

100 Years of Disney

Editorial

Amy M. Davis and Helen Haswell



Figure 1: Disney 100: Walt Disney Animation Studios Production Logo.

In 2023, a major Hollywood film company celebrated its 100th birthday, and almost no one blinked an eye. That studio was Warner Brothers, which was founded on 4 April 1923 by brothers Harry, Albert, Sam, and Jack Warner.

But on 16 October 2023, another major Hollywood film company—the Walt Disney Company, founded on 16 October 1923 by brothers Walt and Roy Disney—celebrated its 100th birthday with much more fanfare. In early 2023, it began a year-long celebration of its centenary. The first thing it did was launch an entire product line—Disney Eras—in which Disney’s history was celebrated, decade by decade, with merchandise that either reproduced or evoked important places, moments, and characters of the studio’s history. Other merchandise has simply marked that Disney is 100 years old. The Disney theme parks sold some of this merchandise, costumed clothed members of the “Sensational Six” (Mickey, Minnie, Donald, Daisy, Goofy, and Pluto) characters in special silvery outfits, and put up a few anniversary-related decorations. On its streaming service, Disney+, programmes marking the 100th anniversary have included *Disney 100: A Century of Dreams* (Dave Hoffman, 2023), and for October 2023, the service organised some of its offerings into decades, available on the home screen. It also launched a special short, *Once Upon a Studio* (Dan Abraham and Trent Correy, 2023), first on the American network ABC (the network where Disney’s first TV series, *Disneyland*, premiered on 27 October 1954, and which Disney later purchased in 1996) and the next day on Disney+ internationally. Further, Disney has had a very successful travelling exhibition, *Disney100: The Exhibition*. And, of

course, numerous outside bodies have marked Disney’s centenary, including the British Film Institute’s *Disney at 100* events and screenings during the summer and autumn 2023.¹ Likewise, academia has observed the occasion via publications such as this special issue of *Alphaville*.

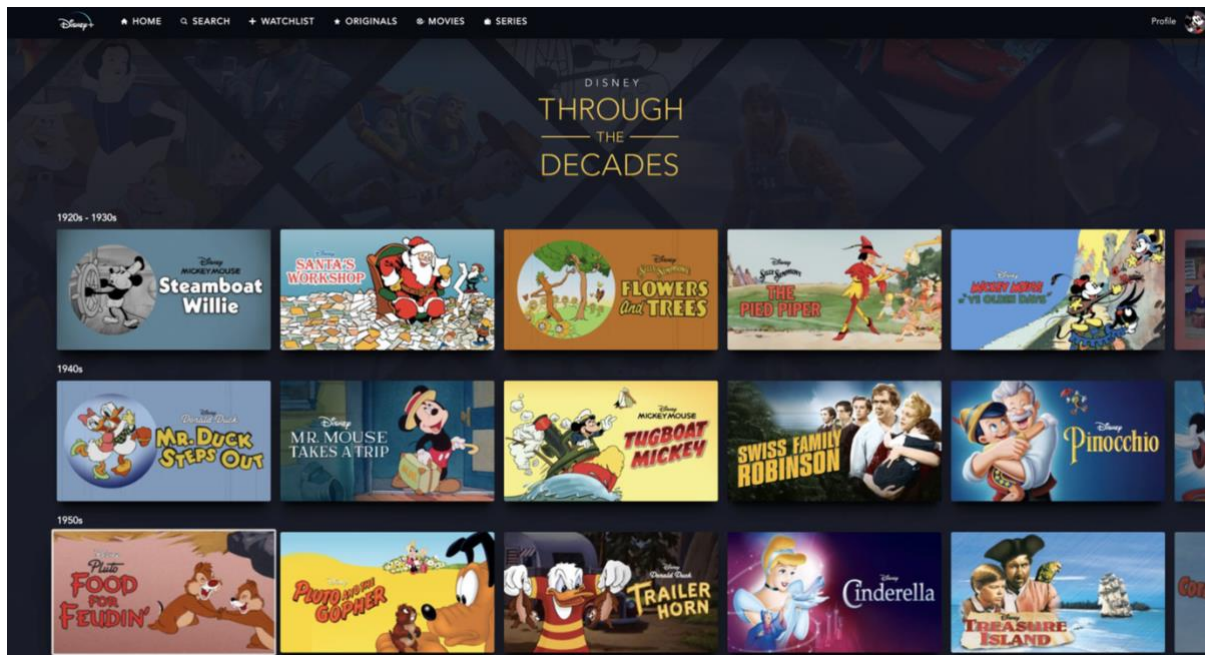


Figure 2: Disney+ Interface: Disney Through the Decades. Screenshot.

So why has Warner Brothers, a company that once held so much more power in the film industry than Disney, that has produced such classics as *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942), *My Fair Lady* (George Cukor, 1964), and *What's Up, Doc?* (Peter Bogdanovich, 1972), has itself been home to some genuinely iconic animated characters—Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, Elmer Fudd, Sylvester and Tweety, Roadrunner and Wile E. Coyote, Foghorn Leghorn, and Marvin Martian—and produced stars like Bette Davis and Humphrey Bogart, seen its centenary come and go almost unnoticed, whilst Disney’s has elicited so much more excitement? Admittedly, one of those reasons may be self-promotion: Warner Brothers has done very little itself to celebrate, so most people likely were unaware of its milestone. But that is only part of why Disney’s centenary has received more attention. At the heart of it? People may respect Warner Brothers, but they *love* Disney. Warner Brothers may be important, but Disney is an institution. And though Warner Brothers has been around for generations, most of us have grown up with Disney.

For this special issue, we (your intrepid coeditors) have worked to try and cover a range of what comprises Disney as it marks its first 100 years, even whilst recognising that Disney has so much—means so much to so many people—that it is impossible to fit it all within the confines of a single journal issue. Beginning as a “company” of just two, the last 100 years have seen Disney expand in multiple ways: first, by experimenting with and expanding its own outputs; then, beginning in the 1990s, through its acquisitions of major production companies and studios such as Pixar (2006), Marvel Entertainment (2009), Lucasfilm (2012) and Twenty-First Century Fox (2019), making it one of the largest conglomerates in the media industry.² In its centenary year, the Walt Disney Company reported total earnings of \$88.9 billion (“Walt Disney Company”). Similarly, there is much that could be said about Disney’s impact on film

making (both within and beyond animation), as well as larger practices such as merchandising (not just for animation or Hollywood, but even in such diverse areas as sports and the tourism industry). Hopefully, we have hit the highlights: Disney's cinema, music, television, theme parks, how it deals with and (re)presents its history, and a snapshot of its interactions with the wider world. The papers we have included here will both deepen your knowledge of the Disney Company *and* contribute to the ongoing discussion of what Disney means.

Gabrielle Stecher starts us off with “Examining the Legacy of Disney Artist Mary Blair”, an in-depth, scholarly examination of the life, work, and influence of the Disney Legend. Blair was an iconic Disney artist whose work spanned the company's divisions and continues to inspire Disney artists and imagineers well into the current era. Stecher, in examining her work and legacy, also questions why Blair is the first (and sometimes only) female artist from Disney to be remembered.

Blair was one of the Disney artists to join Walt Disney on his 1941 tour of Central and South America, and it is to that region we head next with András Lénárt's examination of the tour of “El Grupo” and the two package films that came from it, *Saludos Amigos* (Norman Ferguson, 1942) and *The Three Caballeros* (Norman Ferguson, 1944). As Lénárt notes in his article “Donald Duck Goes South: Walt Disney and the Inter-American Relations”, El Grupo's trip played an important role in strengthening ties between the Roosevelt Administration and the governments of numerous Latin American nations in the shadow of the Second World War, going far beyond these films' role as cinematic entertainments.

Likewise, Sureshkumar Sekar examines how Disney has repurposed its musical films to tap into a more recent trend of holding “screencerts”—film screenings with live musical accompaniment—a wholly nostalgic experience evoking a sentiment both for the (contemporary) film and this silent-era exhibition practice. In this video essay, titled “Disney Screencerts”, Sekar defines and examines the experiential differences between the variations of Film-with-Live-Orchestra concerts to discuss how Disney has built on its film musical and musical theatre traditions to create a new screencert hybrid, exemplified not by the official worldwide centenary event, *Disney 100: The Concert*, but also through its production of *Encanto at the Hollywood Bowl*.

Of course, tapping into that musical heritage brings to mind the ways Disney has long used its “vault” both to showcase and conceal its history. Bailey Apollonio's article, “Hidden Histories: Vaulting as Corporate Archival Practice,” examines how Disney has used its concept of “vaulting” as a way to both repackage and re-release its earlier films and, in the case of *Song of the South* (Wilfred Jackson, 1946), to hide away films that are now seen as too problematic even for limited collector release.

Tying together the concepts of music and nostalgia, Toby Huelin's article, “Stick to the Status Quo?” examines the ways *High School Musical: The Musical: The Series*, produced exclusively for Disney's streaming service, uses musical nostalgia to expand the popular *High School Musical* franchise into a new format, underscoring the technological developments of the Disney brand and its increasingly global platform while maintaining nostalgic and familiar narrative conventions.

Cody T. Havard and Amy M. Davis continue this examination of Disney's use of streaming services in their article “Streaming with the Mouse: Disney's Entrance into Direct-to-Consumer Streaming and Implications for the Future of Entertainment.” Here, they provide

a history of Disney+ (including its prehistory, both within home entertainment technologies more generally and through its precursor, DisneyLife) by examining how and why Disney came to be involved in Direct-to-Consumer streaming, as well as where Disney+ fits within the larger streaming market.

In “Part of Whose World?”, Niall Richardson re-examines the representation of race in one of Disney’s most beloved animated films, *The Little Mermaid* (John Musker and Ron Clements, 1989). Widely acknowledged as marking the beginning of Disney’s Renaissance, Richardson argues that the film, particularly in its musical sequences, presents an implicitly racist narrative. Through comparative analysis, Richardson argues that racist tropes in the original film are made even more explicit by the clear revisions made by the 2023 remake.

And finally, by foregrounding the cultural challenges to Disney’s representation in its 100-year history, Priscilla Hobbs and Antares Leask examine how successful the company has been at responding to these changes. Walt Disney once famously declared that Disneyland would never be finished, and the same has held true for the subsequent theme parks. In their timely article “Diversity in Disney’s Theme Parks: Is it Working?”, Hobbs and Leask analyse three popular (and problematic) Disney theme park attractions to understand how Disney functions as a cultural influencer and how these rides have evolved to suit larger cultural shifts.



Figure 3: Group Photo: *Once Upon a Studio*. Dir. Dan Abraham and Trent Correy, Walt Disney Studios, 2023. Screenshot.

The themes explored throughout this special issue underline the ways Disney has consistently engaged with (and relied on) its history, iconography, nostalgia, and sentimentality, while always looking to the future, to create a bond with its audience and remain relevant in the public eye. These ideals are further underpinned in the celebratory short, *Once Upon a Studio*, which combines traditional hand-drawn and digital animation to bring together Disney’s animated characters. Set in the Roy E. Disney Animation building and featuring Burny Mattinson, Disney’s longest serving employee, it centres Mickey and Minnie Mouse gathering (almost!) all of Disney’s animated characters for a celebratory group photo. The nine-minute film quickly becomes a “spot all” of one’s favourite Disney heroes and villains, voice-over artists and animators. The film also takes a moment to show Mickey spotting—and then gazing wistfully at—a framed photo of Walt Disney in a corridor of the studio. As the chorus of one of Walt’s favourite songs, “Feed the Birds”,³ is played softly on a piano in the

background, Mickey holds his hat in his hand. Minnie calls him to join the group, and Mickey addresses Walt's picture in a voice full of emotion: "Gotta go. But thanks. On with the show." One cannot help but think that this is not only a fitting tribute to Walt Disney's central role in the studio and the company that bear his name, but one that also speaks to the present-day Disney Company's role as an entertainment empire and cultural icon, producing characters and films that still have the power to capture widespread fandom and spark critical and scholarly debate. With such a significant legacy, we may well see it celebrating its bicentennial one hundred years from now.

Notes

¹ Amy M. Davis, one of the coeditors for this special issue, participated in two panels on two separate dates in July 2023 at the British Film Institute (BFI) in London, as well as giving a talk on Walt Disney at the BFI.

² Today, the Walt Disney Company operates within three business segments: Disney Parks, Experiences and Products, Disney Media and Entertainment Distribution, and Content Groups, which is further separated by Studio Entertainment (Walt Disney Animation, Pixar, Marvel, Lucasfilm, etc.), General Entertainment (20th Century Television, ABC Networks, Disney Channel, etc.), ESPN and Sports Content, and International Content and Operations.

³ In keeping with Disney's penchant for and promotion of nostalgia, the film features a newly recorded track of "Feed the Birds" by the Academy Award-winning composer, songwriter, and Disney Legend Richard Sherman who, in 2022 at age 94, returned to Walt Disney's office to play piano exclusively for this short ("How Disney").

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