Realism In Snow White

‘Snow White and the Seven Dwarves’ (1937) was originally inspired by the Grimm Brothers’ fairy tale. This story left an impression on Walt Disney as a child and urged him to create the movie we all know today. For this film, Disney incorporated new animation techniques such as rotoscoping and multiplane to create a sense of realism within a fantasy world.

‘Snow White’ showed many traits that reflected realist trends within live-action filmmaking, such as deep focus photography and simulated camera movement. Many sequences in ‘Snow White’ simulate a Three-Dimensional environment by using a multiplane camera. This technique used four layers of artwork placed in front of a horizontal camera and enabled it to peer through multiple layers at the same time, therefore creating a sense of depth. This also allowed the entire frame to be in focus and all elements of mise-en-scene in each plane (foreground, middle ground, and background) to be showed individually and as a whole. This helped the audience to focus on what the creators wanted to guide their eyes through in that particular scene. In the sequence between Snow White and the Huntsman who was hired by the Queen to kill her, the scene consists of different sized shots. The Huntsman observing Snow White in the background as she picks flowers in the foreground, and a river placed in the middle ground to separate the two. This gives the scene a solid structure by separating the background, middle ground, and foreground, which assists in creating a sense of depth. Therefore, this scene directs the audience through a series of cuts, and different shot types/sizes- which adds to the realism of the film and follows typical techniques seen in modern animation today. This mimics how a person would look at a scene in real life.

In ‘Snow White and the Seven Dwarves’ the camera was represented as a physical object within the scene. Sequences showing this usually have the camera positioned within the scene so characters can move around it. For example, the mine cart moving over the camera to reveal the dwarves during “The Working Song” sequence. As well as the camera being an animal’s point of view of the cottage floor during the “Whistle While You Work” sequence. The optimal use of this physical camera is during the first sequence of Snow White singing into the wishing well. The camera is “placed” inside the well, angled up at her, during the “I’m Wishing” song sequence. Disney made it seem like it is underwater through creating ripples and Snow White’s reflection distorted. This adds to Disney’s attempt to incorporate realism into the animation. While the Wishing Well sequence has realistic effects added, it seems unrealistic to have anything inside the well to which the point of view could belong to. Another clever use of the multiplane camera was during the sequence wherein the Evil Queen drinks the potion to transform into a hag. The creators moved the objects in the background and foreground in opposing directions to create a sense of depth.

Animation is meant to be made of representational drawings, not photographic reproductions of physical objects. Rotoscoping was a technique in animating, invented by Max Fleischer in 1915. Rotoscoping was when live-action footage was projected onto an animator’s drawing board and then drawn frame by frame. This technique was used in scenes between ‘Snow White’ and ‘Prince Charming’, as well as most of the Evil Queen’s scenes. Rotoscoping was used to create more realistic characters by capturing expressions, costumes, hair movements, and gestures. This was then painstakingly drawn frame by frame. However, due to the “realistic”

element the rotoscoped characters' movements bring to the movie, it does pose an issue with photorealistic animation. The Evil Queen's acting seemed quite stiff and forced, particularly before her transformation. This same issue is also present in Snow White as her face is sometimes inexpressive, emotionless, and masklike. This, unfortunately, seems to happen across animated films- the more realistic you try to represent a human character, the more alien and strange it becomes. The human characters within this film move and act in a more realistic way. Their movements resemble humans in real life. This clashes with the "fantasy" or "magical" characters such as the "Seven Dwarves" and the "Evil Queen" who are all drawn as characters with big hands, feet, and exaggerated facial expressions. Due to the contrast, the fantasy characters seem more natural and comfortable throughout the film. Disney's reasoning for infusing realism throughout his animations was to create characters his audience could relate to and empathize with. He gave animated characters a sense of humanity by drawing and realistically presenting them.

In "Snow White and the Seven Dwarves", the pioneering technique is shown through the dwarves. This technique aided in giving them personality, doing this gave each dwarf identifiable characteristics. This helped in making more memorable characters and moments throughout the film. Disney created a lot of exaggeration through these characters which is another principle often applied to animation. An example of this is the sequence where the character Sneezy ends up sneezing so hard, his head/face stretches and squashes down multiple times. The true power of exaggeration is shown through the strength of his sneeze as it forces the other dwarves as well as furniture to be blown away. While the dwarves are making their way towards the mine, the squash and stretch are quite apparent. Keeping to the rhythm of the song "Heigh-Ho", their walk rises and falls which emphasizes the music. This gives their characters the illusion of weight and volume. Another exaggeration sequence would be inside the mine as the dwarf Doc reacts to his hammer hitting a diamond. The squash of his face is unrealistic. Additionally, 'Dopey's big ears, as well as the miserable expression of Grumpy's face and bulbous nose, are continually affected by the stretch and squash principle to give them more life. This corresponded with Disney's style of hyperrealism as it helped make their animations more believable. During the sequence "Whistle While You Work", 'Overlapping Action' and 'Follow Through' are shown as Snow White is cleaning the dwarves' home with her animal friends. This principle is commonly more noticeable during dancing sequences to create more realistic flow. In this particular scene, we see 'Snow White' dancing and her dress swaying with the action. This principle did not immediately start with her movement but waited a few seconds to catch up to her swaying. This delay adds realistic physics by applying gravity to the objects and animation. The same thing is shown through Snow White's hair as well as the ears and tails on the animals as they sway and rotate with their movement. The movement stops when the characters halt their actions, which once again contributes to the realistic style Disney was going for. Examples of these principles with an opposite effect to realism would be during dancing sequences of the dwarves in their house. Many of the dwarves are playing instruments. We can see the strings, drums and symbols vibrate as they are hit. There is quite a lot of exaggeration shown in this sequence through stretch and squash.

The concept of hyperrealism and realism in general is mostly significant within 'Snow White' herself. It is shown in the small size of her mouth and eyes compared to the other characters. This may have been done in order to emphasise her 'innocence'. Creating a character as realistic as Snow White would have been impossible to accomplish with traditional two-dimensional hand animation, as the principles were what created and emphasized Disney's style of realism. The realism of the film was also aided by naturalistic drawing and cinematic

framing. The most powerful aspect of hyperrealism was the fluid and life-like movements and expressions of ‘Snow White’ as well as the animals. “The movement, construction and behavioral tendencies of ‘the body’ in a hyper-realist animated film will correspond to the traditional physical aspects of human beings and creatures in the 'real’ world” – Paul Wells stated. The Fleischer studio, well known for the creation of the cartoon series ‘Betty Boop’ (1932-39), believed that Disney’s use of rotoscoped animation within films diminished the semblance of life in Snow White’s character.

The focal point in using these animation principles was to aid in creating realism in animated films. Through using physics, giving characters personality and exaggerating squash and stretch to capture the audience’s attention. It also stimulated creative minds and inspired many animation artists and studios to follow Disney’s ideas. Disney strived to create more realistic characters in order to engage the audience. While some may see these principles as controversial, ‘Snow White and the Seven Dwarves’ set a worldwide standard for animation industries, through the combination of realism and animation, and created the Disney we all know and love today.

References:

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