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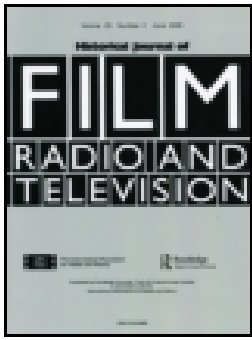
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‘WHAT DO WE GET FROM A DISNEY FILM IF WE CANNOT SEE IT?’: THE BBC AND THE ‘RADIO CARTOON’ 1934–1941

Victoria Jackson

This article examines the BBC’s experimentation with animation and radio during the 1930s and early 1940s. It explores how the BBC adapted animation into the sound medium of radio, through an emphasis on aesthetics and the exploitation of character. It also examines how the BBC adopted a transmedial storytelling approach which resulted in an expanded engagement with the world and characters developed by Disney.

During the 1930s and early 1940s, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) transformed animated films into ‘radio cartoons’. This included adaptations of feature films and animated shorts, particularly drawn from Disney. But it also drew on a wider context of animation, using characters from animated films and developing new ‘animated’ radio series. Discussed with fascination within the popular press at the time, and treated as a considerable and important output by the BBC, this largely forgotten genre of radio reveals a rich engagement between two developing media forms. But as the journalist Grace Wyndham Goldie mused ‘what do we get from a Disney film if we cannot see it?’¹ This article traces how animation’s shift into a new media reveals values and assumptions circulating around animated films during this period, as well as ideas of radio’s own specific potentials. In particular, it explores how the emphases and understandings of animation, which is seemingly so dependent on the visual forms of motion, character and design, were shifted in sometimes surprising ways when transferred to a different medium.

This article focuses specifically on rhythm and character and how they were employed, embellished and altered in radio cartoons, as well as how they were received in popular reception at the time as both capturing and missing the appeals

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of animated films. It begins by examining how the BBC used rhythm to imitate the visual motion of the original animated cartoons. Rhythm was a fundamental aspect of Disney cartoons and a key part of the planning and production process of the studio with the result that rhythm and motion were closely entwined in their productions. In the second part, this article examines how characters were translated to radio by the BBC through a transmedia storytelling style, which offered an expanded engagement with the Disney world of the films. Henry Jenkins, in his study of the merging of mass communications outlets, defines transmedia storytelling as producing ‘stories that unfold across multiple platforms, with each medium making distinctive contributions to our understanding of the story world’.² The BBC’s adaptations of Disney shorts offered a privileged view of the Disney world and characters which extended beyond the content of the original films.

In Britain during the 1930s, Disney films were extremely popular with critics and audiences alike. Disney’s two series of short animated films, Silly Symphonies and Mickey Mouse, were regular features of cinema programmes. Moreover, over the course of the decade, Mickey Mouse and other Disney characters became increasingly pervasive in day to day life: Disney toys became firm favourites with children, Mickey Mouse comic strips appeared in newspapers and a multitude of Disney related gramophone records could be heard playing in the homes of Britain. In this context, it is not surprising to find the BBC eager to adapt Disney cartoons to radio, allowing them to tap into their popularity and familiarity. When Disney began producing feature films with *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (Hand, 1937), ‘Britain’s most popular film of 1938’,³ the prominence of animated films reached new heights; so much so that the radio version of *Snow White* was described as a ‘scoop’ for the BBC by Grace Wyndham Goldie in the *Listener*, a weekly magazine produced by the BBC to reproduce broadcast talks and review radio and the arts.⁴

Audience familiarity with Disney films was critical to their transformation into radio cartoons. A critic for the *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer* pondered ‘to what extent a radio-production should be self-contained in its appeal, and how much it may rely for its entertainment value on listener’s experiences in other media’.⁵ In Britain, a number of broadcast versions of animated films were screened before general release. For example, the Silly Symphony *Who Killed Cock Robin* (1935) and all of the BBC’s animated feature film adaptations beginning with *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*.⁶ Therefore many people in Britain would have encountered Disney feature films on the radio before seeing them at the cinema. A critic for the *Manchester Guardian* argued that radio cartoons which listeners had not seen at the cinema made a ‘better impression’ than those they had: ‘In the one case the imagination is free to construct for itself; in the other the imagination is pinned down by what it has already seen, and at the same time feels a sense of loss’.⁷ This argument taps into discourses surrounding radio’s ability to exercise the listener’s imagination. If a listener was already familiar with the Disney film which the radio adaptation was based on their imagination was curtailed. However, without prior knowledge of how a cartoon appeared the listener was free to engage with the ‘radio cartoon’ and allowed to build an image in their minds. Goldie in the *Listener* summed up the multiplicity of engagements with the

BBC radio adaptations describing them as ‘parasitical growths we can have a good deal of fun out of’. She argues, ‘There is fun for those who have already seen the film and like to be reminded of it. There is fun for those who have not yet seen it but like advance news about it. There is fun for those who may not see it all and would rather have a radio version than nothing’.⁸

The BBC began producing ‘animated films’ on radio in November 1934 with *Dotty Ditties* (1934–5), an experiment with the musical qualities of the *Silly Symphonies*. In later years, they extended this first foray into new radio cartoons with *Please, Mr. AEsop!* (1938) and *Dandy Lion* (1940), two programmes inspired by animated films. The first attempt at an adaptation of an animated film followed shortly after the premiere of *Dotty Ditties* when John Watt, then in charge of the Revue section of the Variety Department, included a *Silly Symphony* in the regular feature *Songs from the Films* in which the BBC Variety Orchestra played songs from popular films.⁹ Such was the popularity of these *Silly Symphonies* that they became a regular feature of the show culminating in 1939 with two programmes dedicated exclusively to them.¹⁰ The BBC also occasionally broadcast gramophone records based on songs from animated films.¹¹ In 1935, they produced the series *Meet Mickey Mouse* in which characters from both the Mickey Mouse and the Silly Symphonies featured with songs interspersed from the films. Finally, in the later 1930s and early 1940s, the BBC adapted features such as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1938), *Pinocchio* (1940), *The Reluctant Dragon* (1941) and *Dumbo* (1942).¹² While this article will not explore all of these radio cartoons, it will focus on key examples to consider how rhythm and character were developed.

Visuals through rhythm

The BBC’s adaptation of Disney animated films was not the first time the studio’s films had crossed to a purely sound medium. The music from Disney productions were a key appeal of the films and were also popular as sheet music and gramophone records from the 1930s onwards in the United States and Europe. Initially, many of the songs that were commercially released, such as *Who’s Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf* from *The Three Little Pigs* (1933), were largely reinterpreted versions, often extended with additional lyrics to make them suitable for dance halls and radio play.¹³ Alongside these records developed from the original film scores, there were also a number of songs that were inspired by Mickey Mouse. Some were commissioned by the Disney studio, such as *Mickey Mouse and Minnie’s in Town* (1933), but others were not connected to the studio, such as *The Wedding of Mr Mickey Mouse*.¹⁴ From 1936 onwards, there were also gramophone records copied directly from the soundtracks of the films.¹⁵ All these records sought to capitalise on the popular appeal of the music of Disney’s film. As a review of a new gramophone record of Disney songs noted: ‘If there is one form of music that affords universal delight, it is the music of Walt Disney’s “Silly Symphonies” with their funny animal and other effects.’¹⁶ Such was the popularity of the music that several critics saw the radio series as a privileged way to listen to the music, allowing it to take centre stage without the distraction of the animated image. Discussing a broadcast of a Silly Symphony, a critic from the *Yorkshire Post and*

Leeds Intelligencer suggested: 'It is not until one hears the dialogue and music of these films, divorced from the pictures, that one realises just how ingenious they are.'¹⁷ *Variety*'s review of the BBC adaptation of *Snow White* made a similar observation, noting: 'And in one way listeners scored. They were able to enjoy the delicate orchestration of the music- ... without half their minds being taken up in watching the picture ... What we lost in sight we gained in sound'.¹⁸ While such comments, privileging sound over image might seem strange they also reveal the music itself carried a considerable interest at the time.

While the BBC clearly tapped into the musical appeal of Disney films in their adaptations, they were aspiring to do more than simply reproduce popular music. Through their emphases and alterations of the original material, they sought to transfer some essence of the animated film aesthetic to the medium of radio. As well as adding dialogue to more clearly communicate the narrative, they used innovative approaches in terms of lyricism, rhythm and sound effects to transfer visual animated appeals to radio. These features conveyed emotion and mood, recreating the animated film aesthetic in sound.

Sound was an integral part of Disney animations and the studio carefully managed its synchronisation with images, using 'rhythmical organisation' to match music and movement. As Lea Jacobs has demonstrated, 'decisions about rhythm and tempo, were operative from the moment of a film's inception'.¹⁹ William Garity, writing on the animation process of the Disney studios in 1933, explained 'the music must fit the mood of the picture in order to be effective: if properly chosen, it enhances the value of the story and the action'.²⁰ Rhythm in sound and movement were so intimately interlinked in the animated film that it was possible that if sound were divorced from the image it might still retain an echo of the movement through its rhythm. A reviewer from the *Manchester Guardian*, discussing the first episode of *Meet Mickey Mouse* on radio, suggests the effect of this: 'this substitution of voice for the animated things was one of the most ingenious things in the whole ingenious programme. As Mr. Watt spoke the words the verses had the same rhythmic quality in sound that the drawings have in line'.²¹

In adapting other Disney films, the BBC would elaborate on this 'rhythmic quality' through dialogue. *The Tortoise and the Hare* (1935), first broadcast in *Meet Mickey Mouse*, uses lyricism and rhyme to offer a sense of motion. Because the Disney animation had just 15 lines of dialogue and no lyrics, the radio broadcast required almost an entirely new script to be written to allow the listener to follow the story.²² The narrator's description of the start of the race follows the tempo of the tortoise's steady trot:

When the starter fired off his gun,
 At once the hare began to run.
 He stepped right out, and he went so fast
 That ya' couldn't see him when he went past.
 Though the tortoise started kind of late,
 He plugged along at a steady gait,

He used his head, an' he done his best,
An' he didn't take out no time for rest.²³

Through narration such as this, a rhythmic pace suggests the action of the animation, which would likely be further enhanced by using the music from the film itself – in this case, the tortoise's 'Slow but Sure' theme.

As a further example of the use of rhythm in the BBC's adaptation of Disney animated films let us consider the scene in both the film and radio versions of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in which Snow White runs from the Huntsman. In the film we see Snow White flee, confused and frightened, through a forest. The animated images present the forest change from a safe and welcoming place to a dark and foreboding environment. This change also represents Snow White's terrified state of mind. As she runs she confuses inanimate trees, branches and plants for monsters. While the scene contains no dialogue, only the cries of Snow White, the tempo of the music conveys her hurried flight through the woods; her growing fear is emphasised through a rhythmical pattern which repetitively builds and falls, becoming faster each time, leading to a climax in which Snow White screams and collapses to the ground.

The broadcast version begins with what the script describes as a 'hurry rhythm' that segues into 'hurry music', climaxing following a scream by Snow White just as in the film.²⁴ Even if the audience were familiar with the story, music alone could not convey the progression of the narrative or the reason for Snow White's terror. As a result the BBC introduced additional narration and lyrics to suggest the original scenes. The scene begins with the Narrator: 'Snow White nearly mad with fright. Flies through the woods as black as night.'²⁵ The rhythm and the rhyme of these lines evokes the sense of speed and urgency in the scene, as well as Snow White's mental state; narrative, mood and movement are all suggested in ways which mimic the animated film.

The scene then continues with lyrics sung over the 'hurry music':

Watch the forest growing darker
That's the menace of the woods,
Ev'ry branch becomes a bogey
That's the menace of the woods.²⁶

The rhythm of these lyrics and the repetition create a sense of impending danger. The lyrics continue to develop the imagery of the film, using rhyme and rhythm to accentuate mood and movement:

Clutching hands on human branches
Eerie trees in ghostly hoods,
Ghastly tree-trunks leer in passing
That's the menace of the woods
. . . .Every eye a gleaming terror
Every vine a hanging noose,

Every log an alligator-

Don't cry out, you can't get loose.²⁷

For a reviewer in the *Times* the BBC's version captured the atmosphere of the forest scene: '... Snow White's flight through the forest in the darkness was brilliantly recast for the new medium reproducing exactly the macabre and fearful feeling of the original.'²⁸

For the same reviewer, however, other sections of the broadcast were considerably less successful. They were critical of the way in which the scene of the Dwarfs pursuing the Queen was adapted to radio, 'The mad race at the end could only be suggested.'²⁹ This scene was handled in quite a different manner to the forest scene. There is no use of rhythmical dialogue and lyrics; instead, the dialogue is used to describe the witch's ascent up the mountain and her ultimate demise: 'C'm'on – after her! After her! ... There she goes- climbing up the mountain side! ... Look – a flash of lightning's struck, the rock the witch was standing on! ... It's breaking apart! ... She's falling ... The Witch is dead!'³⁰ There is no rhythm in the dialogue to mimic the movement and support the action. The only use of sound to create a sense of movement is 'chase music' which accompanies the scene. Similarly, there is little attempt to create mood with the exception of storm music which conveys both the weather on the mountainside and a sense of danger. As a result, the scene takes on the features of a more conventional radio play, lacking the movement and dynamism that evokes the animated qualities of film.

A further comparison can be made with the American radio series, *Lux Radio Theater of the Air's* adaptation of the forest scene in their broadcast of *Snow White*. Like the BBC they kept the movie's musical score but in contrast they provided only minimal additional dialogue by Snow White to explain the scene: 'I'm afraid. There are eyes in the dark, green eyes, staring at me ... staring at me. Monster shapes and mouths and gates. They're getting closer'.³¹ While these lines give a sense of Snow White's fear and confusion, they provide little descriptive detail of the scene itself. The differences in approaches between the BBC's and *Lux Radio Theater's* adaptation of Snow White may in part be in response to expectations of audience familiarity with the film. The minimalist approach to detail of the American version would suggest it expected listeners to be familiar with the film and be able to fill in the gaps of their description of the forest scene from memory. But for audiences unfamiliar with the film, it would have been difficult to understand what was happening. Both the BBC's Queen's death scene and the *Lux Radio Theater's* adaptation of Snow White demonstrate that the use of rhythm had a significant influence not only on the stylisation of the adaptation but also on its ability to convey narrative, mood and motion.

However, other critics felt the BBC's adaptations failed entirely to fully capture the rhythm of movement found in animated films.³² Writing specifically of the forest scene, a *Variety* critic made no comment on the lyrical narration, instead emphasising how: 'the music alone, with added sound effects [was] insufficient to suggest, for example the nightmarish dark wood when Snow White runs from her cruel stepmother'.³³ The reporter did however commend the use of rhymed

commentary by John Watt but felt there was not enough of it.³⁴ But a radio critic for the *Manchester Guardian* noted of the *Meet Mickey Mouse* series: 'however well the voices and music of Disney's cartoons are produced, the loss of rhythmical movement reduces these broadcasts to a shadow of the original'.³⁵ While the reviews offered different judgments on the success of the radio adaptations, the recurring references to mood and rhythm indicate a shared perspective on what the radio cartoon might be able to achieve, and the aesthetic in which it might do so.

The BBC's production of its own radio cartoons, *Dotty Ditties* and *Please Mr. Aesop!*, were heavily influenced by the Disney studio's use of rhythm, music and lyric. *Please Mr. Aesop!* focussed on a number of stories from Aesop's fables and was written and composed by Henry Reed, a musician and composer. It was first broadcast in September 1937 as an item in *Children's Hour*, after which it was promoted to an early evening slot in different locations, where it was called *Further Familiar Fables*. In May 1939 it was renamed *Please Mr Aesop!* and included as part of a variety magazine series called *Roundabout* broadcast at around 8:00 p.m., suggesting that it was considered of interest to adult audiences.³⁶ The radio series was described as similar to the Silly Symphonies, with Goldie suggesting that they 'give us in terms of pure radio something very like the attractive, robust and rhythmical nonsense which mark the Mickey Mouse Cartoons, and the Silly Symphonies'.³⁷ While no radio scripts or recordings survive from the series, Wyndham Goldie's article in the *Listener* provided an extended description of one episode from the series 'The Fox Fable' which she concluded was 'entirely enchanting... genuinely gay and light-hearted... its music and words fit each other so exactly that it is impossible to think of one without the other'.³⁸ Like the adaptations of Disney, the integration of music, rhythm and lyrics was seen as critical to the show.

Several critics compared Henry Reed to Disney, some even proclaiming him a 'British Disney of the Air'.³⁹ Goldie, however, was more cautious in her praise, noting that Reed's work lacked 'both the finish and the continuous inventive humour of the better Disney films'. However, she goes on to say 'Mr. Reed is the nearest approach to a Disney that Radio has yet produced. Which is important enough'.⁴⁰ That a composer should be compared to Disney demonstrates the importance of the music to the creation of a specific aesthetic for the radio cartoon genre. Moreover Goldie's emphasis on the importance of the appearance of a Disney figure for the radio demonstrates a desire for a musical translation of the animated film to radio.

In addition to music, sound effects were a key aspect of animated films, and this significance extended to commentary on the radio cartoon's aesthetic relation to animated films; reviewing the *Meet Mickey Mouse* series, the *Manchester Guardian* critic commented, 'there were some excellent "throw-backs," and 'effects' used to keep the picnic in the form of a cartoon were also cleverly used'.⁴¹ Further, as Garity noted in his account of the work of the Disney studios, 'sound effects should be adapted to the action'.⁴² As a result these sound effects had clear connotations not only of animated film generally, but specifically with the movement in these films. For example, the sound effect of a siren used to accompany the Hare's sprint in *The Tortoise and the Hare* creates a sense of exaggerated speed in

the animated film aesthetic. For listeners, such a use of sound effects on radio may have not only evoked the animated film and its sound aesthetic but also produced a sense of movement through sound. For the *Snow White* broadcast, Styx Gibbling – who was also responsible for sound effects in the *Meet Mickey Mouse* series – had to ‘imitate a hundred and one different noises, including the humming of bees, galloping of horses, bubbling of a witch’s cauldron, a fierce storm, and a creaking door’.⁴³ All of these sound effects represented movement in some form helping to retain a sense of the animated film’s action through sound.

A series in which the BBC had been particularly experimental in the potential of the sound effect in the radio cartoon was *Dotty Ditties* which, like *Please Mr. Aesop!* drew on the style of the *Silly Symphonies*. As a radio critic from the *Daily Mail* noted, ‘This new scheme is to set out to do for the radio what that genius Walt Disney has done for the films ... in fact to adapt his screen brainwave for our listening pleasures’.⁴⁴ *Dotty Ditties* was the BBC’s first experiment with the ‘radio cartoon’, broadcast a few months before their first adaptation of *Silly Symphonies*. Only five episodes were produced between November 1934 and April 1935. The series was intended to capture the humour of the *Silly Symphonies* particularly through music and sound effects. Several critics emphasised its experimental quality; for example, the *Daily Express* wrote: ‘It is a musical joke, a collection of vocal and instrumental tricks, an experiment with sound. This is real microphone stuff, perhaps the beginning of a new broadcast technique’.⁴⁵ For many critics such as this one, the opportunity for innovative uses of sound made the animated film highly suitable for adaptation to radio.

While the critical responses to the *Dotty Ditties* series were mixed, several reviewers wrote very favourably of it, including a radio critic from the *Yorkshire Evening Post* who named it among the best of radio broadcasts in 1934⁴⁶ and the *Manchester Guardian* thought ‘the idea of these sound symphonies is brilliant’.⁴⁷ In the same review the critic describing one episode noted: ‘the miniature sounds with fascinating rhythm and tune made a parallel of the same type of caricature on the screen’.⁴⁸ The animated film medium offered radio the opportunity to experiment with sound, but within this experimentation it was the ‘fascinating rhythm and tune’ that was so vital to evoking an animated quality for the radio cartoon.

Characters and world building

Thus far I have focussed on aspects of the sound aesthetic in the BBC’s radio adaptations of Disney films. This crucial aspect of radio cartoons was coupled with the significant appeal of Disney characters such as Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck. Exploring the role of the animated character through the series *Meet Mickey Mouse*, which featured a variety of Disney characters, as well as through the BBC’s own character based ‘radio cartoon’, *Dandy Lion*, this section turns to consider how the BBC embraced the specificity of radio in the presentation of animated characters. Vital to the concept of *Meet Mickey Mouse* was the reliance on the familiarity and popularity of the Disney films and in particular their characters. Radio’s presence in the home, with its informal and familiar setting, gave the audience opportunities to engage with animated film characters in different ways to the cinema. This

transmedia storytelling allowed for new ways for the audience to engage with Disney's characters. Henry Jenkins has outlined four key functions of transmedia content: it offers a backstory for characters, it maps an imagined story world, it focuses attention on the perspectives of particular characters and it deepens audience engagement.⁴⁹ The BBC's *Meet Mickey Series* employed all these functions to different degrees, developing a world of animated characters through the particular forms and functions of radio.

The core premise of the show, to meet Mickey Mouse, tapped into a desire felt by many fans which was already being exploited by meet Mickey events held at department stores, cinemas and other spaces.⁵⁰ It was also exploited in United States radio series such as *Hall of Fame* (1934) and the later *Mickey Mouse Theater of the Air* (1938). *Meet Mickey Mouse* and United States shows like it attempted to exploit the radio medium's interactive engagement with audiences.⁵¹ This is reflected not only in the title of the series which invited the audience to *Meet Mickey Mouse* but also in a specially written theme song, one part of which explained:

... There's Donald Duck and Peter Pig,
 All looking very swell,
 There's Pluto and the Bunnies,
 And the Grasshopper who'll tell
 How the world owes him a living.
 And Walt Disney one as well.
 Come on, folks,
 Meet Mickey Mouse!⁵²

A key appeal of a series such as *Meet Mickey Mouse* was that many listeners were already familiar and interested in the Disney characters. The Disney studios had made a very conscious effort in the Mickey Mouse film series to build up recognisable personalities for their characters.⁵³ As a result, cinema audiences had a definite sense of who the characters from the Mickey Mouse series were. Although this was considered less important in their Silly Symphony series, characters from this series, with their simple and recognisable traits, were also drawn in to this world of Disney characters.

The Disney studio commonly referred to their approach to characterisation as 'personality animation'. Personalities of characters from the Mickey Mouse series were built up carefully and established over many film appearances. This had the further effect of giving characters the illusion of their own agency and independent existence, which was essential to the idea of the show that the audience could actually 'meet' Mickey.⁵⁴ Donald Crafton notes although voice is one of the easiest ways to 'embody a character on-screen' Disney animators of the early sound films turned to the body instead to express personality.⁵⁵ Crafton has explored how the Disney studio sought to convey animated character's personality through embodied

features such as facial expression, gesture and movements peculiar to them. The animated character's personality, like rhythm, was closely linked to movement.

Such an embodied performance by the animated characters could make the adaption of Disney's characters to radio more difficult, with some Disney stars seemingly more suitable than others. In particular, one critic claimed Mickey was a largely silent character who struggled to come across on the radio.⁵⁶ This may help explain why, in all but two of the episodes, Mickey Mouse himself is notably absent for a series called *Meet Mickey Mouse*. In the episodes in which the listener is invited to join a party or event Mickey remains elusive, often arriving late to the show, hovering just beyond the reach of the microphone. For example, in the first episode in which a party has been held for the listeners to meet Mickey Mouse, Mickey is running late and only arrives near the end of the broadcast. In the last episode, he's so distraught the series is coming to an end he mopes in the corridor for most of the episode.

The absence of Mickey Mouse, however, helped draw more attention to other characters, such as the Grasshopper, Minnie Mouse and Donald Duck. In episode two, we learn additional biographical detail for Donald Duck who recounts in a song he was originally called Donald Drake but changed his name to his mother's name Duck when his father left them:

My Father left my Mother,
 And all his children, too,
 He left her for another,
 And a darned good riddance. I'm telling you!
 His conduct was a shame,
 To her he should have stuck,
 So I took Mother's maiden name,
 That's why I'm Donald Duck.⁵⁷

A reviewer for the *Yorkshire Post* who thought the Disney characters were 'funnier to watch than to listen to' did however see this back story of Donald's as one of the positive point of the broadcast, 'At the same time, last night's picnic had its points, Donald Duck, the latest addition to the tribe ... told us something of his parentage ... It was a sad story'.⁵⁸ So while the characters might by more vital in their onscreen form, the radio could offer different ways of engaging with and understanding characters.

Similarly, this transmedia storytelling offered listeners more insight into the imagined lives and backstories of characters, locating them in a world where the *Mickey Mouse* and *Silly Symphony* series existed as one community. This aspect of the series was stressed in the theme song, which discussed characters from both the *Mickey Mouse* series and the *Silly Symphony* series. It also suggested that they lived in a world or reality which intersected with our own, inviting the listener to meet Walt Disney as well. This connection was established most strongly by John Watt who acted as a bridge between the listener and the characters.⁵⁹ The critic

for the *Manchester Guardian* argued: 'Mr Watt, who acts, as host, helps the illusion of reality, by his natural manner with the animals, and it is an especially telling touch that he should drop his usual casualness and become positively flustered when dealings or attempting to deal with the irrepressible Donald Duck ...'.⁶⁰ One critic however did not appreciate this illusion of reality and expressed concern that the characters could become too real: 'it is a curious fact that without the screen before us to show that the animals are drawings they become in terms of radio remarkably real ...'.⁶¹

This sense of reality was created not only through John Watt's presence, but also in episodes that playfully entwined the 'reality' of cartoon characters with conventions of radio. The last episode of the series, *Request Night*, is based in the radio studio where the characters are recording the show. The third episode, *Mickey's Gala Premier*, develops this idea further: the episode takes on the address of a live radio broadcast at a star-studded Hollywood Gala Premier of a film from the *Silly Symphony* series, *Who Killed Cock Robin?* (Hand, 1935). Following the theme tune, we hear an announcer pass the broadcast to John Watt who provides live commentary: 'Hullo, everybody! Well, I expect you can all hear the cheering. This certainly is going to be a big night for everybody here-especially for autograph hunters. All the well-known Hollywood stars are arriving at the theatre thick and fast to see Mickey Mouse's masterpiece ...'.⁶² Although live commentaries of events such as this were still relatively uncommon by the BBC, most listeners would have been familiar with this address from American films and newsreels. While the original Disney film, *Mickey's Gala Premier* (Gillett, 1933) featured stars being interviewed on radio as they entered the theatre, the radio adaptation's lack of visuals contributed to a sense in which this event was actually happening, helping to blur reality and fiction. The broadcast included an adaptation of *Who Killed Cock Robin?* as the premier of the evening. As the film was not on general release in the UK at the time, this further enhanced the playful nature of the episode and fostered potentially a greater sense of realism of the event for the audience as the radio adaptation became an imitation of a live film exhibition.⁶³

This episode also established the characters in a world in which they coexisted with Hollywood stars. In the original Disney film, these Hollywood stars were presented as exaggerated caricatures of stars such as Laurel and Hardy and Greta Garbo, which gave the impression they were entering the animated world rather than the Disney characters crossing over to reality as in the radio production. In addition, the world of the radio programme also featured Popeye, an animated star from the Fleischer Brothers studio. This was a playful and reflexive cameo by Popeye, who after singing his own theme tune is forcibly removed from the theatre 'for belonging to a rival organisation'.⁶⁴ The world inhabited by the characters of the radio series suggests an imaginary sense of characters living and interacting within a larger world, creating the effect of expanding our perspective on what constitutes the place of animation.

With the BBC's own radio programmes inspired by the form of animated film, these features continued to be evident, although in less overt ways. Although *Dotty Ditties* and *Please Mr. Aesop!* both featured a variety of characters, there was little development of their personalities beyond simple characterisation. *Dandy Lion*

was the first character based, radio-originated series on the BBC. It was first broadcast in October 1940 and ran for one series of twelve episodes. Dandy Lion was an adolescent Lion still living at home with his parents; he was described in the *Radio Times* as ‘a young lion, very big in his own eyes but not quite so grown-up to his mother’s, who wants to leave home and go out into the great Jungle’.⁶⁵ The series was planned and promoted as ‘the broadcast equivalent of a Walt Disney cartoon’ and the BBC looked to draw direct comparisons between Dandy Lion and animated film characters such as Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck.⁶⁶ Several newspapers ran articles on the series and the *BBC Handbook* for the year noted the series as a ‘bold experiment’.⁶⁷ The link to animated characters was embodied by Dandy Lion, described as a ‘new and lovable animal character’ and a ‘funny little animal’.⁶⁸ However, as noted earlier, the personality of Disney animated characters was highly dependent on their movement, expression and performance rather than their dialogue and voice alone. In contrast, Dandy Lion’s personality had to be conveyed entirely by sound, much like radio plays. But unlike other radio plays, it was considered necessary to keep the names of the actors secret; the *Nottingham Evening Post* noted ‘The actors’ names are being kept secret, so that Dandy and his friends may become personalities as alive as Popeye or Mickey.’⁶⁹ This was reiterated in a review by the *Daily Express*, suggesting the BBC had used this language in press releases for the series and considered this autonomy of character as a significant feature of Dandy Lion.⁷⁰

As a stand-alone series, *Dandy Lion* did not have an opportunity to build an expanded world around the character. However, within the limits of the radio series itself there were attempts to play with the space which the characters inhabited. In the early episodes, Dandy’s stories are based in the Jungle and involved his parents and various adventures with his friends against his arch enemy Herman Fox and his accomplice Charlie Cheetah. In later episodes, Dandy’s world begins to expand, interacting more with external contexts such as celebrities, animated stars, mythological figures and nursery rhyme characters. References to the real world also began to appear, such as comments on the BBC and the Second World War. In Episode 6, ‘The Birth of a Notion’ Dandy Lion and his friends plan to make a movie. They decide the film should have acting parts like Mickey Rooney, Eddie Cantor and Shirley Temple.⁷¹ They then audition four actors. Three of the auditionees are animated film characters: Donald Duck, Jiminy Cricket and Popeye.⁷² Each character is asked by the film producer Sam to sing one of the series’ regular song, *Whet Your Whistle*. Each character refuses to sing the words correctly and adds their own signature song to the lyrics. For example, Donald Duck recites *Mary Had a Little Lamb*, as he did in the Mickey Mouse film *Orphan’s Benefit* and also in an episode of the BBC’s *Meet Mickey Mouse*:

Sam: ... Next, please.

Ah, Donald Duck. Get on with it.

Donald: O.K. “Mary had a little lamb ...”

Sam: No – “Whet your whistle and whistle.”

Donald: O.K. "Mary had a little whistle ..."

Sam: Start again.

Donald: O.K. "Whet your whistle and whistle,

His fleece was white as snow –

And everywhere that Mary went

The whistle used to blow."

Sam: No – "whistle".

Donald: O.K. Mary had

Sam: Take him away.

Exit Donald complaining.⁷³

Situations such as these draw Dandy Lion into other worlds of animated characters, creating the same kind of expanded imaginary worlds seen in *Meet Mickey Mouse*. Although *Dandy Lion* lacked the familiarity and diversity of Disney's animated output, it still engaged with a sense that animated characters live autonomous lives that might intersect with other animated and real-life figures.

Despite considerable early promotion in the *Radio Times* and a number of key names such as John Watt in its development, *Dandy Lion* lasted just one series. Surviving scripts hint at one possible reason for its cancellation. In early episodes, the stories were quite simple and juvenile but over time the series developed a more adult address flirting with topics such as alcohol and sexuality. For example, in episode eight, *Dandy's Inferno*, Dandy faces a barrage of female temptation in the shape of Hebe, the goddess of Nectar, the Sirens, the Furies and Vampires. These confrontations are played out as comedy in song and rhyme. For example, a quartet of Vampires call to Dandy:

Come with us, and play with fire,

Taste the forbidden fruits,

Yield to every wrong desire –

Why not? After all, men at heart are brutes.

Drain the dregs, and seek the thrills,

Dance till you're out of breath,

Follow us at the pace that kills –

For, oh, it's a pleasant death!⁷⁴

Confronted with this sea of female sexuality and temptation, Dandy calls for help from his parents before waking from this nightmare: 'Mother! Dad! Oh, someone, help me now, please!'⁷⁵ While perhaps seeking to emulate some of the irreverent and risqué flavour of the early Mickey Mouse cartoons, the series sits relatively uneasily with Dandy's innocent and adolescent persona. Overall there seems to be an inconsistency in the narrative across the episodes which could suggest the writers struggled to find the right approach for the series and at times it

feels unclear who the target audience should be. It was broadcast on Monday evenings at 20.00 on both the National service, for the home front, and the Forces programmes, aimed at the serving Armed Forces. Such a scheduling slot reveals *Dandy Lion* was clearly intended for adults as well as children. Similarly, some of the Disney broadcasts such as *Meet Mickey Mouse* were scheduled around the same time, although at least one critic, Goldie, felt that this series would not appeal to adults.⁷⁶

This tension in audience address is reflected in two recurring songs, *Beyond the Purple Hills* and *Whet your Whistle*, which are both described as theme tunes for Dandy in the surviving scripts. *Beyond the Purple Hills* appears to capture the longing for adulthood and independence which early reviews of Dandy Lion emphasised:

Beyond purple hills,
There's a land where life is play
And they have signs that say
No cares allowed.⁷⁷

The song was likely influenced by its historical context, offering a sense of hope: the Second World War had begun in earnest, the armed forces were mobilised, children had been evacuated and the population were living with the threat of air raids and invasion. While *Whet Your Whistle* was a more upbeat comedic song with adult connotations. Part of the refrain was:

Whet your whistle and whistle
And soon you'll be O.K.
Just a little drink
And just a little tune,
Can kick your little cares
Right over the moon
So whet your whistle and whistle
And you'll be happy all day.⁷⁸

Unlike animated films, *Dandy Lion* appears to have been unable or unwilling to develop an address which could appeal to adults and children alike. It is likely that while the series over time moved towards a more adult audience it may already have been dismissed as a children's series. Certainly, after some initial press coverage in its early weeks, *Dandy Lion* went on to receive no special attention, suggesting it was of little interest to critics.

Meanwhile, however, another BBC comedy series described as a 'radio cartoon' or a 'cartoon in sound' was enjoying much greater success.⁷⁹ *It's That Man Again (ITMA)* began in 1939, a year before *Dandy Lion*, and ran until the death of its star, Tommy Handley, in 1949. It was reported that by 1944 up to 40% of the population tuned in to the show.⁸⁰ Both shows were written by Ted

Kavanagh, who it was claimed, had written for early British film animation.⁸¹ Where *Dandy Lion* failed to find a suitable address for its audience, *ITMA* was able to successfully appeal to adults and children. While it was described as a cartoon in sound by its producer Francis Worsley, it was never advertised as such, nor compared to the Disney brand.⁸² Liberated from an intention to replicate Disney's characters and style *ITMA* was able to experiment with non-animal characters, humour and the surrealist qualities of animated film comedy to develop a series far more closely associated with British theatre and variety, and animated studios such as Warner Bros and MGM, than Disney while still experimenting with the aesthetic of the radio cartoon. For example, the producer of the show Frank Worsley described the use of sound effect on the show: 'There is no attempt to make these [effects] realistic - they are only used to enhance the comedy value and the normal time factor of everyday life is ignored, giving an air of fantasy and speed which is very important in this kind of show'.⁸³ The series contained fast paced dialogue and catchphrases, 'a madcap patter of puns, malapropisms, parodies, and surreal burlesques which worked in topical references and wartime slang'.⁸⁴ The more risqué aspects of the *Dandy Lion* script suggest a similar adult voice was being experimented with, but the series might be seen as being constrained by its associations with existing animated films and radio cartoons. The genre of the radio cartoon, with its emphases on motion and world building, sought to replicate and expand the appeals of animated films in a dynamic and sometimes experimental mode. *ITMA* demonstrated further potentials that animated films offered to radio, developing features that had been established over the previous decade and taking them into new territories.

The BBC's experimentation with the radio cartoon during the 1930s and 1940s reveals much about the two media forms. The ways in which the BBC used sound in radio cartoons to convey the energy and motion of animated cartoons reveals the integral importance of sound to the aesthetic of popular animated cartoons during the period. The BBC's adaptation of Disney reveals a transmedia storytelling approach which did not simply reproduce the animated film in radio form but extended the listener's engagement with Mickey Mouse and his friends. This was achieved, at least in part, because the BBC exploited the medium specificity of radio, its familiarity, its presence in the home and a relatively inform and direct address which allowed a different, more expanded engagement with Disney's animated film world.

Notes

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7. Our Radio Critic, 'Broadcasting of the week: Frederick Lonsdale's comedy—dearth of radio plays—one-sided programmes', *Manchester Guardian*, 22 February 1936, 14.
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9. 'Songs from the films', *Radio Times*, 28 December 1934, 32.
10. 'Silly Symphonies', *Radio Times*, 28 April 1939, 56; 'Silly Symphonies', *Radio Times*, 26 May 1939, 54.
11. 'Gramophone records Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs', *Radio Times*, 1 July 1938, 59.
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