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Framing *Snow* *White*: Preservation, nostalgia and the American way in the 1930s

Jane Batkin

*The Past is still with us in this land. At best, the Present
is a feeble growth.¹*

– WALDO FRANK

If the reach of the past pervades the present, it seems to be within American culture that it is fully embraced, as part of the composition of life. The power of memory has seeped into US thought and discussion about nationhood and has created a nostalgic framework within which society, politics and philosophy sit. As cultural historian Warren Susman states, ‘not only do Americans believe they cannot escape history; few seem to want to’.² The period between the 1920s and 1930s represented a transition that was stark and shocking and, from a decade of decadence and selfhood, came an era of hunger and fear. Robert Harrison suggests that ‘the Depression of the 1930s bit into the fabric of American life’.³ In this challenging climate, the nation turned away from hedonism and embraced what became coined as the ‘American Way’, forming a collective

society to support Roosevelt's New Deal politics.⁴ The 1930s represented a critical turning point for America; while its politics signalled a new age of thinking, the overriding feeling was one of nostalgia for what had been lost – not the recklessness of the 1920s and its obsession with consumer wealth and stock markets but a time before, where Puritanism and self-restraint were markers of a Victorian sensibility. The 1930s was therefore a period of change and reflection, and cinema became a mirror to the struggles and achievements of the everyman. Hollywood told stories of escapism, of the ability to rise up out of the Depression, yet was condemned by some critics for not addressing reality. Margaret Thorp, writing in 1939, asserted that audiences wanted escapism, to be 'cheered up' by cinema rather than seeing 'the squalor and misery of which there was all too much at home'.⁵ Conversely, Lawrence Levine argued that cinema was 'deeply grounded in the realities and the intricacies of the Depression'.⁶ Then Walt Disney Studios stepped into the void in 1937 with *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (David Hand, 1937), a feature film that captured the sensibilities and struggles of an entire decade within its animated looking glass. It had a curious power to frame the 1930s in terms of cultural and political contexts and became a critically important work to view on many different levels. How exactly, then, do we frame *Snow White* within these wider contextual, historical and ideological paradigms?

This chapter will explore the US landscape within which Disney's first feature-length animation sat: from Depression to New Deal politics, to the idea of collective memory and nostalgia. It will dissect culture and the contradictions of restraint and change that defined the 1930s, and journey into the film itself to discover how *Snow White* reflected America and came to represent Americana. The chapter presents an ideological reading of *Snow White* as a product of its time; there is much at stake in focusing on the film symptomatically in this way, but I believe that the politics of the era and the shifting identity of its nation and people are clearly, strikingly, reflected in Disney's work. The 1930s depicted the Hooverville kids, living in makeshift shelters after being displaced by the country's worst droughts, which led to an exodus of 2.5 million from the Great Plains. This era revealed the folly of optimism and selfish individualism, and illustrated, visually, how hunger and unemployment became the new Fear. Significantly, the 1930s represented a violent shift from self to society and a re-emerging puritanism within an inherently conservative country. Within the dusty, drought-ridden landscape of a shocked and struggling nation, and amid snapshot faces of hungry, destitute families, Disney captured a critical moment of American history and presented its own solution to the American 'problem': collectivism, hard work and, above all, preservation of the Past.

Disney's response to the Great Depression

Films can be vital sources of cultural identity and they enable mirrored encounters that provide escapism from reality, but, paradoxically, they can also offer looking-glass exposure to a society's concerns, issues and politics. John Belton states that 'in the American cinema, individual classic styles exist in the context of a larger, national style'.⁷ Mainstream cinema, therefore, leans towards a national collectivism. Belton goes on to discuss American comedy (which was particularly popular during the 1920s and 1930s) as a 'cultural safety valve' that occasionally let off steam and offered a release from life's pressures; Hollywood during this time became the gateway for escapism, often through folly and laughter.⁸ In 1931, cinema takings slumped dramatically as the Depression took hold and this slump continued into the middle of the decade with studios 'in a state of heightened financial sensitivity'.⁹ David Eldridge states that the implementation of the Hays Production Code was believed to be part of the solution to this sensitivity; the flutter of films' financial woes was met with sensible, muted regimentation. Films that applauded hedonism were punished in what became a censorship frenzy and this reflected the changes in society at the time and the turning of the enforced production code towards conservatism. Film during the fallout of the 1920s crash, however, was also attempting to address what exactly was happening to America.

Disney's response was direct and active, and it served as a looking glass into the temperament of US politics and society at the time. Walt Disney, himself, was a staunch supporter of Franklin Roosevelt. He was quoted as saying, 'work is the real adventure of life', and certainly the work ethic of the seven dwarfs in his 1937 feature reflects this ideal.¹⁰ Mining in the wilderness, they appear to enjoy their work routine and, at the same time, acknowledge the benefits of capitalism:

We dig dig dig dig dig dig in our mine the whole day through
 To dig dig dig dig dig dig dig is what we really like to do
 It ain't no trick to get rich quick
 If you dig dig dig with a shovel or a pick

The song points to honest work that reaps rewards, a return to a simple way of life and repetition of manual labour tasks. Disney's way mirrored what became known as 'the American Way' in the 1930s, a phrase that was acknowledged and defined through art, literature and articles that united a people through core moral values.¹¹ Novels such as Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936) and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) were examples of this, as was Roosevelt's Public Work of Arts

Project which encouraged artists to depict 'the American scene', promoting values of American life and hard work.¹² Disney's view reflected this, but was tinted with what Steven Watts calls a 'politics of nostalgia'.¹³ Disney was a futurist, embracing technology and innovation, yet simultaneously was forever glancing backwards into Victorian America (as has been documented and discussed by animation scholars Leonard Maltin, Esther Leslie, Norman Klein and Michael Barrier). Memory becomes fundamental to the Disney canon: Janet Harbord suggests that the studio was 'a form of memory-wiping' through its Disneyfication of a violent century, and Henry Giroux comments on Disney's films being able to 'powerfully influence the way America's cultural landscape is imagined'.¹⁴ Thomas Inge focuses on Disney's ability to reshape the stories it told so that they deliberately reflected Walt's own vision of America and its ethical values.¹⁵ Memory and nostalgia for an idealistic America remain at the core of Disney's cinema and *Snow White*, read ideologically, is a clear example of this, with its attachment to, and argument for, traditionalism.

In the United States, the 1930s represented a reattachment with the country's own distant past, within the work ethic of a newly collective society that ultimately rejected individualism. Amid Hays Code censorship and radically shifting politics that supported a sort of reimagined Victoriana, Disney's own natural traditionalism became aligned with this identity. America and Disney, together, captured the spirit of the time through the collective work ethic of real individuals and fictitious characters. The dwarfs are rigid in their routine of going to work in the mines, despite the distraction of the princess hiding in their home, and they reflect the heroes of the time, reaffirming status through masculinization. The struggle of the breadwinner in the 1930s, in an era of horrific unemployment and hunger, meant that masculinity had lost its past link with financial gain (such as the wealth achieved through stock market trading in the 1920s). Masculinity was instead stripped back to reflect the hard labour necessary for the nation to recover from the Great Depression. This idea ties in with Roosevelt's New Deal policy of introducing a Civilian Conservation Corps aimed primarily at young, fit men who were unemployed, to repair the soil erosion and declining timber resources in America. The men built new roads, repaired telephone lines and planted millions of trees across the nation. Hard labour defines these activities and reflects what had happened to masculinity amid the crisis. The work ethic of the dwarfs in *Snow White* resonates with the New Deal and a back-to-nature ethos: hard work creates rewards, but at the heart of this was the morality of thrift – a Puritan ethic – that working made a man a better person. The *New York Times*, in 1938, stated that the seven dwarfs 'had been the most valiant miners and sappers against recession whom the moving picture magnates have hired this year'.¹⁶ The commercial success of *Snow White* sent a clear message not only about the potential of animated film as an artistic medium but also of the benefits of

honest hard work and capitalism, again reflected within a Disney studio that, itself, created a product of the animation industry.

Popular film implied the paradoxes of the 1930s, as a time of change and of the struggle between modernity and the past. As well as gazing into history, Eldridge argues, Hollywood seemed to be saying 'return to the basics of the American tradition'¹⁷ and therein lies the solution to the American problem. Disney's *Snow White* belonged to this cluster of socially and politically aware films that can be viewed through this ideological lens. Charlie Chaplin's social commentary within *Modern Times* (1936) also reflects the New Deal message of work and honesty as he struggles to survive in an industrial environment, often bewildered by events and the workplace itself. While Chaplin struggles to move forward, he always has one eye on the past with a melancholy sense of longing that reflects Disney's own traditionalism. In *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (Frank Capra, 1939), James Stewart plays an ordinary man who becomes employed by the Senate, amidst political corruption, and who represents the voice of the people in an extraordinary twist of events that enables the empowering of the everyman.

Disney's *Snow White* functioned as a similar signpost to collectivism and traditionalism, as well as being a mirror of 1930s society and politics. The themes of greed and Self are clearly represented as evil: the Queen/wicked witch wants to erase Snow White's beauty so that the mirror will pronounce one beautiful image in the kingdom. This hedonistic display can be applied to 1920s US politics (perhaps more clearly than Europe in a previous century). Snow White's own individualism – running away, straying from the path and moving into the dwarfs' home – is resented and viewed suspiciously by Grumpy, who asserts that she is a harbinger of trouble. Those viewed as being on the 'outside' (Snow White/the Queen) are depicted in a negative light. The pessimism about individualism within society at the time was reflected in Disney's film. Tracey Mollet states that animation, as 'an overwhelmingly visual medium', was able to connect and 'correspond' with the American people during the Depression years through the myths and symbols that were prevalent in Hollywood cinema at the time.¹⁸ Such national messages are veiled in *Snow White*, making them more intriguing. Animation's ability to 'do' ideology in a covert way is evident here, and there is a political undertone that is important. Animation, as an 'innocent' but strikingly visual medium, allows it to play with representations and political messages. Viewed through an ideological lens, *Snow White* reveals the stark truth about life in 1930s America.

The images of food being prepared for the hard-working dwarfs in *Snow White* can be viewed as particularly important symbols of 1930s America. The Hooverville children, displaced through dust storms or by their parents' failed mortgage payments, lived in makeshift shanties and stared out from the camera lens, reaffirming worker Joseph Pizza's message that the 1930s was about survival: 'people have to go through an era like

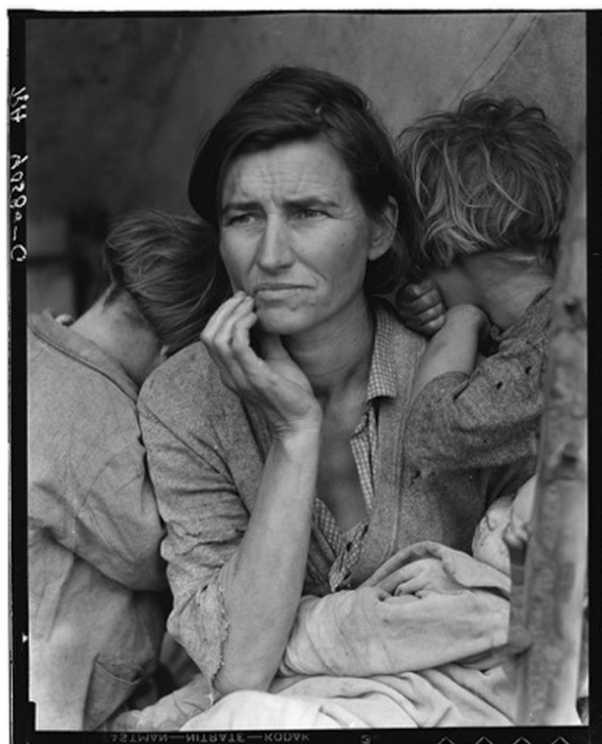


FIGURE 8.1 Destitute Pea Pickers in California: Migrant mother.

Source: <https://www.loc.gov/item/2017762891/> (accessed 20 June 2018).

that to understand what it is, and what it was to be in that position'.¹⁹ Displaced families struggled to survive (see Figure 8.1). In the American Life Histories collection 'Looking Around with a Hay Farmer' in 1938, Leonidas Cockrell laments, 'the crops are mighty little' and 'everybody is in a bad fix'.²⁰ Food preparation in *Snow White* is a reward offered for the absent inhabitants of the cottage and while she prepares it, she imagines she is feeding children who must be hungry, rather than dwarfs returning from work. She makes a simple pie, certain that this will be received with appreciation and that the inhabitants of the cottage will let her stay and look after them (see Figure 8.2). The honest, simple food cooked and eaten (and celebrated) in *Snow White* is symbolic of the time, as is her concern about being homeless and alone in the wilderness. Disney seemed to tap into the 1930s as a moment of suffering and survival and captured the basic needs of its people, with this American interpretation of the Grimm story. While the film deviates from the true European roots of its folklore, *Snow White* certainly seems to reflect America's own return to its Puritan past.



FIGURE 8.2 Snow White preparing food in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (David Hand, 1937).

Self-restraint, community, morality, industry and thrift defined Puritanism in US history, and Puritanism, itself, has become a marker for many of the characteristics of the nation.²¹

Snow White depicts the rejection of wealth and the immoral Self for a return to the land and its unspoiled innocence. Nature is a force in the film: it nurtures and destroys and demands respect. Perhaps this reflects the nation's preoccupation with nature's law during the 1930s, such as the dust storms that brought trauma and displacement to so many. This representation of nature as power aligns itself with Margaret King's view that Disney had an almost 'Jeffersonian bond to the land', wherein nature and nurture represent a moral path and that this is fundamentally the right path to take.²² In believing in the quest of the common man and his sense of belonging within a simple, collective community, Disney revealed his politics of nostalgia and his own view of the American Way through *Snow White*.

Nostalgia and memory

The idea of reclaiming and preserving what has been lost seeps repeatedly into American politics and culture. As Michael Kammen states, America's collective memory links it to tradition in a never-ending dialect, that 'the past is vital, rather than dead'.²³ What is most interesting, perhaps, is how the film reveals its own nostalgia and memory and emerges as a symbol of Americana. Disney's first feature is an artefact of cultural and historical importance, a mirror of a bygone time, its reflected surfaces spilling in different directions, but always presenting a nation's culture. Nostalgia becomes key to the representation of *Snow White* as artefact of Americana, but nostalgia opens itself up to many different interpretations. It is a word

that is not bound by any one era, but remains malleable and ever-changing with each interpretation.

Richard Gross and Rob McIlveen stress the importance of memory, that without it we would be 'servants of the moment'.²⁴ Looking backwards is regarded as memory preservation with great psychological value. Karen Wheeler's essay *Nostalgia Isn't Nasty* is interesting in its discussion of the individual moving from alienation to a state of being non-alienated and as being known by others 'in the commonality of the community which is identified as "home"'.²⁵ This idea complements the notion of collectivism in American society. Svetlana Boym views nostalgia as twofold. For her 'a cinematic image of nostalgia is a double exposure, or a superimposition of two images – of home and abroad, past and present, dream and everyday life'.²⁶ Boym finds nostalgia elusive yet alluring, a 'time-out-of-time of daydream and longing'.²⁷

Memory and nostalgia are at the core of Disney animation. Through our understanding of New Deal politics and Walt Disney's stance within such politics, we can see how the puritan ideals of the past influenced this cinema and how the very nature of puritanism and the American Way point to nostalgia. Susman suggests that few Americans want to escape history, arguing that they 'could find in history a way to become immortal'.²⁸ He explains how early settlers interpreted history as a vital part of life and studies in America, and how the Puritan past continues to impact on the American present. For Susman, the search for the 'real' America and the American Way in the twentieth century was something that could create a new nationalism and sense of conformity.²⁹ Memory becomes preservation in the United States and is examined through its cinema. Hollywood casts an eye to the past and reaffirms the importance of traditional values. Within the 1930s, this was critical and became the message of the decade. Nostalgia for the innocent simplistic past – of hard labour, belonging and nature – became the symbol of the 1930s.

Snow White's nostalgia is all-pervasive. While critical interpretations of the film's messages suit the argument of social change and New Deal politics, the themes of nostalgia and preservation of the past remain dominant. Of course, these become visible through the struggles of social change and politics of the time, such as Snow White cooking and cleaning and the dwarfs engaging in hard labour. Film has always reflected culture and society and the 'real' is always implicitly or explicitly revealed within cinema. Film constructs meaning and truth from life, while shaping it to suit film's own individual message, and the United States has seen its cinema evolve into a national style. America found itself being reflected at the dawn of film: 'the possibility of showing the entire American population its own face in the mirror screen' had arrived.³⁰ American film documents American history and its very nature is to preserve this. The 1930s' cluster of ideological films that can be read symptomatically, such as *Snow White*, also includes *Stagecoach*

(John Ford, 1939) and *Gone with the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939). Where cinema at the time looked to the present, it largely did so through comedy (e.g. with Howard Hawks' 1938 screwball comedy: *Bringing Up Baby*). The past pervaded Hollywood filmmaking, partly in search of the solution to the problem of what had happened to America in the Depression.

Disney's *Snow White* invites its audience to preserve the American Way and its puritan roots. Nostalgia in the film is for nature, hard work and routine, for cooking and eating and celebrating the simple life. The past and present are at conflict; Snow White flees the palace and civilization, which have become corrupt. The present is represented as untrustworthy, a place of hedonism and vanity that embodies evil (such as the 1920s and its ideals of Self). The Queen sits alone within a hierarchical kingdom as a tyrannical ruler; collectivism is absent in this civilized world and the Queen, on hearing that Snow White is the most beautiful maiden in the land, issues a death warrant. When she is told that the princess is still alive, the Queen assumes a poisoned apple will provide the solution to her problem. Her actions are solitary and celebrate the Self; in the Brothers Grimm story, the Queen visits Snow White on three occasions and lives long enough to attend Snow White's wedding to the prince, until forced to dance to her death. Disney's version of the Grimm story is sanitized for its younger audience, and significantly the kingdom and its Queen are depicted as isolated, with only one meeting taking place between the heroine and villainess. The kingdom exists in a vacuum devoid of noise or people, the present stifled by stillness and silence (in Waldo Frank's terms, above, the present is 'feeble'). The State in *Snow White* is elusive and points more to a Stateless, empty space which, in turn, reflects the crisis occurring within politics at the time of production. The beginning of the film reaffirms Susman's views of America and its search for its history amid its rejection of the individual, rather than that of European folklore, and the film's identity and message lie more in its embracing of American traditional values than anything else.

The return to nature and to the land in *Snow White* is a strong rhetoric for nostalgia and the past. Disney strives for non-nationalism through his reimagining of a folk tale, and the film is representative of modernism in many ways, such as the innovation of technology and the use of artistic images within the film's landscape. Disney's multi-plane camera accentuates the strikingly real backgrounds in the film, at the same time signposting the studio's ability to embrace technical change, while the attention to detail of the animated characters is vividly representative of the artistic supremacy of the studio. However, at *Snow White*'s heart lies a desire to return to a pre-modern age, symbolized by nature and the collective, conservative ideals of its characters. Watts suggests that Disney's aesthetic heart 'continued to beat to an internal rhythm of nineteenth-century sentimental realism'.³¹ *Snow White* seems to imply that the answer to America's woes lies within its Victorian and puritan past, realized through its own themes of nature,

nurture, hard work and family values. The past represents the American Way and, for Disney, the American Dream.³²

Family in *Snow White* mirrors society's struggle to revert to traditionalism at the time. Identity shifts from the Self (of the 1920s) to the family unit. The film's representation of family implies an unnatural one, with Snow White becoming home maker and 'mother' to the dwarfs; perhaps this in itself is a symbol of the very paradox of home. The roaring 1920s empowered women to achieve their own goals and have a voice that mattered, yet the Depression represented something of the 'punishment' of the Self. Snow White is a rural girl/woman who believes that her main goal is to feed the 'children', clean the house and be a good mother (while dreaming of marrying a Prince). Disney's message is clear and firm, alluding directly to nineteenth century sensibilities where family was the centrepiece of American values and the American home. Home itself must also be defended and the princess must learn her lesson when she fails to identify danger. It falls to the prince to rescue her because patriarchy is the lynchpin of Disney's early cinema, and patriarchy also reflects the politics of Victorian America. Snow White's journey into the wilderness is undertaken haphazardly and is fuelled by fear and trepidation. When the forest creatures discover her inert body on the ground, however, she quickly recovers, remarking how silly she was to be afraid. Nature is preferable to the cruelty of civilization. As David Whitley states, Disney's attention to the pastoral and the natural landscape within the film establishes and emphasizes 'the relationship of the heroine to the natural environment that both surrounds, and in a sense, defines her'.³³ Here, Snow White can feel safe and achieve belonging in a collective society, albeit one that is steeped in fantasy. Nostalgia is for a bygone time, or as Boym coins it, 'a time-out-of-time' that belongs neither in the real world nor in the dream world but is a combination of both.³⁴ Nostalgia is difficult to place because it means different things to different people. On a national scale, however, it recalls important events and values. The dwarfs' home and workplace are represented as icons of 1930s memorabilia in their values and beliefs, despite their origins in European folklore. As Snow White tries to connect the inhabitants of the cottage to her own knowledge of families, she struggles and fails. Are they children without a mother? Do they need one? The truth is stranger than her imaginings. *Snow White* is situated at the intersection of the fantastic and the political, of home and dreaming, enabling visions of nostalgia to infiltrate it through its dreamy moods and landscapes that are both real and fictional.

Disney himself shaped the stories he told to reflect his beliefs about family life, the work ethic and the American Dream back to the people through cinema. In line with the New Deal of the 1930s, the Disney studio seemed, perhaps unknowingly, to address the need for the American public to fall in line and adhere to a doctrine of puritan, good behaviour. In reshaping *Snow White* to reflect what was important to America at the time, Disney created a

piece of memorabilia of the era that resonated with both the 1930s audience and audiences to come. The film is an important relic within Hollywood cinema, animation history and national US history and yet is one that contains many inconsistencies and paradoxes: it is outwardly non-nationalistic yet it echoes with nationhood, it challenges society and politics yet depicts fantasy and folklore, its characters wander from isolation to collectivism in search of 'home', as well as in and out of nature. *Snow White* Americanizes its European folklore origins as part of this process. The conflicts within Disney's film have become mirrors of society at the time. The first animated feature needed to forge a strong connection with its audience, doing so not just because of its medium specificity but also perhaps because of what it represented about US society and nostalgia. The American Way can be linked to the frontier world, to uncharted land and budding civilizations in the face of great adversities, to individual dreams and goals and Disney's *Snow White* becomes a magnifying glass into American identity.

Americana

National identity, cultural heritage and the American Dream are fragments that fit together to form the 'Americana' of the United States. Typically, they are artefacts that have become symbols of this heritage that embody America and being American. The Route 66 sign, diners, Cadillacs and the Statue of Liberty are, for example, all visual signposts of this history preservation but point more to material 'things' and artefacts than an overall sense of the meaning of this national place. More focused is the relationship between Americana and nostalgia, and this ties in with the discussion above about the preservation of the past. Kammen calls America a 'land of the past, a culture with a discernible memory'.³⁵ It is a land of people that do not relinquish the past easily: the present is viewed as inferior while the past is seen as something alive and longed for. Traditionalism and patriarchy inform ideas of national identity in a country that submerges itself in its own nostalgia. The American Dream began with the conquering of frontiers before transforming into the quest for capitalism. The American Way alludes more to the land than its material wealth. Nostalgia and memory have shaped the United States through its tumultuous past, with preservation enabled through the capturing of images and sounds of bygone eras that we can view and listen to online today, thus tapping into the vaults of history. The past never dies.

Disney's *Snow White*, situated in a period of extreme transformation, has become part of this identity and an integral part of Americana. It forms part of the American experience of the 1930s and also represents memory preservation of the American past. Watching the film in the twenty-first century, themes of a collective culture and strong work ethic, as well as issues of simple hunger, isolation and fear that pervade it all seem to connect

the film to the decade of its production. These are more profound and more directly alluded to than the European heritage of the Grimm story in Disney's adaptation. The film becomes a relic to be preserved as 'Americana', a form of national and individual identity from the vaults of history, as do the documentaries surrounding it.

In the film *American Experience: Walt Disney*, Carmentina Higginbotham makes the connection between Snow White and the 1930s, suggesting that the heroine is the perfect embodiment 'of 1930s culture' and uses her skills and trades in the best way she can, reflecting the women who gained entry to the workplace during the Great Depression. Snow White, she suggests, is completely rooted in a '30s aesthetic'.³⁶ Historian Susan Douglas, however, describes Disney's vision of America as something of a false mirror that projects a very idealized image of the United States back to itself. While this is viewed as a criticism because of Disney's lack of representation of difference and diversity during its classical era – and many theorists have commented on the sanitization of the Disney studios, among them Giroux and Watts – this false mirror itself aligns with the definitions and ideas of nostalgia that this chapter has discussed as pervading *Snow White*. If Disney is accepted as projecting a certain ethos through his cinema, and that ethos is nostalgia, his films must be viewed through a nostalgic lens. Boym tells us that nostalgia is 'an affective yearning for a community with a collective memory, a longing for continuity in a fragmented world'.³⁷ Within the troubled landscape of 1930s America, Disney used the Brothers Grimm folk tale to tell a story of a lost princess and her adventures in the wilderness. Shaping the story to reflect his own views on the world and platforming the American Way as part of those beliefs, Disney offered a solution to the American problem at the time: the Great Depression of the 1930s. *Snow White* has become Americana, a cultural snapshot of a certain period in history and one that, itself, looks back in time into a deeper history. There, it seemed to find the answer to the question 'what happened to America in the 1930s?' As Joseph Pizza reflected, above, people have to go through an era like that to understand it and to grasp the fundamental importance of pure survival, above all else. The solution to the problem of survival, Disney's *Snow White* seemed to tell 1930s America, lay much further back in history to a time of honesty, hard work and family values. Snow White's own path within the film was a mirror, and a glimpse into the American Way, where the past was viewed as more vital than dead.

Notes

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