

Capital, Crisis, and the Rise of *Disney Fantasy*

DISNEY FANTASY AS THE DISCOURSE OF THE OTHER

Disney fantasy as Walt Disney invented and codified it is not merely “an indulgence in the hallucinatory realization of desires prohibited by the Law,” (Žižek 2008, 7) but rather, via the filmic apparatus the film-viewer-as-subject reenacts the mirror-stage process of identification over and over again, in a process by which the ego-subject’s grasping desire for stability and structure is set aside, escaped from momentarily, and then found again, but now as a stable, knowable force via identification with the symbols associated with the idealized ego on screen. The filmic fantasy is, as others have noted, a dream, and as such, is a dream of the subject-viewer’s own mind, only it is not. It is the mind of the producer, the auteur, the invisible enunciator of the impossible fantasy made “real” via the Imaginary, but structured first by the Law of the Symbolic, the codes of the dominant, film-producing culture. Behind it all unconscious desire stages its own cause in terms of the Disney fantasy and offers itself simultaneously as the object of desire, that is, the ego-ideal of the subject-viewer identifies with the idealized ego manifestations (or certain key elements) of the filmic fantasy, and in this way the unconscious of the subject-viewer is interpellated by the Symbolic. When first-order and second-order fantasy combine as third-order fantasy as Disney stages it, it symbolizes the “impossible” scene of original castration, of the original traumatic loss, the loss encumbering the emerging subject in the first moment of self-consciousness, in fact, even before. When the infant

separates from the mother and the ego begins its journey *away*, it is a journey marked by desire's impossible realization. Fantasy then is part of the process by which the Imaginary register of ego development engages in a transactional relationship via language and social practice with the Symbolic register. They are, as it were, inextricably linked, and discussing the Imaginary apart from the Symbolic, and vice versa, is an illusion of language and cognition when no such thing can be done in fact. When consciousness seeks for the Imaginary, it finds the Symbolic, and when it seeks for the Symbolic, it finds only the Imaginary, represented as it were in innocent terms, the obvious normalized by social practice, yet this is nothing less than the *mise-en-scène* of the primordial field of ideology.

Though other dates might be argued for, Disney's "The Three Little Pigs" from 1933 marks a turning point for Disney animation, away from the short cartoons animators filled with gags, and towards a cartoon that would tell a story complete with a rudimentary plot, and characters both good and evil. Four years before the release of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, but some five years after Mickey Mouse's first appearance on screen in "Steamboat Willie" (1928), Disney released "The Three Little Pigs." Competitors, however, were not far behind.

The second full-length animated feature film after *Snow White* was not a Disney film, it was *Gulliver's Travels* (1939) directed by Dave Fleischer and produced by his brother, Max—a pair of brothers in direct competition with Disney studios.¹ Like MGM's *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), *Gulliver's Travels* was meant to compete with *Snow White*. Going head-to-head against Disney's seven dwarfs, the Fleischers put up Jonathan Swift's Lilliputians, perhaps thinking that if seven dwarfs were good, then seven hundred would be even better. *Gulliver's Travels* suffers greatly when compared to *Snow White* in terms of production values and quality of animation. Though the film earned enough to finance a second animated feature from the Fleischers, *Mr. Bug Goes to Town* (1941), the follow-up fared poorly, perhaps because it appeared only two days before the bombing of Pearl Harbor. The Fleischers sold out to Paramount and never made a feature film again, turning their efforts towards shorts and, later, television, including *Popeye the Sailor* and the first animated *Superman* cartoon.

When MGM produced *The Wizard of Oz*, yet another grotesque version of little people was brought to the screen in what can only be described as fourth-order fantasy of a sort. In the original tale from 1900, John Funchion argues, Dorothy's nostalgia is a "central formal

and discursive feature of the text.” It compels her “to resist ... temptations” because she longs for home and desires to return there. “Thus nostalgia in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* is both the disease and the antidote that animates the narrative ... as arguably the most popular American fairy tale ever written, it reimagines the Protestant work ethic for a coming global era as one in which provincialism is always longed for and international intervention is always motivated by the selfless love of liberty for all” (2010, 449). In other words, the exploits of global Capital appear virtuous insofar as the subject articulates a nostalgic desire to return home in the end (442).

“To understand how Dorothy’s nostalgia functions in Oz,” Funchion explains, “it helps to consider Slavoj Žižek’s work on the psychodynamics of fantasy.” By inventing a Kansas worth fighting for, Dorothy’s nostalgia for home exemplifies “the radically intersubjective character of fantasy.” The fact that fantasy always entails an exploration of “the subject’s relation to [the] Other” means that this process shapes the subject’s identity through “the dialectical connection between recognition of desire and desire for recognition.” This dialectic of desire offers a way to understand how the subject’s desired object in terms of *Disney fantasy* turns out to be what the Other desires from the subject; fantasy provide[s] the answer to “What does society want from me?” (443). The big Other desires the subject’s desire, or in other words, the big Other wants the subject to desire what it offers as the solution to the subject’s desire. Like the children who enter Willy Wonka’s chocolate factory, the child-subject must submit to the imperative to enjoy as the price for entrance into *Disney fantasy* while remaining oblivious to the slave labor that makes the factory function as an instrument of Capital. It is crucial that *Disney fantasy* as Roald Dahl satirizes it depends upon subjects who misrecognize their behavior as free acts when in reality they are largely determined by social practice.

The problem with this arrangement is one of scale. When vast populations service an industrial civilization defined by fantasy in terms of the fantasy of exponential, unending Capital growth, and markets, and resource development, with an ever-growing consumer demographic desiring ever more products dependent on ever-expanding resource development, and so on, the risk to base reality takes on catastrophic proportions. While environmental catastrophe on a global scale slowly unfolds, previous environmental crises serve as a reminder that the Real stands opposed and obdurate in the face of human subjectivity defined by fantasy.

“THE DIRTY THIRTIES”

L. Frank Baum's desiccated Kansas was a prescient anticipation of the drought-blasted geography of the mid- and western plains through the 1930s. The Dust Bowl was the greatest man-made natural disaster in American history. From the early 1930s up until 1941, the prevailing fantasy of Capital that dominated politics, agriculture, economics, and the sociopathic behavior of investors searching for a quick buck in winter wheat failed, even as the weather revealed its lack of interest in American triumphalism and manifest destiny.

The Dust Bowl and the Great Depression threatened the political, financial, and social status quo like few crises before it. Looking for easy money, interlopers from the north and east bought up land in the mid-west hoping to make fast money on cash crops. As a result, speculators uprooted the prairie sod that had grown for thousands of years to make way for wheat. American investors did not realize it at the time, but they were involved in a great experiment—did the rain follow the plow, as the song said? In other words, were the transcendental forces of nature on the side of the American farmer and the investors who hired him to bust the sod? Would sod that was three feet thick with loam and root-matter and that had adapted to the arid, often dry, conditions in the mid-west over tens of thousands of years mind so very much if it was left to dry out in the sun? Would the rains obey the ideology of Capital? Would the Symbolic control the Real?

The goal was to open up as much farmland as possible and to sell as much wheat as possible, along with other cash crops. At first, there seemed to be no end to the demand for wheat, but as is the fate of all markets sooner or later, the wheat market collapsed and farmers went bankrupt, but not until tens of millions of square miles of prairie grass had been uprooted, exposing the now fallow soil.

As if nature were intending to put too fine a point on it, just as the wheat market failed, an epic drought struck the mid-western states recently plowed in “the great plow up.” It turned out that the pronouncements of ideologues like Charles Dana Wilber were nothing more than wishful thinking, a self-serving fantasy. Wilber wrote with an engorged ardor about how American manifest destiny would justify the American conquest of its western regions. Nature herself would also bow to the Monroe Doctrine, to American Triumphalism, and to greed. The very processes of God's creation would bow to the American farmer.

Wilber's writing was a prayer and an exhortation, and it urged American interests westward. By the power of the farmer's plow, the mind of God was changed, and by the plow's "wonderful provision, which is only man's mastery over nature, the clouds are dispensing copious rains ... it is the instrument which separates civilization from savagery; and converts a desert into a farm or garden ... *Rain follows the plow*" (Wilber 1881, 15). The plow was nothing less than,

a miracle of progress, the plow was the unerring prophet, the procuring cause, not by any magic or enchantment, not by incantations or offerings, but instead by the sweat of his face toiling with his hands, man can persuade the heavens to yield their treasures of dew and rain upon the land he has chosen for his dwelling ... The raindrop never fails to fall and answer to the imploring power or prayer of labor. (Wilber 1881, 15)

Wilber, however, was wrong. But because of unregulated financial speculation justified by a fantasy-ideology that depicted man's relationship to nature in market terms, an ecosystem that had endured for tens of thousands of years collapsed in a matter of forty years and suffered the worst man-made environmental disaster in American history.

While the Great Depression ravaged economies, the Dust Bowl made huge parts of the American mid-west virtually uninhabitable. Dust storms became more fierce, more deadly, and more frequent. Dust storms more than a mile high carried with them the top soil of the mid-west, and deposited it hundreds of miles away. One particularly large dust storm even reached FDR's desk in Washington D.C. Dust storms that carried dust clouds a mile or more into the sky were called the "black blizzards." The storms left behind two- and three-foot drifts of dirt that was once the top soil of the fertile plains. "Some 850 million tons of topsoil blew away in 1935 alone ... due to 'the Great Plow-Up'" (Burns 2012).

The Dust Bowl stands as a potent cautionary tale about the inevitable moment when "fantasy as social practice" (informed by fantasies of the righteousness of global Capital and neoliberal market economies) crashes hard against the dumb Real. While the critical years of the Dust Bowl lasted only until 1944 when the rains returned and war in Europe drove wheat prices up again, the lessons of the Dust Bowl have gone largely unheeded. The Dust Bowl compounded the sufferings millions of people, many of whom were already economic refugees in their own land. Environmental

collapse exacerbated an already critical cultural moment in which millions of unemployed were joined by tens of thousands of dispossessed farmers in search of the basic necessities of life.² From the homegrown American environmental crisis of the Dust Bowl emerged *Disney fantasy*.

“THE THREE LITTLE PIGS”

On May 27, 1933, the American economy reached an unprecedented nadir; the first significant drought and the beginning of the Dust Bowl in the mid-west was less than a year away and Walt Disney released “The Three Little Pigs,” an eight-minute short in Technicolor as one of the *Silly Symphonies* series. Less than three months before, Franklin D. Roosevelt (having handily defeated Herbert Hoover) began his first term as president on March 4, 1933. Economic production in American had fallen by nearly a third, incomes by 40%, and

more than 12 million people were thrown out of work; the unemployment rate soared from 3% in 1929 to 25% in 1933, and unemployment was probably even more wide spread. Some 85,000 businesses failed. Hundreds of thousands of families lost their homes. By 1933, about half of all mortgages on all urban, owner-occupied houses were delinquent. (Wheelock 2008)

Not until the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941 and the United States’s entry into World War II did government spending expand to provide the stimulation the economy needed to all but eliminate unemployment, get money flowing again, and increase consumer spending. Most histories of the Disney Studios in the 1930s mention the Great Depression only in passing, if they mention it at all, unless they are writing about “The Three Little Pigs.” Popularly understood even at the time as an overt and self-conscious disavowal of economic uncertainty, according to Michael Barrier, Neal Gabler, and other Disney critics and historians, the “Three Little Pigs” moved the short cartoon and Disney animation in general into a fruitful moment of development for Disney Studios.

If Mickey Mouse was Disney’s initial, almost instinctual foray into *restorative* fantasy in a rudimentary way, the “Three Little Pigs” represented something else entirely. “Three Little Pigs” was Disney’s attempt to move away from gags and humor. Gags and humor, however, had

made Mickey Mouse, and Walt Disney with him, a cultural hero for children and their families, and for sub-cultures that identified with Mickey Mouse as a rebel, an other among others who had spirit, spunk, and always came out on top. He represented what Benjamin described as a “wish symbol ... a rather utopian figure, a compensatory image, consolation for the nightmare of modern life” (Leslie 102).

In an interview article from June 3, 1934, in the *New York Times* Sunday Magazine, Walt Disney claims that when creating he and his team do not “bother with a formula ... I play hunches and leave psychology to others.” Though it is true Disney was known for having an invincible faith in his own judgment—he understood himself as a kind of “everyman” in touch with the tastes of the folk—he realized that there was something not entirely thoughtless or spontaneous about how he wanted his audience to react. And so he hired Dr. Boris V. Morkovin to give lectures on the psychology of humor at Disney Studios for three years, beginning in 1933 and ending in 1936.

In a 1936 version of his work on cartoons and humor, Dr. Boris V. Morkovin presented Walt Disney with a “Gag Manual.” In it he writes about “The Psychology of the Gag” as a way to explain why audiences laugh at cartoons, all so that Walt Disney might achieve the desired results from an eight-minute short cartoon: audience laughter. It almost goes without saying that achieving a kind of mastery over the psychological could help Walt Disney extend his domination of the cartoon box office, for laughter sold tickets. In the early 1930s cartoon humor was still defined by visual gags, animated scenarios of comic distortion, exaggeration, and surprise.³ Morkovin explains the cartoon gag:

As mentioned in the introduction, a gag is a twisted cartoon way of telling the story. It is a presentation of commonplace, familiar actions and feelings of characters in such an exaggerated, distorted and fanciful way that it creates in the spectator a shock. The outburst of laughter is a sudden release of energy shaking diaphragm and lungs of the spectator, caused by the “kick” of the gag. Irresistibly coaxed by the naturalness of this visual gag-action, the spectator unconsciously repeats the gag in the muscles of his own body. The result is the “kick” of sudden realization that spectator has been fooled and has been doing impossible screwy things with the cartoon character. (Morkovin)

“The Three Little Pigs” marks an evolutionary moment in the history of *Disney fantasy* because of its attempt to tell a story with characters and a coherent plot. Though “Pigs” is rich with cartoon gags, narrative and storytelling represent the primary organizing principle of the cartoon. Long gone are the figures of rubber hose animation, or even the stark and simple figures from “Steamboat Willie.” In “The Three Little Pigs,” storytelling became the most important development in Disney animation, for Walt Disney began to understand the nature of his own desire—yes he wanted to reach his audience via humor and gags, when appropriate, but more than that, he wanted to partake of the tradition of the fairy tale, the folk tale, and engage in a cartoon discourse that would offer a way for the audience to address—though comically—the “great truths of life.”

Unlike some of the earlier, literary versions of “The Three Little Pigs,” the Disney version removes the violence and sweetens the story because the first two pigs survive their brush with death. Though the wolf destroys their homes, they survive by escaping to their brother’s brick house, suggesting at least one moral to the story: *always have a richer brother*. On the surface, the fantasy is one of survival and that survival is the same as success. Though this logic may be questionable, at the time it must have made sense for, in 1933, survival was what a great portion of the American public were hoping and praying for, nothing more.

Before “The Goddess of Spring” (1934) and the “Old Mill” (1937), “The Three Little Pigs” marked a seminal moment in the development of *Disney fantasy*. “The Three Little Pigs” was far from an example of believable human characters for the audience to recognize and care about, but it was a step towards Disney’s desire: the feature film. He felt Hollywood had rejected him when he first came to Los Angeles, and now this was his chance to move from “cartoons” to feature filmmaker. In “Three Little Pigs” *Disney fantasy* is born:

- The short represents a third-order fantasy as an adaptation of second-order material—in this case, “The Three Little Pigs,” an English tale published in 1890 by Joseph Jacobs; the tale had appeared earlier, and has taken various forms.⁴
- Music and song tell the pigs’s story and offer a musical take-away or “souvenir” to the audience in the form of a catchy tune with a trip-ping lyric. “Who’s Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?” went on to become

an “unofficial anthem” of the Great Depression and was the best-selling sheet music of the year.⁵ Columbia records released a version of the song in 1934.

- Story and character, as rudimentary as they are, attempt to make an appearance. “The Three Little Pigs” won the Academy Award for “Best Animated Short” in 1934.
- Third-order fantasy-as-ideology. Released at a time when the Great Depression had only deepened after nearly four years, Disney adapted “The Three Little Pigs” and waded directly into the ongoing social crisis with a self-conscious effort to distract and pacify.

Iris Barry’s 1933 review of “The Three Little Pigs” uses a kind of mock severity to praise the film’s “gleeful” effect. This “cinematic gem,” she writes, is made up of “crude color,” and

jingling rhymes. Its appeal is ... to the lowest in human nature, the moral being that it is far more important to have the right friends than to be virtuous. The pigs are as unpleased as Rumpelstilzkin or the Duchess in Alice—two of them unbearably fresh and the other is hatefully stolid. The wolf is ridiculous—no one really believes he will catch even one pig. The spectator is consequently free to beat time to the tune and gleefully jeer at the lot of them. (Barry 1933)

As a result, we can laugh at the wolf, at the pigs, at the cartoon, even at ourselves.

Scholars critical of Walt Disney’s appropriation of the fairy tale worry that Disney’s film versions overpower and all but displace the literary form. The problem with this critique, however, is that it might be leveled with equal force and relevance against the Brothers Grimm for what they did to the oral tradition of the folk tale, in both its German and French origins, along with their disingenuous marketing of their first collection of fairy tales as the tales of the German “folk,” in *Children’s and Household Tales* (1812).⁶ Others, however, have made the point that, while fairy tales represent a kind of “preservation system of the cultural heritage of any given country,” the same is equally true of the Disney versions, “which are similar reflections of their own period of production” (Mollet 2013, 111).

There can be no doubt that Walt Disney appropriated and transformed the fairy tale, and that, as Zipes maintains, he “cast a spell on the fairy

tale and has held it captive ever since.” The development of the Disney version of the fairy tale includes, according to Zipes, the emphasis on film technology and the celebration of “the animators hand and the camera.” The filmed versions tend to foreclose on ambiguity and openness, and instead offer a “totality, and harmony that is orchestrated by a savior” like Walt Disney. Characters are two-dimensional stereotypes “arranged according to a credo of domestication of the imagination,” related to the colonization of the spectator, as well as “other national audiences.” Perhaps Zipes’s most important observation, and the one more relevant to this study, is that in the Disney version “the fairy tale is geared toward nonreflective viewing;” that is, in short, a way of saying that is simple-minded, “and comforting in its simplicity” (Zipes 1995, 39–40).⁷

Disney fantasy emerged just as the need for solace from unnerving cultural and economic upheaval reached a new and more desperate level. Movies offered half the population at any given time an affordable place to gather and escape uncertainty. Even in the worst years of the Great Depression movie attendance “still averaged 60–75 million people per week,” in a population of approximately 125 million. “People sought deliverance from their black and white lives, filled with unemployment, hunger, and despair” (Mollet 2013, 112).

Perhaps the staying power of Frank Churchill’s song, “The Three Little Pigs,” lies in the cartoon’s song, “Who’s Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?” Henry Hall recorded Churchill’s song with an expanded lyric that tells the story of the cartoon in twelve stanzas connected by a chorus. The cartoon, and especially the song, offers implicit recognition of the existential threat facing American society at the time in the form of a didactic tale about the virtues of work and preparing for the very worst possible catastrophe that might befall a pig: a wolf through the door.

The pigs are like children, at least the first two. They sing and dance, mug for the camera, ply their music and generally behave in an “unbearably fresh” manner, as Barry (1933) wrote, but this “unbearableness” of the first two pigs is deliberate. As characters, or at least as character types, the first two pigs, while suggesting a childlike vulnerability, are also naughty and irritating, for they seem to lack all awareness of their incompetence. The “stolid” pig with the gruff, smoker’s voice, knows better, and he represents an ego-ideal sanctioned by the cartoon and offered to the subject in the audience as a symbol for identification and emulation. He is afraid, and he is preparing, not singing.

Meanwhile, the cartoon links fearlessness to the first two pigs and their obviously naïve ignorance. The “fresh” pigs are foolish, but they are foolish because they are young. The childlike costumes and cheeky cavorting of the first two pigs invites the audience’s judgment and its forgiveness. The pigs are “fresh,” but they cannot help it; they are young. They do not know enough to fear the wolf, at least at the outset of the cartoon, though they will meet him face-to-face before the end.

But the cartoon’s seemingly simple didactic message is belied by the fact that the first two pigs prepare houses for themselves just as the third pig does, only their building materials are different. They lose their homes as a result, and though it seems the moral of the cartoon wants to lay the blame on the two pigs who sing and dance, this is not, in fact, a story of “The Ant and the Grasshopper.” The first two houses fail not because the childlike pigs dance and sing, but because presumably they lack either the desire or the ability to handle the more difficult and laborious process of building a house with brick. It is not the homes that are “unbearable;” it is the pigs’s *attitude*. Whether they lack the material resources in the first place or not, they are simply *too happy*. Perhaps they prepare as best they can, but the lesson they must first learn is that stolid pigs survive, fresh pigs do not.

It is hardly a coincidence that the cartoon’s lyric takes up the language of Roosevelt’s First Inaugural Address in which he famously declares “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” Roosevelt would later claim “Who’s Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?” as one of his favorite songs. Along with unemployment, shuttered businesses, farmers with no market, families with no savings, Roosevelt (1933) acknowledged in his address that “a host of unemployed citizens face the grim problem of existence, and an equally great number toil with little return. Only a foolish optimist can deny the dark realities of the moment.”

For all of the cartoon’s technical achievements (as well as deficiencies), it acknowledges “the dark realities of the moment” and offers reassurances that are at best ambiguous and at worst contradictory and uncertain, a rarity in *Disney fantasy*. Perhaps the unusually reflective “The Three Little Pigs” is both a conscious and an unconscious acknowledgment of the extraordinary challenges facing America in 1933 as Walt Disney understood them.

As the first two pigs build and sing “who’s afraid of the big bad wolf?” the audience understands (though the pigs do not) that they sing as if to invite disaster. The dramatic irony is heavy, for they have no idea that

the homes they build—adopting as they do the hay and sticks available—cannot possibly constitute homes capable of weathering the storm of the wolf’s coming. An audience familiar with the English fairy tale understands the dangers implicitly. The reflective ambiguity of the cartoon emerges in this first anticipated moment of doom for the two seemingly naïve and unprepared (or underfinanced) little pigs. Their houses fail not because the pigs are lazy or refuse to prepare—rather, the cartoon renders their respective cartoon homes as simple, unassuming dwellings that belie the laziness or ignorance of the first two pigs. Their homes appear to be reasonable examples of cartoon housing. The first two pigs, in spite of their innocence, know enough about home building so that they hang pictures on the walls and otherwise create domestic spaces suitable to their needs. How much does a pig need, after all? The ambiguity of the tale emerges in the cartoon’s invitation to misrecognize the cause of the pigs’ doom as self-induced, as in Grasshopper’s suffering in Aesop’s “The Ant and the Grasshopper.”⁸

What is the lesson(s) of “The Three Little Pigs”? If you do the right thing, you will survive? Work hard? Be prepared? All of these and more might be reduced to the following: *do good and you will do well*. The moral from the English folktale overlays Disney’s version, but is not fully supported by the cartoon. The problem with the *do good and you will do well* moral is that it fails to offer a satisfactory interpretation of the wolf as he appears in the cartoon, and as he was experienced by the audience at the time: as an existential threat of the greatest scale and significance, a scale that challenged if not obliterated ordinary ideological frames of reference. Doing good and, as a result, living well did not necessarily protect the pig from the wolf, existentially speaking. It was simply the best way to live while waiting for the inevitable appearance of the wolf. The film is really quite extraordinary as fantasy in the Disney canon. Few films since then have spoken to the existential crisis of the moment more immediately and directly than “Pigs” did during the Great Depression. There is no analogous film from the war years, or from the 1950s through to 1966, Disney’s third- and fourth-order fantasy unfailingly embodied *restorative* nostalgia as the definitive response to existential angst and suffering.

In 1933 the crisis the wolf symbolized was so great, in fact, that a simplistic moral of *do good and do well* offered itself as a screening fantasy that masked a reflective, open ambiguity that hinted at the horrors of the Real.⁹ As it is, the wolf’s desire symbolizes the desire of the Symbolic order run amok. What does the Other want from me? In “The Three

Little Pigs,” the answer is conflicted and at odds. On the one hand, the wolf as the Other of desire would like to annihilate the subject entirely. The third “stolid” pig who builds in brick speaks as well for the Other; he is a kind of superego balanced against the ego-id of the childlike pair of pigs, and he frowns and berates his audience as he sings and lays brick. He has had no chance to sing and dance because work and play do not mix, he sings, and he shakes his trowel and jounces to the music to make his point, at the same time suggesting that the three little pigs are not so different as the bricklayer seems to believe. They build and he builds. They sing and he sings. They dance, and he jounces to the tune. By the end, the wolf will have entered all three of their houses, in spite of the pigs’s best efforts to keep him out.

The wolf is the desire of the Other disguised as the other, the scapegoat beggar, carpetbagger, Jew at the door. Symbolizing the wolf-as-other blames the scapegoat for the existential threat to the social order from within, rather than the social order itself that produces predatory practices between Capital and consumer. In Disney’s version the wolf-as-other is a disguise and a screen against the unconscious knowledge that the wolf is Other come to foreclose in an act of financial as well as psychoanalytic foreclosure of subjects-as-consumers. The penalty for failure is to face annihilation. Capital’s desire as the big Other is a psychotic desire, destructive and all-consuming. But the wolf’s demise at the hand of the third pig’s big boiling pot suggests a third foreclosure, that of fantasy’s promise to offer an “imaginary resolution of a real contradiction” (Zipes 2011, 3). The contradiction? Capital loses the battle in “Three Little Pigs” but, in its symbolization as a defeated predator, it does not promise freedom but a guaranteed return of the repressed. The wolf will be back, and the cartoon acknowledges that fact in any number of unconscious ways: in the rendering of the pigs’ houses; their interior décor; and the ultimate failure of the pigs to keep the wolf *out*. Though vanquished, the fantasy of Capital depicted as the wolf scurrying down the road while howling in pain represents only a deferral, not a defeat.

The subversive aspect of “Three Little Pigs” is to render the voraciousness of Capital as a symbol that the audience would plainly recognize. Like a dream, the cartoon allows the audience to work out their fear and anxiety provoked by economic collapse into a form that offers false mastery in the most simplistic, childlike structure. The cartoon offers an allegorical fantasy of the human psyche in trauma, a very specific kind of trauma produced by the lack, the ultimate hollowness, of

Capital and its commitment to exercising total dominion over the lives of its subjects. In its last gasp, Capital eats its employees to stay alive.

The allegory of the subject-pig working hard and preparing wisely symbolizes the moral—the subject must protect its home and all that home represents from Capital’s predatory claims upon it in times of economic distress. The fantasy-as-ideology of the cartoon reveals a narrative and moral contradiction at its core. The cartoon unconsciously symbolizes the “traumatic kernel at the heart of the Real” (Žižek 2007, 3) in that it makes it quite clear that there is no place safe from the wolf’s desire, not even a brick house can keep him out.

The clever pig in the Jacobs version captures the wolf in a boiling pot just as the wolf descends the chimney into the house. The same thing happens in the Disney version. However, in the Jacobs version, the first two pigs are dead, already eaten by the wolf when the third pig captures, boils, and eats the wolf, presumably with the two other pigs running through its guts. The Disney version refers to his macabre grotesquerie in the third pig’s brick house. Hanging on the wall of the pig’s living room are pictures of Father and Mother. Mother is depicted as a sow on her side, suckling a half dozen piglets. Father, on the other hand, is depicted as a chain of sausages. It is a visual pun, almost a Freudian slip of sorts. In an effort to be funny and add a depth to the humor, Disney inadvertently let the cat out of the bag. Pigs get eaten. Pigs are for the slaughter. A pig defeating a wolf is a ridiculous reversal of the obvious natural order of predator and prey. Jacobs’s version reverses this natural order, but at a cost—the surviving pig survives on the meat of the wolf and the “sausage” already within the wolf’s intestines made up of the first two pigs. Disney spares us this particular horror, and leaves the audience with the comfortable fantasy that “preparation” and “hard work” will vanquish the wolf. As a rudimentary form of *Disney fantasy*, the cartoon strays into *reflective* nostalgia while ultimately leaving the audience with a fantasy that will allow them to “slide into their reveries in which their wishes are fulfilled” (Huang 2009, 32). But in the case of “The Three Little Pigs,” the implicit wishes the cartoon grants are particularly laden with the social crisis concurrently unfolding in America. The question was one of survival in a time when Capital itself was at risk. How precisely would FDR work to change the system? Would big business and its ties to nationalism and proto-fascism lose their hold in Washington?

While Disney's "The Three Little Pigs" depicts an allegory of the subject in conflict with the predatory Other, the cartoon as a social practice functions as a lesson about fantasy itself, and not an innocuous one. "The liberating effect of dreaming is temporary, if not deceptive;" in fact, the regressive reception of mass-culture products like Disney films will hinder even the possibility of challenging the dissatisfying status quo (Huang 2009, 33). In *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkhemier and Adorno maintain that the entertainment industry, especially Disney cartoons which were in their sights, represents a social practice designed to "hammer into every brain the old lesson that continuous attrition, the breaking of all individual resistance, is the condition of life in this society" (2002, 110). This assessment, however, does not adequately address the cartoon's function as fantasy and its final elision of the truth in song, "The Three Little Pigs."

The wolf's desire is a perverse desire. His fantasy relationship seems etched into the mythology of beast fables, though, in fact, the overturning of predatory relationships in the folk and fairy tale is not an uncommon outcome, and this thematic device is most clearly seen in "The Three Little Pigs." The pigs must win, though in Disney's version the price of sparing the lives of the first two pigs must be paid for by the wolf's survival, all but guaranteeing the "return of the repressed."

While it may seem that the Disney version has obfuscated the darker truth of the fairy tale by allowing the pigs and the wolf to live (thus sparing the little children Jacobs's predation and cannibalism), Disney's tale is no less dark and is existentially far less satisfying and so that much more unsettling. The cartoon settles nothing, and it knows it. Rather than reveling in and leveraging *restorative* nostalgia, as he will a few years later in *Snow White*, "The Three Little Pigs" is almost without nostalgia, or rather, it mocks nostalgia, for the two "fresh" pigs who sing and dance and play all day are as representations of children—willfully flouting the seriousness of the situation, ignoring the council of their betters, their elders, and generally asking for it. Rather than a nostalgia or a longing for childhood and the idyllic lives of the dancing pigs, the narrative punishes them for their wrong-headedness and willful desire to live in a dream of pleasure.

As a fantasy "The Three Little Pigs" condemns fantasy. Hard work is what is required if one is to survive. Children and childhood are something to be put away. From a Lacanian perspective, the third pig symbolizes an ego-ideal the subject-viewer is urged to identify with and

attach to, though the cartoon's hail is contradictory and complex. While it invites the subject-viewer to cathect to the third pig as an ideal that might lead to the idealized ego in the subject, and thereby lead to the satisfaction of the subject's desire, in the end the childish song of the childish pigs becomes the anthem of the cartoon, and even of the third pig. For what he represents—stolid, hardworking, prepared—is ultimately disavowed by the narrative and what the subject-viewer is left with in an ideological bait and switch maneuver is not a fantasy, but a reminder from the Real. The wolf lives. Fear and anxiety can best be met by singing a happy tune.

FDR declared “The Three Little Pigs” his “favorite film” perhaps because of the song, a clear homage to his first inaugural address (“Who’s Afraid” 2012). While encouraging Americans to keep a check on their fear and not surrender to it, the song in the cartoon offered an ostensible solution that that is pure delusion. Consider at the outset of the cartoon how the first two pigs appear as “fresh,” that is, as frivolous, childish children proudly singing of their decision to sing, dance, and be happy. The cartoon offers a cautionary tale about the importance of resisting the desire for pleasure and pursuing instead the reality principle. There will be time later for music, dancing, and play. The third, “stolid” bricklaying pig articulates the reality principle. He knows the wolf may soon be at their doors, long before the wolf appears.

It is at this point that the first two pigs sing and dance in response to their brother's advice: “who’s afraid of the big bad wolf?” At this point in the cartoon the answer to the rhetorical question is obvious: the two little pigs should be afraid. Their fearlessness is equated with a kind of naïve, intransigent stupidity. Do they not realize? Surely they do because they sing about the wolf. How can they not know? The song indicates that even the childish pigs know about the wolf, only they choose to affect a fearless *jouissance*. Can they not see? They choose not to. And for all of this they will be punished by the predatory Law of Capital.

The wolf makes his first appearance in the cartoon as a carpetbagger dressed in a top hat and drooling when he sees the pigs singing and dancing and not being afraid. Not only are they not afraid, the pigs are unjustifiably confident in their ability to handle the wolf should he ever appear. They are inexperienced children living in an adult world, elements of which are happy to destroy them. When they finally do meet the wolf, they flee to their respective homes, narrowly escaping destruction. The Disney version is careful to render even the straw house as a

sturdy dwelling that the wolf cannot simply enter. Because of this, he blows the straw house in, sending the first pig running to his brother's stick house. The door of the stick house is strong and keeps the wolf out, and so the wolf leaves in order to begin a series of deceptions to try and trick the pigs into coming out because the house is, after all, well-built and sturdy.

The two pigs think the wolf has left for good and they begin singing and dancing again, and asking each other "who's afraid of the big bad wolf?" The two pigs are oblivious to the obviousness of their situation, though the audience is not. The cartoon suggests that perhaps the first two pigs deserve the coming calamity because of an incorrigible tendency to live in a fantasy of denial.

The wolf appears again in a series of disguises suited to the cultural and ideological landscape of 1933 America. First, he comes as an abandoned baby left on the door step. He is in "sheep's clothing," an abandoned lamb in a basket sucking a nipple connected to a bottle. The wolf's ruse of abandoned infant comes straight out of the Great Depression and not the Joseph Jacobs version. In 1933 Roosevelt's signature legislation, the Social Security Act, had not yet been passed. Meanwhile, the Children's Bureau (1912) estimated that 300,000 children were at risk, abandoned, or otherwise in need of services that communities were unable to provide in the early 1930s. Title VII of Roosevelt's Social Security Act made the health and wellbeing of dependent children a joint federal-state responsibility (Berkowitz 1991). In 1933 finding an infant abandoned on the doorstep was not beyond the realm of possibility, yet the two pigs are not fooled. And so the wolf decides to blow the stick house down. He huffs, and so on, and succeeds.

The two pigs are almost captured by the wolf, but manage to escape to their brother's newly finished brick house, complete with a brick bed and a brick piano. The third pig welcomes the first two, but not without first lecturing them on the rightness of his decisions and the wrongness of theirs: "See I told you what would happen when that big wolf came around only bricks and stone are wolf proof, now at last you're safe and sound." But the fact of the matter is bricks and stone are not wolf proof, and it seems that the third pig is hardly less naïve and misinformed than his brothers. Fortunately for the audience, however, the dour, over-confident third pig loves to boogie, and he bangs out a jazzy piano accompaniment to the other two pigs singing "who's afraid of the big bad

wolf,” no longer a song of naïve overconfidence, apparently, because the third pig believes them all to be truly safe. When the wolf knocks on the door, the third pig is undismayed, even pleased.

The wolf’s next deception is to dress up as a Jewish peddler, complete with heavy, round glasses, a long black beard, a long nose, and a smooth head, as if was wearing a yarmulke, or skullcap, common to Jewish men. Disney undoubtedly thought the stereotype was all in good fun, a visual gag depending on a collective understanding of the Jewish peddler “type,” traveling as part salesman, part “gypsy,” and part con man, intent on using his cover as a Jewish traveling salesman to cheat non-Jews. The figure of the wolf allows Disney to indulge in a small but telling bit of “economic anti-Semitism.” The question regarding Disney’s anti-Semitism belies another question, that of Disney’s attitude towards Capital, for the stereotypical caricature of the Jewish peddler symbolizes both Disney’s (and his animators’s) attitudes towards Jews and hence the cartoon’s attitude towards capitalism. As such, though the Jewish stereotype surely circulates a common and culturally acceptable form of anti-Semitism, what remains overlooked is the underlying subversive nature of the cartoon’s attack and warning against Capital in its circulation of the Jewish stereotype. The stereotype of the Jewish peddler is part of the cartoon’s warning against Capital since the Jewish peddler symbolizes antagonism against Capital because Jews were viewed as the “creators of capitalism.” So Disney was free to caricature Jews in the 1933 Great Depression (Foxman 2010, 98). By 1947, in the aftermath of World War II and the Holocaust, Disney revised the dialogue and softened, though did not entirely remove, the anti-Semitic symbolization. But in the 1933 version of “The Three Little Pigs” the message is clear: the wolf and the Jew work together to destroy you, for both are symptoms—or *sin-thomes*—of Capital.

In 1933 Disney undoubtedly approved the wolf-as-Jew through numerous stages of the cartoon’s production process. Does the appearance of the wolf as a “Jewish peddler” indicate that Walt Disney was consciously anti-Semitic? Scholars have both condemned and exonerated Walt Disney for anti-Semitic beliefs. The only thing one can be sure of from “The Three Little Pigs” is that anti-Semitic stereotypes were in play and available to those who developed the adaptation via storyboards, a process all but invented by Walt Disney to help control narrative development before costly animation began. Disney would have overseen and permitted the Jewish peddler gag. Does this make him anti-Semitic?

Whether Jews controlled Hollywood or not, four major studios certainly did control Hollywood in the 1930s. Thomas Schatz writes that “the Hollywood studio system was, as economists and the federal courts well understood, a ‘mature-oligopoly’—a group of companies cooperating to control a certain market”—in this case they were Warner Bros., MGM, Universal, and David Selznick (2010, 9). Certainly, though, racist caricatures were common, accepted, and part of the ideological discourse of the 1930s and before. Whether Disney believed himself to be an embattled outsider competing against a “Jewish Hollywood” of the 1930s, or whether his animators felt stronger anti-Semitic feelings than he, the times being what they were, the anti-Semitic reference says something about what Walt Disney believed “ordinary Americans” believed who the wolf really was.

For Disney, the wolf was surely Capital, and the Jew his agent. Disney had grown up listening to his father lecture strangers and vagrants at the dinner table on the ills of capitalism and the promise of the socialist revolution. In 1933 Disney clearly still felt a certain affinity for the working man, and perhaps believed that part of his troubles resulted from greedy capitalists who felt no compassion for the dispossessed, unemployed citizen, who would happily foreclose in the name of Capital; a trend that would only grow worse as the Great Depression intensified and the Dust Bowl brought environmental misery to an already suffering population.¹⁰

The “stolid” bricklaying pig is prepared for the wolf’s deceptions and beats him with his own brush while pulling the rug out from under him. The pig disappears into his “wolf proof” brick fortress, leaving the wolf enraged. He is hungry and motivated and tries to blow the house in but, of course, fails. Inside the house, meanwhile, the third pig plays piano and makes light of the wolf’s efforts to force his way in. Finally, the wolf leaps to the roof, laughs with carnivorous joy and works himself down the chimney. At last, he has found his way in.

When the wolf finds himself inside the house he looks around hungrily. The third pig hides around the corner seemingly pleased to be doing battle within his own house. The first two pigs are out of sight. At this point in the narrative, all that has gone before in terms of the cartoon’s didactic cautionary moralizing about knowing when to work and when to play falls by the wayside. The third pig—and so the first two—survive because of quick thinking and a handy can of turpentine mixed in with the boiling water. In the Disney version, the pigs do not eat the wolf; rather, they expel him, foreclosing on his invasion as it were, and

casting him out. As a central though rapacious aspect of the Symbolic order, the pigs's victory over Capital is only possible via fantasy, but the fantasy is qualified, potentially subversive, and more *reflective* than *restorative*. Whatever world the pigs lived in before the wolf arrived has now been utterly transformed.

The cartoon ends with the wolf howling in pain and fleeing the neighborhood while the first two pigs sing and dance and the third pig accompanies them on the brick piano. The song lyric, once marking the first two pigs as childish and naïve has been transformed by events into a song of triumph and celebration. Who's afraid of the big bad wolf? Not us. Not now. Not ever.¹¹ Of course, victory over fear is short-lived. In the midst of their celebration the third pig knocks loudly on the music stand, sending the other two pigs diving in fear under the bed, so sure the wolf has returned. But he will because he must. That is the nature of things. Unlike the Jacobs version in which the hierarchy of predation is inverted and the prey eats the predator, in the Disney version, Capital is kept at bay, but the ideological system that sets wolves on pigs—that is, Capital on its subjects—remains intact. The cartoon offers only a hollow signifier in the form of a rhetorical question set to music: “Who's afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?”

The cartoon's moralizing dialogue about work and play functions as an ideological *objet a* for the viewer-subject; the rudimentary messaging of “work and play don't mix” as an ideological ego-ideal, perhaps meant to encourage the millions of unemployed to get back to work, failed to address the systemic causes for unemployment. If playing too much and working too little was the cause of the wolf coming around, then victims of the wolf's wrath have only themselves to blame. In this, the cartoon announces that it is *restorative* nostalgia for the system and not a subversive exploration of alternate ways of being. As a beast fable, the heavy-handed allegory of “The Three Little Pigs” limits the degree to which fantasy might open reflective, or subversive, modes of thinking. Instead, “The Three Little Pigs” complains about the status quo, but offsets the anger for the situation not on the system, but on the Jew-other, the one responsible for subverting the system for his own ends. As a result, the Jew/Wolf/Capital is on the prowl.

The overt didacticism of the tale and its admonishments to work hard, play later, is surely not its unconscious import, for the didacticism breaks down and fails to deliver on its promise by the end and thereby reveals the unconscious message in the cartoon, that is, the trace effects of the

Symbolic order working both on, and *as*, the cartoon. As an allegory of the “reality principle,” the cartoon’s overt message teaches the subject-viewer about the benefits of knowing when to work and when to play. Working is both a moral and an ethical responsibility, for your neighbors’s lives may depend upon it. The younger pigs are less sympathetic as they sing and dance at the beginning of the cartoon precisely because they seem to flout their responsibility to the other. They are selfish as well as stupid, and deserve to be turned out by the wolf. The stolid pig, knowing his ethical duty, sublimates his desire for pleasure into the creative outlet of bricklaying and domestic defense. He sublimates, and as a result, survives the wolf attack. The ideological message of the cartoon remains at the level of propaganda, that is, as a message that supports the status quo in attempting to offer a catharsis rather than a message of revolutionary change. The possibility existed for such a message to inform the cartoon—when the pig eats the wolf—but Disney declined, and as a result the cartoon never rises above overt didacticism and as a work of propaganda for the status quo.

The cartoon takes up the contradiction between Capital and the material conditions of the people it subjugates. Are they food? Are they to be sacrificed to the circle of predatory economic life? On the one hand, the cartoon says no, the pigs will not be food, they will be a family. On the other hand, however the wolf remains at large and the cartoon has already indicated that pigs *are* food, and so perhaps any victory over the wolf is at best temporary. Best to stay on guard and sing, “Who’s afraid of the big bad wolf?”

NOTES

1. For more, see Leslie Cabarga. *Gulliver’s Travels* earned \$3.27 million in the United States according to <http://www.ultimatemovierankings.com/top-grossing-movies-of-1939/>. See also Michael Barrier, 1999.
2. See “Dust Bowl.” 2004. *Gale: U.S. History*. March 10, 2017.
3. From the Disney History Institute.
4. This is no small category and I will return to consider Jack Zipes’ “Breaking the Disney Spell,” along with Maria Tatar’s perspective on the Brothers Grimm and Charles Perrault tales that served as key source material for Walt Disney throughout his career.
5. <https://trueclassics.net/2012/07/28/whos-afraid-of-the-big-bad-wolf/>.
6. For more on this process, see: J. Zornado.

7. For more of this important article, see Jack Zipes, "Breaking the Disney Spell." pp. 39–40. It is worth noting that while Disney did indeed appropriate and transform his literary fairy tale source material as Zipes, Tatar, and others observe, he followed a pattern of appropriation and revision similar to what the Brothers Grimm perpetrated on their source material, the oral tales. Disney represents a cultural and historical moment of evolution for the fairy tale no less significant than the Brothers Grimm and perhaps a great deal more. To claim that something has been lost in the transformation from second-order to third-order fantasy suggests a nostalgia for a "restorative signifier" that carries with it an essence, a presence, so that the second-order materials of the Brothers Grimm appear to be more than culturally constructed patterns of signifiers.
8. Also see Russell Merritt, 2004 for a discussion of *Pigs* as a drama of "pre-sexual childhood" at risk in a world of dangerous predatory adults.
9. See Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* for his sense of how critical the social crisis had become in America, circa 1933.
10. Chapter 3 examines Disney's biography and his childhood. For more, see Neal Gabler's biography of Walt Disney.
11. "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf" lived again as an unofficial anthem of the early war years in response to the existential threat of Nazi Germany. For those who sang it was the anthem's meaning any more established, or was it contingent and ambiguous?

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