, they've diluted it.

As such, it is important to remember that the industry and production team behind Disney animation is still predominantly male. Although Minnie has gained independence and autonomy over the years, she is still not totally freed from the male gaze. She still dons the same frilly skirt and high-pitched voice. The impetus for *Eau de Minnie* (S2E3) is when she puts on too much perfume for her date with Mickey, even though no short has ever shown Mickey obsessing over his own appearance. She is still the everyday American woman and the picture of femininity, even though our conception of femininity has changed since 1928. A discussion on organizational readiness uses *Frozen*'s Elsa as an example of how the male gaze still operates within the "woke" era:

> **There is a paradox here. Elsa is transformed into a beautiful, seductive woman: she may be freed from her duties as ruler, but she is not freed from the imposition of rules about how a woman *should* look (Stacey, 1994). Thus her sense of freedom is a false one: she cannot escape from the norms that govern gender. [...] women *must* take on the responsibilities of work, must work hard, but at the same time they must conform to norms of femininity, notably in regard to looks. (Griffin et al. 883-884)**

The voyeuristic sadism has not ended, only mutated itself into a cleaner, more palatable look. Rather than seeing the woman suffering violence or waiting for the man's rescue, the audience watches the woman struggle to take on the hard work by herself. But even more, as in the case with Minnie, the role of women has doubled. Whereas women were once expected to

only maintain traditional roles of femininity (often appearance), they now must be both strong *and* feminine. Minnie is still Mickey's supportive girlfriend, but she is also her *own* advocate and devoted to herself.

This, of course, is a vast improvement from past representations of women. By no means is this to say that female characters should go back to relying on men or that they are incapable of taking on all of this responsibility. However, Disney Animation's unique place in the cultural conscience must be acknowledged and fully understood. As a cultural artifact and point of deep nostalgia, adults are likely to give less scrutiny to these films as pedagogical tools for their own children. Therefore, Disney Animation content from various eras are presented to the new generation simultaneously, providing a strange amalgamation of positions on gender that inevitably leads to confusion for young girls. At worst, the gender identity construction model provided is informed by the male gaze, subjecting female viewers to viewing experiences that enable self-violence, self-punishment, or self-eroticization. At best, young girls are encouraged to work hard and thrive without men — while still restricted to the traditional burdens of femininity, thus doubling their standards of responsibility (while resulting in men enjoying lessened responsibility). Minnie is no longer only concerned with her skirts or how to take care of her home. Now she also manages multiple employees at Minnie's Bow-tique, maintains a fruitful dating life as a thoughtful girlfriend, and actively participates in local events or volunteering — all while saving Mickey's butt whenever he gets himself into trouble.

Conclusion

In sum, Minnie Mouse has lived many lives. She likely rivals most people in age, but she is also unbeatable in the number of roles, jobs, and personalities that she has taken on. As a chameleon, Minnie truly could be any American woman from the 20th or 21st century, which has made her a perfect vehicle for stringent guidelines on comportment for the everyday American woman. Male animators and writers seized the symbolic annihilation of Minnie Mouse as the stellar opportunity to craft their ideal woman and disseminate that image to the American public. Whether it be commentary on finding a husband, what type of jobs (if any) women should pursue, and what role they must take on in the home, Minnie has been weaponized against young girls to dictate their place in society.

Does salvation exist for Minnie Mouse? In today's political climate, the inclination is often to simply retire rather than revamp a character that may have a more problematic past — and that is often the only feasible solution. Indeed, a variety of considerations make it difficult to imagine a successful reimagining of Minnie's character. After all, her character exists purely in relation to her much more famous boyfriend. Creating a healthy gender identity construction model, if one at all exists, will always be constrained by Minnie's past appearances. However, the reality is that Disney Animation has held and continues to hold as a cultural artifact in the American soul. Perhaps one day, Minnie Mouse's multiversal cast of existences can be acknowledged and all of the Minnie Mouses can be put in dialogue with one another. But until then, her character will remain a complicated one — a Minnie Mouse laden with pains, joys, and downright inconsistencies.

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