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From Caligari to Disney: The legacy of German Expressionist cinema in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*

Victoria Mullins

Life is composed of lights and shadows, and we would be untruthful, insincere, and saccharine if we tried to pretend there were no shadows. Most things are good, and they are the strongest things; but there are evil things too, and you are not doing a child a favor by trying to shield him from reality. The important thing is to teach a child that good can always triumph over evil.¹

From Caligari to Disney

While film scholars routinely recognize the ‘expressionist’ aesthetic of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), Disney’s fairy-tale film has thus far eluded a sustained academic dialogue with German Expressionist cinema.² This is largely due to the variant sociopolitical contexts that envelop each area of study. *Snow White* – and, indeed, Disney animation at large – is both applauded and admonished as a reflection of Walt’s own ‘conservative ... middle American values’.³ German Expressionist cinema has, on the contrary, come to represent the collectively deflated psyche that permeated

the Weimar Republic in the years immediately preceding Adolf Hitler's rise to power. In much the same way that America and Germany occupied oppositional sides in the First World War, so too have Disney animation and German Expressionist cinema come to represent and embody contrasting sociocultural values and climates, if not contrasting visual styles.

Adapted from the Grimm Brothers' 'Little Snow White' (first published in 1812), Disney's *Snow White* is based on an oral folktale that was first committed to print as part of a concerted effort to recover 'a German mythology and German attitude to life [in order to assert] what was German against the French occupying forces of the Napoleonic empire'.⁴ Yet, created and released during the Great Depression that plagued America in the wake of the 1929 Wall Street Crash, Disney's version of the fairy tale has become ingrained in the cultural mythology of Walt Disney as 'an avuncular Horatio Alger figure'.⁵ Dubbed 'Disney's Folly' throughout its ever-extending period of production, *Snow White* not only raised the Hollywood cartoon to a platform previously reserved for live-action cinema, it also 'reinvigorat[ed] one of America's most poignant national myths'.⁶ Far from simply providing escapist fantasy during a time of cultural anxiety, *Snow White* transformed Walt Disney into a living personification of the American Dream.

In stark contrast, German Expressionist cinema, known as 'the world of light and shadow', is largely understood as a 'world of distorted perspectives, dreamscapes, murder, mayhem and menacing shadows' that reflects the 'dark side' of the collective German psyche during the sociopolitical uncertainty of the Weimar Republic (1919–33).⁷ As Thomas Elsaesser explains, this 'potent analogy between film culture and political history' is largely the result of two scholarly texts: Lotte H. Eisner's *The Haunted Screen* (1952) and Siegfried Kracauer's *From Caligari to Hitler* (1947).⁸ Eisner's work focuses on the movement's aesthetic presentation of Romantic tensions between reality and the subjective 'German soule', yet Kracauer's text interprets recurrent plotlines and symbols within Weimar cinema as psychoanalytically charged reflections of the 'general retreat into a shell' mentality that Weimar Germany had inherited from the failure of the First World War and the disastrous effects of the Treaty of Versailles. Often taken together, Eisner and Kracauer's respective analyses created what Elsaesser terms 'historical imaginaries' that see German Expressionist cinema consistently aligned with German nationalism and the rise of Nazism.⁹

Although *Snow White* and German Expressionist cinema were therefore both created during times of national trauma, they have been respectively aligned to the contrasting formations of American triumphalism and German defeatism. German Expressionist cinema is hailed for its visual presentation of 'that excess of soul ascribed to things "typically German"', yet Disney's simplification of the Grimm Brothers' 'Little Snow White' has led many folklorists to conclude that *Snow White* sees 'the German quality of the original tale [give] way to media fantasy'.¹⁰ However, as this chapter

shall demonstrate, while the simplification of (and deviation from) the Grimms' 'Little Snow White' allowed Disney to imbue their adaptation with specific 'Hollywoodizations', it also provided opportunities to give clear animated form to the 'dark shadows' found across German Expressionist filmmaking.

Animation is, in many ways, the most fully realized incarnation of the great Expressionist art director Hermann Warm's oft-quoted mantra that 'Films must be drawings brought to life.'¹¹ Unbound by corporeal reality, Disney animation in particular held what Sergei Eisenstein called a 'plasmatic' potential that affords the medium a unique ability 'to more persuasively show *subjective reality*'.¹² Nevertheless, while German Expressionist cinema is routinely applauded for its cohesive use of stylized sets, lighting and acting to reflect the psychological depths of both its characters and its audience,¹³ *Snow White* is often analysed in terms of the attainment and subsequent consolidation of the 'Disney Style': an aesthetic that, frequently parodied and often criticized, is largely defined by the pursuit of 'hyperrealist' principles that appear to undermine the 'ideological freedoms' of the animated form.¹⁴

By exploring *Snow White* through the lens of German Expressionism, this chapter will argue that, in crafting the 'realistic' characters of *Snow White*, Walt Disney not only recognized animation's expressive potential but also actively encouraged his animators to draw upon Expressionist techniques in the production of their animated images. As he explained in a 1935 memo to Don Graham (a highly respected art teacher tasked with leading art classes for the Disney animators), 'In our animation we must show not only the actions or reactions of a character, but we must picture also with the action ... the feeling of those characters.'¹⁵ Through a close reading of *Snow White*'s most overtly 'expressionist' sequences (Snow White's forest flight and the Queen's transformation, as well as the relationship between these pivotal characters), this chapter will demonstrate that rather than 'simplifying' and 'Americanising' the Grimms' original German tale, Disney utilized the 'expressive' potential of animation (and the visual referents of German Expressionist filmmaking) to lend visual form to the psychological depths of the Grimms' inherently German source text.

The trees have eyes: Snow White's forest flight

Snow White's deployment of Classical Hollywood narrative conventions to amplify the heroine's romance with the Prince has fuelled a common critique of the film that 'Disney's focus on Snow White appears to extend no further than her willingness to fall in love.'¹⁶ However, such critiques often fail to analyse the character of Snow White as an intrinsic part of the film's

broader cinematic landscape. In reading *Snow White* through the lens of Expressionism, we can observe that, although Disney's inaugural Princess has been routinely admonished as a 'flat and one-dimensional' heroine, she plays an integral – and, indeed, active – role in shaping the landscape that surrounds her.¹⁷ As Kristin Thompson explains, 'Expressionism lends the expressivity of the human body to the entire visual field, while simultaneously trying to make the body a purely compositional element.'¹⁸ The apparent simplicity of Snow White's character (and her role as a reactive heroine) not only foregrounds the highly expressionist nature of the film's visual style but also affords her a depth of consciousness arguably not found among Disney's later, more 'active,' heroines. This formal relationship between German Expressionism and the visualization of Snow White's subconscious can be readily observed in her iconic forest flight.

Disney's cinematic portrayal of this sequence conforms to – and deviates from – the Grimm Brothers' original description. In the Grimms' version, the Huntsman, unable to kill Snow White himself, tells her to 'Just run off, you poor child', while resolving to himself that 'The wild animals will devour [her] before long.'¹⁹ His thinking is practical: he will avoid staining his own hands with the princess's blood by leaving her to the predatory whims of the forest beasts. Snow White's reaction is rather unsurprising:

She was so frightened that she has no idea where to turn. She started running and raced over sharp stones and through thorny bushes. Wild beasts hovered around her at times, but they did not harm her. She ran as fast as her legs would carry her. When night fell, she discovered a little cottage and went inside to rest.²⁰

Within the Grimms' forest, Snow White is both frightened by the Queen's vendetta and facing the genuine and constant threat of predators. In Disney's reimagining of the sequence, however, the predatory threat is presented as symptomatic of Snow White's compromised state of mind: the terrifying forest is sculpted by the heroine's fear of falling victim to the Queen's hatred. The trees with horrifying faces and snatching talons, the gaping mouth into which she falls, the snapping crocodile-logs that attack her as she dangles from a vine: they are the incarnation of Snow White's terror. Disney thus transforms the material threat of the Grimms' forest into a stylistic opportunity to demonstrate Snow White's overwhelming sense of danger.

To visually present Snow White's terror, Disney borrows heavily from the stylistic repertoire of German Expressionist cinema. Marc Davis, one of Snow White's central character animators, recalls that Walt Disney hired a cinema auditorium during the film's production, in which he and the lead animators watched:

Anything that might produce growth, that might be stimulating – the cutting of the scenes, the staging, how a group of scenes were put together ... *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, *Nosferatu* were things that we saw. I remember *Metropolis* ... I would never want to see this film again because it had a very strong impact on me. I have built it up in my mind and want to leave it that way.²¹

Davis's account verifies how key works of German Expressionist cinema were used as vital sources of visual inspiration during *Snow White*'s production. It also evidences a strong link between Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* and *Snow White*'s forest flight. The 'strong impact' that Lang's treatise on technology had on Davis manifests in the crescendo of predatory eyes that overwhelm *Snow White*, causing her to collapse in terror. The sequence parallels *Metropolis*' iconic use of an eye-montage when the imposter, robot-Maria, dances erotically in a men's club (see Figure 1.1).

A compilation of the lustful stares of the high-society males watching robot-Maria's dance, *Metropolis*'s eye-montage is – as Andrew Webber posits – 'an image of the consuming potency of the male gaze' that – thanks to robot-Maria's position as a bachelor machine 'put on show by her "father"' – can be understood as a reproduction of the 'uncanny effects of the proliferation of eyes, organic and artificial' in the German Romantic author E. T. A. Hoffman's *The Sandman* (1816).²² In both Hoffman's short story and Lang's film, the sense of unfamiliar familiarity encapsulated in the concept of the uncanny is linked to automata, because, in blurring the boundary between human and humanoid, they lead us to question 'whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not be in fact animate'.²³ *Snow White* is, in both a literal and philosophical sense in this 'forest-flight' sequence, an *animated* figure. Although a Rotoscoped human figure rendered through a series of drawings, *Snow White* is not the source of the uncanny feelings in others. Instead, the sense of uncanny that pervades her is reflective of her own reactive emotional state. By therefore observing the differences between Lang's and Disney's respective eye-montages, we can come to understand how the animators moved towards striking Expressionist imagery to imbue the doubly 'animated' *Snow White* with the 'Illusion of Life'.

As Disney animators Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston have explained, the 'Illusion of Life' is dependent upon the animators' ability 'to make the audience *feel* the emotions of the characters, rather than appreciate them intellectually'.²⁴ To achieve this audience involvement in *Snow White*, the Disney animators draw upon Expressionist techniques. By Eisner's account, Expressionism can present both 'an extreme form of subjectivism [and] the complete abstraction of the individual'.²⁵ As the Disney animators utilize Expressionist techniques to transform the forest landscape into an active pursuer against which the heroine can react, I suggest that both a sense of

FIGURE 1.1 A comparison of composite eyes in *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1927) and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (David Hand, 1937).

subjectivity and individual abstraction are inherent in Snow White's forest flight. As she reacts against the forest, her subjective fear is presented in abstracted form. Although found in preceding film movements, the use of 'montage sequences of empty landscapes [and] superimpositions to denote subjective states' is a well-established technique in German Expressionist filmmaking.²⁶ By superimposing gaunt faces onto the trees and logs, while intercutting point-of-view shots with images of the terrified Snow White framed using Dutch angles, the Disney animators are able to use the hostile vision of the forest to effectively dramatize the princess's inner turmoil.

As a culmination of point-of-view shots that see the terrifying tree faces quickly consume the screen as they occupy Snow White's mindset, *Snow White's* eye-montage draws on both the notion of the consuming (male) gaze and the uncanny that Webber reads in the Expressionist imagery of *Metropolis* but employs them to contrasting effect (see Figure 1.1). Whereas Lang's eye-montage, standing alone, reinforces the control robot-Maria exerts over the lusting men, Disney's eye-montage visually overwhelms Snow White, reinforcing her victimhood. Snow White is innocent, rather than a '*femme fatale*, whore, and rabble-rouser' like robot-Maria.²⁷ The forest's multiplying eyes in this sequence are therefore used to reflect Snow White's all-consuming fear, as opposed to the all-consuming desire she inspires from this now animated landscape. Where the 'consumptive' gazes that fall upon Lang's robot-Maria and Hoffman's bachelor-machine Olimpia emanate from men's carnal desires, the gaze that befalls Snow White appears predatory because the eyes are animated in a style suggestive of the 'wild beasts' within the Grimms' forest. Lang's eye-montage operates as part of *Metropolis's* Marxist critique, yet Disney's eye-montage collapses the boundary between reality and subjectivity, reflecting a tangible visualization of Snow White's horror unto the audience.

By using Expressionist techniques to transmute the forest into a monstrous manifestation of Snow White's inescapable fear, the animators are not only able to initiate the audience into Snow White's feelings of disorientating terror but also able to highlight the distinction between the heroine's subjective experience and 'reality'. As Walt Disney set out in a story meeting dated 27 June 1936,

It would be good for her to be caught in the bushes showing these grotesque hands, then the wind and all the things that frighten her. Have it lead to things that make her think things are alive, but at the same time the audience should have a feeling that it's all in her mind ... her imagination goes wild.²⁸

The transition from 'subjectivity' to 'reality' is signalled as Snow White collapses onto the floor and the background turns to black. The following frame reinstates the 'reality' of Disney's animated world as Snow White,

weeping on the floor, is now surrounded by several pairs of faceless eyes that, unlike those from her imagination, are not nightmarish but cartoony. As the shot pans outwards, warmth is slowly injected into the previously cold and dark colour palette, presenting this shift from interiority to 'reality' as a move away from terror and towards comfort. This is reinforced as the subsequent scenes give faces to the floating eyes: first, three shocked-looking rabbits and two chipmunks step forward into the scene's newfound light; they are followed by more chipmunks, some squirrels and deer. Where Snow White had imagined the predatory gaze of the Grimms' fairy-tale forest, Disney unveils the 'reality' of tame, jovial creatures that inhabit the forest of its own making. Snow White is soon surrounded by a flurry of the gentlest of forest inhabitants, who, learning that she is not a threat, move to comfort her. *Snow White* thus presents the uncanny through the juxtaposition of Expressionism and the familiar hyperreal 'Disneyfication' of nature. To a contemporary audience, however, the uncanny significance of the distinction between 'Expressionism' and 'Disneyfication' was much more profound.

The uncanny is derived from the German *unheimlich*: an inversion of the *heimlich*, which, in the original high German usage, means 'belonging to the house'. When understood in these terms, Disney's eye-montage is also imbued with a self-reflective sense of the uncanny. Prior to *Snow White*'s release, Disney was known primarily for its Mickey Mouse and *Silly Symphony* shorts, which – building upon the carnivalesque 'Cartoonland' in Walt Disney's earlier *Alice Comedies* short series (1923–7) – were largely characterized by anthropomorphized animals and plants that were rendered with a metamorphic, 'plasmatic' freedom of style and form. The conjunction between Disney's anthropomorphized plants and animals and their metamorphic qualities was, in many senses, not simply stylistic but a defining feature around which much of these short subjects were based. This is especially apparent in those *Silly Symphonies* based upon the springtime season. The plot structures of shorts *Springtime* (Ub Iwerks, 1929), *Flowers and Trees* (Burt Gillett, 1932) and *The Goddess of Spring* (Wilfred Jackson, 1934), for example, all used nature to mirror the cyclical state of the seasons. Harmonious nature, first abounding with images of animals, flowers and trees dancing to life in a jovial spirit, is then set upon and disrupted by disagreeable spirits – such as the arsonist snake-tongued tree, or the devilish Hades who kidnaps the goddess Persephone to be his underworld queen – that are, in turn, overthrown as the conclusion sees nature restored to its idyllic springtime state.

Within *Snow White*, however, nature and its inhabitants are largely presented in a 'hyperrealistic' or – to borrow from Paul Wells – 'neo-realistic' style.²⁹ While Wells uses 'neo-realism' to highlight the studio's 'constant drive' away from the inherently abstract potential of animation 'towards ever greater notions of realism', André Bazin's historical conception of cinematic 'neorealism' as style that embraces and portrays

'truth,' 'authenticity' and 'naturalness' is also a useful way to understand the set-up of this sequence. Although *Snow White* is, of course, a work of the imagination, and the animated form is inherently linked to the subjective, Disney presents its 'realistic' rendering of the natural world as a sort of 'truth'. While the metamorphoses of Disney's springtime *Silly Symphonies* offered an avant-garde reflection of the changing seasons, the transformation of *Snow White*'s forest reflects the 'unreality' of the heroine's compromised state of mind. Disney had previously employed the metamorphic potential of animation in conjunction with caricatured anthropomorphism. However, in *Snow White*'s forest flight they draw a stark distinction between the two. As the forest's transformation is rendered through Expressionist techniques, the metamorphic potential of animation is made dependent on the heroine's fearful mindset. 'Neorealism', meanwhile, becomes the *modus operandi* through which nature's 'true' form is rendered. As Eisner writes, 'Expressionism sets itself against Naturalism ... and its paltry aim of photographic nature.'³⁰ By offering animated form to the aesthetic tensions between 'Expressionism' and 'Naturalism', *Snow White*'s forest flight thus defines neorealism against the 'unreality' of Expressionism. The iconic sequence thus comes to stand as a sort of aesthetic watershed in which Disney's 'house' style of animation becomes the neo-realistic presentation of 'tame', 'joyful', anthropomorphized animals, while the plasmatic potential of animation, thus defined against neorealism, is made an expression of the uncanny.

As *Snow White* at last recognizes the 'true', non-threatening nature of the animals, she confides in them: 'You don't know what I've been through, and all because I was afraid. I'm so ashamed of the fuss I've made.' On this cue, the audience is invited to share in *Snow White*'s sense of relief. Through the Expressionist presentation of *Snow White*'s fear to first pervert the presentation of nature, Disney is able to offer its vision of cutely anthropomorphized animals as 'a drop of comfort, an instant of relief'.³¹ By depicting *Snow White* as a reactive heroine to whom the audience's reaction can run parallel, Disney effectively prompts spectators to embrace its neorealism as a site of welcomed familiarity. Disney, through using the distinctive style of Expressionism, is thus able to mark the transition to neorealism as a shift from interiority to reality, from uncanny unreality to benign familiarity.

Snow White: A Symphony of Horror

The idea of 'nature' is evidently central to both the Grimm Brothers' tale and Disney's adaptation. Within Grimms' 'Little Snow White', *Snow White*'s nature is linked to the queen because she likewise exhibits a destructive preoccupation with vanity. Following the folkloric rule of three, the Grimms'

Snow White suffers two additional near-death experiences. Disguising herself 'by staining her face and dressing up as an old woman', the queen first entices Snow White to try on corset staylances tightened to the point of suffocation, then brushes a poisoned comb through her hair, before finally returning with an apple that has two sides: one red and poisoned, consumed by Snow White, the other white and un-poisoned, consumed by the queen. Exploring the symbolic significance of the shared apple, Joyce Thomas argues that Snow White and the Queen are linked in nature; the 'crucial similarities' of 'their sex, mutually dependent roles as protagonist and antagonist, beauty, vanity and association with the glass object' revealing the queen 'to be the dark shadow of Snow-White'.³² In keeping with Carl Jung's archetypal shadow-self as the incarnation of negative personality traits from which the ego disassociates itself, the Grimms' queen stands as 'the incarnation and nightmarish exaggeration' of Snow White's own 'flaw' of vanity.³³ However, as Disney removes the queen's first two attempts to kill Snow White and justifies her consumption of the apple not by its beauty but by her belief that it is a 'magic wishing apple', the heroine's childish displays of vanity are expunged and 'the darkness of the Wicked Queen [is respectively] intensified and enlarged'.³⁴ Where the Grimms' Snow White is linked to the queen through her vain nature, Disney's Snow White is separated from the Evil Queen through her idyllic engagement with Disney's 'benign world of nature'.³⁵

Snow White's own personal engagement with nature is evocative of the 'pastoral mode' within art and literature.³⁶ Although nature appears as a malevolent force throughout her forest flight, Snow White is subsequently reinvigorated through the help of her newly acquired animal helpers. As she sings and completes domestic chores alongside the animals, Snow White's purity is foregrounded, and she, like the nature that surrounds her, exists in a romanticized and idealized mode of being. The Queen, in stark contrast, is kept largely within the confines of her Gothic castle, transfixed by her vanity. Through rejecting nature, the Queen is made an 'unnatural' being. Snow White is sympathetically aligned to Disney's 'benign world of nature', but the Queen is contrastingly presented through Expressionist visuals that foreground the perverting influence of her monstrous narcissism and wicked power.

The Queen's extreme subjectivity is reflected in the architecture of her palace. This is made especially apparent in the film when a largely comical scene in which Snow White forces the dwarfs to clean themselves immediately transitions to a haunting shot of the palace's exterior, which visually recalls Dracula's Transylvanian residence within Tod Browning's 1931 film adaptation of Bram Stoker's 1897 novel. Through a series of overlaps, an image of the castle's window is overlaid upon an extreme close-up of the decorative box that holds what the Queen believes to be Snow White's heart. As the Queen learns from the mirror that Snow White

is still alive, she immediately rushes down a grand and winding staircase. An architectural motif common in works of German Expressionist cinema, the staircase signifies a descent into the darkness that lurks in the 'landscape of the mind'.³⁷ The forbidding nature of its contents is highlighted as the perspective foregrounds the rats and cobwebs that dwell there. The Queen even goes momentarily out of shot, as the scene tracks the rats descending the stairway's hidden chains.

While *Snow White* has been critiqued for 'sanitizing' the Grimm source text, the presence of the rats not only initiates fright into the scene but also signifies the Queen's cannibalistic tendencies through aligning her with nature's 'meaner' creatures: an attribute that Stoker's Van Helsing describes as common among vampires. In particular, Disney's focus on the rats seems to visually echo an episode in F. W. Murnau's landmark German Expressionist film, *Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror* (1922), in which both the boat's crew and the audience are made aware that the vampire Count Orlok has stowed away on a boat to Wismar by the rats that have grouped around his box-coffin. As Paul Coates suggests, the 'rats may be seen as [Orlok's] emissaries, [as they] are an aspect of the monstrous (unnatural) nature he seeks to shed so as to enter Western civilizations'.³⁸ However, with elongated teeth, ears and fingernails, Count Orlok has a grotesque rat-like appearance that showcases his monstrosity and obstructs him from effectively entering society. In foregrounding Orlok's unnatural existence, Murnau presented him utilizing an Expressionist aesthetic that jarringly juxtaposes the scenic shots of natural landscapes that make up the rest of the film.³⁹

Disney's *Snow White* offers a similar contrast between the 'natural' and the 'unnatural' by presenting Snow White among Disney's 'benign world of nature', while rendering the Queen through Expressionist techniques and allusions that foreground her exclusion from Disney's natural order. As in *Nosferatu*, the rats function as the Queen's emissaries as they also exist outside of Disney's 'benign world of nature'. With haunting yellow eyes, they are unlike the characteristically cute anthropomorphized animals that befriend Snow White. While the Queen's monstrosity is not reflected in her appearance, her beauty is – as the Grimms' text states – 'decidedly unnatural because no simple no simple equation [is made] between the physical and the spiritual'.⁴⁰ The presence of the rats, therefore, signifies that the Queen, like Orlok, is going to shed her 'unnatural' visage so that she might enter Disney's 'benign world of nature'.

By overthrowing her coldly beautiful appearance, the Queen's transformation brings to light her monstrous nature. The scene invokes the German philosopher F. W. J. Schelling's sense of *unheimlich* as 'the name for everything that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light'.⁴¹ Within the Grimms' text, the queen descends 'into a remote, hidden chamber in which no one ever set foot' to make the poisoned apple.⁴² By

Schelling's definition, the queen's chamber functions as a *heimlich* space, because it contains those things that 'good manners [have] oblige[d the Queen] to conceal'.⁴³ Yet, in visualizing the Queen's chamber, Disney's film necessarily amplifies the sense of *unheimlich* that is only hinted at by the Grimms, doing so by staging the chamber as a rather macabre laboratory. Adorned with a huge array of steaming flasks, skeleton imagery and a shelf of dark magic books, Disney's chamber visually recalls the laboratory setting of Dr. Henry Jekyll's iconic transformation scene in Rouben Mamoulian's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1931).

Although Mamoulian's *Jekyll* is a Hollywood production, both its cinematographer, Karl Struss, and its art director, Hans Dreier, were émigré German Expressionist filmmakers.⁴⁴ Primarily concerned with man's dualistic nature, Mamoulian's *Jekyll* employs an Expressionist aesthetic that sees 'portraits, mirror-images and shadows merged into one vision'.⁴⁵ As Mamoulian's film, in stark contrast to Robert Louis Stevenson's original novella, opens with an extended point-of-view shot from Jekyll's perspective, the first time we see him is through his mirror reflection. The first time we *truly* see Jekyll is when the camera switches to a spectator's vantage point as Jekyll delivers a public lecture in which he theorizes that 'man is not truly one, but truly two' and if the two were separated, the 'good' side would soar, while the 'evil' side 'would fulfil itself and trouble us no more'. Point-of-view shots and mirror reflections showcase Jekyll's interiority as he represses his baser instincts so that people perceive him as a charitable – even, saintly – man. Yet, as the creation of the Neanderthal-like Hyde means that Jekyll has an outlet for the 'base' behaviour he has previously repressed, Jekyll's first transformation scene offers the last instance in which both Jekyll's own point of view and reflection are shown. After he pens an apology to his love, Muriel, and walks over to a mirror, Jekyll's transformation is shot entirely from his point of view. An extreme close-up of the formula-filled glass is moved out-of-shot to unveil Jekyll's reflection (see Figure 1.2). As Jekyll walks towards the mirror, his reflection subsumes the screen and, from this perspective, we see him drink the formula, then stagger back from the mirror clasp his throat. Jekyll's disorientation is shown through a rapidly rotating camera as Expressionist superimpositions visualize a series of flashbacks in which Jekyll has fought his 'indecent' instincts.⁴⁶ As the point-of-view shot stabilizes, we hear heavy panting. When Jekyll returns to the mirror, it unveils Hyde's reflection, to which, Hyde, overcome with joy, proclaims: 'Free! Free at last!'

Walt Disney often expressed that he wanted the Queen's transformation in *Snow White* to be like 'a Jekyll and Hyde'.⁴⁷ Indeed, the sequence bears such striking similarity to that of Mamoulian's *Jekyll* that it is through exploring Disney's implementation of subtle deviations we can come to better understand the presentation of the Queen's villainy. In Disney's transformation scene, the Queen's reflection is shown directly in the

FIGURE 1.2 A comparison of reflections in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (Rouben Mamoulian, 1931) and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (David Hand, 1937).

chalice containing her bubbling potion, as opposed to through a mirror (see Figure 1.2). The shot then zooms in, becoming fixed as the Queen's chalice-reflection subsumes the screen and she commands that the potion 'now begin thy magic spell'. This is the last time that we see the Queen's reflection, and its existence as a subtle deviation from Mamoulian's scene suggests that the Queen's transformed state both reflects her evil spirit and makes her feel less self-conscious. After drinking her potion, the Queen clasps at her throat. Her chalice smashes to the floor and the room begins to rotate, transforming into a swirling background that visually echoes the consumed potion. The Queen's choking visage is superimposed onto this scene, demonstrating how each frightful ingredient takes its effect. Unlike Mamoulian's *Jekyll*, the Disney animators do not utilize superimpositions to show the Queen's flashbacks, only close-up shots of her transforming hands and hair.⁴⁸ As Eisner explains, a recurrent plot device among German Expressionist films 'denies a personal life to all of the characters with whom the hero is in conflict'.⁴⁹ The Disney animators, in placing complete focus on the Queen's physical transformation, allow her only to exist insofar as she is consumed and motivated by hatred for Snow White. Thus, unlike *Jekyll*, the Queen does not have a 'good', or 'rational', half. Although her transformation scene bears striking similarity to that of Mamoulian's *Jekyll*, it is this departure that renders Disney's Queen a complete villain: only her appearance has transformed, not her soul.

While *Jekyll* came to pervert nature through science, the Queen in *Snow White* uses black magic to unveil her existence as a monstrous being. Disney concludes the Queen's transformation by focusing on the mutating shadow she casts upon the wall. As the Queen, suddenly speaking in a much older and more strained voice, exclaims, 'My voice! My voice!' the shot tracks along her mutating shadow, building up suspense before unveiling her transformed visage. Disney's focus on the Queen's shadow offers another allusion to *Nosferatu*, as it visually recalls Murnau's iconic use of *chiaroscuro* lighting to create an elongated shadow that forewarns of Orlok's presence when he enters the home of the protagonist, Thomas Hutter, to feast on the blood of his wife, Ellen (who sacrifices herself to ensure Orlok's sun-stricken demise). Disney's use of shadow thus not only heightens the suspense of unveiling the Queen's grotesque disguise, it also suggestively aligns her to cinema's inaugural vampire, highlighting her existence as the supernatural source of horror throughout the film. This is underscored as, when the scene fades to black, the Queen's eyes are left momentarily suspended (Figure 1.3). Visually piercing the screen, the Queen's eyes recall émigré Expressionist cinematographer Karl Freund's iconic use of lighting in Browning's *Dracula*. Freund, who was also the cinematographer for *Metropolis*, shone two flashlights into Bela Lugosi's eyes to give the visual impression of Dracula's hypnotic gaze (Figure 1.3).⁵⁰ Although, as Elsaesser has pointed out, it has become increasingly difficult to simply attribute the

FIGURE 1.3 A comparison of eyes seen in *Dracula* (Todd Browning, 1931) and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (David Hand, 1937).

distinctive aesthetics of Hollywood horror and film noir to the influence of German Expressionism, we can recognize that Disney, through drawing upon Expressionist cinematographer Karl Freund's work in both Germany (*Metropolis*) and America (*Dracula*), creates a direct visual link between the Queen's looming eyes and Snow White's fearful visions. By exploring *Snow White* through the lens of Expressionist filmmaking, we can understand

that the eyes proliferated in Snow White's forest flight are suggestive of the Queen's supernatural influence over the young heroine's unconscious.

The perversion of nature within Snow White's forest flight is, therefore, reflective of not only the heroine's innate fear, but also the power that the Queen wields over her as the source of that fear. As Whitley explains,

even the branches seem to grasp at her [Snow White], their bony, finger-like structures reminiscent of the evil Queen's hands when she later transforms herself into the shape of an old hag. ... while she is in this [terrified] state Snow White's 'nature' is not just linked to the Queen's: it is subsumed by it.⁵¹

By understanding *Snow White*'s Expressionism through its links to the Queen's narcissism, Disney renders the Queen's existence as Snow White's 'dark shadow' in aesthetic terms. While the Grimms' queen showcased the 'evil side' of Snow White's personality, Disney draws upon the works of German Expressionism and its filmmakers to create a sense of *unheimlich* that renders Snow White a pure and familiar victim, and the Queen a complete and vampiric villain. After the Queen ultimately falls to her death, the Prince awakens Snow White with a kiss, and the pair, quite literally, ride off into the sunset. Disney's *Snow White* thus successfully showcases the morally dichotomous world that Mamoulian's Jekyll had envisioned, in which the good soar and evil extinguishes itself.

Conclusion: Walt Disney's world of light and shadow

While *Snow White*, as the 'prototype' from which all subsequent Disney animated features derived, is often taken as a milestone in its consolidation of the 'hyperrealist' principles of the 'Disney Style', their inaugural animated feature also initiated Expressionist techniques into the Disney's aesthetic repertoire. Disney film historian J. B. Kaufman states that *Snow White* (and, in particular, Snow White's forest flight) represents the studio's 'deepest foray into the world of expressionism'.⁵² More recently, Disney animator Andreas Deja wrote an online piece titled 'German Expressionism and Disney', in which he playfully admitted that 'Someone needs to write a book on this topic'.⁵³ The influence of German Expressionist cinema on Disney animation made in the wake of *Snow White*'s success has been well-recorded,⁵⁴ particularly in relation to *Fantasia* (James Algar et al., 1940). Indeed, by giving animated form to the emotions created by classical pieces of music, *Fantasia* offers the most apparent treatment of Expressionism within Disney's animated canon. Yet, it is by no means an

isolated example. Expressionism occupies a central role within Disney's animated language, providing the means through which Disney invests the often-archetypal characters of printed fairy tales with the 'Illusion of Life'. As Walt Disney himself set out, 'Story-wise, we sharpen the decisive triumph of good over evil ... in a romantic fashion, easily comprehended by children.'⁵⁵ Over eight decades since *Snow White*'s initial release, the Disney studio continues to give animated form to the time-old struggle between Good and Evil, 'familiar' and 'Other'. Given these relationships, Disney animators are consistently able to maximize the aesthetic and psychological dimensions of light and shadow, creating characters in which cross-generational audiences can invest their emotions. Through witnessing a character's hardships, we can rejoice in their triumphs. By witnessing evil, we are better equipped to embrace the good. More than simply providing a satisfying 'Happily Ever After', it is this ability to make the audience *feel* the emotions of animated figures that has made Disney such a powerful and culturally prevalent storyteller. In this way – to borrow from Walt Disney – Disney's 'moving pictures' have become 'more potent than volumes of familiar words in books'.⁵⁶

Notes

- 1 Walt Disney, 'Deeds Rather Than Words', in *Faith Is a Star*, ed. Richard Gammon (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1963), 8.
- 2 For an example of a critical exploration of *Snow White*'s 'expressionist' aesthetic, see Thomas A. Nelson, 'Darkness in the Disney Look', *Literature/Film Quarterly* 6, no. 2 (1978): 96.
- 3 David Whitley, 'Learning with Disney: Children's Animation and the Politics of Innocence', *Journal of Educational Media, Memory & Society* 5, no. 2 (2013): 75–6.
- 4 A. S. Byatt, 'Introduction', in *The Annotated Brothers Grimm* (The Bicentennial Edition), ed. and trans. Maria Tatar (London: W. W. Norton, 2014), xxviii.
- 5 Richard Schickel, *The Disney Version: The Life, Times, Art and Commerce of Walt Disney*. Revised and updated edition. (London: Pavilion Michael Joseph, 1986), 12.
- 6 Tracey Mollet, 'With a Smile and a Song ...': Walt Disney and the Birth of the American Fairy Tale', *Marvels and Tales* 27, no. 1 (2013): 23.
- 7 Thomas Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After: Germany's Historical Imaginary* (London: Routledge, 2000), 61.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 3.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 18–60.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 20; Simon J. Bronner, *Following Tradition: Folklore in the Discourse of American Culture* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1998), 187.

- 11 Quoted in Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 68.
- 12 Paul Wells, *Understanding Animation* (London: Routledge, 1998), 27 (emphasis original).
- 13 See Ian Roberts, *German Expressionist Cinema: The World of Light and Shadow* (London: Wallflower Press, 2008).
- 14 Wells, *Understanding Animation*, 3.
- 15 Quoted in Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston, *The Illusion of Life: Disney Animation* (California: Disney Editions, 1984), 473.
- 16 Jane Batkin, *Identity in Animation: A Journey into Self, Difference, Culture and the Body* (London: Routledge, 2017), 36. For further analyses of Snow White's character, see: Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas and Laura Sells (eds), *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995); Tison Pugh and Susan Aronstein (eds), *The Disney Middle Ages: A Fairy-Tale and Fantasy Past* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); and Amy M. Davis, *Good Girls and Wicked Witches: Women in Disney's Feature Animation* (Eastleigh: John Libbey, 2006).
- 17 C. R. King, C. R. Lugo-Lugo and M. K. Bloodsworth-Lugo, *Animating Difference: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Contemporary Films for Children* (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011), 95.
- 18 Kristin Thompson, *Eisenstein's Ivan the Terrible: A Neoformalist Analysis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 44.
- 19 Maria Tatar (ed. and trans.), *The Annotated Brothers Grimm* (London: W. W. Norton, 2014), 251.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Quoted in Robin R. Allan, *Walt Disney and Europe: European Influences on the Feature Films of Walt Disney* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 14.
- 22 Andrew Webber, 'Canning the Uncanny: The Construction of Visual Desire in *Metropolis*,' in Fritz Lang's '*Metropolis*': *Cinematic Visions of Technology and Fear*, ed. Michael Minden and Holger Bachmann (Suffolk: Camden House, 2000), 266.
- 23 Ernst Jentsch, quoted in Freud, *The Uncanny*, 135.
- 24 Johnston and Thomas, *The Illusion of Life*, 22.
- 25 Lotte H. Eisner, *The Haunted Screen: Expressionism in German Cinema and the Influence of Max Reinhardt* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1969), 12.
- 26 Barry Salt, 'From Caligari to Who?', *Sight and Sound* 48, no. 2 (1979): 120.
- 27 Elsaesser, *BFI Film Classics: Metropolis* (London: BFI, 2000), 52.
- 28 Quoted in Allan, *Walt Disney and Europe*, 201.
- 29 Wells, *Understanding Animation*, 23.
- 30 Eisner, *The Haunted Screen*, 10.

- 31 Sergei Eisenstein, *Eisenstein on Disney*, ed. Jay Leyda, trans. Alan Upchurch (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1986), 155.
- 32 Joyce Thomas, *Inside the Wolf's Belly: Aspects of the Fairy Tale* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), 73.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 Nelson, 'Darkness in the Disney Look', 96.
- 35 Douglas Brode, *From Walt to Woodstock: How Disney Created Counterculture* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 201.
- 36 David Whitley, *The Idea of Nature in Disney Animation: From Snow White to WALL-E* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2012), 19–38.
- 37 Michael Walker, *Hitchcock's Motifs* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014), 351.
- 38 Paul Coates, *The Gorgon's Gaze: German Cinema, Expressionism, and the Image of Horror* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 94.
- 39 Count Orlok has often been interpreted as a supernatural incarnation of Weimar anxieties. For more information, see: Robin Wood, 'Burying the Undead: The Use and Obsolescence of Count Dracula' (2015), William F. Burns, 'From the Shadows: Nosferatu and the German Expressionist Aesthetic' (2016).
- 40 Thomas, *Inside the Wolf's Belly*, 69.
- 41 F. W. Schelling quoted in Freud, *The Uncanny*, 132.
- 42 Tatar (ed. and trans), *The Annotated Brothers Grimm*, 257.
- 43 Schelling quoted in Freud, *The Uncanny*, 132.
- 44 Hans Dreier was a long-standing friend and colleague of the iconic German Expressionist director Ernst Lubitsch, while Karl Struss had previously worked alongside both F. W. Murnau and *Caligari* co-screenwriter Carl Mayer on the Academy Award-winning film *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans* (1927). F. W. Murnau and Carl Mayer had themselves made a German Expressionist Jekyll-and-Hyde film entitled *The Head of Janus* (1920), but it is now unfortunately lost.
- 45 Eisner, *The Haunted Screen*, 129.
- 46 The rapidly rotating camera in Rouben Mamoulian's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1931) is suggestive of F. W. Murnau's influence. Murnau, who believed that the camera is the filmmaker's pen, was known for his innovative and pioneering use of camera motion. (He famously tied a camera to a bike to achieve some footage used in *Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror* [1922]).
- 47 Quoted in J. B. Kaufman, *The Fairest One of All: The Making of Walt Disney's Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (California: Walt Disney Family Foundation Press, 2012), 173.
- 48 The shot of the Queen's transforming hands is itself a reminder of Mamoulian's film, in which Jekyll consistently looks at his hands to confirm that he is transforming into Hyde. See Richard Dury's 'The Hand of Hyde' (2003).

- 49 Eisner, *The Haunted Screen*, 209.
- 50 For information about Karl Freund's use of Expressionism in *Dracula*, see Elisabeth Bronfen, 'Speaking with Eyes: Tod Browning's *Dracula* and Its Phantom Camera', in *The Films of Todd Browning*, ed. Bernd Herzogenrath (London: Black Dog, 2006).
- 51 Whitley, *The Idea of Nature in Disney Animation*, 21.
- 52 Kaufman, *The Fairest One of All*, 15.
- 53 Andreas Deja, 'German Expressionism and Disney', *Deja View* (12 May 2015), available at <http://andreasdeja.blogspot.com/2016/05/german-expressionism-and-disney.html>.
- 54 For a particularly in-depth reading of *Fantasia* and its use of Expressionist techniques, see Allan, *Walt Disney and Europe*, 91–174.
- 55 Quoted in Charles Solomon, *The Disney That Never Was: The Stories and Art from Five Decades of Unproduced Animation* (New York: Hyperion, 1995), 61.
- 56 Ibid.