



**Imaginary friends**  
 (from left) Walt Disney's genre-defining Mickey Mouse; magical nanny Mary Poppins; Sleeping Beauty Castle in Disneyland Paris; Elsa from *Frozen*; Bashful from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*

# CARTOON CENTURY

As the Walt Disney Company celebrates its centenary, **John Wills** traces the story of the 'House of Mouse' from early animations to global blockbusters – and political controversies

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**A**s the 2023 Super Bowl television commercial for the Walt Disney Company's centennial anniversary played on 12 February, emotions soared. The advert showed children dressed up as princesses, waving lightsabers and hugging Mickey Mouse mascots. With its vast array of cartoon characters, classic movies and superhero franchises, the Walt Disney Company has proven to have extraordinarily broad appeal. On its centenary, it's hard to imagine a world without Disney – yet the history of the media giant is far more complicated than you might imagine.

"It was all started by a mouse," Walt Disney explained in the 1950s, attributing the colossal success of Walt Disney Studios to one simple cartoon character: Mickey Mouse, first drawn in the late 1920s. Before creating that game-changing mouse, the young Disney, son of a businessman and farmer, had worked as a Red Cross driver in France, before trying his hand at animation for a range of Midwest companies. Eager for success, Disney helped set up the Laugh-O-Gram studio in Kansas City and got paid \$500 for a dentistry cartoon, *Tommy Tucker's Tooth* (1922). He also began work on the *Alice Comedies*, an innovative series that combined cartoon with live action. When the studio financially collapsed, a bankrupt yet determined Disney, still only 21 years old, headed to California to begin his business ventures anew.

In 1923, together with his brother, Roy, Walt established a small animation business on Kingswell Avenue in Los Angeles: the Disney Brothers' Studio. Not long afterwards, he produced the *Oswald the Lucky Rabbit* series of short films for Universal. In 1928, having lost the rights to Oswald, Disney and fellow animator Ub Iwerks made three black-and-white cartoons based around their new character, Mickey Mouse. *Steamboat Willie* (1928), the first cartoon film made with sound, starred Mickey as a rambunctious, raspberry-blowing rodent working on a steamship – vastly different from later, much softer incarnations. Thanks to some shrewd marketing, mouse frenzy took hold. By the 1970s, even Japanese emperor Hirohito sported a Mickey Mouse watch.

In the early 1930s, thanks to money coming in largely due to the success of Mickey Mouse, Disney turned to grander ideas of movie-making at his new studio on Hyperion Avenue. The company soon started developing full-length animated features, and in December 1937, *Snow White and the*



**Mighty mouse** Walt Disney completes a sketch of Mickey, the character who became his most iconic creation, in an undated photo

*Seven Dwarfs* opened to rapturous applause at the Carthay Circle Theater in Los Angeles, while a movie-themed exhibit, Dwarfland, entertained crowds nearby. That film saw Walt Disney recast the Brothers Grimm's dark folk story into a remarkably family-friendly and colourful experience – a tactic he later repeated with other European stories.

*Snow White* offered a welcome escape from the Great Depression and escalating global tensions – a "tonic for disillusion", as one critic called it. Perhaps partly for that reason, it became the most successful movie of the era. Watched in 41 countries around the world, *Snow White* strengthened Disney's global recognition. In Britain, one police constable in Salford, after gaining Disney's permission, used the seven dwarfs in his local road-safety campaign. Interviewed by a journalist about the film's phenomenal success, Disney told him: "All we are trying to do is give the public good entertainment." However, the good entertainment came at a cost. A perfectionist and workaholic, Disney controlled his projects and staff tightly, and took it personally when animators chose to strike in 1941 over working conditions (as retribution, he later named strike leads in hearings designed to punish and blacklist Communists).

Consciously or not, Disney had begun to influence cultural ideas of domestic life and gender roles, introducing the first 'Disney princess' in *Snow White*. During the Second World War, the corporation also began

***Steamboat Willie* starred Mickey as a rambunctious, raspberry-blowing rodent who worked on a steamship**

assisting with the production of wartime propaganda.

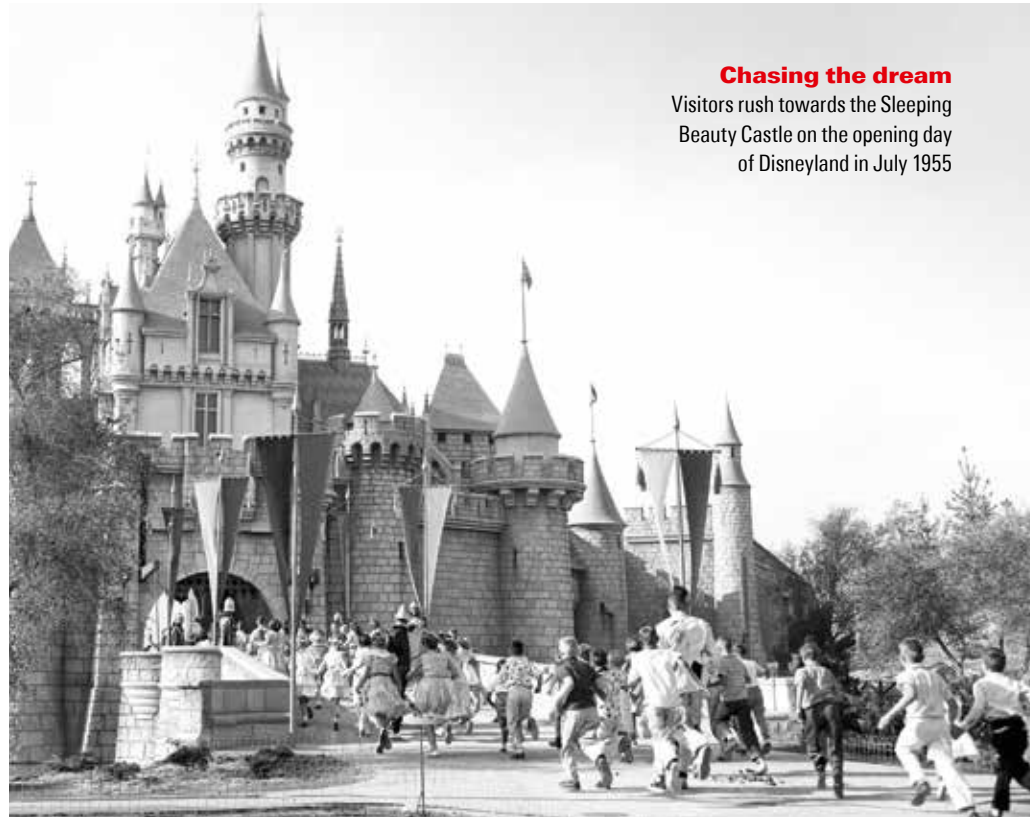
Alongside a desire to entertain the masses, Walt Disney nurtured ambitions of securing his status and artistic reputation. Work on *Fantasia* (1940) and *Bambi* (1942) reflected his perfectionism and personal quest for recognition. For *Bambi*, Disney insisted on having live animals parading around the studios to encourage more natural-looking animation, while the production of *Fantasia* involved a full symphony orchestra. As a result, costs spiralled and bankruptcy loomed. Only more commercial, simpler offerings – most notably *Dumbo* (1941) – kept the company afloat.

**Era of opportunities**

In the aftermath of the Second World War, many Americans embraced a new era of consumer power, leisure opportunities and technological conveniences. They took to the freeways in their chrome-finned Cadillacs, and watched television for the first time in freshly constructed suburban homes fronted by white picket fences.

Disney took advantage of this new decade of recreation and entertainment by expanding into live-action movies and nature documentaries (called *True-Life Adventures*). The studio also produced weekly television programmes for the ABC network, with Walt warmly introducing the shows – and becoming a father figure to the nation in the process. Meanwhile, *The Mickey Mouse Club*, with its legion of young Mouseketeers, appealed to children, and soaring numbers of kids grew up ‘Disney.’

The 1950s marked a significant coming together of Disney culture and American values – at least, those of the white middle class – and, arguably, the highpoint of Disney



**Chasing the dream**  
Visitors rush towards the Sleeping Beauty Castle on the opening day of Disneyland in July 1955

dominance. The Mickey Mouse brand now seemed as American as the Star-Spangled Banner, and ‘When You Wish upon a Star’ synonymous with the American Dream.

This interface of cartoon fantasy with American dreaming also found physical form. In an orange grove in Anaheim, California, Walt Disney created what he enthusiastically promoted as a radical new kind of theme park. Disneyland was clean, fun and family-friendly – the antithesis of worn, dirty Coney Island in New York City. In reality, though, the designs borrowed heavily from previous world’s fairs and amusement parks.

On Disneyland’s opening day in July 1955, trouble was brewing. Thousands of visitors crowded into the park, some entering illegally over fences. Drinking fountains ran dry, freshly set asphalt melted, cars were stuck at a standstill on the Anaheim freeway, and the Mark Twain steamboat nearly sank.

**Perfect escape**

Despite the difficulties of opening day, though, Disneyland quickly proved a huge success. Around 90 million Americans watched the live special on ABC television, with then-actor Ronald Reagan hosting. And the new park offered a perfect escape –



**How Disney shaped history**

John Wills explores the ways the corporation has framed perceptions of the past: [historyextra.com/xxxxxxxxxxxx](http://historyextra.com/xxxxxxxxxxxx)



Animated films such as *The Fox and the Hound* (1981) merely mimicked earlier Disney movies, while the blockbuster sci-fi *The Black Hole* (1979) was a pale imitation of its obvious inspiration, George Lucas’s 1977 space opera *Star Wars*. Perhaps reflecting the social and economic difficulties of the 1970s, Disney no longer seemed so influential or relevant to the US or the wider world. By the early 1980s, Disney appeared open to takeover bids and acquisition.

The appointment of Michael Eisner as CEO in 1984 helped turn Disney into a profitable company once more. Eisner oversaw what is now termed ‘The Disney Renaissance’, with a decade-long run of new animated features such as *The Little Mermaid* (1989) and *The Lion King* (1994) recapturing the classic Disney magic, bolstered by successful marketing and merchandise campaigns. The first Disney Store opened in Glendale, California in 1987. The first overseas store followed in London in 1990, its shelves laden with copious soft toys and limited-edition re-releases of classic Disney films.

As in the 1950s, the corporation also began to expand its business profile, opening Disneyland Paris in 1992, entering the luxury cruise-line sector in 1996, and building the residential community of Celebration in Florida around the same time.

In the 1990s, though, tensions surfaced over the direction of the Disney corporation, and its deviation from Walt’s family-oriented and largely conservative entertainment brand. Disney purchased Miramax, an adult-focused studio most famous for Quentin Tarantino’s stylish but super-violent *Pulp Fiction* (1994), and acquired the ABC Television Network, noted for its hit show *Ellen*, starring out gay woman Ellen DeGeneres. These moves provoked a back-



**Ears and years**  
*The Mickey Mouse Club* TV show ran for more than 40 years, starring a succession of Mouseketeers – these youngsters featured in 1957

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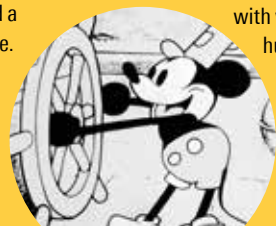
a cartoonist’s bunker – from the pressures of the wider world, particularly the looming Soviet nuclear threat. It also depicted the sort of world that Walt Disney wanted – in particular, Tomorrowland, with its white city utopianism. While looking forward in time, Disneyland also heavily invoked nostalgia for an imagined American past, with Frontierland and Main Street celebrating ‘traditional values’.

Walt’s death from cancer in December 1966 led to an extended period of uncertainty for the corporation. Walt Disney World opened in Florida in 1971, but the company’s overall energy and dynamism had dissipated.

**10 DISNEY MILESTONES**

**Alice’s Wonderland 1923**

One of Walt Disney’s early silent films is a delightful mix of live action and cartoon. Starring child actor Virginia Davis, it features a range of Disney staples including a Disneyland-style train and a cartoon mouse.



**Steamboat Willie 1928**

Disney’s first animated film with synchronised sound – a technical breakthrough of the time – also introduced the world to Mickey Mouse. Just 8 minutes in length, the film is packed with visual humour.

**Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs 1937**

The company’s first animated feature film was initially dubbed ‘Disney’s folly’ because of its spiralling costs and three-year production time. Yet it proved hugely successful, and introduced the first ‘Disney princess’.

**Der Fuehrer’s Face 1943**

Watch Donald Duck get caught in ‘Nutzi Land’, a fascist world of strangely manicured swastika shrubbery and bayonets, in this Chaplin-esque Second World War government propaganda piece.



Donald Duck joined the propaganda war in *Der Fuehrer’s Face* (1943)

**The Living Desert 1953**

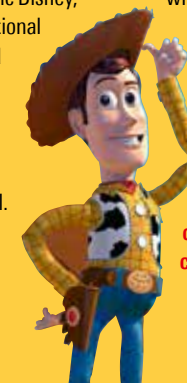
Disney’s 1950s attempts to break into nature documentaries weren’t without controversy: for *White Wilderness* (1958), film-makers hurled lemmings off cliffs as evidence of that species’ mass suicides. Yet nature has never been more entertaining than scorpions square-dancing to the ‘Stingeree’ in *The Living Desert*.

**Mary Poppins 1964**

This charming musical, featuring blended live-action and animation sequences, cast Julie Andrews as the extraordinary titular nanny. Disney’s version of Edwardian London is romantic, colourful, dreamlike and class-conscious. Some classic Sherman Brothers tunes make up for Dick Van Dyke’s mockney accent.

**The Little Mermaid 1989**

Marking the dawn of the ‘Disney Renaissance’, this animated feature – based on a Hans Christian Anderson fairy tale – is classic Disney, with its traditional hand-painted animation, catchy tunes and story of mermaid princess Ariel.



**Toy Story 1995**

Created by Pixar and distributed by Disney, the first wholly computer-animated feature film is technologically sophisticated, yet awash with nostalgia for lost childhood and beloved toys, and proved a perfect vehicle for mass merchandising.

*Toy Story*, starring cowboy Woody, launched a computer-animated era

**Frozen 2013**

With their ice-set story of sisters Elsa and Anna, directors Chris Buck and Jennifer Lee updated a classic fairy tale for the 21st century – and Disney had its biggest hit in decades.

**Black Panther 2018**

*Black Panther* was the first Marvel film with a black lead and director

This superhero movie with both a big heart and a powerful message is a spectacular celebration of African history, culture and artistry, and highlights the strengths of the Disney–Marvel relationship.



## THE DARKER SIDE OF DISNEY

Questions linger about the beliefs, culture and impacts of the company and its founder, says **John Wills**

Though the popular image of the Walt Disney Company is Mickey Mouse-eared innocence, the reality behind the brand is more complex. Founder Walt Disney remains a controversial figure, with shadows cast over his near-mythic reputation by charges of sexism in the workplace and racism – particularly relating to the live-action *Song of the South* (1946). That film views life in the cotton-growing South with warm nostalgia, glossing over racial injustice. An ardent anti-communist, Disney appeared at the US House Un-American Activities Committee in 1947 to smear former employees, despite little hard evidence. Latterly, the Walt Disney Company has worked hard to defend its founder's reputation, with *Saving Mr Banks* (2013) seen as a strategic attempt to save Walt's public image.

Though seemingly offering utopian playgrounds, Disney theme parks have faced accusations of negative environmental impacts, poor food quality, consumer exploitation and harsh conditions for workers. For decades, park staff were subject to the strictest of controls over body image: the 'Disney Look' prohibited visible tattoos or piercings, and dictated what facial hair

was acceptable for men – though in recent years rules have been relaxed considerably.

Critics have argued that visitors frequent the parks as passive and controlled consumers, never allowed to lie on a bench or wander freely, while \$100-plus ticket prices target the richest echelons of society. Such aspects were brilliantly satirised in 2015 by artist Banksy at Dismaland, a temporary art installation in the Somerset seaside resort of Weston-super-Mare. Here, guests visited a dystopian park falling apart at the seams, populated by unfriendly staff throwing insults as well as pointing arcade guns at them.

On a broader level, the Walt Disney Company continues to be criticised for its century-long appropriation of global stories, cultures and traditions for mass profit. In the early 1990s, plans for an American history-themed park in Virginia collapsed, chiefly as a result of a distrust of the corporation's ability to interpret the nation's past – the suggestion being that 'Distory' would be pitted against history. As Disney's global entertainment empire continues to grow in the 21st century, questions of trust, power and influence remain prominent.



**Cartoon hero** A Mickey Mouse film in production in the 1930s. Today, Disney remains a bellwether of American culture, says John Wills

lash from US Christian evangelical groups, who boycotted all things Disney, claiming: "You can't walk the family side of the street and the gay side of the street in the Magic Kingdom at the same time." The revival of Disney fortunes seemed dependent on a more diverse portfolio but also a more liberal message at odds with the traditional values espoused by its founder.

Corporate expansion accelerated in the 21st century. The company produced several successful teen shows, including *High School Musical* and *Hannah Montana*. Following the purchase of pioneering computer animation studio Pixar in 2006, Disney Studios deployed more ambitious animation techniques, leaving behind its classic hand-drawn style.

In 2013, Disney released *Frozen*, a progressive film about two sisters in a snowy world that netted the corporation over US\$1bn in revenue, and proved that a movie could easily succeed without male leads or male heroes. The lead song, 'Let it Go', served as an anthem for the rejected or oppressed.

### Stellar ambitions

Strengthening its position as the world's leading media and entertainment company, in 2009 Disney acquired Marvel Comics, and in 2012 bought Lucasfilm (home of the *Star Wars* films). For Marvel and *Star Wars* fans, a Disney acquisition initially sparked concerns over the 'Disneyfication' of their prized franchises. Such fears proved largely false, and the takeovers were followed by a spate of highly acclaimed and technically accomplished

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### Journey to the stars

A scene from the 2019 movie *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker*. Disney's 2012 purchase of Lucasfilm has proven successful, but has "threatened to overwhelm the Disney brand" according to John Wills

movies. These included nostalgia-heavy crowd-pleasers such as *The Force Awakens* (2015), launching a new phase of *Star Wars* stories with neither Jar Jar Binks nor even a space-suited Mickey Mouse in sight. Marvel Studios have also created films strong on message, including *Black Panther* (2018), with its overtures of black cultural nationalism, and *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol 3* (2023), with its animal rights storyline.


If anything, the steady stream of Marvel and *Star Wars* productions threatened to overwhelm the Disney brand, rather than vice versa. As part of other overhauls, several theme parks were redesigned to feature Marvel and *Star Wars* areas, in the process potentially relegating to history some Disney elements. The success of the streaming service Disney+, too, owed much to new Marvel and *Star Wars* television series, most notably *The Mandalorian* (2019–). With no new Mickey Mouse features for decades, Spiderman, Groot and Grogu ('Baby Yoda') inspired popular new soft toys for kids.

As Disney celebrates its 100th anniversary, it is also fully entering the culture wars. In 1992, scholar Stephen Fjellman declared Walt Disney World "the most ideologically important piece of land in the United States". In the 2020s, the company serves as a symbolic and contested landscape. On the one side, liberal Disney employees and fans defend progressive Disney values; on the other, Republican pro-life, anti-LGBTQ politicians such as state governor Ron DeSantis have been keen to wrest power from the entertainment institution in the state. Deliberately or not, Disney's message of diversity, communicated across a



range of movies such as the animated science-fiction adventure *Strange World* (2022), as well as live-action remakes of older cartoon classics, put it on a collision course with wider societal forces.

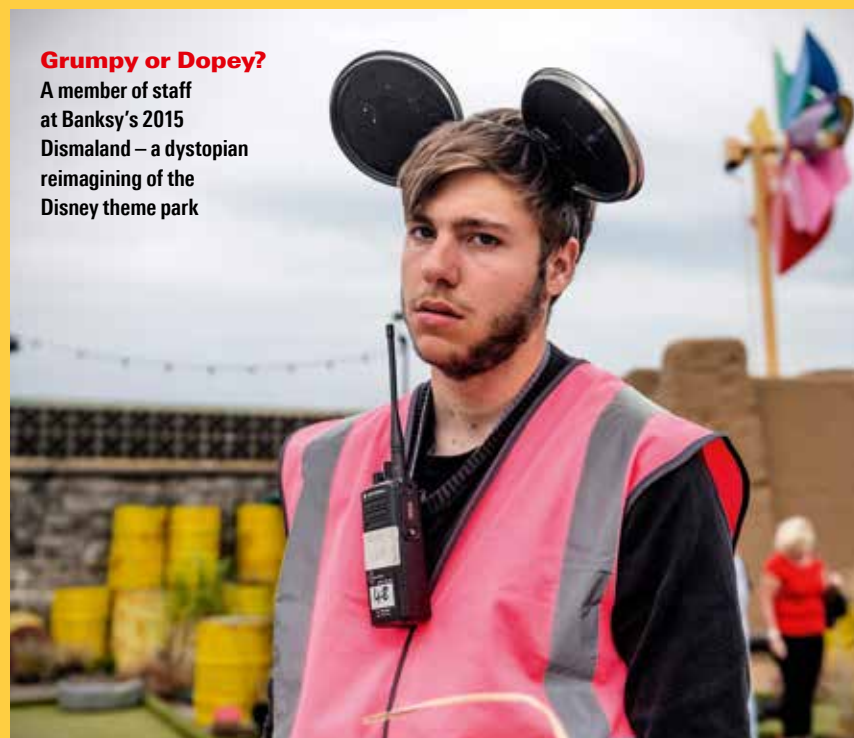
### The business of hope

At 100, the Walt Disney Company is decidedly different in message, global reach, business revenue and character line-up from the classic Disney corporation of the 1950s – and light-years away from young Walt, drawing sketches in Hyperion Studio in the 1920s. However, and crucially, Disney is still in the same business: it offers hope for a better world, it facilitates escape for all who want it, and it provides, on the whole, dependable family entertainment.

As a bellwether of American culture – and global trends – Disney continues to assert a largely positive influence. That idea recalls the experience of one *New York Times* journalist who, after watching the 1937 premiere of *Snow White*, observed that: "Wars are being fought as the picture unreels; crimes are being committed; hatreds are being whetted; riots are being brewed. But the world fades away when Mr Disney begins weaving his spell, and enchantment takes hold." 

John Wills is a professor of American culture at the University of Kent, and author of *Disney Culture* (Rutgers University Press, 2017)

 **Disney 100: How a Studio Redefined Animation** is a new episode of the BBC World Service series *The Cultural Frontline*, available on BBC Sounds 



### Grumpy or Dopey?

A member of staff at Banksy's 2015 Dismaland – a dystopian reimagining of the Disney theme park

**Disney's positive message of diversity put it on a collision course with wider societal forces**