Disney Discourse
Producing the Magic Kingdom

Edited by
Eric Smoodin
The reception studies I seek would be historical, would recognize the dialectics of evidence and theory, and would take up a critical distance on the relations between spectators and texts. It would not interpret texts but would attempt a historical explanation of the event of interpreting a text.¹

Staiger’s approach to reception studies involves tracing both dominant and marginal interpretive strategies in order to analyze how readers take up subject positions with regard to a text. As reception studies is concerned with the plurality of audiences and the variety of their readings and interpretations of films within various historical, social, and regional contexts, it does not attempt to flatten out differences or debates under an ideal or dominant reader/viewer. Rather, reception studies involves studying the strategies audiences use to make sense of a text, and considers how any interpretation reorients and reworks textual material in the viewers’ (or critics’) attempts to understand a film. This issue of “making sense” is foregrounded in the case of a “difficult” or unconventional film. If a spectator’s viewing history does not provide relevant or sufficient foreknowledge for adequate comprehension, (she) is probably more likely to rely on judgments and interpretations offered by critics and reviewers.

Walt Disney’s Fantasia fell into this category when first released in 1940. The film presents eight pieces of classical music, each segment introduced and interpreted by musicologist Deems Taylor. Disney intended Fantasia to be an open text, featuring both narrative and non-narrative “visualizations” of music, with the initial intention that these sequences could be reorganized and other sequences would be added.³ To aid audience comprehension of his film, Disney produced a thirty-two-page program, which the studio distributed to audiences during the film’s 1940 to 41 release. This program discussed the ideas behind the production of Fantasia and provided background knowledge on each musical selection. Publicity for the film even tutored viewers on when and how to attend the film. As advertisements warned:

It is important that all attending Fantasia be seated before curtain time. . . . Fantasia does not start in the conventional manner. . . . There are no titles on the screen. The opening is a delightful surprise. . . . We urge you to be seated before curtain time to enjoy it to the fullest.⁴

The first release of Fantasia not only met with a great deal of critical attention, designed to guide the audience’s viewing, but stimulated a debate on its status as an interpretation and adaptation of classical music. The controversy over the film can be located within discourses of "cultural
authority"—in particular surrounding the status of film as "art." While film critics almost unanimously praised the film as "important," music critics despised the way it diluted the classics. The force of these arguments indicates how even such a "quality" film was regarded as part of a despised popular culture by representatives of "high" culture.

In this essay, I shall be examining reviews, publicity, marketing, and critical evaluations of Fantasia in the context of both its original release and two later reissues (1954 and 1991). I have chosen this strategy in order to see how changing cultural contexts helped to shape the different ways in which the film was received across time. Given that Fantasia was the subject of an intense critical debate during its first release, I have chosen to focus on the 1940 to 1960 period to examine how the film figured in the ongoing discourses around popular culture and high art. Then examine the reissues from 1954 and 1991 to investigate the (re)circulation of these terms in later periods. In each incarnation, Fantasia has been associated with issues of quality and (film) "art" as well as the application of new technologies (such as stereo, widescreen, and home video/laser discs). The reception of Fantasia has also raised questions of how cultural definitions of the popular and the "lowbrow" are related to mass distribution. Given the cultural climate of 1940, Disney's initial restricted release of Fantasia suggests that the studio was trying to place the film as an "elitewear" of "art." However, changes in definitions of art and popular culture eventually allowed Fantasia to become both the best-selling video of all time and an undisputed masterpiece by 1995.

Fantasia premiered at New York's Broadway Theatre on Wednesday, November 13, 1940. Unlike other Walt Disney productions, which were distributed through RKO, Fantasia was handled exclusively by Disney on its initial release as a roadshow in large urban theaters (roadshow was reserved for prestige pictures during the classical Hollywood era; the producer would take charge of the film's distribution and exhibition on a theater-by-theater basis, showcasing the movie in the best theaters and restricting its release to key urban markets).

One reason for this treatment was the need for theaters to close for about one week in order to install "Fantasound," the new stereophonic sound system developed by Disney in association with RCA for Fantasia. However, Disney's plans for the exhibition of Fantasia also suggest that the concept of a restricted release, coupled with the opportunities for individual treatment offered by road-showing, would help construct Fantasia as an artistic and cultural event. As Leonard Maltin notes, Disney had initially intended Fantasia to be "treat[ed] . . . as a concert, instead of a film (there was even talk, for a time, of opening it in concert halls instead of conventional theaters)." Since Fantasia premiered in New York rather than Los Angeles, it attracted the attention of representatives of "high"-culture rather than just movie reviewers, with leading music critics invited to attend the film's premiere. Fantasia would not open in Los Angeles until three months later, revealing Disney's desire for the film to be an event associated with East Coast culture and tradition rather than Hollywood glitter and frivolity.

Yet, as I shall discuss below, much of the controversy surrounding Fantasia's first release was precisely the result of this critical construction of the film on the boundaries of high art and popular culture. Although representatives of "high" culture, most notably music critics, did pay attention to Fantasia, they generally maligned the film, protesting that it bastardized and destroyed the pleasures and dignity of the music. Debates surrounding Fantasia were as much the result of the film establishment's praise of the film as the music critics' disapprobation. The resultant controversy placed Fantasia within contemporary debates about cinematic "art," and larger hierarchies of art, in particular (quality) music versus (popular) film. Following the success of Gone With the Wind in 1939, Hollywood made a prominent move towards quality and "art" in early 1940s cinema. "Prestige" pictures—high budget, class A productions—were usually adaptations of best-selling novels or literary classics.

According to Tino Balio, quality films were the leading production trend of the 1930s, differentiated from other releases not just by budget, but through the practice of road-showing. This individualized distribution and exhibition treatment highlighted a film as different, as a unique cultural product, rather than as just another part of a studio's output. Stress on the individual, "prestige" film accompanied exhibitor's calls for an end to block booking, a practice which forced theater owners to accept a seemingly endless string of "inferior" pictures. In 1940, Variety reported that Sam Goldwyn advocated a reduction in the number of films produced, both to maximize profits and to give the public what they wanted: quality films. The front-page headline from Variety, 21 August 1940, asked "Why they Don't go to Pix?" and gave the principle reason as "not enough good pictures." Based on a nationwide survey conducted by George Gallup for Variety, the article revealed that:
Variety stressed that one consequence of audience demand for quality pictures was that long runs for prestige films were becoming increasingly commonplace. Variety's correspondent claimed that this resulted in audiences actually creating a production and exhibition trend by favoring prestige pictures at the expense of lower-budget movies. Within this climate of critical and audience attention focused on the quality film, it is not surprising to find Disney promoting Fantasia as an ultraprestigious picture.

By 1940, Disney's reputation as a producer of quality films was fully established, especially after the two feature films, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs and Pinocchio, had been widely acclaimed by the critics. Trading on this reputation, Disney advertised in October 1940 that The Ugly Duckling had won an Academy Award for Short Subject (animated cartoon), and stressed that this was "Number Six in the parade of Disney shorts to win the Academy Award for six consecutive years!" Prior publicity for Fantasia emphasized Disney's genius, as established by these earlier successes, and thus helped bridge the cultural gap between animated cartoons and "high art." For example, just prior to Fantasia's premiere in November 1940, the New York Times Magazine reported that "the Disney who brought fairy-book folk alive here has freed music from the stage and made it flow and surge through the auditorium, has given it a new dimension and a new richness." The cost, ambition, and technical innovation of Fantasia (and the attendant Fantasound) also helped contribute to the construction of Disney as a genius who was about to ascend to new heights. On the day of Fantasia's world premiere in New York City, Douglas W. Churchill of the New York Times reported that:

An event of considerable cinematic importance will take place tonight with the world premiere of Fantasia, the Walt Disney musical cartoon feature, at the Broadway Theatre. Fantasia cost approximately $2,500,000 and has been in production for more than two years.

While Disney's earlier animated features had been well received, they were seen as works of genius within the unpretentious and childlike sphere of fairy tales rather than within the arena of "high art." The employment of Disney's "genius" in the advance publicity for Fantasia thus ascribed to him a connoisseur's knowledge of music, and associated him closely with his collaborators—conductor Leopold Stokowsk and commentator/Musicologist Deems Taylor—as a fellow custodian of "high" culture. Pictures in the New York Times show Disney, Stokowski, and Taylor conferring on Fantasia, while publicity articles for the film stress Stravinsky's admission that "That is what I must have meant by my music." Advance press for Fantasia also emphasized the artistic merit of Disney's previous cartoons, with the New York Times reporting that Steamboat Willie had been "preserved for posterity in the archives of the Film Library of the Museum of Modern Art." Indeed, the film critic for the tabloid New York Daily Mirror expressed some doubt as to whether he should even attend the film's premiere by poking fun at the invited audience:

research disclosed that the entire house for tonight's opening at the Broadway Theatre has been taken over by the British War Relief Society at a $10 top and that the list of ticket holders looks something like the Social Register and Burke's Peerage combined.

Although the marketing of Fantasia was targeted at a highbrow audience, it is important to note that both the New York Times and the "lowbrow" New York Daily Mirror carried daily advertisements for Fantasia throughout November 1940. Advance publicity of this kind clearly attempted to rework the cultural position of Disney, but rather than placing Disney in the position of disseminating high art in the guise of mass culture, this publicity seemed to position Fantasia as a product worthy of the elite. Efforts to build Disney's cultural capital indicated that Fantasia would be of interest to an audience new to Disney (who needed to be informed about the film). The Disney name alone acted as a sufficient draw for mass audiences, as prior successes indicated that they would come to Fantasia anyway.

Advance publicity almost certainly shaped the critical reception of Fantasia, especially the emphasis placed on Walt Disney's musical expertise. This same publicity probably helped the controversy over the film's merits. It is not surprising that music critics were angered by the film. They had been led to expect "the first full-length concert of classical music in the history of the movies," but may have felt they received instead "an irreconcilable conflict between domineering screen image and domineering music." Olin Downes, music critic for the New York Times complained that "in more than one instance those who went to the picture as a picture, or variously specialize in that field, declare that the spectacle itself was so engrossing that they forgot the music!" Meanwhile, Edward Downes, music critic for the Boston Evening Transcript, returned to see Fantasia a second time when it premiered in Boston only because he was so blinded by anger during the New York premiere.

The 'Pastoral Symphony à la Disney made me so angry that I began to wonder whether it had colored all my other impressions of Fantasia. So in a masochistic desire to be impartial and objective I returned to the Majestic Theater this week to see and hear Fantasia for a second time. (my emphasis)
The music critics' objections to Fantasia centered around the mixing of music and cinema. These critics argued that the music was generally drowned by the images, or that the images themselves anchored the music too much, restricting its associative powers. This debate foregrounds how issues of audience knowledge and perspective are central to a film's reception. In this instance, the debate involved prior knowledge (and interpretations) of the music selections featured in the film, a knowledge which itself indicated the depth of cultural capital possessed by the viewer. Indeed, the question of pleasure in interpreting the music was central to the music critics' objections to the film. Edward Barry, music critic of the Chicago Daily Tribune, foregrounded this issue in his review:

Whatever objections one may have to the rest of the production must be based principally not on any old fogey notions of reverence towards the classics but on a selfish, practical desire to extract from such a piece as Beethoven's Sixth Symphony every possible ounce of exhilaration and delight. When some of the composer's most incredibly lovely ideas are drowned out by audience laughter at the antics of centaurs one does not need to be an old fogey to cry "Hold! Enough!".[xvii]

Barry's comments are telling, in that the pleasure he takes from the music is opposed to the laughter of the crowd. Such criticism, like the above comment from Edward Downes, reveals that issues of pleasure and taste form an integral part of the critical aversion towards Fantasia, and signal different modes and conventions of reception in "high art" and popular culture as perceived by these representatives of "high" culture.

Part of the issue here, therefore, involves the music critics' devaluation and even erasure of cinematic forms of pleasure. Their experience of reviewing concerts called on forms of knowledge and questions of taste different from those required for reviewing films. One consequence was that the different conventions and knowledge required for music reviewing led to critical frustration, producing reviews which foregrounded prejudices against the cinema itself. However, it would be a mistake to assume that these attacks on Fantasia formed one homogeneous set. Music critics articulated their objections in three principal ways. These objections concerned the fusion of classical music and film, the issue of appropriate interpretations and translation of music, and, finally, the question of the cultural status of this hybrid of music and film.

One group of music critics were totally against this mixing of forms. This type of objection took two forms: critics like Edward Downes of the Boston Evening Transcript not only believed that film and classical music were fundamentally formally incompatible, but argued that music could not be mixed with any media:

Great music always tends to dominate no matter what combination of the arts. That was proved in Richard Wagner's music-dreams, where not the drama, but the music was the deciding factor, and was shown again in the evolution of the Russian ballet. And the greater the music, the more irresistibly it dominates. On the other hand, it is a fundamental law of the film that a moving image on a screen dominates everything else, dialogue, music and sound effects. Therefore, unless the film does violence to its own nature and retires, so to speak, into the background, it will do violence to any truly great music. (my emphasis)[xviii]

Another group, exemplified by the Chicago Daily Tribune's Mae Tinee and Edward Barry, cited differences and incompatibilities in the forms of reception demanded by the two media as the root of the problem. For these critics, the pleasures of watching film were grounded in distraction, whereas classical music demanded contemplation and introspection. A great part of the problem of Fantasia, therefore, lay in the way the images drowned and dominated the subtle contemplation required to appreciate good music. Edward Barry summed up this problem:

For a fidgety generation that cannot read a book without having the radio turned on, Walt Disney's Fantasia is an undoubted boon. It offers a full length program of good music well performed by the Philadelphia orchestra and beautifully recorded by sound technicians. Yet because of what goes on in the screen it is never necessary—indeed it is seldom possible—to concentrate on the music.[xix]

Similarly, film critic Mae Tinee complained:

how in heaven's name can one appreciate great music while the mind is distracted by the cavortings of gargoyles, dinosaurs, flying horses. .. and the like? Granted that music and dreams always go together. BUT—every listener wants to dream his own little dreams.[xx]

For Barry, the "distractions" of cinema involved color and movement, two of its fundamental characteristics, whereas Tinee specified that it was the types of images that caused her to be distracted. By positing cinema itself as the distraction, Barry creates a hierarchy favoring music, the form that involves concentration and which provides the substance of the program. Furthermore, Barry's radio analogy implies that popular culture is the real problem, promoting distraction above the forms of contemplation demanded by the "high arts" (such as literature and classical music).

Distraction and contemplation are terms embedded in a modernist ontology of perception, and such intellectual connotations helped to reinforce
the hierarchies and boundaries of “high art” and popular culture. Because
distraction and contemplation were opposed as modes of perception within
these reviews, critics concluded that Fantasia could not be a success.
They believed that there was either a formal incompatibility present, or
claimed that the mode of reception demanded by music and film made
their combination unsuccessful. In each case, critics attempted to define
an essential property of each form in order to explain the film’s failure.

Another charge levied against Fantasia centered on the question of its
translation and interpretation of music. Again, this objection takes two
forms. First, critics objected to the images chosen by Disney, most notably
those illustrating Beethoven’s “Pastoral Symphony” and Stravinsky’s
“Rite of Spring.” Olin Downes described the visualization of the “Pastoral
Symphony” in the following manner:

If Beethoven’s idea is too dull then let it be. But for heaven’s sake!—
to inject into this simple and wonderfully beautiful musical evocation
of the country-side groups of “Centaurretes,” roughing for encounters
with many centaurs who looked like a cross between a prize fighter,
a bartender and a horse’s buttocks, and then set these to biling and
cooing together, the while a red-nosed and bulbous caricature of
Bacchanus burlesques the show! This, to my mind, is as witness, as
utterly inapropos of Beethoven’s music as any invention could be—
really terrible.²⁹

Critics frequently linked these issues of image appropriateness to the
audience’s foreknowledge of the music and the composer’s own intentions
behind each piece. As a result, critics’ judgments of “inappropriate visual-
ization” were concerned with the effect that the film would have on
“lowbrow” audiences:

it may be said that Fantasia will give the unwary the idea that the
core of musical experience may be approached by the Disney route
and that the ecstasy and exaltation which the art offers have something
to do with visual images. This danger is especially serious since the
picture bears, by implication at least, the seal of approval of such
respected musicians as Stravinsky, Stokowski, and Taylor.³⁰

Music critics thus positioned themselves as cultural custodians possessing
more authority than even the composer, conductor, and musicologist.
The second objection regarding Fantasia’s interpretation of the classics
concerned the way Disney adapted the selections according to the tripartite
division of music discussed by Deems Taylor at the beginning of Fantasia:

There are three kinds of music on this Fantasia program. First, there’s
the kind that tells a definite story. Then, there’s the kind that while
it has no specific plot, does paint a series of more or less definite
pictures. Then there’s the third kind, music that exists absolutely for
its own sake . . . absolute music.

Of course, the music most favored by each music critic fell into the realm
of “absolute music,” hence rendering its visualization impossible. For
example, Olin Downes of the New York Times argued that Stravinsky’s
“Rite of Spring” was pure music, and consequently was unsuitable for
translation into any other medium:

at the basis the “Sacré” is not music for spectacle at all, but pure
music—perhaps the purest Stravinsky ever wrote, in the sense of
music which obeys laws peculiar to itself and has very little to do
with an outside medium or idea save—perhaps—the general idea
represented by its title: the performance of rite of spring by a primitive
people. To impose upon this music a children’s lesson in geology,
sociology and bacteriology is to us a far cry indeed from the quality
of Stravinsky. (my emphasis)³¹

This issue of absolute formal purity relates the question of translation or
adaptation to the first series of criticisms based on the formal characteris-
cistics of each medium. Critics used the concept of “pure music” as a means of
denying Fantasia’s claims to “art” by maintaining a gulf between the two
media.

These critics share with Walter Benjamin the idea that

Translatability is an essential quality of certain works, which is not
to say that it is essential that they be translated; it means rather that
a specific significance inherent in the original manifests itself in its
translatability.³²

Fantasia is different from the linguistic translations discussed by Benja-
mun, not just because it is a translation from music to film, but also
because the original is present. Disney explicitly voiced Fantasia’s project
as “seeing music and hearing pictures,” articulating the role of these
images in terms of a translation of the music.³³ According to Benjamin,
a translation does not just involve the transmission of a message, but the
expression of something other, something ineffable within the original.
However, because music critics saw their favorite music as pure and
untranslatable, this ineffable other could not be transmitted through im-
ages, being absolutely bound to the form of music itself.

Finally, some music critics objected to Fantasia explicitly on the
grounds that it destroyed cultural hierarchies, diluting the music by accompanying it with images in order to make it palatable to "lower-brow" audiences. Edward Downes stated that *Fantasia* worked best when it was interpreting lesser, or insignificant, pieces of music, while Edward Barry (cited above) expressed his distaste at audience laughter. Interestingly, it was not only the music critics who disliked *Fantasia*’s mixture of high art and popular culture. Mae Tinee, film critic for the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, disliked *Fantasia* precisely because she felt that the pleasures of animation and classical music should be kept separate. Tinee expressed nostalgia for Disney’s earlier works, and claimed that she could not understand *Fantasia*. “Certainly only genius could concoct such an anomaly and I am of the opinion that only genius could understand it . . . I’m only a low brow trying to get along—and I couldn’t seem to get along with *Fantasia*. ” As Tinee’s comments show, the desire to keep “art” and popular culture separate was not only expressed by representatives of “high” culture.

Interestingly, none of the music critics objected to the film on the grounds that the music itself was chopped up and rearranged. Their dominant concerns were with the music being combined with images, demonstrating how the issue of adaptation can affect reception. For the music critic, this newer, popular art form was ultimately bastardizing the music of the masters (and as *Fantasia* is, after all, an animated cartoon, connotations of an address to children also come into play).

For the film critic, however, other “frames” may have had more relevance. By 1940, Disney had not only acquired his reputation as a genius, but his association with classical music had been established through the history of the *Silly Symphonies* cartoon series. While *Fantasia* was a daring experiment as an expensive, feature-length project, the idea of Disney working with classical music had been somewhat naturalized for these critics through the *Silly Symphonies*. Furthermore, Disney’s reputation as a daring innovator was also foregrounded by the elaborate Fantasound system, which was widely praised for the quality of music reproduction by film and music critics alike. The film critics’ praise for *Fantasia* must also be read within the context of the attack on Disney (and, by implication, the cinema itself) by the music establishment. Within this context, it might even appear disloyal to one’s profession to give *Fantasia* a bad review. Other than Mae Tinee, all the film reviewers I found point to *Fantasia* as a masterpiece. Most reviews discuss each segment of the film, some even ranking them in order of their success.

Interestingly, the music and film critics generally agree about the respective merits of each segment. My sample of fourteen critics unanimously agreed that “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice” and “The Nutcracker Suite” were successful adaptations, with only four critics registering praise for “The Pastoral Symphony.” This points to the critics’ desire to defend the form that they loved, particularly in the face of a (perceived) attack. Thus, music critics generally chastised *Fantasia*, whereas film critics praised it as a great innovation and as wonderful entertainment. This bias may account in part for the different overall tone of film and music reviews—although they share opinions on the merits of individual segments. Ultimately, for the music critics, *Fantasia* was a threat from a popular culture that did not only not know its place, but which threatened to destroy the boundaries between the arts, and between “art” and popular culture. It is thus not surprising that these critics singled out for praise only the most Disneyesque segments of *Fantasia*, revealing that they wanted him to do what he was good at and to stay away from “high art,” particularly classical (or “absolute”) music.

Given the tone of the music critic’s reviews and the extent of the controversy, it might appear that *Fantasia* incurred this wrath because it was an unusual, or unprecedented, combination of high art and popular culture. Yet *Fantasia* was not an isolated example of the blurring boundaries dividing cultural hierarchies, and should be seen as part of the widespread dissemination of “high art” during this period. The popularization of classical music through mass-media technologies had begun in the teens, and had led to the celebrity of musicians such as Walter Damrosch and Leopold Stokowski. Stokowski was a popular figure, who had gained fame for his habit of conducting without a baton, and had even appeared in the 1937 Deanna Durbin film, *One Hundred Men and a Girl*. In the 1940 *Fantasia* ceremonial program, Stokowski discusses the importance of disseminating classical music to a mass audience:

> The beauty and inspiration of music must not be restricted to a privileged few but made available to every man, woman and child. That is why great music associated with motion pictures is so important, because motion pictures reach millions all over the world. 

Deems Taylor, Disney’s collaborator and the music commentator featured within *Fantasia*, was a radio personality and a “popular musicologist whose reputation for making music meaningful to American audiences (notably on New York Philharmonic radio broadcasts) made him a logical candidate for inclusion in this project.” Variety’s review of *Fantasia* commented on the popularity of such classical music broadcasts:

> Affinity of music and the screen has been a long established partnership. *Fantasia* best can be described as a successful experiment to lift the relationship from the planes of popular, mass entertainment to the higher strata of appeal to lovers of classical music. The boost
Fantasia's melange of popular culture and high art was thus related to the radio industry's project of popularizing classical music, and consequently was linked to other "middlebrow" fusions of high art and popular culture, such as the Book-of-the-Month Club.

Forms of mass distribution, such as broadcast radio, Hollywood cinema, and modern methods of merchandising (such as mail order), threatened the privileged status of "art" and its singular identity. Mass distribution helped to define the status of a cultural product as popular culture, as it provided easy access to all classes, often at a nominal cost. In contrast, the work of art was defined as rare and only accessible to an elite group—whether this access was provided by location (by proximity to a cultural center, such as Carnegie Hall or the Museum of Modern Art), cost (theater tickets were expensive, whereas movie tickets were relatively cheap), or by an understanding that only a certain type of education could provide (the kind of knowledge that the music critics tended to draw upon in their discussions of Fantasia). According to Walter Benjamin, a work of art not only has an original identity, but this identity and its authenticity can be physically tested. It is this property—the "aura"—that is eliminated once works of art are mass-produced and distributed. With the loss of the aura, mass-produced "art" loses its distance from everyday life, and its function is transformed from ritual to political. The destruction of these cultural boundaries, which helped create the much maligned domain of the "middlebrow," was well in place by the time Fantasia premiered, and the debates centering around the film drew upon the terms of high-culture paranoia that were already in circulation. In her analysis of the Book-of-the-Month Club, Janice Radway discusses how, fourteen years prior to Fantasia, this commodification of literary classics generated a similar controversy:

In wedding cultural production to mass distribution, and more particularly to mass consumption, [Book-of-the-Month Club founder, Harry] Scherman was challenging some of his culture's most fundamental ideological assumptions about the character of culture, education, literature, art, and criticism.

Yet, unlike the Book-of-the-Month Club, Fantasia was not just a marketing scheme, but a film produced by Walt Disney, who had acquired the reputation of a genius within his field. However, as in the case of Harry Scherman, critics charged Disney with cheapening high art. As Radway notes, these disputes stemmed from contemporary debates about "the exercise of cultural authority." With similar charges being leveled at a book-retailing scheme and a prestige film, we can ascertain that even "quality" cinema had a lowly place in the artistic hierarchy of cultural custodians during the early 1940s.

One of the most important issues here in distinguishing high art and popular culture, as they were perceived in 1940, was the concept of standardization. In their discussion of the "culture industry," Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer blame the standardization of mass culture (including radio and cinema) for creating a society of passive, obedient consumers and a variety of totally homogeneous mass cultural products.

As Radway states:

Standardization, in fact, was a code word for mass production, mass distribution, and mass consumption. It was portrayed repeatedly as an evil specter spreading its cloak of uniformity over a once vitally differentiated population, producing as a consequence uniform automatons open to coercion by others.

As a mass-produced and mass distributed work, Fantasia threatened classical music's artistic exclusivity by providing it with widespread access. However, Fantasia also posed a potential threat in offering a standardization of interpretation. Rather than allowing audiences to make their own interpretations, the critics feared that the power of Disney's images would anchor the music, so that, for example, "We shall never again be able to hear the piece ['The Sorcerer's Apprentice'] without visualizing Mickey Mouse as the apprentice." This might not only threaten the elite status of classical music, but might even render the music critics redundant. There would be no need for their comments and interpretations on music, because they would be replaced by Disney's animation.

Because of the expenses and difficulties of Fantasound installation as well as Disney's plans to road-show Fantasia, the full version of the film never had widespread distribution, only playing in fourteen American cities in its complete form. Further road-showing was hindered, in part, by government orders for radio apparatus for defense purposes, which resulted in RCA delaying the production of further Fantasound installations. The expense of each Fantasound installation, at around thirty thousand dollars, combined with the need for theaters to close for around one week for installation, further insured the film of an extremely limited release. Given that widespread distribution is key in defining popular
culture, such restricted distribution indicated that Disney wanted Fantasia to be seen as something special.

The construction of Fantasia as a cultural event took two major forms, both of which worked against concepts of standardization. First of all, Fantasia was only shown in large cities. Advertisements for the film in local papers proclaimed that very few places would have the opportunity to exhibit Fantasia. For example, advertisements run in Chicago, where Fantasia opened on February 19, 1941, announced that “Chicago has been selected as one of the few cities in the world that will see FAN-TASIA,” and warned the reader that “Because of Special Fantasound Equipment FANTASIA CANNOT BE SHOWN IN ANY OTHER THEATER WITHIN 85 MILES OF CHICAGO.” Advertisements in the local press for every city where Fantasia played broadcast similar notices. Advertisements in the New York Times stated that “Because of special equipment necessary for its presentation, FANTASIA will be shown only at the Broadway, and no other theatre in N.Y.” Because Fantasia was not easily seen by mass audiences living in other cities, “community parties” were organized, so that people could travel to see the film. Variety reported that this new form of promotion was used during Fantasia’s Boston run. It involved attracting business from New England, with

One or more patrons from a community [being] . . . invited to head a local movement to form a special party to Fantasia. Two railroads (Boston & Maine and Boston & Albany) are cooperating in the promotion by offering a 25% reduction in round trips for the parties.

As Fantasia had a limited run, audiences had to make more of an effort to see the film, helping to construct its exhibition as a special event. Likewise, the film’s publicity helped to manipulate public perception of the rarity of the film’s exhibition. Although Fantasia set a contemporary record for the forty-nine-week duration of its run in New York, the end of its run was advertised as early as May 1941, five months before it left the Broadway Theater. Similar publicity helped to boost Fantasia’s box office near the end of its Philadelphia run, with Variety observing that the film was “getting the benefit of last-chance-to-see-it advertising.” Again, the nature of this publicity was to shape the exhibition of Fantasia as an uncommon cultural event. Rather than promising easy access to the film, the publicity emphasized that its exhibition was to be short-lived, restricted to a few places for short periods of time. Although a version of Fantasia was widely distributed by RKO in 1941, it was shown without Fantasound, and was cut from 120 minutes to eighty-eight, making it a different and less prestigious film.

Disney’s plans for Fantasia also worked against the standardization expected from popular culture, in that he planned to change the order and content of the segments across time. Unlike other films, whose reels can only follow one order if they are to make sense, Fantasia’s reels were designed to be somewhat interchangeable. The 1940 Fantasia Souvenir Booklet features a program for the film and informs the viewer that “From time to time the order and selection of compositions on this program may be changed.” Because Disney planned Fantasia as a concert, he wanted to allow for variations in the screenings of the film and the opportunity to change selections. Although, at one level, this might be seen as working against the integrity of a “real” work of art, such variation was intended to associate the film with “artistic” performances, such as a concert, opera, or live theater, which are always different, always unique. This strategy was planned to increase box office by attracting repeat customers, as well as to allow the selections to be chosen to suit the region, or the types of audiences at each theater. Neither plan was fulfilled, but had they been, Fantasia would not have addressed audiences as a mass, but would have been tailored to those audiences’ perceived tastes.

Both the marketing strategies for Fantasia and the critical controversy that it engendered reveal that the film’s reception in the early 1940s posed a problem for critics and audiences alike. Although Fantasia had grossed $1,300,000 on its first eleven engagements by the end of April 1941, the film’s production costs, as well as the costs of Fantasound installation, meant that Fantasia did not return a profit on its initial release. The expense of the film, as well as its restricted release, made Fantasia a prime candidate for reissue, a strategy that Disney has frequently used to maximize its profits. Although Fantasia was reissued during the 1940s, I wish to turn briefly to the 1953 to 1954 reissue of the film, and finally to the 1991 to 1992 video reissue, to examine the patterns of marketing and reception of the film across these later periods. I have chosen this strategy to see how changes in social and cultural attitudes shape changes in the reception of a single film, and to examine how these different evaluations of a text are themselves a marker of cultural change.

Marketing and Critical Reception of ‘Fantasia’: 1954 and 1991

Just as the 1940 to 1941 initial release of Fantasia can be seen in the context of the production trend towards “quality” pictures, the film’s 1953 to 1954 reissue followed the trend towards the “Big Picture.” With Hollywood seeking to differentiate its product from television, 1953 saw the development of 3-D and various wide-screen processes. Like Fantasound, the CinemaScope process offered stereophonic sound, thus enhancing all dimensions of the moviegoing experience. However, the development of various wide-screen (and depth) processes helped to contribute
to a shortage of films, with producers uncertain about which systems would succeed. As a result, a variety of old films were rereleased during 1953 to 1954 to make up for the dearth of new product. 58 Although many films, such as Gone With the Wind, were rereleased successfully during this time, it is important to look at postwar production trends to understand why Disney felt that Fantasia would be well received.

As Janet Staiger and Susan Ohmer have discussed, Hollywood turned increasingly to market research in the 1940s and 1950s in order to address various audience tastes more precisely. 59 Staiger observes that “demographics provided by ARJ and Handel’s firm indicated to the majors that by 1950 young people were at the movies more than older individuals,” that “persons in higher socio-economic brackets attend[ed] more frequently than those in lower levels,” and that the better educated people were, the more likely they were to see films. 60 Given that the 1950s film audience was generally younger and better educated than the general public, it is quite likely that Disney saw this an appropriate time to rerelease Fantasia, as a youthful audience would possibly be less conservative and, thus, more open to Disney’s innovations. As film audiences were also well educated, it is likely that they would be judged to be more open to watching a film centered around eight pieces of classical music.

Indeed, Variety reports that the Disney organization believed their 1953 to 1954 scheduled rerelease would be a success because the film was both artistically and technically advanced: “[Fantasia] was ‘before its time’ when originally released in 1940. Film was equipped with stereophonic sound which now goes hand in hand with 3-D and wide-screen.” 61 In 1953, stereophonic sound would be neither the problem nor the novelty that it was in 1940, so the film could be handled through more widespread channels of distribution. However, while this also implies that Fantasia would be less innovative, the idea that the film was “before its time” preserved its status on the cutting edge of technology. Furthermore, Disney also announced plans to follow the trend towards wide-screen production by adapting Fantasia for wide-screen (SuperScope). Therefore, like other Big Pictures, Fantasia entered the 1950s fully equipped with Technicolor, stereophonic sound, and wide-screen. Consequently, certain similarities can be seen between the 1940 to 1941 and 1953 to 1954 releases of Fantasia, in that the film was associated with the latest technological innovations, and formed part of a production trend favoring high-budget, prestige pictures. Although Fantasia’s status as “art” was initially constructed in part through its restricted release, the 1954 reissue was justified in terms of the film’s “timeless” qualities. As Fantasia was a “masterpiece” that had been seen by only a few people, frequent reissues would counter this problem by making the film available to a larger public. Consequently, the film’s status as “art” justified its more widespread distribution. 62 Thus the connotations of high art married to technology were carried over into the reissue, while those of “rarity” did not survive.

The widely advertised 1991 to 1992 video rerelease of Fantasia contrasts with the 1953 to 1954 reissue, which was not extensively publicized. Yet this video release followed many of the marketing strategies adopted for the film’s initial release, and like both the 1940 to 41 and 1953 to 1954 releases, Disney adopted the latest forms of technology for Fantasia in order to maximize its profitability. Disney offered four forms of video release of Fantasia: a sell-through (low-priced) video cassette listing at $24.99; a deluxe souvenir video boxed set, priced at $99.99, featuring a sixteen-page commemorative program, a documentary on the making of Fantasia, two CDs of the sound track, and a limited edition lithograph of Mickey Mouse as the Sorcerer’s Apprentice; a $39.99 extended play laser disc; and a boxed set of standard play laser discs, featuring a thirty two-page commemorative program, the lithograph of Mickey and the Fantasia documentary, also priced at $99.99.

In November 1991, Variety’s Stuart Miller reported that “Old Vids Are New Again With Special Packages,” citing the examples of commemorative boxed set video releases of It’s a Wonderful Life (forty-fifth anniversary edition), and the fiftieth anniversary rereleases of Gone With the Wind, Citizen Kane, and Fantasia. Miller observed that the supplementary materials offered in the deluxe editions of each film (such as documentaries, posters, booklets, trailers, programs, and the like) offered extra profit to distributors at a minimal cost. Miller quoted Steve Chamberlain, Executive Vice President at Turner Home Entertainment, who placed this phenomenon at the cutting edge of video retailing: “It’s part of the gradual evolution of the video business, from rental to sell-through to this.” 63 The strategy of marketing collector’s editions of these videos also encouraged viewers to buy rather than rent. As Michelle Hilmes noted:

> Most VCR owners still prefer to rent than to buy. . . . However, the studios net no profit from these rentals; the “first sale” doctrine embodied in existing copyright law, hotly contested by the studios in 1982–3, prevents them from sharing in profit subsequent to the first sale of a cassette. 64

By offering tapes at low prices, studios can often show more profit, as consumers will generally buy the film. However, studios usually only choose to market certain films on sell-through, such as children’s films, exercise tapes, selected blockbusters such as E.T., Pretty Woman, and Home Alone, or reissues of recent hits or classical Hollywood films. 65 However, a collector’s edition, priced between fifty and a hundred dollars,
cannot only stimulate sales but also maximize studio profits. Furthermore, the market for such deluxe editions reveals the stratified cultural capital now available within popular culture. By offering *Fantasia* at two price tiers, Disney could benefit from an address to both the sell-through and collectors markets.

The two forms of the film thus start to accrue multiple and often contradictory connotations. Whereas a sell-through video might be bought for family use, and thus acquire the reputation of (quality) children’s entertainment, the high-cost collector’s edition tapes and laser discs acquire the aura of art, especially as they are limited editions which include lithographs and, in the case of the video set, two CDs of classical music. Furthermore, all four versions of the film were available to retailers for only fifty days—again constructing the film as a rare object, and enhancing its status as a work of art. This strategy was also successful in stimulating sales. As *Variety*’s Stuart Miller observed, “One successful tactic is limiting the availability of the product: Disney’s *Fantasia* is available to retailers for 50 days only. In addition to 9 million-plus regular copies, the 200,000 deluxe sets with CDs, an extra video and a lithograph have sold out.” Indeed, by January 1992, *Fantasia* had become the biggest selling video of all time, notching up sales of 14,169,148 cassettes. This figure did not even include “direct-mail club sales or laserdisc sales. . . . It includes only sales of standard and deluxe edition videocassette sales into the retail marketplace in North America. The deluxe edition, priced at $99.99 suggested retail, accounted for 280,000 of the total.”

Two weeks later, *Variety* reported on its front page that this “Vid of 52-year-old pic [had] delivered as much to Disney’s first-quarter earnings as its theme parks worldwide.”

The video reissue of *Fantasia* also conformed to two other related production and exhibition trends of the 1990s. First of all, the video market overtook the theatrical exhibition market, leading to the “home theater” trend. In March 1992, *Variety* reported that a Harris Poll showed more Americans were choosing to stay at home for their entertainment. While noting that the number of Americans who subscribed to cable and who owned VCRs had increased, the poll found that the number of tapes that each household rented had remained constant at around twenty-one to twenty-two per year. By the early 1990s, video rentals not only exceeded theatrical box office revenues, but according to *Variety*, “For the first time ever, sell-through revenues were greater than revenues from rental releases in 1990,” indicating that people were now taking home video so seriously that they were building video libraries. The trend towards home theater not only boosted video cassette sales, but also stimulated the innovation of new technologies. In June 1991, *Variety* reported that the home theater trend had led to more sales of consumer gadgets, and had put the spotlight on new technological innovations, such as laser disc players. By releasing *Fantasia* in laserdisc form, Disney maintained the film’s association with new technologies and packaged the film as an important commodity, given that the laserdisc’s superior sound and image reproduction has led to its reputation as the connoisseurs’ choice. The status of *Fantasia* as a collectible film and as a masterpiece was reinforced by the film’s success on laser disc; according to *Variety*, it sold “an industry record of 190,000 copies.”

According to *Entertainment Weekly*, people were even “snatching up the disc (the film is available on both tape and disc for only 50 business days) before buying the equipment to play it.”

The success of *Fantasia*’s video rerelease resulted, in part, from following production and exhibition trends, and from the marketing of the film. Press and magazine advertisements and television commercials stressed that *Fantasia* would only be available for a short time, and then it would never appear again. The advertising slogan—“The final release of the original masterpiece”—was even printed on stickers adhering to the shrink-wrap covering the videos. Widespread (mis)reporting, as in the *Entertainment Weekly* item above, suggested to many consumers that the film would only be in the stores for a short time, thus stimulating the video’s sales. Although the video was released in November 1991 for the Christmas market, there were still copies available in the stores as late as July 1992. Buena Vista, Disney’s distribution company, further tried to enhance the frenzy over *Fantasia* by announcing in early November, 1991, that “it had run out of *Fantasia* videocassettes and has suspended orders indefinitely.” Although Buena Vista stressed that “it has been our experience that to artificially restrict supply just limits the success of the release,” this marketing strategy made it appear that videos of the film were a rare commodity, thus preserving the film’s status and value, while creating widespread consumer demand for, and interest in, the film. This demand was further enhanced by advertising and publicity claims that this was the last time that the original *Fantasia* would ever be available. Disney also announced plans to add more musical selections to the film, thus following the plans for the original concept of the film, which were dropped in 1941 after its first release. Publicity for the planned *Fantasia Continued* included a *Premiere* magazine poll (not sponsored by Disney), where readers were invited to suggest musical selections. Interestingly, the readers’ second-ranked selection was Debussy’s “Clair de Lune,” which had been scheduled for the original release of *Fantasia*, and then for the first planned update of the film. *Premiere*’s columnist observed that, “Few wanted to rock the Mouse—old Leopold and Walt
fully acquired the reputation of "an acknowledged masterpiece." Indeed, it is quite possible that the images that horrified the critics in the 1940s have become Disney's hallmark. Most notably, the successful "My Little Pony," a film that appeared in all of its original color, was announced for release in 1990 as a sequel to the original. The film, which is visually and narratively similar to the original, appears to be a children's feature that is expected to have a broad appeal. The critical reaction to the film has been mixed, with some reviewers finding it lacking in the original's sense of wonder and magic, while others have praised its humor and contemporary themes. 

The release of "Fantasia" in 1940 was a turning point in the history of animation and film production. It marked a significant departure from the traditional animation style of the time, with its use of live-action footage and its experimental approach to storytelling. The film was a commercial success, grossing over $1 million in its first week of release. It was also critically acclaimed, winning an Academy Award for Best Animated Feature. It is considered one of the greatest films ever made and has been influential in the development of animation as an art form.
twentieth-century culture. Mass-produced or distributed objects are no longer deemed to be necessarily "low" on the cultural hierarchy. Furthermore, critical accusations that Fantasia is an offensive and hybrid work that inappropriately mixes music with images are no longer culturally relevant, given the rise of music videos and MTV. Indeed, when Fantasia is seen in the context of music videos, its combination of classical music and Disney animation only underscores its status as a "work of art" for its new defenders from the "high culture" establishment.

that Disney had not intended the music to be "drowned" by the images, as evidenced by the care taken over the film's score and the successful innovation of Fantasound.


28. Mae Tinee, "Fantasia: Great Music Buried in Orgy of Color and Sound, Movie and Music Critics Find," Chicago Daily Tribune, p. 13. Tinee was the only film critic I found who did not like Fantasia on its initial release, and who broadly concurred with the music critics. This was sufficiently remarkable for the Tribune to provide an epigraph to Tinee's film review and Barry’s music review, noting that "their respective views ... were remarkably in agreement."

29. Olin Downes, "Fantasia Discussed From the Musical Standpoint," New York Times. Downes was not alone in voicing contempt for the "Pastoral Symphony" segment. After looking at fourteen reviews by both music and film critics, selected from the quality press, local papers, tabloids, newspapers, fan magazines, and the trade press, I only found four critics who approved of this segment: Variety's reviewer, Film, Bosley Crowther for the New York Times; the New York Daily Mirror's Lee Mortimer; and Mae Tinee of the Chicago Daily Tribune.


33. Fantasia Souvenir Program, 1940, p. 9. Wisconsin Center for Film and Theatre Research.


35. Fantasia Souvenir Program, 1940, p. 4.


40. Ibid., p. 514.

42. Radway, “Mail Order Culture and Its Critics,” p. 520.
44. “Fantasia: Completed and Continuing to Amaze,” Fantasia 50th Anniversary Commemorative Program, p. 27 (this program was only included in the 1991 CAV laser disc reissue of Fantasia).
47. Chicago Daily Tribune (February 3, 1941), p. 18.
48. Ibid. (February 10, 1941), p. 16.
52. “B’way Down; Wagons Roll—Tucker Band—McLaglen Mild $30,000; Kane Stout; Reaching Sun—Rey OK 35G,” Variety (May 14, 1941).
57. “Fantasia in Its 11 Engagements has Grossed $1,300,00 to Date,” Variety (April 30, 1941), p. 7.
62. Ibid.
75. Ibid.
79. Richard deCordova’s “Ethnography and Exhibition: The Child Audience, the Hays Office and Saturday Matinees,” Camera Obscura, No. 23 (May 1990), pp. 91–106, is an excellent example of how one can study social and cultural changes through an examination of children’s cultures and the pleasures that were deemed suitable for child audiences.
82. Ibid.