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Unearthing *Blanche-Neige*: The making of the first made-in-Hollywood French version of *Snow White* and its critical reception

Greg Philip and Sébastien Roffat

The first French version of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* has never been the object of a full analysis.¹ This chapter is an attempt to present new information regarding the first French dubbing made in Hollywood, alongside its production and its reception when first shown in Paris on 6 May 1938. As long-time enthusiasts of the film, our alternate goal was to be able to find, screen and preserve that lost version. This raised several questions: What are the technical and artistic merits of this specific version? What was the creative process? How was it critically received? And why was this version replaced in subsequent releases?

The making of the first French version

In the silent era, movies were usually shot with two cameras. One negative was used for domestic release and the other one for foreign adaptations. Alternate takes were also used for that second version, which was similar

but not identical to the first, and that was used as a basis for all foreign versions. Intertitles were translated in the appropriate language, reshot and inserted in the movie: that was enough to achieve a foreign (say French) or international version.²

When talkies arrived, the basic principle was retained: although musicals flourished because they required few adaptations for foreign release, the need to have spoken dialogue adapted in the native language of the country of release demanded a solution. Subtitles as we know them today were archaic and inadequate. In any case, in France, the demand for French talking pictures was growing, as well as the rejection of the English language. Studios reacted by shooting their movies in multiple versions. In Germany, England and Hollywood, several films were produced using the same sets, same costumes, same script, sometimes the same crew but with a different cast, each speaking a different language. One rather famous example of that is Tod Browning's *Dracula* (1931), whose English-speaking crew was working during the day, while the Spanish crew took over at night. The result was two productions of the same script, with the Spanish version costing far less (\$66.000) than the American one (\$355.000).³

This system of multiple language versions (or MLVs) was phased out by 1934 due to the development of a technique that started as early as 1931 with better and better results as time went by: *dubbing*.⁴ With sound recording having more and more fidelity with the RCA 'noiseless' system, there was no more concern about surface noise when mixing various tracks together. In order to improve these versions, studios eventually prepared an international soundtrack with only music and effects ready to be mixed with new dialogue to complete the illusion that the on-screen actor actually spoke a foreign language.

Critics and audiences initially disliked dubbing in France as it was considered cheating, since the real voice of the American actor was not heard anymore and because of the bad quality of the first attempts.⁵ However, dubbing was eventually preferred because multiple versions were much more expensive, and because they prevented the audience from seeing the Hollywood stars that could only speak English. Of course, by the time *Snow White* was released, dubbing had become an industry standard. However, Disney wanted things done fast yet still keep complete control over that alternate version.

The early Disney sound shorts did not need adaptation for foreign countries as the soundtrack comprised of merely music and sound effects, but with dialogue and songs came the need for adaptation. That is where expatriates who had come to Hollywood to shoot movies in French came in useful: the studio could hire some of them to record a French version in Hollywood, without the added expense of recording abroad or importing actors. Disney planned to use this system with their first feature. Even though France had passed a law that compelled filmmakers to dub their

movies in France, a special permit was delivered for *Snow White* because it was a cartoon and therefore that French version was not really considered dubbing.⁶

Two foreign versions were hastily prepared: Spanish and French. Paul Stuart Buchanan was made head of foreign adaptations. After those two essential versions were made, Buchanan then travelled to Paris and from there prepared all other foreign recordings which were then shipped back to the United States to be mixed to the international soundtrack.⁷ But the first two versions were recorded right there in California, so he had to pick a translator and artistic director – a job requiring a perfect knowledge of the French language, so surprisingly he chose a Chilean: Marcelo Ventura.

Born in 1901, Ventura was fluent in Spanish, English, French and Greek, so became a diplomat for the King of Spain, and in that capacity, he directed a documentary called *Barcelona Trailer* (1929) and travelled to the United States to show it as the Delegate of the 1929 International Exposition of Barcelona, a trip during which he met the director of Paramount Adolf Zukor.⁸ Ventura became Mae West's personal assistant and made cameo appearances in some of her movies. He changed his name to Marcel Ventura on 13 May 1938. His duty on these international versions of *Snow White* was to pick actors for various parts, ultimately casting himself as the Prince.⁹

The main criterion for the performers' selection was how close they sounded to the original US actors. Even when there was no dialogue such as in *Snow White's* forest scene, some of the human sound effects were mixed differently from one version to another. At the end of the forest scene, more screams were added in subsequent mixes for each version, so that Snow White screams twice in the original US version, three times in French and up to five times in Italian (that difference has been wiped from all new versions since they are mixed with the same international track which is identical to the original US version). Just like in the original Disney feature, no actors were credited in that version. It was Disney's will to maintain the illusion by not revealing who the actors behind the performance were. In the original programme, no actors are mentioned, only the characters.

François Justamand, on the website *la gazette du doublage*, published an article in 2009 revealing that the Disney archives in Burbank had kept a document about 'outside salaries' paid in September 1938 to a group of twenty-three artists to make a 'Snow White French version'. He gave a few of the names, but based on what he found in the press and interviews of French artists, he was unsure if this was actually a list of the cast of the first French version. More research was needed about these artists, and comparing their voices across as many movies as possible makes it possible to link each character with the corresponding actor. The actors that played the dwarfs have an impressive filmography, with mostly uncredited cameos in famous or not so famous movies. Louis Mercier is a very familiar face in any Hollywood production that features French-speaking characters,

such as Alfred Hitchcock's *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1956) where he plays the policeman in Marrakech, or *To Catch a Thief* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1955) (playing a Croupier), as well as *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942), *To Have and Have Not* (Howard Hawks, 1944) and *The Razor's Edge* (Edmund Goulding, 1946), to name a few. Likewise, Eugene Borden – who had featured in *The Mark of Zorro* (Rouben Mamoulian, 1940), *Gilda* (Charles Vidor, 1946) and *All About Eve* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1950) – had a very distinctive nosy voice that perfectly fit the part of Doc.

All of these voices were rather close to their American counterparts. However, even so, some creative choices were still possible: the actor who played Happy was Charles de Ravenne, who came from a family of actors that originated in Nice in the south of France and had a very strong southern accent that, to any listener with a good knowledge of France, might evoke associations of sunny skies. As in other dubbings, one actor at least did double duty. Veteran actor André Cheron played both Grumpy and the Hunter, while the Queen and the hag here are also both played by the same actress. Two artists were also needed for Snow White: Christiane Tourneur, wife of director Jacques Tourneur, for the speaking part. However, she could not sing and a professional singer had to take care of the songs. Ventura had to find a lyric soprano who spoke French and whose voice matched Adriana Caselotti's in California. It is not surprising that he eventually chose an American girl. It was probably decided that a slight American accent, especially in the singing, would not be a problem. Actually, problematic accents seem to plague every early version of *Snow White*: the speaking voice in the Spanish version has a very heavy US accent, while most members of the German cast were actually Austrian. In the French version, Snow White thus sings with the voice of Beatrice Hagen who was voted in 1936 'first Hollywood radio baby star', not exactly your average Paris girl. During her short time at the studio in early 1938, she also recorded the brief singing part of the farmer in the Disney Silly Symphony titled *Farmyard Symphony* (Jack Cutting, 1938).

Technical and artistic merits of the first French version

Translation

As far as quality is concerned, the translation is rather good, although some phrases are not grammatically correct. For instance, when Snow White goes to sleep, she inquires if the dwarfs will be comfortable downstairs. In that French version, she utters 'êtes-vous sûrs que vous serez confortables?'.

Unfortunately, the word ‘confortable’ in French can only be applied to something, not someone. A couch can be ‘confortable’, not a person. This kind of mistake, ironically enough, must have sounded unacceptable when first released but sounds almost modern today given the influence of English upon the French language. In fact, even in laudatory reviews of this version, critics often regret the bizarre accents of some of the characters and the few mistakes in the translation, even in the programme of the premiere!¹⁰

A critic published on 12 May 1938 in *Candide* notes that ‘The dialogue – especially in the French version – is bad and hurts the film. The image is light, detached from contingencies, but these precise words spoken with pronounced and fake dictions, with slang accents and mistakes, bring us back to reality.’¹¹ Likewise, the opening line in the book translates ‘Once upon a time’ as ‘Il y avait une fois’ unlike the more common and modern ‘Il était une fois’ which has been digitally replaced in 1992 and used until the 2001 DVD release, after which the English version was subtitled and used instead. However, the translation of songs was so successful in that version that it was kept with very minimal changes throughout all subsequent versions.

Technical quality

Although most of the film’s soundtrack is quite successful for a 1938 recording, for some reason, only the quality of the recording of the singing voice of the main character leaves a lot to be desired, as Buchanan and Roy Disney privately regretted.¹² The sound is so unsuccessful that it is hard to understand the lyrics, which is not helped by Beatrice Hagen’s accent. Indeed, several records were cut directly from the American and Spanish soundtracks but none from the French version. Only re-recordings of the French songs were issued by many different singers and bands, the original soundtrack was only heard in theatres.¹³ However, one thing that is common to all foreign versions of *Snow White* made in 1938 is that only the wordless choirs are used. Choirs with actual translated lyrics were only recorded from the 1960s. Other than that, the Technicolor copies of the time are of the same quality as the US prints.

Visual adaptation

Great care was taken to give the impression that the film had been made almost especially for the French, so instead of adapting only the soundtrack, every visual element that contained writing on-screen was also changed. That obviously included the main and end titles. These were simply translated and shot over the same backgrounds and, like the original Disney film, emphasized the fact that this was a feature-length animation.

FIGURE 11.1 On the left, the US version, on the right the French version.

A tougher job was to reshoot animated segments with translated backgrounds. They either had to erase them, such as the flour bowl when Snow White is baking or the Vault sign at the dwarfs' mine, or translate them (such as the many books belonging to the Queen). The camera department occasionally made it easier for themselves by removing some of the cel layers when they were not absolutely necessary: so in the bedroom sequence, when Snow White reads the names of the dwarfs off of their beds, there are fewer animals running around (Figure 11.1). An even tougher job involved working with the visible animated writing. When Snow White bakes a pie for the dwarfs, the birds grab a piece of pastry and write the name Grumpy on the top. For the French version, the animators had to reanimate the whole sequence. This is the only instance where they undertook this task: for all other versions, the birds merely make a whirl with the paste (Figure 11.2).

With later translations, some of the dialogues differed from what is seen onscreen. When the Queen reads 'mummy dust', the translation on the book and in her dialogue is 'magic powder', probably with the aim of not scaring children. But the new translation from 1962 onwards remains 'mummy dust', yet since the book had not changed, the Queen appeared to read the line wrong. In 1958, *Snow White* was reissued in the United States for the first time without the RKO distribution deal, meaning that every mention of RKO had to be erased from the credits. New main and end titles were shot for the film with a new background, and it is that background that was also used to make new versions of the foreign titles. The credits were smaller so that the top and bottom of the film could be matted (as was the industry standard then), and the credits could still be read. One important change took place: the new cast was listed. In 1992, some of these French inserts were altered to modernize the film. Finally, when the Blu-ray was released, they were completely removed and any copy of *Snow White* shown in France today is the American version with a voiceover for the book opening. Little by little, what was left of this first French version has been completely

FIGURE 11.2 US version (left), French version (right) and international version (centre).

erased. However, given the fragile nature of nitrate film, its preservation is essential as this is how the contemporary French audience saw the film.

Disney's aesthetic triumph: *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*

The American press was unanimous in its praise for a film that had been hailed as 'Disney's Folly'.¹⁴ Walt Disney appeared on the cover of *Time*, and *Snow White* was screened five weeks in a row at Radio City Music Hall in New York. For the first time in American film history, a movie earned more money in the second week than in its previous one. In the first three weeks, Radio City Music Hall sold 521,000 tickets.¹⁵ It was estimated that in three months, 20 million spectators saw the film. One of the first reviews to appear in France was that of John W. Garner, who had seen the film in the United States in January. His review could not have been more enthusiastic: 'He is a spectator still under the impression of the adorable fairytale conceived by this magician whose imagination has never been more fertile in poetic discoveries. ... We can predict for Snow White a posterity

equal to the one of her young brother Mickey.¹⁶ On 30 April 1938, Raoul d'Ast in the newspaper *Liberté* wrote that 'In New York, the film was so successful that the tickets worth a dollar ten at the ticket office were sold [on the black market] for up to five dollars at the doors of Radio City Music Hall. It is to be expected that all Paris will want to see this extraordinary achievement, which will be a milestone in the history of cinema.'¹⁷

It was the Pathé-Cinéma company that ensured the exclusivity of Disney's *Snow White* for a duration of six months and who would also project it on the screens of its circuit of Paris and the rest of France. The French release was set for 6 May 1938 in the Marignan cinema Paris on the Champs-Élysées (the film was due out in mid-April, but the French dubbing was not finished in time). The release in France of *Blanche Neige* was also a first: whereas the habit in France was to show two feature films together, the American producer demanded that this animated feature-length film be shown with just a short documentary. The reason given by the producer was that '*Snow White* does not need any supplements. The film is self-sufficient. Any other film shown at the same time would only diminish its value.'¹⁸ This comment revealed the confidence that the Americans had in the success of this film. The programme proposed in Marignan was thus: 'Pathé-Journal, world news; *A story of penguins*, documentary about the life of penguins; Walt Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*'.¹⁹ RKO France also published a very detailed advertising notice intended exclusively for cinema operators.²⁰ The title is explicit: 'An exceptional film requires exceptional publicity. For this movie you MUST do a MAXIMUM of advertising to get the MAXIMUM turnover.' It also explained that

You can never give too much attention to the aesthetics and advertising appeal of your façade. Always ensure it is very well lit, well maintained and well cared for. The advertising elements that make up it must be well disposed and their artistic layout must attract the eye of the passer-by. Some of the advertising suggestions included Singing Competition for Children, Snow White Cake, Hiring a dwarf dressed as Dopey in front of the theater.

Snow White attracted the attention of the French press from 30 April 1938, exactly a week before its release on 6 May. Rarely would a film enjoy so much enthusiasm and unanimity on the part of French press reviews. A month after its release in Paris, there were already 100,000 spectators for the Marignan alone.²¹ The film was screened for thirty-one weeks in Paris (four months in Marignan, then in Imperial and until December). Success followed in Lyon and throughout France. Indeed, the film was a global success. According to estimates for foreign countries and the United States, *Snow White*'s revenues amounted to \$8 million in 1938, making it the greatest success at that time. The first release of the film in the United States earned \$4.2 million; in Great

Britain the figure was \$2 million; France contributed half a million dollars; the rest of the world for a million and a half.

France was therefore the third country in the world in which *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* had the most success. We can estimate the number of the French audience at around 3.5 million. *Snow White* achieved seven times more revenue and attracted eight times more viewers than was average. The top ten films in 1938 in France according to the magazine *La Cinématographie française* were:

- 1) *Snow White and the seven dwarfs*, Disney studios
- 2) *Le Quai des brumes* [*Port of Shadows*], Marcel Carné
- 3) *Katia*, Maurice Tourneur
- 4) *La femme du boulanger* [*The Baker's Wife*], Marcel Pagnol
- 5) *Alerte en Méditerranée* [*Alert in the Mediterranean*], Léo Joannon
- 6) *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, Michael Curtiz and William Keighley
- 7) *Barnabé*, Alexandre Esway
- 8) *La Maison du Maltais* [*Sirocco*], Pierre Chenal
- 9) *Les Trois Valses* [*Three Waltzes*], Ludwig Berger
- 10) *Prison sans barreaux*, Léonide Moguy²²

For the first time since 1936, two American films were ranked in the top ten productions of the year. *Snow White* won the first place that had gone to *La Grande Illusion* (Jean Renoir, 1937) the year before. It is the first time in history that an American movie ranked the first place in France (in the same magazine, French actor Jean Gabin was elected the most popular star in French cinema). A rare occurrence, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* was even shown in French in New York at the Waldorf Theater from April 1939. Walt Disney himself made a short appearance.²³ *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* was certainly an extraordinary success with both the public and the critics. However, this did not stop an interesting debate starting in the French press: by wanting to reach photographic realism in his first feature-length film, did Walt Disney contribute to the destruction of the very essence of the cartoon?

Photographic realism: Killing or reinventing cartoons?

From the outset, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* was described as a masterpiece by the French press. Yet a debate was emerging: some press reviews considered that by copying the model of film in real shots, Disney

was moving away from their prior 'plasmaticness' as defined by Sergei Eisenstein.²⁴ Animated cartoons had been hailed by French critics exactly because they seemed to be the first cinematographic genre to clearly move away from filmed theatre. Was it a new beginning or the beginning of the end for animated movies? That was the question which in part agitated the small world of the French film press in 1938.

Unlike filmed theatre, the cartoon exploits to the full the new possibilities of its technique. This 'masterpiece' (the term itself comes back more than thirty times in the corpus of reviews) was generated by a drawing factory. This was also what French critics admired. What was also surprising for many observers was the mastered technique of drawing human beings attained by the cartoon industry in only a few years. In just a decade, Disney passed from embryonic drawings of Mickey in the first cartoons to a perfect animation of animals and men. In 1935, Walt Disney himself explained: 'I definitely feel that we cannot do the fantastic things, based on the real, unless we first know the real.'²⁵ As Paul Wells remarks,

[Disney] wanted animated figures to move like real figures and be informed by a plausible motivation. As Disney's studio grew and embarked on ever more ambitious projects, most notably the creation of a full-length animated feature, Disney's animators undertook programmes of training in the skills and techniques of fine arts in the constant drive towards ever greater notions of realism. Animals had to move like real animals.²⁶

The level of reality was further enhanced by the development of the multi-plane camera, which enabled the creation of the illusion of perspective. This camera costs \$75,000 in a total budget of \$1.5 million, more than four times the average budget of a feature film in 1937 (more than six times over the original estimate).

As Disney advanced towards the development of what had been called an aesthetic of the 'illusion of life' – that the public accepts, recognizes and even finds comfortable – critical opinion had begun to change. While *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* was unanimously hailed in the United States as an important date both for the feature film and for its realistic effects, in 1941 the American critical climate had clearly changed. Even Siegfried Kracauer, a fervent theorist of cinematic realism, criticized the Disney animated features because they began to 'imitate the technique of the realistic films', emphasizing three-dimensional space, camera movement and characterization. In a declaration that suggests his preference for early animation's avant-garde, Kracauer argues that the cartoon should work differently from live-action film, that it should emphasize 'the dissolution rather than the reinforcement of conventional reality' since 'its function is not to draw a reality which can better be photographed'.²⁷ There is a kind of consensus among the Anglophone scholars from 1941 that offer the first

real reproach about Disney's 'photographic realism', such as the particular critique of Kracauer for *Dumbo* (Ben Sharpsteen, 1941). Esther Leslie even goes as far as to devote a whole chapter to this.²⁸ However, several French critics had already echoed such an opinion as early as the release of *Snow White* in 1938.

These criticisms of *Snow White* were rather marginal, but nevertheless present enough evidence that reflect the ambiguity with which the film was received. One reviewer noted that 'It's legitimate to ask ourselves if we do not witness the death of the cartoon [because] this cartoon is constructed like a "real film."²⁹ Pierre Brisson from *Le Figaro* similarly argued 'As soon as the cartoon seeks to supplant photography, it goes astray and loses its meaning.'³⁰ François Vinneuil in *L'Action française* gave an interesting analysis in the same vein, noting, 'With the queen, we see the cartoon looking for models in the photographic cinema, ... in the manner of Greta Garbo.'³¹ Louis Chéronnet in *Beaux-Arts* also agreed that 'Every servile imitation of movement is as false as the search for photographic truth in a painting ... In *Snow White*, the evil queen and the young Prince Charming, "credible characters," seem unfeasible and in fact become unacceptable'.³² Fauteuil 22 writing in *La Croix* also admitted that 'the characters of Snow White and Prince Charming did not quite satisfy me. They lack stylization, they are too much like reality.'³³ Another critic in *Notre Temps* said he was 'afraid, very afraid' because 'For a few minutes into Walt Disney's film, I thought he was abandoning stylization to faithfully recompose the photographic reality. ... May filmmakers open their films even more to fantasy and poetry, make our dreams possible, never copy the truth, but reinvent it!'³⁴ Even the famous French author, journalist and historian Robert Brasillach argued that 'We regret a little the charming madness of olden days which has disappeared from the screens.'³⁵

Among these reviews focused on *Snow White*'s realist style, Marcel Arland from *La Nouvelle Revue Française* (NRF) delivered (much later, more than five months after its release) one of the most violent reviews of *Snow White*. While the previous comments are incorporated into more positive remarks, for Arland 'Everything in this film, or almost everything, is savourless, boring and silly. ... *Snow White* is a failure.'³⁶ One senses in Arland's argument all the weight of Walter Benjamin who wrote in 1935 *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* several criticisms of Disney and Mickey. Arland condemned the film as a 'meticulous copy of life', noting that 'In its appetite to embrace everything, to replace everything, the cinema destroys itself. Look, we are told, the gestures, words and colors, our films are the meticulous copy of life.' Arland's virulent criticism was absolutely unique in the corpus of the 234 press articles studied on Disney's *Snow White*. Bearing the weight of the Frankfurt School, he was the very archetype of the conflictual relationship that Disney maintained with the intellectuals, especially after the Second World War.

In March 1939, Etienne Fuzellier in *Les Cahiers du Sud* also used harsh terms to describe the film through its 'insidious blandness', 'sneaky tartuferie', 'marshmallow style', 'enormous flaws in taste' and painful and annoying impressions'.³⁷ The weekly Paris-based French news magazine *Marianne* noted 'the film is long, colour often turns into chromolithography'.³⁸ *Le Figaro* concurred: 'The landscapes resemble chromolithographs. Colours often remain vulgar,' while Jean Fayard in *Candide* also shared this point of view by arguing 'Snow White. This little doll-headed lady is as bland as real movie stars'.³⁹ These critiques echoed that of filmmaker Jean Cocteau at the first showing of the film. He was present at the gala organized for the release of *Blanche Neige* on 26 April 1938 and found the film 'awful'.⁴⁰

Walt Disney himself had always been suspicious regarding the studies undertaken on his films. In 1937, he noted that 'We just try to make a good picture. And then the professors come along and tell us what we do.'⁴¹ After *Snow White*, if the general press and the audience were enthusiastic, this was hardly the case of the academics or the great French museums. In the 1930s or 1940s, no book about Disney was published in France, and no French publisher translated Harvard Professor Robert D. Feild's book *The Art of Walt Disney* or *Art from the Mayas to Disney*, written by artist Jean Charlot in 1939, a collection of essays in which he saw Disney as the heir of Cubism. Likewise, no French museum bought or exhibited works from Disney Studios, and no French academic study was interested in Disney.⁴² For the first time, in 1959 the Exhibition 'The Art of Animation' opened in a small room of the Parisian Department Stores Le Printemps. Only half of the works exhibited in the United States were in France because the vast halls of the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Rue de Rivoli, near the Louvre, refused to host the exhibition (whereas Belgium had welcomed it at the Musée des Beaux-Arts of Brussels). This was the only major event in France before the 1985-6 Centre Georges Pompidou exhibition and the Grand Palais exhibition in 2006-7. In spite of the public success of this French version, it was returned only three times (1938, 1944, 1951), after which a new version was created and the original disappeared, never to be seen or heard again.

Three versions, discovery of the first version

There are three French versions of *Snow White*. A studio can have many reasons to record a new soundtrack for a film: the improvement of its technical qualities, legal reasons, the addition of new or previously cut scenes, voice consistency of a character throughout various sequels or modernization of the vocabulary. In the case of *Snow White*, the subsequent versions were mainly motivated by the first two reasons. The first version

was recorded early in 1938, was released on 6 May 1938 at the Marignan Theater in Paris and then was reissued in 1944 and 1951. The film was re-recorded in 1962 because the quality of the original recording at the time was considered too old to meet the 1960s standards. Lucie Dolène was chosen for both the singing and speaking parts. That version was reissued in 1973, 1983 and 1992 in a restored version, and finally released on VHS in 1994.

In 1996, Lucie Dolène sued Disney for use of her voice in these tapes since she was not receiving any residuals (like Peggy Lee had done before her regarding the use of her voice in *Lady and the Tramp* [Clyde Geronimi, Wilfred Jackson and Hamilton Luske, 1955]). Dolène won the case but considered it a personal failure not only because the sum that she won was relatively disappointing, but more importantly because she was blacklisted from further Disney productions (a loss for fans who already heard her in *The Jungle Book* [Wolfgang Reitherman, 1967] as the little girl, and later *Beauty and the Beast* [Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise, 1991] as Mrs. Potts). In those films, her voice was meticulously replaced by other actors. In the case of *Snow White*, obviously, the whole feature had to be changed.

For that reason and in order to meet the standards of DVD (5.1 surround sound), yet another new version was recorded in 2001 with actress Valérie Siclay in the speaking part and Rachel Pignot in the singing role. It is this version that is now widely distributed on DVD, Blu-ray and in theatres. The previous version can still be found legally on VHS and Laserdisc. Only the first version has remained unavailable ever since its last release in 1951. This led to speculations over who the actors were. Even in articles of the time, one really needs to look hard to find actual information about the cast. When such information was included, it was often incorrect or incomplete. Various actresses and singers such as Lily Pons are rumoured to be the voice of Snow White, yet while unconfirmed some of these rumours persist to this day.

In an era of multitrack media, DVDs and Blu-rays, the inclusion of an old track would perhaps not take too much disc space. However, there is no apparent commercial reason to restore and release these old versions of *Snow White*. The public does not even suspect that they ever existed, and French film experts usually deny any artistic or historical value to any French version since they almost unanimously prefer original versions. However, overlooking the importance of dubbed versions is a serious mistake as these are the versions that most French viewers actually saw and heard and that, to this day, remain the most viewed versions in the country. The original versions (most often in English) remain a niche in France.

After repeated calls to private collectors through our own personal blogs, eventually, in February 2013, a private collector who actually owned a 16mm copy agreed to have it digitized. He played an extract of his copy over the phone so we could confirm this was what we were looking for: we

had never heard that version before. We were able to capture the sound of the film as he was playing it for us. We also filmed the screen in order to have a visual reference to synchronize the sound to a restored image, because the copy had numerous cuts and missing frames. We then set out to work with our modest digital means to restore the track, removed some of the hiss, bleeps and pops and synchronized it to the restored DVD image. A few years later, we discovered that a 35mm copy was kept in the vaults of the Archives françaises du film at Bois D'Arcy. We could not use it for the restoration, but were happy to see another copy with some scenes intact where they were in poor shape in 16mm. Finally, we found a collector who happened to own a very rare 35mm nitrate copy, possibly the only one in private hands, and was able to scan the titles and other shots from that. The end result is an HD file of that long-lost French version.

Re-recording a new version of a film to meet with new standards is a good opportunity to see it in a new light, discover new talents. Unfortunately, it is the current policy of the Disney studio to replace previous versions by the latest one. In very few cases do they see a commercial reason to release an 'old' version, though it can occur: the Italian Blu-ray of *Peter Pan* (Clyde Geronimi, Wilfred Jackson and Hamilton Luske, 1953) has a track for each of the two Italian versions, while the first French version of *The Little Mermaid* (Ron Clements and John Musker, 1989) has recently been re-released. Some collectors hold on to their old VHS tapes in order to keep 'their' version of a film, while it is not hard to find among social media pages certain requests for the release of a specific version. Unfortunately, in the case of *Snow White*, the two first versions are not commercially available anymore, and the first one has not even been seen since 1951! The contempt of film buffs and disinterest of general audience are reasons for the lack of demand, and there is little commercial interest for the studio to release that version.

Conclusion

Clearly, in 1938, *Snow White* marked a break concerning the reception of Walt Disney movies in France. Very soon there grew an irremediable gap between Walt Disney and France: on the one hand an undeniable popular success and very favourable reviews (before the Second World War at least) and on the other hand the absolute scorn from French intellectuals both for Disney and for its millions of spectators. From the moment when Walt Disney sought absolute realism as part of his visual style, he cut himself off from a part of the French intelligentsia. Even though for the French viewing public *Snow White* marked the beginning of a new era and a series of successful feature films such as *Pinocchio* (Ben Sharpsteen and Hamilton Luske, 1940), *Bambi* (David Hand, 1942) or *Dumbo* (that was released

after the war in France), the film marked an irreconcilable split between Disney and the intellectual movements, especially of the French left.

Walt Disney is undoubtedly the filmmaker who has suffered the most incredible reversal of opinion of the twentieth century at the hands of French critics, passing from the position of genius to that of impostor in a relatively short time: sometimes seen as ‘the old uncle Walt’, the greatest storyteller of the twentieth century, a genial, fascinating, popular beloved figure and a respected purveyor of innocent imagination, edifying fantasy and moral instruction. Yet among French circles, he is sometimes seen as Disney the artistic fraudster, an imperialist, a cynical manipulator of cheap commercial formulas, a mushy sentimentalist, vulgar and abject, an object of intellectual disdain, a manipulator of the industrial machine for mass culture with strongly conservative ideas.⁴³

Notes

- 1 The study of the film’s reception is based on the 234 press articles issued at the time of release in 1938. Even though several articles on the subject were published (with a few errors), most notably François Justamand’s 2001 article for DVD Vision, republished on his website La gazette du doublage called ‘*Blanche Neige et les sept nains: Ses trois doublages*’, <http://www.objectif-cinema.com/horschamps/040.php>, as well as ‘*Le mystère Blanche Neige*’, La gazette du doublage, November 2009 <http://www.objectif-cinema.com/spip.php?article5235>. In 2013, Rémi Carémel, ‘*Le premier doublage de Blanche-Neige enfin retrouvé!*’, <http://danslombredesstudios.blogspot.com/2013/03/le-premier-doublage-de-blanche-neige.html>. Also in 2013, Greg Philip, ‘*Snow White’s First French Version*’, <http://www.alostfilm.com/2013/03/snow-whites-first-french-version.html>. Rémi Carémel and Greg Philip, ‘Films d’animation Disney: à la recherche des doublages perdus et le cas *Blanche Neige et les sept nains*’, in *Archives et acteurs des cinémas d’animation en France*, ed. Sébastien Denis, Chantal Duchet, Lucie Merijeau, Marie Pruvost-Delaspre, Sébastien Roffat (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2014), 167–74. Karl Derisson includes some of the information already published in his book *Blanche Neige et les sept nains: la création du chef-d’œuvre de Walt Disney* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2014), 83. Pierre Lambert, in his 2000 book *Blanche Neige* (Rozay-en-Brie: Démon et Merveilles) or in the 2009 reissue (ed. La Martinière), does not even mention the original dubbing.
- 2 Davide Pozzi, with the collaboration of Claudine Kaufmann, ‘Koenigsmark, Journal d’une Restauration’, in *Léonce Perret*, ed. Bernard Bastide and Jean A. Gili (AFRHC, 2013), 223.
- 3 Bryan Senn, *Golden Horrors: An Illustrated Critical Filmography of Terror Cinema, 1931–1939* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006), 440.
- 4 Ginette Vincendeau, ‘Hollywood Babel: The Coming of Sound and the Multiple-Language Version’, in ‘*Film Europe*’ and ‘*Film America*’: *Cinema*,

- Commerce and Cultural Exchange, 1920–1939*, ed. Andrew Higson and Richard Maltby (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1999), 207–24.
- 5 Martin Barnier, *Des Films Français Made in Hollywood, Les Versions Multiples 1929–1935* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2005), 10–11.
 - 6 Anon., 'Snow White Is Exempted from French Dubbing Rule', *Film Daily* (20 May 1938): 10.
 - 7 J. B. Kaufman, *The Fairest One of All: The Making of Walt Disney's Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (California: The Walt Disney Family Foundation Press, 2012), 255.
 - 8 As explained on the back of a press picture of the two men. Personal collection Greg Philip.
 - 9 Kaufman, *The Fairest one of All*, 255.
 - 10 L'intransigeant, 7 May 1938. 'Admittedly, the voices given to the legendary characters too often have Anglo-Saxon accents which are shocking.'
 - 11 Jean Fayard, 'Blanche-Neige et les Sept Nains', *Candide* (12 May 1938).
 - 12 Kaufman, *The Fairest one of All*, 255.
 - 13 The programme of the Marignan Theater which ran the film exclusively for months in Paris only mentions the English soundtrack and re-recordings of the songs by Lucienne Dugard, Ray Ventura and various British band leaders.
 - 14 Beverly Hills, "'Disney's Folly' Makes History', *Liberty Magazine* (12 February 1938): 43.
 - 15 Anon., 'Vendredi au Marignan, un très grand évènement cinématographique: Blanche Neige et les sept nains.' *Paris-midi* (4 May 1938): 6.
 - 16 John W. Garner, 'De New York. *Blanche-Neige*. Ce qu'est la féerie de Walt Disney', *le Jour* (3 February 1938): 6.
 - 17 Raoul d'Ast, 'Nous verrons le 6 mai au Marignan *Blanche-Neige et les sept nains*', *Liberté* (30 April 1938): 4.
 - 18 Edmond Epardaud, 'Une parfait oeuvre d'art, une déplorable affaire commerciale: Blanche Neige', *La griffe* (11 November 1938) (Rondel collection held at the Bibliothèque des Arts et Spectacle).
 - 19 For more details, see Greg Philip, 'The French *Snow White* premiere', 15 November 2011, <http://www.alostfilm.com/2011/11/french-snow-white-premiere.html>.
 - 20 Our thanks go to Jacqueline Dana-Mounier, daughter of Jean Mounier, advertising manager for RKO France, who kept some his archives (and donated a part of them to the Cinémathèque française). She also published some documents on her website: <https://www.cinema-jeanmounier.com/cinema/rko-19371939/blanche-neige/>.
 - 21 Anon., 'Cette charmante petite fille n'est autre que le 100.000ème spectateur de Blanche Neige et les sept nains que l'on a fêté, l'autre jour, au Marignan', *Le Figaro* (7 June 1938): 5.
 - 22 A. T., 'Référendum français, *Blanche Neige* et Jean Gabin ... sont d'après les directeurs le meilleur film de l'année et la vedette la plus populaire de 1938', *Le jour – Echo de Paris* (13 April 1939): 6.

- 23 Kaufman, *The Fairest one of All*, 257.
- 24 Sergueï Eisenstein, *Walt Disney*, Circé, 1991.
- 25 Walt Disney Productions. Inter-Office Communication. Date 23 December 1935. To Don Graham from Walt. <http://www.lettersofnote.com/2010/06/how-to-train-animator-by-walt-disney.html>.
- 26 Paul Wells, *Understanding Animation* (London: Routledge, 1998), 24.
- 27 Siegfried Kracauer, quoted in J. P. Telotte, *Animating Space: From Mickey to WALL-E* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 133.
- 28 Esther Leslie, 'Dumbo and Class Struggle', in *Hollywood Flatlands: Animation, Critical Theory and the Avant-Garde* (New York: Versen, 2002), 200–18.
- 29 'Le cinéma. *Blanche-Neige et les sept nains*' (5 May 1938) (Rondel collection held at the Bibliothèque des Arts et Spectacle).
- 30 Pierre Brisson, 'Chronique des spectacles. *Blanche-Neige de Walt Disney*', *le Figaro* (8 May 1938): 5.
- 31 François Vinneuil [Lucien Rebatet], 'L'écran de la semaine. *Blanche-Neige et les sept nains*', *l'Action française* (13 May 1938): 5.
- 32 Louis Chéronnet, 'Au cinéma. *Blanche-Neige et les sept nains*', *Beaux-Arts* (20 May 1938): 6.
- 33 Fauteuil 22, '... Dans un fauteuil. *Blanche-Neige et les sept nains*', *La Croix* (15/16 May 1938): 6.
- 34 'Blanche-Neige', *Notre temps* (17 June 1938): 3.
- 35 Robert Brasillach, 'Les Spectacles: Petite histoire du dessin animé', *la Revue Universelle* (15 May 1938) (Rondel collection held at the Bibliothèque des Arts et Spectacle).
- 36 Marcel Arland, *Nouvelle Revue Française* (1 October 1938): 610.
- 37 Etienne Fuzellier, 'De Méliès à Blanche-Neige', *Cahiers du Sud* (March 1939): 276.
- 38 Mezzanine, 'La semaine à l'écran. *Blanche-Neige*', *Marianne* (18 May 1938): 17.
- 39 Pierre Brisson, 'Chronique des spectacles. *Blanche-Neige de Walt Disney*', *le Figaro* (8 May 1938); and Jean Fayard, '*Blanche-Neige et les Sept Nains*', *Candide* (12 May 1938): 5.
- 40 Jean Cocteau, *Cahiers Jean Cocteau*, no. 10 (Paris: Gallimard, 1985), 182.
- 41 'Mouse and Man', *Time* (27 December 1937): 21.
- 42 There was, however, the exhibition at la Cinémathèque française, *Exposition du dessin animé*, from December 1945 to February 1946, not specifically about *Snow White* or Disney, but some of his characters appear on the poster next to Grimault's or Emile Cohl's. This exhibition was directly followed by another, *Emile Reynaud, inventeur du dessin animé*, which also lasted three months.
- 43 Sébastien Roffat, 'Disney Walter Elias', in *Dictionnaire de la pensée du cinéma*, dir. Antoine de Baecque and Philippe Chevallier (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 2012), 233–6.