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Walt Disney and the Propaganda Complex: Government Funded Animation and Hollywood Complicity During WWII

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WALT DISNEY AND THE PROPAGANDA COMPLEX:
GOVERNMENT FUNDED ANIMATION
AND HOLLYWOOD COMPLICITY DURING WWII

By

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Bachelors of Arts in Communication
University of Colorado, Colorado Springs

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

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ABSTRACT

**Walt Disney and the Propaganda Complex:
Government Funded Animation and Hollywood Complicity during WWII**

By

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The focus of this proposed thesis will be on the animated propaganda films the studios of Walt Disney produced for the government during World War II, analyzing three of the most widely viewed animated features: *The New Spirit* (1942), *Der Fuehrer's Face* (1943), and *Education for Death: The Making of the Nazi* (1943). These government-financed films were used to encourage Americans to pay their taxes; they generally depicted Germany as a threatening enemy and encouraged support for America's effort and involvement in the war. Using a semiotics theoretical approach, the thesis will analyze these films as propaganda to demonstrate how they were created to influence audiences. The conclusions of the study will assess their effectiveness.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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PREFACE

I chose to study the propaganda during WWII produced by the Disney Studio because this period in history has always interested me and I have been a lifelong Disney fan. Growing up in Southern California, fifteen minutes away from the one and only Disneyland, brought me there multiple times each month. Disney animated films and books lined my bookcase, and stuffed animals of Mickey Mouse, Minnie Mouse, and Donald Duck were scattered around my room. My love of Disney matured as I did and once I began studying Walt Disney in college, my fascination grew. Graduate school brought the intense research required to bring my attention to an often-overlooked period in Disney's history: the studio strike before WWII, animated propaganda during WWII and Disney's testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee after WWII. The relationship Disney formed with the government throughout these events interested me and the lack of research about this period pushed me to do further research and help others discover a new side of Disney and his famous studio.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Walt Disney's work as an animator during World War II and during the post-war Red Scare had a measurable impact on culture and in the development of government-produced messages. The innovative animation techniques implemented at Walt Disney Studios were the first to use synchronized sound in animation. The studios also produced the first color cartoon, and the first full-length feature animated cartoon (Gabler, 2007). From movies to television, Walt Disney helped shape economic and demographic changes that may have happened without him, but his ability to evolve and prosper in spite of the challenges he and his studio faced represent his visionary triumphs.

This thesis will examine specifically an understudied area of Walt Disney's life and in the history of his studios — the studio's efforts to produce wartime training and propaganda films during World War II. Government agencies including the U.S. Treasury, the Office of War Information (OWI), and the Information and Education Division (I&E) contracted Disney to produce thirty-two animated shorts between 1941 and 1945 (Gabler, 2007, p. 383). Employing a semiotic approach of cinema, this study will focus specifically on three of the most widely known: *The New Spirit* (1942), *Der Fuehrer's Face* (1943), and *Education for Death: The Making of the Nazi* (1943). The semiotic theory used will look at signs and symbols as a method of study for the aesthetics of film. The media is full of signs — in Disney's case, remarkably so — and although audiences may not think about them, these signs have meaning and affect viewers on a very real level.

Background

During the studio strike of 1941, Walt Disney said he was convinced that communist leadership and activities had brought about the labor unrest (Gabler, 2007, p. 366-367). The strike and Disney's views would be addressed during his testimony before Congress. Disney was one of the first members of Hollywood to testify as a friendly witness before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), suggesting he was not only willing to cooperate with the proceedings, he would provide the names of active or purported communists in Hollywood. This blacklisting era of Hollywood included actors, directors, writers and other entertainment workers who were suspected of communist loyalties or sympathies and were virtually tossed out of the business (Klingaman, 1996, p. 31-32). Disney's behavior during these events is in line with his decision to make propaganda films for the government.

Disney was not only an entertainer with his weekly television show he himself hosted, but he also acted as a historical mediator. His animated creations helped Americans cope with the unsettling transformations of the twentieth century. This role was unintentional yet clear, as Disney's products were consistently cultivated by connections to mainstream American culture. From the aesthetics, political ideologies, social structures, economic construction, and moral principles, the studio evolved with the times in order to stay relevant (Watts, 1997, p. xx). The socio-economic suffering during the Great Depression of the 1930s was the beginning of the surge in popularity for Disney products. For example, one of the first colorful classics produced by the studio in 1932, the *Three Little Pigs*, spawned the popular song on the radio "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad

Wolf” and became a Depression-era theme for Americans (Gabler, 2007, p. 184-185). Disney’s cartoons were a form of escape during this time, and just a decade later, the propaganda Disney pumped out at record pace did the same for a nation at war.

By moving inside mainstream American culture, Disney defined the American traditions of the time by building a cultural cushion around them and never apologizing for their creative choices. His work largely defined the culture of the United States as the country encountered the difficulties of economic and global warfare before facing the nervous energy associated with the post-war fears of a nuclear attack. It is through these hardships that audiences were introduced to the unfolding of Disney’s childhood. From his humble beginnings in Marceline, Missouri (the small-town model and inspiration for Disneyland), to his days of working as a pre-teen delivering newspapers during harsh Kansas City winters, Disney’s imagination and drive fueled his desire to succeed no matter what hardships he and his many companies faced (Barrier, 2007, p. 11-12).

Disney’s true vision can be hard to define, but his goal was to achieve nostalgia and a celebration of America’s past. While the man himself cannot be separated from the empire that bears his name, the achievements of Disney are not attributable to one man alone, but as a complex organization of thousands who have worked to make the company stand out in a harsh and competitive business (Watts, 1997, p. xx-xxi). In fact, a researcher cannot understand the full significance of Walt Disney’s impact by looking only at the characters he developed, the movies he made, and the products he developed. The change in content over the years, as well as way the entertainment products were received, understood, and interpreted by audiences are important to analyze when looking at the significance of Disney and his empire. The reason for looking at Disney’s story during

WWII and the immediately following Cold War is to see how these events affected the evolution of the studio and also bring light to an otherwise neglected area of study.

The change in material produced by the Disney Studio began when the strike at the studio came to fruition after the end of 1940. The strike was a turning point in the studio's history (Watts, 1997, p. 204). When Disney refused to bargain with the Cartoonists' Guild, the guild led a strike against the studio. Thus, after more than a decade of spectacular animation achievements and a new gorgeous campus-like studio, the studio began to go into a downward spiral. Labor issues combined with wartime problems led to a strike over animators wanting to form a union (Gabler, 2007, p. 358-359). These events shocked Disney who himself made no more money than his top animators did.

While this was the case, the haphazard salary structure was one of the biggest reasons for discontent among employees (Watts, 1997, p. 205). Through this, Disney became a different man, his films became different products, and his studio became a different place. After the strike was settled in the fall of 1941, America's involvement in WWII was becoming imminent and the former sour relationships that formed because of strike tensions were put aside. Weeks later, after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the U.S. Army moved into the Disney Studio for a total of eight months. During these months and the years following, Disney and the Disney staff enthusiastically enlisted in the war effort and produced a string of more than a dozen patriotic training films for the Army (Watts, 1997, p. 228). Several propaganda films featured the Disney Studio's contribution to the war effort and polished its image in the public eye; the most successful, Academy Award winner *Der Fuehrer's Face* (1943), depicts Donald Duck throwing a rotten tomato in Hitler's face (1997, p. 230).

In the early weeks of the war, Disney's public image gained luster with a film made for the Treasury Department, *The New Spirit* (1942), which encouraged Americans to support the war effort by paying their income taxes (Gabler, 2007, p. 384). *The New Spirit* and *Der Fuehrer's Face* both received nominations at the Fifteenth Academy Awards in 1943. While not as successful on popular levels as Disney's Academy-nominated films, one of the most important films produced by the studio at the time was *Victory through Air Power* (1943). While the government did pay Disney for the films, it was below cost and the studio, already in financial trouble, lost thousands of dollars on every film made (Gabler, 2007, p. 390). Because of the Army's presence, Disney began to restore his political orientation thus molding the egalitarian, Depression-era populism of his early films into a darker and more defensive form (Watts, 1997).

The animated cartoon feature *Victory through Air Power* was based on Alexander de Seversky's 1942 book of the same name. Seversky was an ex-Russian pilot from the First World War who believed that bomber planes were the "secret weapon" for winning wars in the future (Mosley, 1990, p. 206). Walt Disney had asked the government to let him make a cartoon version of Seversky's book, but he was turned down and received no external funding. He decided to make the film as a private film completely financed by the studio and put out as a Disney entertainment feature. Publicists for the U.S. Navy opposed the film, suggesting it was Air Force propaganda and that it would not be popular with movie-going audiences and the film subsequently lost half-a-million dollars (1990, p. 206). Regardless, the film inspired the United States military who used the suggested tactics to help win WWII.

The changes and evolution of Disney's political views led to his involvement in forming the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals (MPAPAI) in February of 1944 by a coalition of other conservative actors, directors, and producers in Hollywood, including actors John Wayne and Gary Cooper (Klingaman, 1996, p. 268). The alliance's principles state that they are in sharp revolt against the surge of communism, fascism, and other totalitarian-minded beliefs that seek to undermine and change the American way of life (1996, p. 268-269). The founders also stated that the group grew because of a perceived threat from communists in the industry. They believed Americans have "the right to succeed or fail as free men according to the measure of [their] ability and [their] strength" (1996, p. 268). The MPAPAI believed that communists and their sympathizers were attempting to bring pro-Soviet propaganda into motion pictures. Disney was even elected to become the organization's first vice president (Barrier, 2007, p. 200). Members of this group were among the first to provide testimony before HUAC.

Disney was one of the first "friendly" witnesses to appear during the initial anti-communist hearings held in October 1947 by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). After a month of hearings, ten witnesses were found to be unfriendly because they had invoked their Fifth Amendment rights (Klingaman, 1996, p. 178). They became known as the Hollywood Ten, a group that consisted of motion picture screenwriters and directors subsequently blacklisted from Hollywood. Executives in Hollywood stood behind them, opposing HUAC, which was viewed as a politically charged smear crusade (1996, p. 178-179). After a two-day conference in New York City the next month, the studios fell under pressure from the investment community and agreed

to take Congress's side. The studios denounced the Hollywood Ten, vowing they wouldn't hire a member of a suspect group. The power of the blacklist continued through — and after — the career of Senator Joseph McCarthy in 1954 (1996, p. 31-32).

Although Disney was one of the first to offer a “friendly” testimony to Congress on the subject, he was certainly not the last. More than 300 people in the entertainment business were blacklisted before the end of the communist scare, and many of them were outright banned from Hollywood (Klingaman, 1996, p. 31-32). Regardless, many writers continued to produce content for films though they were forced to work under pseudonyms or simply go unnamed.

It was widely recognized that Disney produced the best animations and even reinvented the field itself. In these postwar years, the studio turned to live-action films with real scripts that became an increasingly large part of Disney's plans and just like with the studio's animated films, Disney showed the film industry that it was the best in the business. With the successful release of *Treasure Island* in 1950, Disney launched a series of movies allowing the studio to move into a slightly new genre: live-action. At first, the live-action films were a desperate move produced in England to utilize funds frozen in that country during post-war economic woes until Disney caught up financially (Watts, 1997, p. 286). Between 1950 and 1961, twenty-four of these live-action features were produced by Disney and included historical adventures, such as *Davy Crockett, King of the Wild Frontier* (1950), family dramas such as *Old Yeller* (1957), and science-fiction tales such as *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1954) (1997, p. 286). This vast array of new projects in the 1950s and the popular reaction to them can be seen as a manifestation of Cold War pressures, reflecting both anxieties and bravado of the time. Live-action films

were much cheaper to produce and allowed the studio to make money, stay afloat, and keep making Disney's true passion: animated films (Gabler, 2007, p. 439).

WWII Propaganda

Every technologically advanced country, as well as some not so technologically advanced, use some form of media to relay information to its citizens. Whether by newspaper, radio, television, through films, or the internet, people gather the majority of their information by way of a media outlet. Technologically advanced countries have generated mass media and the role of this media and its effects provides a rich source of history. During WWII, films played a primary role in providing information and entertainment to the American people. Animation, seen as a form of juvenile entertainment, was one particularly popular way to deliver wartime propaganda in order to make the propaganda seem as benign as possible (Smoodin, 1993, p. 72). WWII was not fought on American soil. Those not at war (women, children, those too old or unable to fight) were free to go to the movies without threat of attack unlike European/Asian citizens. This made it easy for Hollywood and the government to inform and entertain the American people.

The American motion picture industry made an important contribution to the war effort. This effort included providing feature films for the front, producing 140 information films, contributing to charity, and organizing seven War Loan Campaigns (Culbert, 1990, Vol 2, p. xi). A proclamation from Hollywood's War Activities Committee 1942 report *Movies at War* listed ten types of motion pictures that would contribute to the war effort. The list included:

- 1) Victory films;
- 2) America Speaks Films (e.g. *The New Spirit*);
- 3) Films for Fighting Men (feature films);
- 4) Army Training Films;
- 5) Orientations Films;
- 6) Strategy Films (e.g. *Victory through Air Power*);
- 7) Good Neighbor Films (e.g. Disney's two Donald Duck cartoons for the Internal Revenue Service: *Saludos Amigos* (1943) and *The Three Caballeros* (1945));
- 8) Newsreels;
- 9) Moral Films (e.g. *Der Fuehrer's Face*; *Education for Death: The Making of the Nazi*);
- 10) United National Films.

(Culbert, 1990, Vol 2, p. vii)

The committee recognized that films played a significant role in war efforts, and the government could enlist Hollywood to deliver their message.

Hitler had written in *Mein Kampf*, "Victory is won by destroying enemy morale" (Culbert, Vol II, 1990, p. 6). Governments during this time used propaganda in order to sell certain policies and programs to people, as well as to demoralize enemies and make allies appear favorable (1990, Vol 2, p. xv). To keep Americans supporting the war, the government had to convince the American people war was necessary, and for "good citizens," it was important to support America's position. When studying film propaganda during this tumultuous period in history it is necessary to look at some of the many definitions on the term "propaganda" itself. In its definitional sense, propaganda describes the widespread promotion of particular ideas and doctrines, with scholars developing

sophisticated analyses of propaganda's effects. David Culbert, for example, compiled an anthology of government propaganda documents during WWII. He described propaganda as "the deliberate attempt by the few to influence the attitudes and behavior of the many by the manipulation of symbolic communication." Moreover, propaganda was "what practical people are paid to do, in practical ways, to achieve practical (hence measurable) objectives ... to make people *do* something they would not otherwise have done." Propaganda was, in Culbert's harshest assessment, "that branch of the art of lying which consists in very nearly deceiving your friends without quite deceiving your enemies" (Culbert, 1990, Vol 2, p. ix-x). While precise definition may be impossible, in order to study propaganda in film requires a basic understanding of this subjective word.

Propaganda involves the exaggeration of ideas already present in particular cultures, it removes certain cultural dominant themes that appear during times of crisis and is generally seen as defensive (although sometimes seen as offensive) when war comes (Culbert, 1990, Vol 3 p. xi). Propaganda "extracts and elevates selected themes to a dominant norm" and in the process allows exaggeration to become the norm (Culbert, 1990, Vol 3 p. xv). It is also crucial to distinguish between public propaganda (backed by government or official agencies) and private propaganda (an individual or studio working toward preselected goals) (1990, Vol 2, p. xiv). In Disney's case, it was a combination of the two. "The attempt to manipulate is not the same as manipulation" and those who study propaganda from this period must keep in mind that the desired effect of each individual film may be lost on an intended audience (Culbert, 1990, Vol 3, p. xiii). It is impossible to be certain that audiences have comprehended the original intent of the filmmaker simply by reading the visual signs and their intended meanings (or signifiers and signifieds)

encoded in the films. “The most effective propaganda was the most overt” and “should state its objectives clearly” (Smoodin, 1993, p. 81).

Every participant in World War II was in need of skilled propagandists. Germany even employed a Ministry of Propaganda led by Joseph Goebbels put in place to remedy the lack of propaganda the country put out during World War I (Culbert, 1990, Vol 2, p. xv). The most famous piece of German propaganda, as well as the one of the most brilliant, is Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* (1935) which set the standard for film propaganda. This film did such a convincing job selling Adolf Hitler to Germany and reminding the German people that Germany was becoming a great power once again, Hitler’s rise to power came easily. It was so powerful and successful at the time that it eventually inspired Hollywood’s Frank Capra in his celebrated series *Why We Fight* (Smoodin, 1993, p. 81). The army’s Information and Education Division (I&E) invited Capra to make a series of information (or propaganda) films to explain war endeavors to those in the armed services. The series played out in seven films and many were even released to civilian audiences in America, translated into foreign languages, and shown worldwide, making the series one of the most successful official war films produced by the U.S. Government (Culbert, 1990, Vol 2, p. xix).

Film played a central role during WWII, not only in American wartime instruction, but also in explaining the meaning of the war to American soldiers and citizens. Wartime signaled the time to shift both civilian and military branches of American society into the contemporary world of mass media. This new world featured media that offered escape, information, and as a source for social engineering — to reaffirm the United States as a democratic society with the media’s ability to spread democratic values (Raiti, 2007, p.

159). Analyzing these documents brings awareness of just how much the modern world during this time was shaped by the visual propaganda they were exposed to every time they went to the cinema.

Thematic Statement

By 1947, Walt Disney's Studios were famous for their short cartoons, animated motion pictures, and a small number of live-action films, all of which were distributed globally. This proposed thesis examines Disney between 1941 and 1945, the thirty-two animated shorts the studio produced for the government, and what effect they had on America during this period in history (Gabler, 2007, p. 410). Disney also worked with the FBI in its investigations of communists in Hollywood (Watts, 1997, p. 242). His name is rarely associated with the post-war Red Scare era, which is why it is so important to look at this neglected area of study in his life. From the studio strike, Disney blamed on communist interference to the government takeover of his studio during WWII and the subsequent testimony before Congress show that Disney was changed as much by what his studio produced as the rest of society was.

Viewers feel like they are taking a step back in time after watching the animated propaganda put together by the Disney studio. By revisiting the period, this thesis will develop a clearer understanding of the messages Disney produced, as well as the government's rationale in having him act as a propagandist. Not only did this animation comfort a scared and unsure audience, but also they offered a way for Americans to feel empowered and proud of their country. For Disney, films such as *The New Spirit*, *Der Fuehrer's Face*, and *Education for Death: The Making of the Nazi* were small

propagandistic forays used to reinforce the popular mood by attacking Nazism and the Nazi leader while the competition at Warner Bros. targeted the Japanese in their animated propaganda (Smoodin, 1993, p. 172). While these films were proven effective in the Gallup polls conducted, they did not change public opinion, they reinforced it. The Disney studio created them, but with the Army occupying the studio, the studio no longer produced Disney's work alone. As a result, Walt Disney lost control of his creations and was frustrated over the kinds of films he was being forced to make (Gabler, 2007, p. 393).

At the end of the day, Disney made significant contributions to the American success with the films he and his studio created during this time. The Treasury Department even gave him credit for helping to sell more than \$50 million worth of savings bonds (Gabler, 2007, p. 412). For a visionary like Disney, everything was about control. Walt Disney wanted to provide America with an escape or fantasyland and he thrived on the control and vicarious empowerment that came with it. "As he discovered each new, unexplored medium, his interest dwindled in the one that he had previously conquered" (Thomas, 1994, p. 144). Using Disney's testimony before the HUAC, the Gallup poll statistics he cites support the claim that these propaganda shorts were successful in their goal and using semiotic analysis is the best way to analyze them.

Significance of Study

The largest collections of documents relating to government propaganda in America ever published make up the volumes that hold together the *Film and Propaganda in America* series put together by David Culbert. These books contain nearly 6,000 pages of official government documents taken directly from government archives.

These documents allow scholars to access the sources they need in order to try to understand the meaning of particular films or the relation of film policy to overall government war endeavors. During World War II, every major participant used film to explain war aims. Some Hollywood films contained explicit propaganda and others merely hinted at anything that could be considered propaganda. The influence of other countries whose government placed great emphasis on film propaganda, such as Germany and Great Britain, is apparent when studying propaganda in America (Culbert, 1990, Vol 3, p. xv).

While there are hundreds of books and articles written about Walt Disney and his impact on society, none of them captures his role and contributions during WWII. Moreover, Walt Disney the person is not well known to most. This thesis will combine an analysis of Disney's films and an examination of his biography to develop a semiotic and cultural analysis of his place in history, specifically his role in propagandizing the American war effort during the 1940s. The changes in his political beliefs are evident in the changes in content the studio made. Disney was in charge of all the decisions at his studio and the animated films, including propaganda, were seen by millions of people. The Disney Studios, and therefore Disney himself, had a huge influence on American culture.

The actual films Disney made must be studied within a historical context to be fully understood. "Film propaganda is an easier historical source to justify as a subject for serious analysis than, for example, the use of feature films as a gauge of a particular society's collective interests" (Culbert, 1990, Vol 2, p. ix). Propaganda requires a mass audience to be effective and since the motion picture was the most effective medium to inform the nation according to President Roosevelt, the government was hard pressed to find an alternative means of informing the public (Raiti, 2007, p. 160). These films were

financed by the government and their messages created by the government. The sole purpose of these films was to influence and manipulate a passive audience, powerless to prevent the influence. The images of evil portrayed in the government-funded films shows that the power lies with the message of the text. For these reasons, scholars can study these particular propaganda cartoons as cultural artifacts. This forgotten and neglected period in Disney's history, in Hollywood, and in U.S. history deserves examination to show audiences today the significance of what Disney was doing.

To analyze these materials, a semiotic approach will be used to show that Disney and the Disney Studios had a tremendous impact on American mass media and popular culture during WWII and the subsequent Cold War. His lasting legacy and empire have continued to permeate society and his cartoons during WWII, although government fueled propaganda, contained the signature Disney magic appealing to both adults and children alike. Disney somehow managed to turn a Treasury Department message telling Americans to pay their taxes into a popular success that still has entertainment value more than six decades later. This is why Disney's cartoons were and still are so significant: Disney never set out to do anything ordinary. His animation and feature films were the best in the business so the world was not going to get ordinary propaganda, they were going to get "great, earth-shaking propaganda" and get it they did (Gabler, 2007, p. 394). While American wartime animated propaganda was not limited to the Disney Studios alone, Disney's specific brand of propaganda, with the help of animation, promoted optimism and nostalgia to encompass the blatant patriotism so clearly needed during WWII (Raiti 2007, p. 156).

Literature Review

Academic and popular presses have published voluminous literature ranging from scholarly articles to biographies about Walt Disney. Literature pertinent to this study focuses on a narrower selection of papers and books about propaganda and Disney's life. Biographical accounts have portrayed him as a visionary, but also as someone who fell short of perfection, or as an angry, lonely-even racist man who pushed away those who were closest to him. In his biography, Gabler looks to "penetrate the image and decipher the mystery of Walt Disney," as well as try to understand the psychological, cultural, and social forces that led to his art and his empire (2007, p. xx). Gabler's expansive book is painstakingly detailed and every moment of Disney's life from before he was born when his parents met, to the day he died.

Neal Gabler was the first biographer to have full access to the Disney Studio archives. It took seven years and thousands of hours digging through documents in the archives for this journalist and author to put together his massive book on Walt Disney. He focuses much of his book on Disney's financial troubles and does not portray Disney as a smart executive. Gabler discusses the high demand and costs of the films Disney was asked to produce for the government and says he was frustrated over the kinds of films he was being forced to make.

Gabler spends considerable time discussing the heartbreak that was the studio strike and betrayal of his employees-which contributed considerably to his conservative beliefs and his over-the-top patriotism. Disney became involved with the phantom enemy that came with the Cold War scares: communist subversion. He testified willingly before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). He joined the Hollywood

professional red-baiters by coming forth as a “friendly” witness on October 24, 1947 (Watts, 1997, p. 284). Disney claims the communists had tried to strong-arm him during the studio strike, which later motivated him to make propaganda for the government (Gabler, 2007, p. 451). Gabler focuses much of his biography to numbers and financial figures and the chapter discussing the Army’s occupation of the studio during WWII is no exception. Instead of looking at the content of the propaganda films, he chooses to show that the government underfinanced the studio to make these films and led to Disney losing thousands of dollars on each cartoon (2007, p. 400-401).

These films and their cultural influence deserve historical attention and there are many who have studied Disney history and chose not to include research on the government contracts and propaganda the studio created. Michael Barrier, another Disney biographer, is one who devotes little to the fact that Disney made propaganda during WWII. He spends even less time on Disney’s involvement in the communist witch-hunts and his testimony with the HUAC hearings. The studio became a different place after the strike that forced Disney to unionize his beloved company in 1940. The strain made him a broken man. He blamed the “communists” for the strike and his relationship with both those who went on strike and those who remained suffered. He became suspicious of everyone and thought of his own employees as enemies who had betrayed him (Barrier, 2007, p. 171-172). Barrier focuses his biography on Disney as an executive and on his work on Disney films. His powerful entrepreneurial drive combined with his artistic sensibility made Disney such an influential figure, likely a reason the government chose Disney to create their propaganda films (Barrier, 2007, p. 99). Barrier also addresses the fact that Disney did not animate any of his cartoons or feature films even though they all

bore his name. Even though Disney may not have drawn anymore, the studio, cartoons, films, style, and quality were all influenced by him and his creative genius.

While Disney was involved in the anti-communist movement by Congress, his testimony to the HUAC was not the first time he helped the government during times of war. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, the U.S. Army took over the Disney Studios. Disney was encouraged by the government to make commercial and industrial films to support World War II. At first he was not open to the idea and thought it would take away from the studio's purpose of entertaining, but in October of 1940, he met with service representatives about making training films (Gabler, 2007, p. 381-382). One of the biggest contributions to war efforts from the Disney Studios was the film *Victory through Air Power* based on a popular book by Major Alexander P. de Seversky (Barrier, 2007, p. 184-185). The film showed that the war could not be won with land forces or naval attacks, but with air attacks. This film was completely financed by the studio and the reactions to the film from the military accepted and implemented Seversky's policies (Barrier, 2007, p. 188). The Disney Studios were devoted to making training films and documentaries for the government and this war film is just one example of how Disney had a profound effect on American mass media and popular culture.

Disney's curious status in American culture inspired Steven Watts to write what he calls "a hybrid genre: part biography and part cultural analysis" (1997, p. xvii). Watts cites Disney's curious status as being seen as a beloved popular figure and object of intellectual disdain, a manipulator of a massive culture-industry machine, and as a reassuring uncle-type figure whose stern leadership was met with fear and resentment from former animators. Watts's book distinguishes the real Disney from the differing portrayals that

have muddied the waters and made any assessment extremely difficult. Watts does devote a decent amount of research to Disney and the studio during the Cold War unlike many other biographies. He also makes the argument that the films Disney made for the government helped shift his political beliefs into a more conservative and anti-communist slant. After Disney finished these government films, he became more involved in helping the government in the anti-communist crusade (Watts, 1997, p. 303).

While he is best remembered for pioneering the animated film and theme park, Kathy Jackson (1993) focuses her research on Disney's impact in the areas of animation, film, television, children's literature, theme parks, business, and the overall Disney vision. This compilation begins with a brief biography of the filmmaker, a complete listing of hundreds of articles, scholarly essays, and books on Disney that have appeared over the last six decades. Jackson also includes a survey of Disney's impact on various aspects of media and popular culture as well as extracts from a number of Disney's statements and interviews over the years. His extensive bibliography on Disney is critical in these lesser-known areas of his accomplishments, relative to how they shaped an entire generation.

Walt Disney is regarded in Hollywood as an innovator in the field of animation. His cinematic achievements are still widely viewed and the "happy memories" associated with the studio continue. In his biography written over 25 years ago, Leonard Mosley disrupts the "happy feelings" readers have when first thinking of Disney. Mosley claims that his book is not intended to upset or destroy the image of Disney, but to show the flaws in his character (1990, p. 9-10). He is suspicious of the legendary status associated with the man. While his biography is well written and researched, it suffers from a reliance on the rumor mill and a tendency to embellish the facts in the attempt to stir up scandal.

Mosley spends a lot of time blaming Disney for the strike and the trials that came with it, yet mentions nothing of his suspicion of a communist presence or of his testimony before the HUAC after devoting his studio to creating propaganda during WWII.

At the other extreme of biographies on Walt Disney and his famous studio is Bob Thomas's *Walt Disney: An American Original*. Written in 1976, Thomas was sanctioned by the studio to show readers the truest or best rendition of Walt Disney's life possible. As a veteran journalist, Thomas had interviewed Disney numerous times, and he was able to use material from these interviews as well as interviews from Roy Disney, Diane Disney and countless employees who worked with Disney. This clearly written biography is factually accurate and full of detail, yet this favorable analysis fails to include information and events that cast a dim light on Disney or his beloved studio. Disney's creativity and eye for talent is unquestionable and Thomas attempts to discover what led to the development of his creative processes. He focuses on the man's genius as opposed to his role as a cultural innovator. Thomas, like many who write about the Disney studio, elects to pass over Disney's role in producing propaganda for the government. While he does briefly mention *Victory through Air Power*, it is only to say that the studio produced it and it was not a box office success. It is not surprising that he chooses not to include information from this time as he worked closely with the studio and was even able to interview Disney himself before his death.

The 1940s was a tumultuous period for America, in war overseas and within the movie industry. Understanding and appreciating the social impact, cultural value, and lasting appeal of the films made during this time, as the industry shifted to war production, is important for this understudied period in American cinematic history. In Thomas

Schatz's book on the history of the American cinema during the 1940s, he looks at three phases of the decade: the prewar (1940-1941), wartime (1942-1945), and postwar (1946-1949) periods. Using archive materials including production records, movie reviews, studio contracts, legal and financial documents, and studio contracts as well as interviews and industry biographies, Schatz provides a thorough study of films made during this time. He focuses on the events of the decade and the effects they had on the movie industry. The studio strike as well as the U.S. Army occupying Disney Studios was extremely influential on Disney's animated product. Nearly all of Disney's wartime output supported the war effort and unlike other studios, made little money off them (Schatz 1997, p. 14). This was because the Disney Studios were the only studios designated as an official war production plant, producing not only training films but also animated shorts for moviegoers. The only feature Disney produced on their own during the war was the animated documentary on strategic bombing *Victory through Air Power*, which brought disappointing box-office returns (Watts, 1997, p. 236-237).

Schatz cites Donald Duck as a wartime star for Disney. He was the feature star of Disney's animated war shorts. As opposed to the upbeat Mickey Mouse, Donald's abrasive, quick-tempered manner brought humor and ambition to the films in which he starred. Schatz is also one of the only film historians able to compare the animated shorts Disney created for WWII with those of other studios including Warner Bros., MGM, Fox, and Paramount-although Disney was the only studio exclusively making animated shorts for the war effort. While Disney cartoons were successful, these films were produced at cost for the government and prevented the studio from making films of their own for higher profit (Gabler, 2007, p. 400-401).

While the films Disney made during WWII are a necessary area of study since this is the first time a country at war had media technology available to them, it is also important to look at the political, cultural, and industrial network they were apart of as well as what effect this animated propaganda had on the audience. In *Animated Culture: Hollywood Cartoons from the Sound Era*, Eric Smoodin stands out as one of the few scholars to look at Hollywood animation and the social implications that resulted. More than two-thirds of this book is spent discussing Disney and the relationship Disney and the studio had with the federal government. From making animated propaganda to serving as an FBI informant and testifying before the HUAC, Disney had a very close working relationship with the government. Smoodin is one of few researchers to realize this and write about the fact that over the last forty years, little scholarly attention has been given to Hollywood animation and is typically considered by audiences and the popular media as children's entertainment (Smoodin, 1993, p. 72). This book is definitely a crucial source to use when looking at this period in animated and American history. The number of primary sources and government documents consulted are critical in showing just what was happening between Hollywood and the government during WWII.

Another rare source that looks at the animated propaganda that came out of the Disney Empire is a journal article that analyzes these shorts from a globalization perspective. Gerard C. Raiti compares the effects of WWII on Hollywood to such global crises as the September 11 terror attacks and the War in Iraq. Raiti aims to show why changes in media technologies and politics have negated the use of animation and propaganda. Everything was different when Disney joined the war effort. "The U.S. government propaganda machine no longer uses animation as a medium of choice" and

Raiti provides an examination of the dangers of propaganda and argues that propaganda in the form of animation would probably be ineffective because today's citizens are focused more on the individual (Raiti, 2007, p. 166). Animation was an effective medium for propaganda because people associated cartoons with whimsical entertaining behavior (2007, p. 159). Having popular Disney characters give a serious patriotic message was successful because the non-threatening characters were associated with the nostalgic content of previous Disney films. While cartoons today may be marketed to children, this was not the case during their early life (Smoodin, 1993, p. xii). Cartoons, specifically those created as propaganda, were geared towards an adult audience and Disney's in particular during WWII contained adult themes and messages children would not understand.

Methodology

The primary sources considered in the methodology of this study include the original thirty-two animated shorts Disney made for the government between 1941 and 1945 as well as the full-feature *Victory through Air Power*. Recordings are from the released collection *Walt Disney Treasures: On the Front Lines* DVD's, and while all of the animation will be viewed, this study will focus on the three of the most popular and successful shorts: *The New Spirit* (1942); *Der Fuehrer's Face* (1943); and *Education for Death: The Making of the Nazi* (1943). These cartoons can also be viewed in their entirety on YouTube. Two newspaper articles from the period from the *Chicago Tribune* and *Los Angeles Times* also provide insight into this unusual era for the Disney Studios. To confirm government involvement in the Disney shorts of the early 1940s, official government contracts with Disney are also included in the study.

Semiotics

The many visual and textual meanings in these cartoons are ideal for a semiotic study. Semiotics is the study of signs and is useful in understanding and identifying the many signs depicting evil and danger or its opposite patriotism and safety, shown in the animated cartoons. This study will use semiotics in order to demonstrate that there is no such thing as a neutral viewing experience and that Disney's animated propaganda had a profound effect on audiences of this time. People find meaning in life by seeing things as signs. Signs are defined as anything that can be used to stand for something else (Berger, 2005, p. 21). The father of semiology, or as it is known today semiotics, Ferdinand de Saussure said that everything is a sign and it is pertinent to figure out how signs work and how they are interpreted (Mitry, 2000, p. 8). Signs are composed of a signifier (an image, text, or sound) and a signified (the concept generated by the signifier). Signifiers can change over time so it is important to learn what signifiers in film mean. Collective representations, or mass media including films, television shows, cultural practices, etc., are sign systems and therefore good for semiological analysis (Berger, 2005, p. 18).

The researcher Yuri Lotman describes the use of semiotics to study cinema. He sees semiotics as a worthy study of film images because films offer many layers of meaning and the more a person is aware of and able to interpret the signs presented before them, the more they can see in, and therefore read from, the image (Lotman, 1976, p. 41). Films are broken down into shots so there is the possibility of emphasizing any detail, especially in early-animated films where every single frame is painstakingly hand drawn. Just like in spoken language, syntax is used in film to generate certain meanings in the minds of the audience (1976, p. 27). Instead of ordering spoken words, there is the

ordering of shots. Every shot conveys meaning because it is a sign. Every shot carries information to the viewer.

Film criticism is extremely complicated since there are so many factors to deal with. Using semiotic analysis to study animated film means looking at every aspect of each film including not only particular shots or sequences of shots, but music, caricatured images, sound effects, scenery, pacing, and characters (Berger, 2005, p. 82). Lotman also says that “nothing in a work is accidental” and since there are so many factors to deal with, film criticism is extremely complicated (1976, p. 42).

Everything noticed during the viewing of a film has meaning. Not everything in a film will be noticed the first time it is viewed however and that is why when analyzing film, multiple viewings are necessary as things that escaped notice the first or even second viewing of a film may come into focus with further study. Audiences bring a great deal of outside information to the films they see, which helps them interpret the signifiers they are presented with (Lapsley & Westlake, 2006, p. 32). This means that in interpreting a sign in film, viewers bring to it, as with any text, a plethora of information that stems from educational, socio-economic, cultural, and moral backgrounds in order to make sense of and analyze what it is they are seeing. This means that different viewers have different ways of interpreting signs and there is no such thing as a neutral viewing experience (Harries, 1996, p. 48).

Semiotics is a vital area of study for the aesthetics of film. Any criticism offered on a film depends on being able to read its text and knowing what it means. Not understanding the signs leads to a lack of meaning in the film (Berger, 2005, p. 84-85). There is a fundamental connection between a sign-system, between the way we are taught

to interpret signs, as well as the social and economic institutions in society that create signs. The mass media makes use of this sign-system and plays a large role in molding the consciousness of those who consume the films (Berger, 2005, p. 84).

While it is important to study signs in mass media, it is important to remember that signs are often ambiguous and people can interpret signs differently from the way their creator expected them to be interpreted. The relationship between signifiers and signifieds are arbitrary and open to considerable differences in opinion. This kind of subjective research can be tricky as meaning comes into being only with the person who experiences it (Nowell-Smith, 2000, p. 15). The American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, who coined the term semiotics, said that a sign “is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity” (quoted in Berger, 2005, p. 21). Whoever interprets a sign plays a crucial role in making sense of signs and often times does not interpret the sign those who sent the sign believes they will. This can create issues when looking at signs in film, particularly in animated films without actors, where audiences often do not interpret signs correctly. Peirce also notes that in and of themselves, neither signification nor information guarantees meaning (Nowell-Smith, 2000, p. 15).

Being surrounded by visual messages, audiences today can become immune to the symbols and meanings they are constantly being bombarded with. During WWII, those who were able to get out maybe a few times a month and become exposed to the visual media messages of the theater, were captivated and engrossed by the multitude of symbols they viewed. Peirce, who did his work on studying signs during the Civil war, said that signs could represent an individual’s habits, state of mind or events (Borchard, Mullen, & Bates, 2000, p. 3). Peirce identified three types of signifiers: iconic, indexical, and

symbolic. Iconic signifiers are those that bear a resemblance to the signified, indexical signifiers have an underlying connection with the signified, and symbolic signifiers are those that are related to the signified by convention (Berger, 2005, p. 16). He also noted that the way elements were positioned in a frame led to a representative relationship between subject and viewer (2013, p. 3). In essence, “the way in which images were interpreted was not affected by the amount of information included in them, as long as the essential meaning of each symbol remained the same” (2013, p. 3).

The way the signs in the animated propaganda Disney created are interpreted today will most certainly be interpreted differently than they were when looked at more than sixty years ago. Audiences today have a very different relationship with media and the government so the relationship between the signifiers and signifieds as viewed today will be different from the way they were meant to be interpreted when these short animations were first shown.

Saussure explains that language is “a system of interdependent terms in which the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others” (Lapsley & Westlake, 2006, p. 33). This means that people generally tend to think in terms of opposites, such as happy versus sad, white versus black, rich versus poor, smart versus dumb, or as is the case with propaganda created during WWII, good versus evil. This analysis will study the films *The New Spirit*, *Der Fuehrer's Face*, and *Education for Death: The Making of the Nazi* using semiotic analysis to show how they generate meaning by using conventionally understood signs, otherwise known as signifiers.

The New Spirit

The New Spirit was one of the first films the government contracted with Walt Disney to make. The Treasury Department needed a film to speak to Americans and convince them to pay their income tax. The \$80,000 price tag caused many critics to raise their eyebrows but proved a worthy investment and was successful nonetheless (Watts, 1997, p. 231-232).

This cartoon is a Donald Duck cartoon through and through. Donald is portrayed as feisty, stubborn, and impatient, and at the same time, a character to whom many felt they could relate. He was flawed and made mistakes, had a temper at times, and provided a “human” relief to the always optimistic and heroic Mickey Mouse. Mickey Mouse would pay his taxes just because you asked him and it was the right thing to do, Donald Duck on the other hand would need some convincing.

The intent of this film was to inform and educate average Americans about the new tax law. The release for the film explains that “Treasury tax experts called upon Disney for guidance in determining Donald Duck’s status and decided Donald was the ‘head of a family’ because of his support of his three adopted nephews, ‘for whose maintenance he has a legal and moral obligation’” (as quoted in Smoodin, 1993, p. 170-171). Donald emerged as a role model and patriarch whose number one priority was to his dependents and if he could do it, so could any American taxpayer (1993, p. 171). This film speaks directly to the audience and shows them why they are fighting. This cartoon is the shortest of the three and has an eight-minute run time.

Der Fuehrer's Face

This is another Donald Duck cartoon and is rare in that Donald is not playing himself; he is a German factory worker slaving away under the Nazi regime and is dressed as a Nazi himself. While Donald's true characteristics are still present, he is not in his usual red, white, and blue sailor getup that is so recognizable. The intent of this cartoon is to entertain American audiences and poke fun of the Axis powers while at the same time showing the cruelty of Hitler and the Nazis. Again, Donald is used as the main character as opposed to the good-natured Mickey Mouse or affable goofball Goofy. Donald is one of the few characters who could believably portray a Nazi and afterwards still maintain the love of America. The gap between Donald striving for mental calm while working under Nazi conditions and his dramatic failure to do so as his workload increases resonate in this historically comedic cartoon (Watts, 1997, p. 257).

Der Fuehrer's Face shows the struggles that go along with the demands of living in an authoritarian state. In this cartoon audiences see Donald beginning his day as a German factory worker dressed in full Nazi gear. He is poked out of bed by the marching Axis leaders and prepares for his day before marching off to work with a bayonet poking him in the back. The tailspin of Donald working to death in an ammunition factory with work breaks only to "Heil Hitler" every time a photo of Hitler appears on the ammunition line is saved by Donald waking up from a nightmare and a happily-ever-after ending of him kissing the Statue of Liberty. Showing what it means to be a German citizen under Hitler's rule, Disney brought to American audiences the reality those living in European countries face every day. The poster for the cartoon is of Donald Duck throwing a rotten tomato into a caricature of Hitler's face. This image would pull in American audiences as

it made Hitler seem less threatening with a rotten tomato in his face. This cartoon has an eight-minute run time and *Der Fuehrer's Face* even won the Academy Award for Best Animated Short Film at the Fifteenth Academy Awards (Jackson, 1993, p. 190).

Education for Death: The Making of the Nazi

Disney never tackled a more serious subject than the one dramatized in this dark cartoon. *Education for Death: The Making of the Nazi* by Gregor Ziemer, based on a bestselling book, departs from the Disney norm by showing how Nazis indoctrinate an innocent young boy and brainwash him into believing party ideology (Maltin, 2004). Since this film was shown to general audiences it was smart to include moments of humor such as the hilarious fairytale scene drawn by Disney veteran animator Ward Kimball in which a knight in shining armor Hitler romances and saves the portly princess Germania (shown as a caricature of Goering) (Watts, 1997, p. 269). But there's nothing funny about book burning and when we see boys acting genuinely cruel it's shocking just as it's meant to be. The ending is one of the darkest and most visually intense scenes ever included in a Disney cartoon. These are just some of the things that make this cartoon and its message so powerful.

Looking at the life of a young German boy from his birth to his adult life as a Nazi soldier, this cartoon shows vulnerability of young children and how they are bred to be monsters. Audiences see how Germany teaches the superiority of the strong over the weak and even how to the Germans their own people are disposable. This cartoon is the longest of the three, and one of the longest Disney produced during this time with the exception of the feature animated *Victory through Air Power* (1943), running ten minutes.

Weaving primary source materials into the findings — for purposes of the Findings and Conclusion — will produce a context for interpreting the themes that develop. While previous attempts to discover the identity of Walt Disney have been wide and various, they generally have not included Disney’s own words. One particularly important interview for the purposes of this study is that of Disney’s testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) on October 24, 1947. In his testimony, he discusses the effect that he believes communists have had on his employees who had recently unionized and gone on strike. This deeply hurt Disney and made him suspicious and untrusting of those closest to him at the studio.

Disney’s testimony is a word-for-word transcript taken from the California Polytechnic State University website. It contains questions ranging from basic demographics—date and location of birthplace, occupation, location of company—to questions regarding suspicions of communists in Hollywood. Disney was openly and strongly anti-communist and played a rather large role during the blacklisting era of Hollywood. Not only does his testimony show he was not afraid to name names, but that he believed communists were behind the studio strike as that is the only way his employees would betray him. This testimony is critical in studying this period at the Disney Studios and how Disney’s personal beliefs regarding the threat of the communist party in this country affected the material produced by the studio.

When Don Peri first met former Disney animator, director, and producer Ben Sharpsteen in 1974, his lifelong interest in all things Disney became his calling. Together they worked on Sharpsteen’s memoirs during his thirty years at the studio. Peri was then inspired to seek out and interview as many former Disney animators, producers, and artists

as he could. These interviews were conducted at the studio, by mail, by telephone, and some at the interviewees' homes (Peri, 2008, p. xi-xii). They offer a fresh, unique perspective on Disney because of the range of subjects and interviewees featured. Most of the group interviewed were at the studio during the Golden Age of Animation from the late 1920s to the early 1940s when Walt Disney was advancing the field of animation and was seen as a darling of film critics and the public (2008, p. xiii). There were so many talented Disney employees to interview that Peri had to split the interviews into two books: The first, *Working with Walt: Interviews with Disney Artists*; and the second, *Working with Disney: Interviews with Animators, Producers, and Artists*. The interviews in both books as a collective whole create an enlightening perspective on the Walt Disney Studios as it grew from its roots in animation to the media powerhouse it's known as today.

Peri conducted interviews between 1976 and 2005 looking at not only their relationships with Disney, but also their relationships with each other. Peri makes no qualms regarding bias in these in-depth interviews. He says there is no way to avoid bias, but throughout the more than ninety interviews conducted there is revealed a little piece of the puzzle that is Walt Disney (Peri, 2011, p. xiv-xv). Some of the extensive interviews are conducted with three of the original "Nine Old Men of Animation" — Ollie Johnston, Frank, Thomas, and Marc Davis. Peri also interviews two former Disney Mousketeers from the original *Mickey Mouse Club*: Sharon Baird and Bobby Burgess who offer valuable perspectives on the work produced by the Walt Disney Studios with the new medium television. Lou Debney, a Disney television producer, discusses the company's influence and involvement with television and live-action film. While Peri asks nearly

everyone he interviews about the studio strike, discussion of Disney's testimony before the HUAC, and his anti-communist values receive no attention in either book.

One of the most gifted artists and inventive storytellers ever to work for Disney was Carl Barks, another unknown talent at the Disney Studios whose specialty lay in creating the imaginative tales for Donald Duck. In an edited volume of interviews on Barks, Donald Ault aims to introduce him to audiences who have never heard his name. These interviews are important historically because these personal contacts allow the mask of anonymity to crack (Ault, 2003, p. ix-x). As was the policy at the studio, everything and anything produced carried the name and face of Walt Disney. The public can now see who truly was behind drawing their favorite Disney characters, most notably Donald Duck who played such a big role in the propaganda films of WWII. This book contains two dozen interviews by historians, journalists, and researchers all hoping to discover who Carl Barks is. There is no mention of Disney's testimony before HUAC and little discussed on the studio strike. The point made repeatedly is that Barks did not participate in the strike and that he believed many of the opinions and views of Disney that are negative, are false. Barks believed that Disney was fair and honest and ran a wonderful company with a keen business sense (2003, p. 51). While these interviews focus more on Carl Barks' work while at Disney, his perception of Disney and the events over the years which had profound effects on Disney and the studio are critical in understanding the change in content during the course of Barks' more than 30 years with the company.

Looking at the propaganda films *The New Spirit*, *Der Fuehrer's Face* and *Education for Death: The Making of the Nazi* helps provide an overall representation of the different types of propaganda produced by the Disney Studio. The federal

government's attempts to exercise social control through Disney animation are seen through the film examples viewed here. They serve as an example of increased government willingness during WWII to propagandize the American population (Smoodin, 1993, p. 137).

The first film viewed, *The New Spirit*, was paid for by the United States Treasury and the message and tone in the film speak directly to the audience. The second film, *Der Fuehrer's Face*, was also financed by the government and is a humorous but warning portrayal of life as a German ammunition factory worker. This cartoon is purely for entertainment and is not a direct message to the audience. The final film, *Education for Death: The Making of the Nazi*, was like the other two financed by the government, but looks at Germany's children, particularly the male children, and how they are raised to become Nazi soldiers. This cartoon is meant to alarm American audiences with its dark subject matter and tone.

These three cartoons are very different in style and content, but they were all successful in captivating an American audience and spreading propaganda in entertaining seven to ten minute cartoons. Several propaganda films showcased the Disney Studio's contribution to the war effort and polished its image in the public eye, but the three looked at here offer a unique perspective separate them from the many cartoons Disney made (Watts, 1997, p. 230). In addition they helped symbolize the American fighting spirit and it's willingness to embrace internationalism (1997, p. 258). The many signifiers presented are powerful and their signified speak directly to an American nation at war.

CHAPTER TWO

FINDINGS

Disney used signifiers in his animated propaganda as a shorthand way of conveying the ideas either of the studios or of the government agencies that funded them — ideas that alluded to certain historical events that would register with those who viewed the animation at the time. Many of the following signifiers and signifieds will be identified:

| <u>Signifier</u> | <u>Signified</u> |
|-------------------|---|
| Swastika | Evil, hate, enemy |
| Adolf Hitler | Cruel, controlling, desire for absolute power |
| Weapons | Harm, war, threat, fighting |
| Nazis | Hunters, obedient, powerful |
| Nazi salute | Obedient, powerful, pitiless |
| American Flag | Pride, safety, patriotism, good |
| Japanese Flag | Bad, threatening, enemy |
| Statue of Liberty | The icon of America, patriotism |
| Donald Duck | Tough, fiery, strong personality, beloved Disney character, American |
| Fire | Fear, danger |
| Dark red sky | Fear, hostility, death |
| Gravestones | True cost of war |

| | |
|----------------|-----------------------|
| Young children | Innocence, the future |
| Soldiers | Obedient, protecting |

These signifiers and signified will be identified and discussed in each of the Disney films viewed in this study. They will be categorized into two thematic themes. The signifiers and the signified they represent will either be considered *American Patriotism* or *Axis Power* themed — in other words, themes of good versus evil. Each film will be analyzed in detail separately and then their themes will be compared and discussed with their cultural significance assessed.

Using semiotics as a theory in order to analyze and study these cartoons, or any piece of media, is completely subjective. The signifiers identified and the signified they represent will always vary from person to person, culture to culture and time period in which the viewing occurs. This kind of qualitative analysis is unique in that the desire to understand the many signifiers and their signified in historical pieces, such as those looked at here, takes patience and a commitment to want to understand the material and audience they were created for in the time period in which they were first shown. The Disney shorts looked at here represent a diverse range of propaganda shorts and were selected for further analysis to show the different categories a piece of propaganda can fall under.

The New Spirit (1942)

The consumption of media texts has an effect or influence upon the audience. This is no more apparent than in the 1942 film *The New Spirit*. This animated short film, produced by Disney and the Treasury Department, was released as part of the War

Activities Committee of the Motion Pictures Industry (Watts, 1997, p. 228). This seven-minute cartoon was the first of the Disney propaganda productions, stars the popular Donald Duck, and was created to encourage American citizens to pay their income taxes in support of the war effort. The goal was not only to persuade Americans to pay their taxes promptly, but to show that it was fast and easy. It was important to show paying taxes as a good thing by explaining why the government needed the money; especially since recently revised tax laws made first-time taxpayers out of less affluent wage earners (Smoodin, 1993, p. 129). This short was designed to inform and appeal to a certain aspect of the American people, the lower and lower middle classes, and assure them of the patriotism that came with paying their taxes (1993, p. 170). The underlying message was, even if you could not physically fight in the war, you could do your part and help your country by paying your income tax.

The intended audience for *The New Spirit* is a passive audience meant to comply with the messages hidden, and not so hidden, in the text. As Donald Duck is listening to the radio, an announcer talks about the new patriotic spirit in America and asks Donald if he is willing to do his part. Donald snaps to attention and excitedly runs to grab random household items to help. This excitement fades as the announcer tells him the way he can help is by paying his income tax. He initially balks at the thought of paying his income taxes, but then, as the radio voice conjures up images of the threat posed by Germany and Japan and the Axis Powers, Donald realizes that for the average citizen, complying with tax laws during wartime serves as the highest form of patriotism (Smoodin, 1993, p. 168). He becomes motivated once the announcer tells him how the country needs the money for

resources in the war and proclaims the cartoon's slogan "Taxes to Beat the Axis!" (*The New Spirit*, 1942).

The announcer walks Donald through filling out the easy form himself and urges him to mail his payment at once. The radio, who has facial like features (AM/FM windows for eyes, tuning knob for a nose and a mouth shaped speaker) asks Donald about his dependents and he lists his three nephews Huey, Dewey, and Louie who appear as angels above him. Donald's nephews, Huey, Dewey, and Louie, appearing as angels above signify to the audience that Donald is a saint-like figure who selflessly cares for his nephews on his small salary as an actor of \$2,501.00. While Donald is giving the answers for his tax form, the animated pen takes a drink of animated ink and they help Donald correctly fill out his easy form. The ease and speed through which Donald fills out his income tax form is one way this cartoon manipulates the passive audience. These signifiers in the first four minutes and thirty seconds fall under the *American Patriotism* category, are inspiring, and signify safety to an America at war. By reinforcing the point that anyone can pay their taxes and be patriotic, the audience becomes fully receptive to the propaganda they are watching.

The end of the film is a montage of images to show the audience how their income tax money will be used for wartime necessities in order to defeat the Axis Powers. The enemy planes that are shown from beneath are plastered with swastikas and the nose of the planes have shark teeth painted on them. This indicates to the audience that the Nazis are evil and want to tear apart American soldiers. There is also a graveyard of Nazi planes after the American tax funded planes have shot them all down. The ending not only reminds the audience that their taxes are essential for American victory and will secure

democracy, but shows that the vast Nazi threat can and will be taken down if the average taxpaying American citizen does their part. This montage is filled with visual signifiers of the *Axis Powers* that signify fear in the audience. “*The New Spirit* achieved its propaganda purpose because it aroused interest in income tax, and definitely connected income tax revenue with the war” (Smoodin, 1993, p. 174). This film was also nominated for the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature at the fifteenth Academy Awards (Watts, 1997, p. 229).

When giving his testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), Disney was asked if he believed there were any current Communist or Fascist employees at his studio to which he responded, “No; at the present time I feel that everybody in my studio is one-hundred-percent American.” Following this he was asked if he believed he had employed any such people in the past and to this, he said, “Yes; in the past I had some people that I definitely feel were Communists.” The committee then brought up the studio strike in the early 1940s and asked if Disney felt “the strike was instituted by members of the Communist Party to serve their [own] purposes.” He proceeded to tell them it was obvious over the course of the strike that there was indeed a Communist group trying to take over his artists and that they succeeded. He even named Herbert Sorrell, a union organizer and leader, as well as William Pomerance and David Hilberman, both animators at Disney Studios, saying they were of the Communist mindset and was still suspicious of them.

American fears of Communist conspiracy triggered a string of red scares and led to investigations by the HUAC and the paranoia of McCarthyism. Disney used his studio to engage Americans with the broad issues of the Cold War. In this way, he played a crucial

role as an arbitrator of American political principles. The HUAC asked Disney if he had ever made any pictures that contained propaganda. He responded by telling them that the studio made one for the Treasury Department on taxes, *The New Spirit*, as well as four anti-Hitler films. Disney also makes special mention for *Victory Through Air Power*, which he considers a film made just as much for him as for the country. The interviewer, Mr. Smith, then proceeded to ask Disney whether he felt the films could be used effectively to disseminate propaganda. Disney said the films were proven to work by increasing the number of taxpayers by 13 million, citing a recent Gallup poll that found 29 percent admitted the film persuaded them into filing their taxes as well as helped give them a clear picture of what taxes will do to help the war effort. In his testimony, Disney not only admits to knowingly making propaganda for the government, but also says how he was successful, namely with the cartoon *The New Spirit*, in what the studio produced. This interview shows the true change in Disney's politics and beliefs that influenced the future decisions he made and the content the studio came to produce.

Der Fuehrer's Face (1943)

Another propaganda short cartoon produced by Disney was 1943's *Der Fuehrer's Face*. This is again a Donald Duck cartoon, but this time it is not a specific message the cartoon is attempting to portray to the audience. This cartoon's main purpose was to show the evil nature of the Nazis in a humorous way. The cartoon begins with a band composed of Axis leaders marching through a German town singing the virtues of the Nazi doctrine. Almost everything, everywhere is shaped as a swastika, from the treetops to clouds, bushes, windmills, fences, fire hydrants, and the tops of power lines and street lamps.

These signifiers are constantly on the screen in various forms and signify the threat of Nazi Germany and the control they have over every aspect of European society. This also shows American audiences watching during this time that the Nazis and Hitler's murderous ways are everywhere and the world cannot escape their message.

The audience then sees Donald sleeping in bed as the marching Axis leaders march by and after his alarm clock with swastikas taking the place of numbers goes off he smashes it, grabs the swastika handle on his shade and pulls it shut. He is then poked out of bed through his window by a bayonet to get him up and ready for work. "Donald the Nazi" (yes, the beloved Donald Duck stars as a Nazi in this one) dresses in his Nazi uniform behind his swastika emblazoned dressing screen, gives a "Heil Hitler" to a caricature portrait on his wall of Hitler and sits down at his table beside his swastika covered wallpaper. Donald opens his safe from behind Hitler's portrait and pulls out his can of coffee and from it removes one coffee bean tied to a string that he then dips in a cup of hot water and hurriedly puts back in the safe before anyone can see. He then grabs a bottle labeled "Aroma de Bacon & Eggs" and sprays it twice into his mouth before slicing his stale bread, which as he is slicing appears to be from a loaf shaped log of wood. In this scene, the signifiers include one coffee bean, the spray bottle of the aroma of bacon and eggs, and the wooden loaf of bread, all signifying wartime rationing followed by citizens living in a war zone. After his breakfast, a copy of *Mein Kampf* is shoved in Donald's face on the end of a bayonet.

The band marches Donald out of his house and takes him to the factory where he will be working his 48-hour daily shift. As Donald is being marched to work by the Axis Powers, the audience sees the swastika in and on everything. From the shapes of treetops

to clouds, windmills, bushes, fences, fire hydrants, and the tops of power lines and street lamps, everything they march by is in the shape of a swastika. This signifier evokes feelings of fear and shows viewers the control and influence of Adolf Hitler and his Nazis in Europe. Donald's job in this world is on an assembly line screwing caps onto artillery shells. Whenever a caricature portrait of Hitler appears on the line, and there are many-one after the other, he must perform yet another Hitler salute while continuing to work. All the while Donald is bombarded with propaganda chants about how wonderful it is to work for "Der Fuehrer."

This cartoon shows Nazis as extremely intense and cruel to even their own people. The pace at the factory increases and the size of the shells vary as they come out. Donald humorously tries to screw the caps on as fast as he can, just as Charlie Chaplin does when working in a factory in *Modern Times*, but cannot keep up. The Nazis are shouting at him to work faster and harder before finally announcing that by the generosity of "Der Fuehrer," Donald is being granted paid vacation in order to relax and come back to work harder and longer for "Der Fuehrer." His vacation consists of being placed in front of a picture of the Alps painted on a curtain. Once his vacation is over, he is told he has been selected to work overtime and it begins immediately. Overwhelmed, frazzled, and threatened by bayonet wielding Nazis, he eventually screams, "I can't stand it! I can't stand it, I'm going nuts! Stop! Stop!" (*Der Fuehrer's Face*, 1943). He has a panic attack and begins hallucinating artillery shells everywhere. Even Donald himself becomes an object on the assembly line, shell casings pound, and walk on him.

As they clear up, Donald is back in his bed in his United States flag pajamas and audiences see it was all just a nightmare. A shadow on the wall appears to salute as a Nazi

and just as he begins to salute Hitler and give a “Heil Hitler,” he discovers it is just the shadow from his Statue of Liberty figurine. Donald embraces and kisses this symbol of America and lets out a squawk of relief proclaiming, “Oh boy am I glad to be a citizen of the United States of America!” (*Der Fuehrer’s Face*, 1943). Donald was not the victim of Nazi Germany, but of a nightmare. He is back in the good old, and safe, United States and everything is now going to be okay.

The Statue of Liberty signifies a sense of pride and the safety of living in America and the freedom that comes with being an American. The cartoon shows audiences the freedoms being an American citizen guarantees as well as the lack of freedom citizens in Nazi Germany are faced with every day. Donald’s American flag pajamas and Statue of Liberty figurine are welcome signs of relief signifying that Donald Duck is still America’s beloved cantankerous duck and not “Donald Duck the Nazi.” The stars and stripes covering Donald’s pajamas, curtains, tablecloth, and wallpaper are in direct opposition to the swastikas seen all over Nazi Germany in Donald’s nightmare. The stars and stripes signify extreme patriotism on Donald’s part and that Donald is indeed in America, safely away from the terrible situation overseas.

Der Fuehrer’s Face shows Donald living his nightmare as he faces food shortages and an accelerating assembly line where he frantically attempts to screw down bomb casings in time (Watts, 1997, p. 231). In this wartime propaganda short, Donald reaches his comedic climax as he goes berserk working on the speeded up assembly line in an ammunitions factory. An American audience watching at the time would appreciate the fact that their government had not forced them to work in a factory to help the war effort or try to control every aspect of their lives, and at the same time, the audience would be

turned off by the abrasive manner of the Nazis. The main signifier prevalent throughout this cartoon is the swastika. It emblazons everything and anything that can be made in the shape of a swastika is. The frequency with which the swastika appears shows audiences how rampant Nazism was overseas and how forceful Hitler was in delivering his message. While this cartoon is not as specific in its propagandistic message, it is effective in reinforcing negative thoughts and views of the Nazis from the various signs throughout.

In opposition of *The New Spirit*, the first part of *Der Fuehrer's Face* (the first seven minutes to be exact) falls into the category of *Axis Power* themed and the last minute, and rest of the cartoon, is *American Patriotism* themed. This cartoon also differs from *The New Spirit* in that the entire thing is pure propaganda; it is not hiding behind another message such as *The New Spirit* and its educational approach in trying to encourage people to pay their income taxes. *Der Fuehrer's Face* is successful in that it depicts Nazism and Adolf Hitler as ridiculous, controlling and over the top. It is also successful in its attempt to show the cruelty of the Nazis towards their own people and in its attempt to show to American audiences how grateful they should be that they live in America and are able to hold on to their freedoms even during a time of war.

Education for Death: The Making of the Nazi (1943)

The last cartoon looked at is *Education for Death: The Making of the Nazi*, also made in 1943. This film is based on a book by Gregor Ziemer and looks at what was going on in the Nazi schooling of German youth (Gabler, 2007, p. 390). Unlike *Der Fuehrer's Face*, *Education for Death: The Making of the Nazi* is clearly made, as is *The New Spirit*, as propaganda with a specific message. In this case, it is anti-Nazi propaganda and shows

the horrors of Germany's education system. This is also one of the few Disney propaganda shorts not featuring a popular Disney character. The film follows the story of the infant Hans. Born, bred, and raised to become a merciless Nazi, Hans is doomed from the day he is born. First Hans's parents must show birth certificates to a Nazi judge to prove they have pure Aryan blood and have the name of their son approved. They are then given a family passport with spaces for twelve more children and the narrator explains this is a hint for the couple to have more children, produce more soldiers. The characters in the cartoon speak only in German. There are no subtitles, only the narrator explaining what everyone is saying. The narrator then takes the audience through the course of Hans's education.

Hans's education begins with kindergarten and the Nazi version of *Sleeping Beauty* the children are told wherein the evil witch is democracy, the knight in shining armor is a skinny Adolf Hitler and "Sleeping Beauty" is an obese, love struck Germania. Germania falls in love with Hitler upon seeing him and he in his outlandish armor struggles with lifting the rotund maiden onto his horse. The narrator observes, "the moral of this story seems to be that Hitler got Germany on her feet, climbed into the saddle and took her for a ride," signifying to the audience that the Axis Powers believe Hitler will save Germany from the evil Democracy trying to destroy them once again (*Education for Death: The Making of the Nazi*, 1943). Hans and his classmates then give the Hitler salute to a smirking portrait of him dressed as a knight.

Before he can continue his education, Hans becomes ill and with his mother at his bedside, a Nazi officer comes to warn her if Hans does not get better he will be taken away since he will be too weak to be a Nazi. This scene implies that the Nazis euthanize sick

children speaks to mothers everywhere, and with women composing the majority of the audiences at the time, the idea of a child being taken away by the government is unthinkable. Once Hans is back in the classroom, a schoolteacher in a Nazi uniform tells the children the story of a strong fox eating a weak rabbit. When Hans feels sorry for the rabbit he is forced to sit in a corner wearing a dunce cap. Hans's other classmates correctly interpret the story that the strong shall dominate and destroy the weak. He recants his statement, screaming that he hates the weak rabbit and the strong are superior.

The classroom environment disappears and the cartoon takes a dark and disturbing turn. Books and valuable art are being burned, the Bible is replaced with Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, the crucifix is replaced with a Nazi sword, and a church with broken windows is burned. Audiences see Hans growing from adolescent to teenager to young man all the while marching and heiling with the rest of Hitler youth. The narrator speaks over the rows of marching soldiers saying that as a good Nazi, Hans sees "nothing but what the party wants him to see," and then Nazi blinders are put over Hans's eyes. Hans says, according to the narrator, "nothing but what the party wants him to say" (then a mouthpiece is put over Hans's mouth), and does "no more than the party wants him to do" (chains are then placed around Hans and the rest of the marching Nazis necks) (*Education for Death: The Making of the Nazi*, 1943). The imagery in this scene is extremely vivid and difficult to watch. The film ends as Hans and the rest of the Nazis march off to war only to fade into rows of graves with a swastika and helmet perched on top showing the reality that the true cost of war is human lives. The narrator informs the audience that Hans's education is complete: his education for death.

In this cartoon, the characters speak in German and a narrator speaks over them explaining to the audience what they are saying. This technique brings realism to the cartoon by making it seem as though the audience and narrator are watching actual events throughout Hans's life. This also provides a disconnection for the audience. They have no idea what the German characters are saying and must trust the narrator to translate. The use of a narrator to translate is a signifier that signifies a lack of understanding in Nazism and the German people. How can Americans understand the control and bizarre behavior of those under Hitler's control? Why would the people overseas tolerate this treatment of themselves and their children? This cartoon is purely meant to shock and encourage anger and hatred towards America's German enemy.

The Disney artists were accustomed to animating fanciful characters but this was something completely different and it is apparent in this cartoon how well they stage each scene for dramatic impact using shadows and silhouettes to emphasize the menace inherent in each phase of this chronicle. Bringing realistic human characters to life was always Disney animators' greatest challenge and they do an exceptional job with the German characters seen here. This grim cartoon shows how the Germans preach the superiority of the strong over the weak complete with book and fine art burning, breaking church windows, replacing the cross with a swastika emblazoned sword and replacing the bible with Hitler's autobiographical manifesto *Mein Kampf*. *Education for Death: The Making of the Nazi* in its entirety is composed of signifiers that fall into the *Axis Power* category. This is the only cartoon of the three studied that contains no signs signifying *American Patriotism*.

When studying these cartoons it is easy to classify them all as blatant propaganda. But to look deeper at their signs and inherent meanings, gives a sense of awe, as nothing even remotely similar in nature would ever be acceptable by today's standards. It is hard to be completely objective when watching these cartoons, and even more difficult to imagine the state of mind an American audience during this tumultuous time would have more than seventy years ago. The first cartoon viewed, *The New Spirit*, is full of *American Patriotism* for the first four and a half minutes while the last part is purely *Axis Power* themed. The second cartoon, *Der Fuehrer's Face*, is in opposition to *The New Spirit* in that the *Axis Power* agenda is up front, devotes the first seven minutes to this theme, and saves the last minute, and thus Donald Duck's image in the eyes of the audience, for a theme of *American Patriotism*. The last cartoon, and by far the most disturbing, viewed is *Education for Death: The Making of the Nazi*. This is the only cartoon studied in which the entire ten minutes is *Axis Power* themed and any notion of America or its Allies are completely absent. *Education for Death: The Making of the Nazi* is also the only cartoon looked at that does not feature a beloved Disney character and is one of the only cartoons produced during this time that is extremely dark in nature.

Screenshot Analysis

The following annotations for screenshots, which are included in the Appendices, reveal the key signifiers and signified themes of the individual animated films studied.

The New Spirit

Figure 1: Donald Duck's 'zeal' shines in his eyes as he hears a voice on the radio proclaim the "new spirit" is that of a free people united in a common cause as a result of paying their taxes.

Signifiers: American flag and Donald Duck.

Signified: Pride, safety, patriotism, good; tough, fiery, strong personality, beloved Disney character, American.

Figure 2: Here Donald lists his three nephews as dependents and they are seen as perfect angels who need a responsible caretaker like Donald.

Signifiers: Donald Duck; Donald's nephews; Halo.

Signified: Tough, fiery, strong personality, caretaker, beloved Disney character, American; Young children, innocence, the future; Pure, innocent, saintly.

Figure 3: In this image, American stars and stripes appear in the sky, victorious over the enemy and able to fight Axis planes and weapons because of patriotic Americans paying their taxes promptly.

Signifiers: American flag; Clouds/sky as American flag; Weapons.

Signified: Pride, safety, patriotism, good; America triumphant over Axis, the United States is the future; Harm, war, threat, fighting; Planes; War, threat.

Figure 4: This image shows the graveyard of enemy planes sinking after being bombed by the American planes. The threat is demolished and America will be safe.

Signifiers: Swastika Planes; Red circle; Sinking, destroyed planes.

Signified: Evil, hate, enemy; War, threat; Japan, threat, enemy; Victory, triumph, defeat.

Figure 5: Here the German war machine has guns for eyes and mouths, and Nazis represent one gigantic evil looking to prey on innocent communities and destroy their enemy. America could be next.

Signifiers: Swastika; Weapons; German war machine; Dark red sky; Neighborhood below.

Signified: Evil, hate, enemy; Harm, war, threat, fighting; Wanting to harm people's safe communities; Signified: Fear, hostility, death; People, community in danger.

Der Fuehrer's Face

Figure 6: This poster advertisement of *Der Fuehrer's Face* depicts Donald Duck throwing a rotten tomato in Hitler's face. This makes Hitler appear less threatening and shows that the enemy can be overthrown.

Signifiers: Swastika; Adolf Hitler; Donald Duck throwing tomato at Hitler.

Signified: Evil, hate, enemy; Cruel, controlling, desire for absolute power; Tough, standing up to the enemy.

Figure 7: Swastika shaped windmills, clouds and bushes make up the background while obediently marching Axis leaders play instruments and sing about how wonderful “Der Fuehrer” is.

Signifiers: Swastika; Nazis; Axis leaders playing instruments.

Signified: Evil, hate, enemy; Hunters, obedient, powerful, pitiless; Controlled by Adolf Hitler, obedient, threatening.

Figure 8: Donald the Nazi stands in his small kitchen area in front of his swastika lined wallpaper preparing a rationed and nutrient lacking breakfast before marching off to work like the rest of Nazi German citizens.

Signifiers: Swastika Donald Duck Nazi Wall safe One coffee bean from coffee can Aroma de bacon bottle.

Signified: Evil, hate, enemy; Tough, fiery, strong personality, American; Hunters, obedient, powerful, pitiless; Protection, security, privacy; Rationing, frugal; Rationing, frugal.

Figure 9: This image is of the factory Donald the Nazi works in. Swastika’s mark the factory, clearly identifying it as German, and even the tops of the power lines are shaped as swastikas. The dark red sky above signify the evil that the factory helps produce.

Signifiers: Signifiers: Swastika; Large German factory; Dark red sky;
Neighborhood below; Loudspeaker off factory tower.

Signified: Evil, hate, enemy; Threat, control; Fear, hostility, threat; People,
community in danger; Control, fear, power.

Figure 10: Donald acting as an obedient Nazi citizen gives a salute and “Heil Hitler” every
time a picture of Adolf Hitler rolls by on the conveyor belt, no matter how many pictures
go by.

Signifiers: Adolf Hitler; Donald Duck; Weapons; Swastika; Nazi salute.

Signified: Cruel, controlling, desire for absolute power; Tough, fiery, strong
personality, American; Threat, harm, war, fighting; Evil, hate, enemy; Obedient, powerful,
pitiless.

Figure 11: Donald has just awoken from his nightmare in “Nutziland,” sees a looming
heiling shadow on his wall, and begins to obediently “Heil Hitler” before realizing it is
just a shadow from his Statue of Liberty figurine.

Signifiers: Donald Duck; Stars and stripes pajamas; Bed; Nazi salute Shadow;
“Home Sweet Home” sign.

Signified: Tough, fiery, personality, beloved character, American; America, good,
safety; Warmth, security; Obedient, control; Threat, the unknown; Security, safety,
happiness.

Figure 12: Here Donald lovingly embraces and kisses his Statue of Liberty figurine and is relieved he is in his own bed in America. He is safe and he has patriotically decorated his home because he loves his country so much.

Signifiers: Donald Duck; Statue of Liberty; Stars and stripes curtains and tablecloth; Donald embracing and kissing Statue of Liberty.

Signified: Tough, fiery, strong personality, beloved Disney character, American; The icon of America, patriotism; America, good, safety; Patriotism, pride, joy.

Education for Death: The Making of the Nazi

Figure 13: This is the German reproductive passport handed out to all parents who have a child. The child's name is recorded and there are spaces for twelve children in order to encourage German's to produce more soldiers for Hitler's army.

Signifiers: Swastika; Reproductive passport; German language.

Signified: Evil, hate, enemy; Control, the future; Fear, the enemy.

Figure 14: Here is an image from the "Sleeping Beauty" tale Hans and his classmates are told in school. Knight in shining armor Hitler is saving Germany from the evil witch of democracy.

Signifiers: Adolf Hitler as Knight; Germania on horse.

Signified: Savior, protector, desire for absolute power; Germany being saved by knight in shining armor; Obedient, servant, worker.

Figure 15: Main character Hans' blonde hair and blue eyes serves as a perfect example of what Hitler referred to as his "master race." He and his fellow classmates stand from their swastika marked chairs and obediently salute and "Heil Hitler," showing that even at such a young age, these boys are being groomed to become Nazis.

Signifiers: Young children; Blonde haired, blue-eyed Hans; Swastika; Nazi salute from young boys.

Signified: Innocent, naïve, impressionable, the future; Prime example of the master race; Evil, hate, enemy; Signified: Obedient, powerful, pitiless, Hitler youth.

Figure 16: This Nazi has come to tell young Hans's mother that if he doesn't get better soon, he will be taken away and disposed of. The Nazi comes across as evil and frightening with his dark, menacing appearance. He takes up the entire doorframe and has no problem cruelly treating his own people.

Signifiers: Swastika; Nazi; Large, dark figure; Lit, narrowed eyes.

Signified: Evil, hate, enemy; Hunter, obedient, powerful, pitiless; Threat, fear; Merciless, control.

Figure 17: This classroom setting shows the German teacher and students beginning their day by saluting "Der Fuehrer" much as children in America would begin their day by pledging allegiance to the flag. The smiling portrait of Hitler gives them his approval at their obedient actions.

Signifiers: Swastika; Satisfied Adolf Hitler; Young children saluting portrait of Hitler.

Signified: Evil, hate, enemy; Pleas his people are obedient and completely controlled by him; Obedient, Signified: controlled, corrupted youth.

Figure 18: Hans is outside the classroom, preparing to become a Nazi soldier. He and the rest of the Hitler youth are obediently heiling and marching in sync.

Signifiers: Children marching and heiling; Blonde haired, blue-eyed Hans; Dark red sky.

Signified: Obedient, controlled, corrupt, future threat; Prime example of the master race; Fear, hostility, threat.

Figure 19: Here the Nazis are done with their education and ready to fight. They have been brainwashed and will continue to be controlled and do as they are told.

Signifiers: Swastika; Nazi blinders; Mouthpiece covering soldier's face; Chains around neck connecting to other soldiers; Dark red sky.

Signified: Evil, hate, enemy; Soldiers see nothing but what the Nazi party wants them to see; Soldiers say nothing but what the Nazi party wants them to say; Soldiers do nothing but what the Nazi party wants them to do; Fear, hostility, threat.

Figure 20: This is the last image seen in this haunting cartoon. Here the true cost of war is seen and the threat of Germany to the Allies as well as their own people is clear. Germany will keep producing Nazis to fight no matter how many lives need to be lost.

Signifiers: Swastika on graves Helmets on gravestone crosses Endless rows of
Nazi gravestones.

Signified: Nazi graveyard; Deceased soldiers, the true cost of war; The cruelty of
Germany to its own people, the true cost of war, the enemy's death.

CHAPTER THREE

CONCLUSION

Over the course of his more than forty years in the entertainment industry, Disney and the products produced by his studio had an incredible impact on the landscape of popular culture. His time in Hollywood spanned the development of the motion picture medium as a modern form of American art (Watts, 1997, p. 13). With one of the most prolific imaginations the entertainment industry has ever known, this pioneer and innovator accomplished everything he set his mind to. He even predicted the limitless possibilities animation had to offer when he said, “I fully believe the animated picture will emerge as one of the greatest mediums, not only of entertainment but also of education” (Thomas, 1994, p. 233).

The movie industry was still quite young when America went to war in 1914, but many in the government and armed forces understood the value of using film as a tool in order to educate, enlighten, and rouse an audience, both military and civilian. So as soon as President Franklin D. Roosevelt declared America’s entry into WWII on December 8, 1941, Hollywood prepared to play its part in winning that war. No studio devoted more of its time and resources to wartime activity than Walt Disney did. The military literally took over the Burbank studio lot and Disney artists found themselves working on everything from aircraft insignias to highly technical training films to home front propaganda. The United States had done everything it could to stay out of war so it was especially important that the average citizen understood why America was fighting, whom America

was fighting, and how they could help. No one did a better job of addressing those issues than Walt Disney and his animators.

When the United States became involved in WWII and Disney's studio was transformed from an animation studio to a movie-making factory for Uncle Sam, the studio was just beginning to recover from the devastating Cartoonist Guild strike and Disney's state of mind and personal politics were fragile at best. For the duration of the war, Disney put the studio's resources at the disposal of his government and country by making educational, training, and morale-boosting cartoons. The studio tackled a wide range of animated films during the course of the war including those that were purely entertaining with a propaganda slant and even instructional films with a very specific purpose. The Treasury Department even credited him with helping sell more than \$50 million in war bonds. By using Donald Duck to inspire Americans to pay their taxes on time and the Seven Dwarfs to help sell war bonds, Disney ambitiously did what he always did: he put out a product better than any of his competitors did (Gabler, 2007, p. 412).

After the outbreak of WWII, Donald Duck started doing his bit to encourage the Allied effort against the Axis Powers. Watching these films is like taking a step back in time. By trying to go back and think about what was going on during this difficult period in American history, it was easier to appreciate what their message was at the time. Throughout this stressful period, government propaganda may have even been necessary to help encourage support of America's involvement in WWII as well as show the evils of the enemy overseas. Not only did they comfort a scared and unsure audience, but they offered a way for Americans to feel empowered and proud of their country. For Disney, films like *The New Spirit*, *Der Fuehrer's Face*, and *Education for Death: The Making of*

the Nazi were small propagandistic forays that were given the Disney spin (Gabler, 2007, p. 390). From the fairytale scene inserted in *Education for Death: The Making of the Nazi* to the whirling ending to Donald Duck's Nazi nightmare in *Der Fuehrer's Face*, Disney's touch was all over the cartoons. Even though these films were blatant propaganda financed by the government and produced at record pace, Disney refused to sacrifice quality or story lines in order to get the message across.

The reason for studying government-funded propaganda during this period in history is because it was effective and it was being created by an entertainment industry that offered no other alternative to Americans when it came to the media they viewed. Every time Americans went to the movies during WWII, they were met with a newsreel update on wartime activities, an animated short, and a film. For the most part, all of these media had something to do with the war. This was before the days of wide television use, as commercial television had been put on hold during the war, with the only other media options being the newspaper or radio, so to be able to see moving images delivering such powerful messages had a profound effect on an American audience.

The Disney Studio was unlike any other. Everyone knew Walt Disney, what Mickey Mouse looked and sounded like, and that Disney produced the best animations in the business. Disney was one of the first to utilize Technicolor, short films were what he did best and his animations provoked laughter and a general "good feeling" in audiences so he was a perfect and safe choice for a producer of entertaining propaganda during this tumultuous time. The realism and fluidity of Disney animations were instantly recognizable and the popularity of the Disney Studio and their products helped Disney make a smooth transition into the more than dozens of propaganda films he made.

Throughout the 1940s and in Disney's early career, he was seen as both a man of the people and as a kind of corporate leader/contemporary philosopher (Smoodin, 1993, p. 98). Disney's wartime propaganda shorts showed him as a kind of ambassador of good will and all around American, doing what he could to help his country in a time of war. The view of Disney held during this time was positive, as critics of the time approved of propaganda films. The intensity following the war brought by the HUAC and McCarthyism however changed the way many viewed propaganda and its appropriateness and use began to dwindle.

More than 26 million people watched the first film Disney made for the Treasury Department and for more than one third said it "animated their willingness to pay taxes" (Watts, 1997, p. 232). *The New Spirit* came at the beginning of WWII and was one of the first pieces of propaganda funded by the government that American audiences saw. While this cartoon was created to encourage Americans to pay their taxes and was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Documentary Short, it is still more propaganda than income tax instruction. It is entertaining and educational and manages to accomplish what it was set out to do. Just as the Treasury Department wanted, *The New Spirit* got Americans to pay their income taxes on time and showed them how to do it. The film informed them of what their taxes were being used for by connecting income tax revenue with the war and brought a sense of patriotism by showing audiences how they could do their part to help America win the war. The clear message and the cartoon's slogan "Taxes to beat the Axis" helped ensure the success of this film.

In a time of war, it is typical to demonize the enemy. At the time, Hitler was the greatest enemy. Caricatures and jokes, not always in the best of taste, rise to the forefront

because it is a way of relieving aggression and fear associated with the threat. This was useful during WWII when the global enemy had a face. Everyone knew something about Adolf Hitler, at least what he looked like. Some feared Hitler some mocked him and the propaganda created in his name such as *Der Fuehrer's Face*, was a way to safely deal with him. Originally titled "Donald Duck in Nutziland," the success of the song written for the cartoon titled "Der Fuehrer's Face" became so popular that the name of the cartoon had to be changed (Watts, 1997, p. 231). This very humorous cartoon giving the all-American duck a nightmare that he was living in a country run by Nazis and reducing the serious tenants of Hitler's Nazism to slapstick absurdity gives the audience a chance to think, as Donald does in the end, about the freedoms they might have taken for granted.

Never before was there a Walt Disney cartoon that followed the grim, dark tone of *Education for Death: The Making of the Nazi*. This eye-opening and disheartening story of a young boy growing up in Nazi Germany must have been shocking to audiences watching while their own young children were at home or in school and their husbands, sons, brothers and other loved ones were currently overseas fighting the evil Nazis they saw onscreen cruelly treating their own people. The decision not to use a Disney star was wise because these characters fit into a safe mold and were undoubtedly American. Young children are innocent and to see that they have no opportunity to escape the hate surrounding them is heart breaking and difficult to watch. Even though this is a Disney cartoon and has brief moments of the Disney touch (the "Sleeping Beauty" scene), it feels remarkably anti-Disney. The dark shadows and figures, the use of cruel young children, the church, book and art burning and the grimacing voice talking over the people speaking in German explaining the events of Hans's life and his eventual end as a Nazi soldier are

characteristics typically not found in the typical happy-go-lucky Disney cartoon and the overall result leaves viewers haunted. That is why this cartoon is so important to study. Every scene is filled with signifiers that evoke fear and anxiety, demonstrating Disney's propaganda at its finest.

While these films were proven effective in the Gallup polls conducted shortly after they came out, these cartoons did not change public opinion, they reinforced it. The Disney Studio created them, but with the Army occupying every inch of creative space, it was no longer the Disney Studio Disney had always imagined. Disney lost control and was frustrated over the kinds of films he was being forced to make. The 1940s represented a period of change and transition and for a visionary like Disney — everything was about control. Walt Disney wanted to provide America with an escape or fantasyland and he thrived on the control and intense empowerment that came with it (Gabler, 2007, p. 501-502). This is clear when reading through Disney's testimony before the HUAC and in reading the interviews conducted with former animators.

Disney lost his control when he received the call that the military was going to be taking over his precious studio. The studio was no longer the Disney Studio; it became an educational and industrial film facility and arm of the government (Gabler, 2007, p. 389). Since he was frustrated with the changes in the studio, he tried to do whatever he could to break out of the unimaginative training and educational film mold that used primitive animation and instead, wanted to make cartoons that satisfied his extremely high standards. With limited budgets and quick deadlines, Disney had to achieve the impossible in order to meet contractual demands. While Disney had no issues with making educational films for the military, when he was approached by the Treasury Department,

he was reluctant to produce propaganda films that were designed to persuade public opinion instead of educating them. One of the biggest issues for Disney was his fear of being labeled as a propagandist in the public eye. Disney worked very hard to maintain his studio's reputation as a whimsical, wholesome, and non-political (Gabler, 2007, p. 389).

Disney accomplished much more than he knew throughout his lifelong career. He was not only an entertainer, with his weekly television show he himself hosted, but acted as a sort of historical mediator. His creations helped Americans cope with the unsettling transformations of the twentieth century. This role was unintentional yet clear. Disney products were consistently cultivated by connections to mainstream American culture. From the aesthetics, political ideologies, social structures, economic construction, and moral principles, the studio evolved with the times in order to stay relevant (Watts, 1997, p. 361-362). It is clear in looking at these materials that Disney and his studio had a tremendous impact on American mass media and popular culture. His lasting legacy and empire have continued to influence society, and his cartoons, although government fueled propaganda, had the signature Disney magic appealing to both adults and children alike. Disney somehow managed to turn a Treasury Department message telling Americans to pay their taxes into a tremendous success that is still enjoyable to watch six decades later.

Since this thesis only looks at three out of the more than dozens of propaganda cartoons the Disney Studio made, further research is needed on this topic. While the Disney Studio and their government-funded propaganda are neglected areas of study during WWII, there were many other propaganda films produced through different studios in Hollywood around the same time. In direct competition with the Disney Studio, Warner Bros. and their "Looney Tunes" and "Merrie Melodies" cartoons also made many

propaganda shorts. These cartoons should be studied and compared with the Disney cartoons made during the same time in order to understand the messages being pushed on American audiences. While the research conducted here is qualitative and completely subjective using the theory of semiotics, more research can lead to somewhat different results and would be helpful in providing clarity to these and other Disney cartoons created for the government during WWII. In addition, *The New Spirit*, *Der Fuehrer's Face*, and *Education for Death: The Making of the Nazi* deserves study, as they are complex in their own way. The comparative analysis done here between these three cartoons is useful in providing an overall representation of the government funded propaganda from this period, but looking at each film individually will help to provide a more thorough understanding of role they played more than seventy years ago.

APPENDICES

The following images cited throughout the preceding thesis are representations from the three animated propaganda shorts featured as sources. The author has included these images based on a thorough review of their contents. The images that follow represent important points in each cartoon that present the overall message. The cartoons were viewed initially for their application to the overall thesis and after verifying their overall contribution, the signifiers found in each of the following images are identified and specified here.

APPENDIX A

The New Spirit

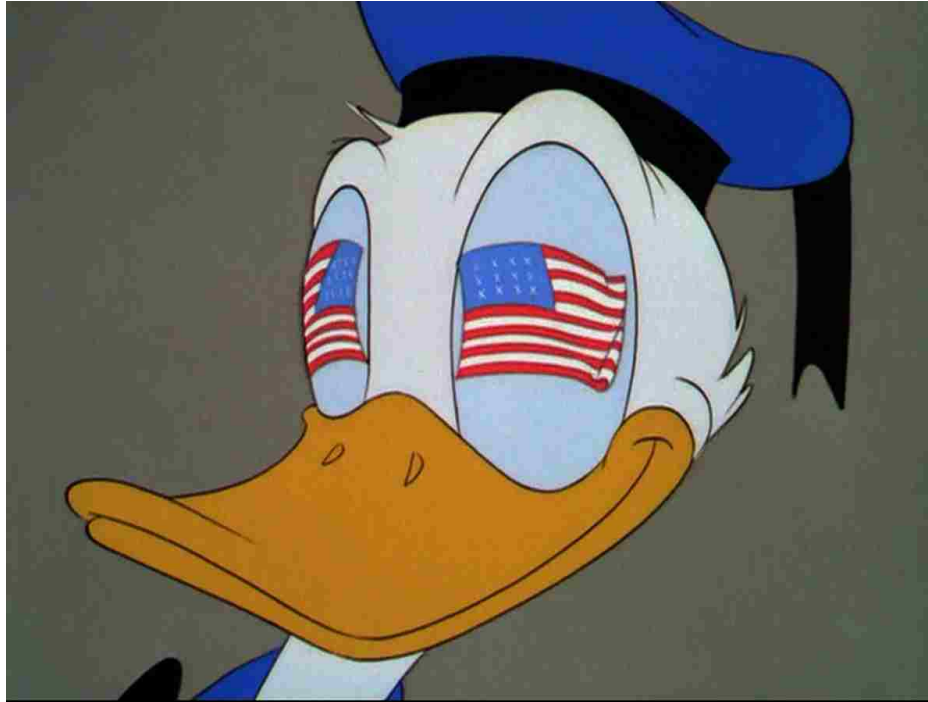


Figure 1: Screenshot *The New Spirit*.

Signifier

Signified

American flag

Pride, safety, patriotism, good

Donald Duck

Tough, fiery, strong personality, beloved Disney character,
American

Donald's 'zeal' shines in his eyes as he hears a voice on the radio proclaim the 'new spirit' is that of a free people united in a common cause as a result of paying their taxes.



Figure 2: Screenshot *The New Spirit*.

Signifier

Signified

Donald Duck

Tough, fiery, strong personality, caretaker, beloved Disney character, American

Donald's nephews

Young children, innocence, the future

Halo

Pure, innocent, saintly

Here Donald lists his three nephews as dependents and they are seen as perfect angels who need a responsible caretaker like Donald.



Figure 3: Screenshot *The New Spirit*.

Signifier

American flag

Clouds/sky as American flag

Weapons

Planes

Signified

Pride, safety, patriotism, good

America triumphant over Axis, the United States is the future

Harm, war, threat, fighting

War, threat

In this image, American stars and stripes appear in the sky, victorious over the enemy and able to fight Axis planes and weapons because of patriotic Americans paying their taxes promptly.



Figure 4: Screenshot *The New Spirit*.

| <u>Signifier</u> | <u>Signified</u> |
|---------------------------|--------------------------|
| Swastika | Evil, hate, enemy |
| Planes | War, threat |
| Red circle | Japan, threat, enemy |
| Sinking, destroyed planes | Victory, triumph, defeat |

This image shows the graveyard of enemy planes sinking after being bombed by the American planes. The threat is demolished and America will be safe.



Figure 5: Screenshot *The New Spirit*.

| <u>Signifier</u> | <u>Signified</u> |
|--------------------|---|
| Swastika | Evil, hate, enemy |
| Weapons | Harm, war, threat, fighting |
| German war machine | Wanting to harm people's safe communities |
| Dark red sky | Fear, hostility, death |
| Neighborhood below | People, community in danger |

Here the German war machine has guns for eyes and mouths, and Nazis represent one gigantic evil looking to prey on innocent communities and destroy their enemy. America could be next.

APPENDIX B

Der Fuehrer's Face

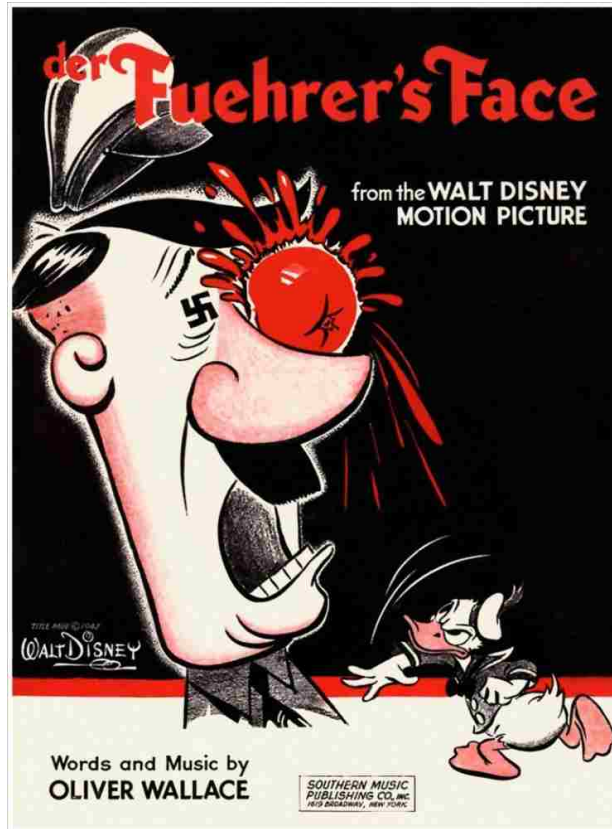


Figure 6: Screenshot *Walt Disney On The Front Lines* DVD.

| <u>Signifier</u> | <u>Signified</u> |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| Swastika | Evil, hate, enemy |
| Adolf Hitler | Cruel, controlling, desire for absolute power |
| Donald Duck throwing tomato at Hitler | Tough, standing up to the enemy |

This poster advertisement of *Der Fuehrer's Face* depicts Donald Duck throwing a rotten tomato in Hitler's face. This makes Hitler appear less threatening and shows that the enemy can be overthrown.



Figure 7: Screenshot *Der Fuehrer's Face*.

Signifier

Swastika

Nazis

Axis leaders playing instruments

Signified

Evil, hate, enemy

Hunters, obedient, powerful, pitiless

Controlled by Adolf Hitler, obedient,
threatening

Swastika shaped windmills, clouds and bushes make up the background while obediently marching Axis leaders play instruments and sing about how wonderful “Der Fuehrer” is.



Figure 8: Screenshot *Der Fuehrer's Face*.

| <u>Signifier</u> | <u>Signified</u> |
|---------------------------------|--|
| Swastika | Evil, hate, enemy |
| Donald Duck | Tough, fiery, strong personality, American |
| Nazi | Hunters, obedient, powerful, pitiless |
| Wall safe | Protection, security, privacy |
| One coffee bean from coffee can | Rationing, frugal |
| Aroma de bacon bottle | Rationing, frugal |

Donald the Nazi stands in his small kitchen area in front of his swastika lined wallpaper preparing a rationed and nutrient lacking breakfast before marching off to work like the rest of Nazi German citizens.



Figure 9: Screenshot *Der Fuehrer's Face*.

| <u>Signifier</u> | <u>Signified</u> |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Swastika | Evil, hate, enemy |
| Large German factory | Threat, control |
| Dark red sky | Fear, hostility, threat |
| Neighborhood below | People, community in danger |
| Loud speaker off factory tower | Control, fear, power |

This image is of the factory Donald the Nazi works in. Swastika's mark the factory, clearly identifying it as German, and even the tops of the power lines are shaped as swastikas. The dark red sky above signify the evil that the factory helps produce.



Figure 10: Screenshot *Der Fuehrer's Face*.

| <u>Signifier</u> | <u>Signified</u> |
|------------------|---|
| Adolf Hitler | Cruel, controlling, desire for absolute power |
| Donald Duck | Tough, fiery, strong personality, American |
| Weapons | Threat, harm, war, fighting |
| Swastika | Evil, hate, enemy |
| Nazi salute | Obedient, powerful, pitiless |

Donald acting as an obedient Nazi citizen gives a salute and “Heil Hitler” every time a picture of Adolf Hitler rolls by on the conveyor belt, no matter how many pictures go by.



Figure 11: Screenshot *Der Fuehrer's Face*.

| <u>Signifier</u> | <u>Signified</u> |
|---------------------------|--|
| Donald Duck | Tough, fiery, personality, beloved character, American |
| Stars and stripes pajamas | America, good, safety |
| Bed | Warmth, security |
| Nazi salute | Obedient, control |
| Shadows | Threat, the unknown |
| “Home Sweet Home” sign | Security, safety, happiness |

Donald has just awoken from his nightmare in “Nutzieland”, sees a looming heiling shadow on his wall, and begins to obediently “Heil Hitler” before realizing it is just a shadow from his Statue of Liberty figurine.



Figure 12: Screenshot *Der Fuehrer's Face*.

Signifier

Donald Duck

Statue of Liberty

Stars and stripes curtains and tablecloth

Donald embracing and kissing Statue of Liberty

Signified

Tough, fiery, strong personality,
beloved Disney character, American

The icon of America, patriotism

America, good, safety

Patriotism, pride, joy

Here Donald lovingly embraces and kisses his Statue of Liberty figurine and is relieved he is in his own bed in America. He is safe and he has patriotically decorated his home because he loves his country so much.

APPENDIX C

Education for Death: The Making of the Nazi

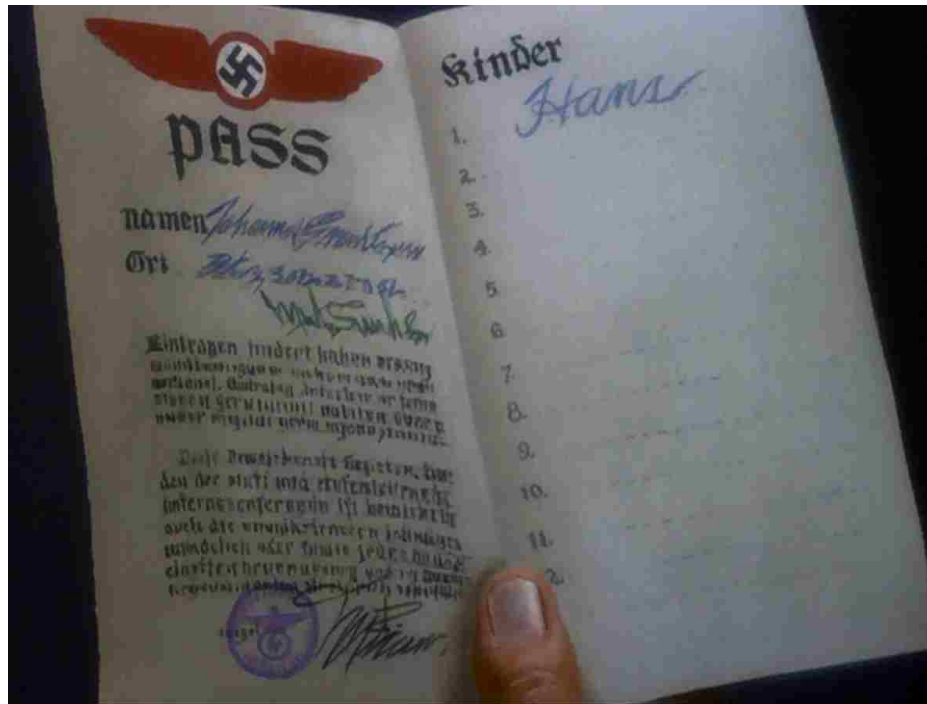


Figure 13: Screenshot *Education for Death: The Making of the Nazi*.

| <u>Signifier</u> | <u>Signified</u> |
|-----------------------|---------------------|
| Swastika | Evil, hate, enemy |
| Reproductive passport | Control, the future |
| German language | Fear, the enemy |

This is the German reproductive passport handed out to all parents who have a child. The child's name is recorded and there are spaces for twelve children in order to encourage German's to produce more soldiers for Hitler's army.



Figure 14: Screenshot *Education for Death: The Making of the Nazi*.

Signifier

Adolf Hitler as Knight

Germania on horse

Horse

Signified

Savior, protector, desire for absolute power

Germany being saved by knight in shining armor

Obedient, servant, worker

Here is an image from the “Sleeping Beauty” tale Hans and his classmates are told in school. Knight in shining armor Hitler is saving Germany from the evil witch of democracy.



Figure 15: Screenshot *Education for Death: The Making of the Nazi*.

Signifier

Signified

Young children

Innocent, naïve, impressionable, the future

Blonde haired, blue-eyed Hans

Prime example of the master race

Swastika

Evil, hate, enemy

Nazi salute from young boys

Obedient, powerful, pitiless, Hitler youth

Main character Hans' blonde hair and blue eyes serves as a perfect example of what Hitler referred to as his "master race." He and his fellow classmates stand from their swastika marked chairs and obediently salute and "Heil Hitler," showing that even at such a young age, these boys are being groomed to become Nazis.



Figure 16: Screenshot *Education for Death: The Making of the Nazi*.

| <u>Signifier</u> | <u>Signified</u> |
|--------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Swastika | Evil, hate, enemy |
| Nazi | Hunter, obedient, powerful, pitiless |
| Large, dark figure | Threat, fear |
| Lit, narrowed eyes | Merciless, control |

This Nazi has come to tell young Hans's mother that if he doesn't get better soon, he will be taken away and disposed of. The Nazi comes across as evil and frightening with his dark, menacing appearance. He takes up the entire doorframe and has no problem cruelly treating his own people.



Figure 17: Screenshot *Education for Death: The Making of the Nazi*.

Signifier

Swastika

Satisfied Adolf Hitler

Young children saluting portrait of Hitler

Signified

Evil, hate, enemy

Pleased his people are obedient and completely controlled by him

Obedient, controlled, corrupted youth

This classroom setting shows the German teacher and students beginning their day by saluting “Der Fuehrer” much as children in America would begin their day by pledging allegiance to the flag. The smiling portrait of Hitler gives them his approval at their obedient actions.



Figure 18: Screenshot *Education for Death: The Making of the Nazi*.

Signifier

Swastika

Children marching and heiling

Blonde haired, blue-eyed Hans

Dark red sky

Signified

Evil, hate, enemy

Obedient, controlled, corrupt, future threat

Prime example of the master race

Fear, hostility, threat

Hans is outside the classroom, preparing to become a Nazi soldier. He and the rest of the Hitler youth are obediently heiling and marching in sync.



Figure 19: Screenshot *Education for Death: The Making of the Nazi*.

Signifier

Signified

Swastika

Evil, hate, enemy

Nazi blinders

Soldiers see nothing but what the
Nazi party wants them to see

Mouthpiece covering soldier's face

Soldiers say nothing but what the
Nazi party wants them to say

Chains around neck connecting to other soldiers

Soldiers do nothing but what the Nazi
party wants them to do

Dark red sky

Fear, hostility, threat

Here the Nazis are done with their education and ready to fight. They have been brainwashed and will continue to be controlled and do as they are told.



Figure 20: Screenshot *Education for Death: The Making of the Nazi*.

Signifier

Swastika on graves

Helmets on gravestone crosses

Endless rows of Nazi gravestones

Signified

Nazi graveyard

Deceased soldiers, the true cost of war

The cruelty of Germany to its own people,
the true cost of war, the enemy's death

This is the last image seen in this haunting cartoon. Here the true cost of war is seen and the threat of Germany to the Allies as well as their own people is clear. Germany will keep producing Nazis to fight no matter how many lives need to be lost.

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