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The Disney Animators' Strike of 1941 and the Formation of the UPA

Redescribing the Formation of United Productions of America

United Productions of America, also known as UPA, was an animation studio established in the wake of the Disney animators' strike of 1941. Due to the Great Depression in the 1930s, many labor unions were formed, including the 1933 formation of the Screen Actors Guild. In 1937, animators from Fleischer Studios went on strike due to the firing of 15 American Art-Union employees. The strike led to the 1938 creation of the Screen Cartoonists' Guild headed by Herbert Sorrell. Although Disney's animators were some of the best paid workers in the industry, toward the late 1930s, discontentment began to rise. In 1936, Walt Disney halted his practice of giving his employees bonuses of 20 percent of the profits due to the increase in staff size (Robb, "Chapter 5 - Walt in Wartime"). This came after many employees dedicated free overtime to complete production of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*.

Instead of giving bonuses, Disney switched to a system of giving out salary adjustments, or raises, to the animators that he thought were giving outstanding work. The promise of salary adjustments were used almost as dangling carrots to encourage his employees to continue to push and work harder. During the late 1930s and early 1940s, the rise of World War II began to affect the foreign markets causing Disney to lose 40 percent of profits from foreign releases. This led to less successful releases with both *Pinocchio* and *Fantasia* (Robb, "Chapter 5 - Walt in Wartime"). The drop in profits forced Disney to cut salaries and lay off employees. Many of the

remaining animators joined the Screen Cartoonists Guild during this time, including Art Babbitt. Babbitt became one of the union leaders, giving a unifying voice to the disgruntled artists. After many disagreements with Sorrell and Babbitt, Disney fired Babbitt due to his inciting behavior, which was the final straw for many employees (Sito, "The Disney Strike of 1941: How It Changed Animation & Comics."). The strike began the next day on May 29, 1941, led by Sorrell and Babbitt.

The strike lasted for five weeks during the production of *Dumbo*, leading to some references bleeding into the film, such as the inclusion of clowns who go to "hit the big boss for a raise". Following the advice of Nelson Rockefeller, Disney took time away from the company to allow for tensions to cool. With the help of a federal mediator, a deal was settled in the Guild's favor, finally ending the strike (Sito, "The Disney Strike of 1941: How It Changed Animation & Comics"). Though the strike came to an end, it ultimately caused irreparable damage to the company morale leading to the staff size to shrink from 1,200 to about 700. Following Babbitt's departure, many other major animators left including Bill Tytla, Walt Kelly, Virgil Partch, David Hilberman, and John Hubley. Together, they established United Productions of America.

Economic Mechanisms

The 1930s and 1940s were complicated times economically, both domestically and abroad. The Great Depression began in the United States in late 1929, and did not end until domestic production ramped up during World War II. Although World War II was helpful to the U.S. economy, the same cannot be said for all industries of the time. World War II greatly impacted business at Disney, as the foreign market began to shrink, causing losses on the

releases of *Pinocchio* and *Fantasia*. “Throughout the spring of 1941, the *Fantasia* was presented as a road-show attraction in 13 cities, where it did unspectacular business at the box-office, raking in only one-seventh of its negative cost of \$2.3 million” (Diffrient 509). This was in stark contrast to the earlier success experienced after the release of *Snow White*.

During the later years of the 1930s, Disney’s staff had grown enormously during production of more successful films such as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. Staff members worked many hours of unpaid overtime during the production of *Snow White* and were promised large bonuses and pay raises after the completion of the film (Lowry, "The Disney Cartoonists Strike, 1941"). No longer able to sustain such a large staff, Disney was forced to lay off animators, as well as stop bonuses, and make salary cuts. This bred malcontent and distrust in his remaining employees.

The collapse of the all-important foreign market during the war years, shrinking domestic profits, increasing production costs, and the layoff of one-third of its staff made continuing the production of full-length animated features nearly impossible, especially those of the labor-intensive and costly variety which had made the Disney reputation: *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *Pinocchio* (1940), *Fantasia* (1940), and *Bambi* (1942). (Inge 219)

Following the layoffs, many of Disney’s remaining animators joined the Screen Cartoonists Guild. Within the Guild, several members, including Art Babbit, gave the disgruntled artists a rallying voice. This caused tensions to continue to grow. Disney finally fired Babbit for “troublemaking” and the provocation of his employees. Instead of easing tensions within the company, Babbit’s dismissal backfired, giving the employees a final and unifying reason to strike.

Technological Mechanisms

During the 1930s, Walt Disney began to push for ultra-realistic animation as he moved from cartoon shorts to animated features (Watts 90-91). In order to further this vision, he employed engineers to create new technology to produce more realistic animation. “The multiplane camera, the brainchild of the studio engineers, created the illusion of depth through a ten-foot-high mechanism where a succession of painted cells were stacked one on top of the other with a camera mounted at the top. The camera then made consecutive shots through rearranged cells. These images, when strung together in the film, suggested three dimensionality” (Watts 90-91). The illusion of three dimensionality added to the realistic quality of the animations produced.

Not all of the animators shared Disney’s vision of hyper realism. Some felt it stifled their creative output and artistic vision. John Hubley, as well as several of his colleagues, did not agree with Disney’s ideal of animation being a meticulously realistic recreation of real life. This sentiment went on to be a founding pillar of the United Productions of America. Hubley and the other founding members of UPA wanted more freedom of expression and design that was not supported by Walt Disney or other major studios of the time.

Social Mechanisms

Culturally, many things changed for Americans during the Great Depression and the beginning of World War II. After many years of decline, the late 1930s held the labor unions greatest comeback. “The Great Depression would ultimately be remembered as labor's finest hour, a time of massive organizing drives, successful strikes, soaring social idealism, and political campaigns that changed labor law for future generations. By the end of the 1930s most

Americans realized that unions were one of the keys to genuine democracy” (Gregory, "Strikes & Unions"). Congress passed legislation such as the National Industrial Recovery Act and the Wagner Act that provided the opportunity of collective bargaining and “requiring businesses to bargain with any union supported by the majority of their employees ("Labor Unions during the Great Depression and the New Deal"). For many years, Walt Disney refused to work with the Screen Cartoonists Guild. As more and more of his employees joined the Guild, greater pressure was put on Disney to comply. The five month stretch of the Animators’ Strike of 1941 finally forced his hand. During the strike, Disney took a leave of absence while a federal mediator was brought in on negotiations. After the mediator sided with the Screen Cartoonists Guild on every issue, Disney Studio signed a contract, making it a union shop. To this day, by Disney being a union shop, they will only hire union members, or require new hires to join a union.

Aesthetic Mechanisms

Disney Studios developed a unique and identifying aesthetic quality to their films during the 1930s as they moved from cartoon shorts to feature length films. As discussed under the technological mechanisms, Walt Disney pushed for a natural and realistic quality of animation. “In many ways, such highfalutin aesthetic achievement was quite incidental. Having but little education and training in art, Disney largely followed his instincts in marshaling pictorial images, humor, comedy, and music to create mass entertainment. Moreover, by the mid-1930s he had begun to seek greater and greater realism in his studio's animations” (Watts 90-91). This was a different approach than anything else being done at the time. The aesthetic style that Disney cultivated had a great influence and impact on other studios.

Most literature dealing with animation during the 1930s and early 1940s stresses the Disney influence on other animation studios. Conventional wisdom has it that in this period, Walt Disney set the agenda for the animation industry. Instead they confirm the existence of an internally unified style or vision, uninfluenced by the production of other animation studios, until the artistic mantle passed to Warner Bros, and UPA in the mid- to late-1940s. (Langer 305).

Disney's aesthetic even had an indirect influence on the founding members of the UPA, as they disagreed with his vision, causing them to follow their own aesthetic design upon leaving Disney Studios following the Animators' Strike of 1941.

Relationships among mechanisms

Many aspects of the Disney Animators' Strike of 1941 and the subsequent formation of United Productions of America span multiple generative mechanisms. One of the most apparent overlap of generative mechanisms is the technologic and aesthetic mechanisms. Walt Disney sought new technology to further his aesthetic, and his visions of more natural and realistic animation led him to seek the technology to help match his ideals. Both of the generative mechanisms shaped the creative differences between Disney and many of his animators, adding to the already high tensions caused by the economic circumstances.

Another relationship between generative mechanisms is the effect the economic mechanisms had on the social mechanisms, and vice versa. The difficult economic atmosphere caused by the Great Depression and impending war fanned the flames of the labor union movement. Legislation passes under the New Deal gave workers more avenues and rights to collectively bargain. This enabled workers to demand more economic stability from their

employers. These social movements allowed the Screen Cartoonists Guild to form, which led to the Disney Animators' Strike of 1941, and then the consequent founding of United Productions of America.

Conclusions: The Relative Force of Generative Mechanisms

Although the formation of United Productions of America exhibits each of the generative mechanisms, the economic mechanisms presented were the most imperative mechanisms that lead to the Disney animators' strike of 1941 and then the creation of the UPA. After years of increasing success, the collapse of the foreign markets due to World War II led to a substantial decrease in profits, causing Walt Disney to cut bonuses, decrease salaries, and layoff a third of his employees. The remaining employees felt vulnerable and betrayed that Disney's promise of reward for their hard work would not be upheld. The Screen Cartoonists Guild gave the rallying cry to strike, which ended in many of the animators leaving Disney Studios and creating United Productions of America.

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