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# "ANIMATED NOIR: INVESTIGATING WALT DISNEY'S FEMALE CHARACTERS OF THE 1940S AND 1950S" BY EMMA BÁLINT

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## INTRODUCTION

Since the establishment of the studio in the early 1920s, the Walt Disney Productions' animators have designed, drawn and animated numerous l damsels in distress, who always submissively abide by the rules of a strictly heterosexual and patriarchal realm. In the 1940s and 1950s, during th of film noir, however, the animation studio daringly adopted the then popular cinematic style known for the portrayal of rather domineering won plots and themes generally unfit for young audiences. The purpose of this essay is to observe the overall influence of film noir on the renowned [ in the resulting animated noirs, namely *Donald's Crime* (dir. Jack King, 1945), *Duck Pimples* (dir. Jack Kinney, 1945), and *How to be a Detective* (dir. Jac with a particular focus on the way the typical Disney female character has been merged with the stereotypical noir woman, the femme fatale, wh possesses both agency and narrative significance. Following a brief description of the era dominated by and the visual and narrative elements ch the film noir style, I will discuss the short films and the female characters featured in them with the help of certain notions of psychoanalytic and theories, which have both been extremely influential in the study of film noir in general.

## HOLLYWOOD IN THE 1940S AND 1950S

During the interwar period, Hollywood productions reflected the tensions in society with increasing realism. In order to regulate and eliminate th "indecent and immoral films," the Production Code Administration (PCA) was founded in 1934 and appointed as the body responsible for enforcir on American motion pictures based on the principles recorded in the **Motion Picture Production Code** (MPPC, also known as the Hays Code). Tl were mainly concerned with criminal and sexual contents, and, as the document proclaims, the ultimate goal was to transform the American mov "the most powerful force for the improvement of mankind." All motion pictures, including the cartoons produced by the Walt Disney Productions, subjected to the scrutiny of the PCA, and could only be exhibited in American movie theatres if they received and displayed the so-called Purity S opening titles (Cristian 74). The PCA and the MPPC were in effect until 1967, when they were replaced by the Rating System, a system that insteac motion pictures reserved the right to ban young audiences from viewing films deemed inappropriate for them (76).

In the middle of the PCA's time in power, film noir "reintroduce[d] themes of sexuality [and excessive violence] within the terms of the Productior clever ways of concealment (Cowie 132). As Marc Vernet explains, since the time of their production in the United States does not coincide with tl France, critics are divided about the exact time period of the noir's classical era, ranging from 1941 to 1958 (4). There is no consensus concerning

the cinematic style either, and so the best descriptions of film noir that we have merely outline its recurring features (Cowie 121). Elizabeth Cowie defines it as "a set of possibilities for making existing genres 'different'" (131), while, according to Janey Place, film noir is a toolbox of "remarkably consistent" cinematic elements (42). These possibilities or elements, deriving from "a synthesis of hard-boiled fiction and German expressionism" include topoi like the sensuous and determined femme fatale, the always composed private detective (Vernet 2), and clichés of American cinema nocturnal rendezvous, and thrilling car chases (10), characterized not only by narrative features but by specific visual elements and an overwhelm claustrophobic, hopeless" mood as well (Place 41). The definition of film noir is thus further complicated by the fact that it can "simultaneously [b matter (black and white) and by its content (the crime story)" (Vernet 1).

The dark and gloomy urban world of film noirs stands in pointed contrast with the pastoral and idealistic classical Hollywood cinema of the time ( instead of creating a safe haven for people in times of economic crises and social instability, the lack of happy endings in noirs urge audiences "to function of Hollywood as a machine that produces dreams of fairytale spectacles" (Vernet 17). As Sylvia Harvey demonstrates, the constant fluctu identities, values, and the "normal" social order, along with the expressive use of darkness in "unbalanced and disturbing frame compositions, str light and dark, the prevalence of shadows and areas of darkness within the frame, [and] the visual tension created by curious camera angles" (22 characteristic of the style of German expressionism (Place 41), function to mirror the abovementioned disorderly world in film noirs. At the same are more than mere socio-historical exposés, as they employ the narrative devices of first-person voice-over narration and flashbacks to provide "hard-boiled" ("clipped and cynical") accounts of usually the male private detective (Cowie 138), who represents "the cultural and moral values of nationalism and individualism" (Vernet 17), and whose psychological motivation can be uncovered with the help of vulgar (Cowie 126, 130) or pop analyses (Naremore 9).

Although film noir is a male fantasy approached from a phallocentric cultural viewpoint in which women are always defined in relation to men, ac Place, this era also marks "one of the few periods of film in which women are active, [...] intelligent and powerful, if destructively so, and derive po weakness, from their sexuality" (35). The two opposing female archetypes of film noirs, "the overtly sexual, liberated noir woman" known as the fe and "the asexual, innocently angelic, infantile woman," can easily be distinguished (Cristian 88). As Place explains, the femme fatale's alter ego, "th mother, the innocent, the redeemer," does not have "access to her own sexuality (and thus to men's) and the power that this access" would provi (Place 35-36), and so not only remains visually and narratively passive but also fails to create a functional traditional family (50). The femme fatale emphasised by the general passivity and impotence which characterises the film noir male" (54), which in turn evokes both desire and castration (Doane 45), and leads to her destruction as "a desperate reassertion of control on the part of the threatened male subject" (2). Although femme f characterized by the quality of "to-be-looked-at-ness" (46), are shown from the male character's viewpoint that directs the viewer's gaze as well, th in composition, angle, camera movement and lighting" at the same time reinforce their strength. What is more, their sexual and violent image fea close-ups of long legs, cigarettes and guns even signify their "'unnatural' phallic power" (Place 45). According to Mary Ann Doane's proposition, the power, shifting between activity and passivity, lies in her "body which is itself given agency independently of consciousness," and which, even des sexual nature, is, similarly to the redeemer's, the "antithesis of the maternal" (2).

## DISNEY AND FILM NOIR

While *Donald's Crime* (dir. Jack King, 1945), *Duck Pimples* (dir. Jack Kinney, 1945), and *How to be a Detective* (dir. Jack Kinney, 1952) may fit into the o definitions of film noir—they were created in the classical film noir era and make use of many of the characteristic visual and narrative elements —, they are not true film noirs but animated parodies, or rather pastiches, of the original style. Their aim, similarly to other imitators of film noir, but merely "to capitalize on a wildly popular trend" (Naremore 200), in this case, by appealing to a mixed audience of children and adults. Though states in his introduction to the Donald Duck DVD collection that "not all of the gags in these films would be considered politically correct today," "understandable," for these should have been regulated according to the **Motion Picture Production Code**. Authors of the MPPC assumed the e innate moral code in people when they categorized murder, theft, lying and cruelty as "naturally unattractive" to people, and thus rarely needing opposed to sex sins, daring thefts and revenge. Similarly, Disney animators must have assumed the innocence of their young audiences, and that interpret the displayed "scenes of passion," including suggestive dancing, "excessive and lustful kissing," and the numerous methods of crimes an as murder, theft and the use of firearms, as slapstick comedy. Although there is only one female character in each of these cartoons, they are slig versions of the femme fatale stereotype, and thus allow for a thorough and fascinating analysis of women in the Walt Disney Production's animat

### DONALD DUCK – THE CRIMINAL

According to Leonard Maltin, Donald Duck was the studio's top cartoon star at the time, who owed his fame to the notorious war propaganda ani

also around the early 1940s. The following two film noir pastiches use the ability of the style to differentiate between light and dark in order to te about right and wrong. Though presenting many film noir elements, they simplify the complex style, and narrate the events of only part of a day chronological order complemented by the vivid realization of the main character's fantasies. The two women appearing in the Donald Duck short Duck and Pauline, are examples of a naive femme fatale and an absentminded dame, respectively, who remain objects within, rather than contril narratives.

The title screen of ***Donald's Crime*** (dir. Jack King, 1945) suggests a suspenseful story, as the ghostly images of Huey, Dewey and Louie look over the The first sequence shows an immodest calendar with a (human) bikini model posing on top that marks Donald's date with his girlfriend, Daisy. As at the last minute that he is short of money, a hoarse voice-over using hard-boiled slang urges him to break open his orphaned nephews' piggy b feeling of guilt disappears while he is jiving with Daisy at a smoky club, who even awards him, the "big shot," with a long kiss at the end of the nigh Sylvia Harvey claims, women in film noir are usually not attained (27), Daisy appears happy to fulfil the role of an accessible prize, or even a sexua be bought. While she looks like an innocent redeemer, her apparent satisfaction with Donald's affluence makes her an oblivious femme fatale, wl object of desire into a criminal life. Although a voice-over has narrated the complete short, the visual film noir elements, such as dark alleys, a lon trenchcoat, and a snap-brim hat, appear only when Daisy, Donald's "temporary satisfaction," is gone (27), and his guilt reappears. Donald gets pa that even streetlights are chasing him, and sees himself as a prisoner in a flashforward. It is in "his lack of both unity and control" that his alter eg emerges in the dark street (Place 41), which, according to Marc Vernet, is associated with the character of the film noir detective (18). In the end, t becomes a cautionary tale—explicated by the voice-over: "you see, chum, crime doesn't pay," and demonstrated by the expression on Donald's c

The first image of ***Duck Pimples*** (dir. Jack Kinney, 1945), a story of crime and horror, shows a lone house in the middle of a lightning storm, and ma the typical black-and-white imagery of film noirs. Donald, listening to scary radio dramas describing murders, is startled by a child-like door-to-do who swiftly disappears into thin air riding his imaginary bicycle, leaving behind books titled "Spook," "Death," "Hate," "Weird story," "Agony," and th opens one, not thinking of the implications of the skull on its back cover and the pearl necklace twisted around a dagger on the front, and is litera the book, where he is immediately accused by a criminal and a shady private detective of stealing a dame's pearl necklace. Befitting a sensuous fe story stops as Pauline, wearing a fancy dress and excessive make-up, squeezes herself out of an open book, with the camera, along with the view on her (Place 45). It may be worth noting that this brief scene is part of the daydream of the same Donald Duck who had an obscene calendar on *Donald's Crime.* Pauline looks a lot like the curvy Jessica Rabbit from the popular neo-noir, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (dir. Robert Zemeckis, 1988), a a forgetful, maybe even dim, dame, who seeks help from the wrong man. The handcuffs shining like a pearl necklace at the back of the detective's clue of his deceitfulness, after which Pauline takes matters into her hands, and decides to crawl under his jacket to further investigate—leaving th thinking she was kidnapped. Suddenly, the author of the story appears, and reveals that the thief is the corrupt detective, who immediately admi exclaiming: "Idunit!" After he shoots Donald with his (toy) gun, Donald is back in his living room, looking distraught, once again, as a consequence vivid imagination.

#### GOOFY – THE DETECTIVE

The Walt Disney Studio's Goofy character is a clumsy antropomorphic dog, who always finds alternative, seemingly irrational ways to carry out his somehow always succeeds. Accordingly, in ***How to be a Detective*** (dir. Jack Kinney, 1952), instead of introducing the film noir style, he ridicules it, as disguised magnifying glass in the title screen already suggests. The short opens with someone being thrown off a bridge on a foggy night, followe ways to murder people, presented by shadows in the windows of a single apartment building, each of whom is shaped like Goofy. A deep male vo describes what detective films, or rather film noirs are like, and Goofy, of course, does the opposite of everything he is told a detective should do. according to Marc Vernet, the detective's witty jokes are the only source of comedy in film noirs (21), here the mocking and literal interpretation o terms are the primary sources of humor. Suddenly, a dame walks into Goofy's, a. k. a. Johnny Eyeball, the private eye's office, giving him money fr filled with weapons, and orders him to "find Al." This scene does not only sketch the ensuing noir story with typically deceitful characters, but with characteristic, poorly decorated city office darkened by venetian blinds (Naremore 1), and the implementation of film noir camera movements an contrasts as well.

Although Goofy in this short possesses many features of a film noir detective on the surface, such as a constant resistance to the police (Vernet 1 perform at his job. He is repeatedly beaten and defeated, as when he drinks a cocktail spiked with a "goof ball" at a bar, and fails to realize that th been looking for, a homicide officer named Al, had been following him, even saving him from himself, and telling him to "leave the case alone" all his incompetence, all four characters end up at a court house following a car chase, and the nameless femme fatale reaches her goal of marrying

boiled tradition of civil religion (19). No character is as skillful as the dame herself, who, by having her way, practically entraps herself in a patriarc
(Harvey 31).

Even though film noirs are not typically focusing on family relations, they are often central to the plot, even if their destruction is the goal (Cowie 
representation of the institution of the family [...] in film noir serves as the vehicle for the expression of frustration" and "the non-fulfillment of de
same time "suggest[ing] the beginnings of an attack on the dominant social values normally expressed through [it]" (Harvey 23). In fact, the inspir
femme fatale itself came from the new working women of the war era, whose appearance also generated a psychological threat to men and to th
family values (Cristian 56). In film noirs, marriage is typically "structured around the destruction or absence of romantic love and the family" (Harv
case for Al and the veiled femme fatale.

While "the duplicitous woman is, of course, never cited as a central protagonist" (Cowie 1993, 134), she has a significant role in this short as the hi
the plot. The veil helps her in "produc[ing] herself as a spectacle" (Doane 58), and in "transforming the threat of the woman into a secret, somethi
be aggressively revealed, unmasked, discovered" (1), which in this short happens when the viewer realizes that her dress doubles as a wedding g
"the most readable space of the body" with an impenetrable veil (47), the "discursive unease" surrounding the femme fatale, who is never who sh
(1), gets amplified. Ironically, the only two utterances she says throughout the cartoon are both related to Al: first, she asks Goofy to find him, anc
scolds her fiancé for being late to his own wedding. The three male characters standing opposed to the femme fatale in this cartoon generate a s
triangle between the femme fatale, Al, and a "shady or suspicious character" in the form of a ferret, who fills in both as the other man, trying to st
from getting to the courthouse by throwing tacks in front of their car, shooting at them, and literally picking up and stealing the femme fatale, an
of the peace who officiates the marriage (Cowie 123). The cartoon ends on the same note as *Donald's Crime*, as Goofy declares, "guess that proves
don't pay."

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this essay was to analyze three short films created by the Walt Disney Productions during the classical era of film noir, namely *Do*
Jack King, 1945), *Duck Pimples* (dir. Jack Kinney, 1945), and *How to be a Detective* (dir. Jack Kinney, 1952), which imitate this popular cinematic style.
various studies and definitions of film noir, which often draw from psychoanalytic and feminist film theories, as well as on the text of the Motion 
Production Code, which was an influential form of censorship applicable to all American cinematic productions at the time. My aim was to examir
independent and determined femme fatale has influenced the generally submissive female characters created by Disney, and to identify the feat
utilized in these pastiches.

The visual and thematic milieu of film noirs has been successfully reproduced in these animated short films, so much so that although they are d
less violent than live-action film noirs, they still present images that violate the Production Code, such as suggestive dancing, theft, and the use of
Daisy Duck, an ignorant femme fatale oblivious to the damage caused by her sexuality, and Pauline, a spoilt and absentminded dame, both posse
characteristics of the femme fatale, the stereotypically determined and independent noir woman is best embodied in the character of the namele
fatale of *How to be a Detective*. She is also the only female character punished, who is defeated through dooming herself to a patriarchal marriage
restoring the order befitting the Walt Disney Productions' ideologies. Thus, though at first sight it may appear that the femme fatale has been acc
Disney ouvre's small collection of female stereotypes, she in fact, has been adopted and adapted to the Disney way of looking at women as subm
narratively insignificant.

A valuable follow-up study for both cartoon and film noir scholarships could be conducted on femme fatale-like characters in Walt Disney produc
outside of this classical era of film noir, as for example, the Evil Queen in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (dir. David Hand et al., 1937), and in ani
created by other studios, such as the Warner Bros. Studios (e. g. *The Great Piggy Bank Robbery* (dir. Robert Clampett, 1946) and *The Super Snooper* (
McKimson, 1952)). Further discussions of more recent neo-noir animated films, as the renowned *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (dir. Robert Zemeckis,
*Renaissance* (dir. Christian Volckman, 2006), could also contribute greatly to the study of film noir.

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