

## *Snow White* in 1930s Britain

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Annette Kuhn

The film *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* had its world premiere at the Carthay Circle theatre in Los Angeles on 21 December 1937. Based on a folktale collected by Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm and first published in 1812 in their collection *Kinder und Hausmärchen*, this was the first ever feature-length animation film. Its 84 minutes or so of running time was the fruit of several years of costly (and high-profile) planning and execution at Walt Disney's Burbank studio.<sup>1</sup> The production, involving hundreds of artists and other personnel, as well as innovative animation techniques and specially developed film-making equipment, cost a reported \$1.5 million. This was an enormous budget for the time, and the project was regarded as a huge gamble on Disney's part.

But *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* confounded the doubters and proved an immediate international hit: according to film trade figures it was the world's best-selling film of 1938, and by 1940 it had grossed an all-time record of \$8 million. The film's early awards included the Special Biennale Art Trophy at the 1938 Venice Film Festival, the New York Film Critics' Special Award in 1939 and, also in 1939, an Honorary Academy Award for Walt Disney. Over the following five decades, in a carefully orchestrated programme of international theatrical re-releases (in 1943, 1952, 1958, 1967, 1975 and 1983), *Snow White* was introduced to a series of new generations of cinema-goers. A 'fully restored' video version, which included a 'Making of *Snow White*' featurette, appeared in 1994, and the film is currently available as a digitally remastered DVD that comes with an additional disk containing more than three hours of supplementary material.

This essay explores the circumstances surrounding *Snow White*'s initial release in Britain, and considers how the peculiarities of the film's British reception context interacted with some of its

distinctive features as a piece of cinema to produce particular forms of intertextuality and modes of recollection. My account draws in considerable part on research on cinema culture in 1930s Britain that was begun in the mid-1990s and still continues; it is important to note that, as far as the project is concerned, British cinema culture includes, but is not confined to, British cinema or British films, and that the British cinema experience is regarded as part of the ensemble of activities and practices peculiar to people's daily lives at the time, with the cinema culture (or cultures) of 1930s Britain being seen as informed in turn by these practices. This research has principally involved investigating contemporary (1930s) source materials and also gathering, through interviews and questionnaires, memories of people who were filmgoers at the time (Kuhn 2002). As well as revisiting data and findings from earlier phases of the project, the present essay also draws on new research specifically on *Snow White* in the cinema culture of 1930s Britain, including a small-scale questionnaire study of men and women who saw the film on its original release.

The first UK public screening of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* took place on 24 February 1938, when the film opened at the ultra-smart New Gallery cinema in London's West End for an unlimited run of six daily screenings. Within three weeks, it was subsequently reported in the film's press book it had already been seen by 150,000 people. A nationwide release had to wait several months, however, and it was not until September that cinemas around the country could start exhibiting the film. Meanwhile, the numerous reviews across the spectrum of the British press were unanimous in their praise. The *Daily Mirror* thought it 'a wonder film—it will go right to the heart of everyone who sees it' (25 February 1938), and the *News Chronicle* called it 'the screen's most sparkling novelty' (22 February 1938). According to *The Times* its 'unity, lightness and feeling' were 'magical' (22 February 1938). The *New Statesman* declared it 'a delightful and unique entertainment' (26 February 1938), while, writing in *The Spectator*, Basil Wright conceded that 'three years of anticipatory and well-stimulated excitement' (4 March 1938) had been fully justified. *The Listener* dubbed the film 'a notable picture, not only in its execution, but because it has successfully lifted the cartoon up among the long feature films' (9 March 1938) and the British Film Institute's *Monthly Film Bulletin* promised that 'to see the film is to see into Fairyland' (February 1938: 44). The trade press agreed: for the *Today's Cinema* reviewer, *Snow White* recreated 'the enchanted atmosphere of a child's mind in its early formative stages' (22 February 1938), while *Kinematograph Weekly's* more pragmatic view was that the film was excellent entertainment for all classes and

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ages and for both sexes, and therefore ‘an unprecedented box-office proposition’ (24 February 1938). In the film fan press, too, *Snow White* attracted huge coverage and high praise, with the fan weeklies unanimously dubbing it ‘outstanding’ and listing it among the best films of 1938.<sup>2</sup>

Cinema-goers evidently concurred. *Film Pictorial* readers voted *Snow White* among the best films of 1938, and it was *Kine Weekly*’s biggest box-office moneymaker of the year. In a 1939 investigation of the leisure activities of close to 200 secondary school boys and girls, *Snow White* topped the list of favourite films (*Film Pictorial* 21 January 1939; Struthers 1939). In short, on every measure *Snow White* was Britain’s most popular film of 1938. For one UK cinema, probably typical of its kind, the film was a ‘runaway hit’, topping attendance figures not just for the year of its release but for the whole of the 1930s (Kuhn 2002: 252). Bearing in mind that one of the most significant findings to emerge from memory work with 1930s cinema-goers—that recollections of individual films are relatively rare—it is remarkable that *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, either the occasion of going to see the film and/or images or scenes from the film itself, stands out in the recollections of a surprisingly large number of informants. *Snow White* figures prominently in the list of ‘informant-generated’ film titles—that is, pictures that interviewees remember seeing in the 1930s, recollecting the occasions in some detail—as well as those named by significant numbers of questionnaire respondents in answer to the question ‘Do you recall any films that made a particularly strong impression on you?’ However, it is worth noting that, unusually for films released before the age of television re-runs, video and DVD, *Snow White* had an extended afterlife of theatrical re-releases, and this may well have informed respondents’ memories of the film. Nonetheless, there are some unusually vivid and detailed memories of the circumstances of seeing the film *in the 1930s*. A few examples:

I saw [*Snow White*]. I cycled with Dennis Porter to Blackpool in 1938. Aye, and saw it in the Tower Ballroom. It cost me all of, I think it was four bob [20 pence] and that was ruinously expensive, it was the dearest cinema seat I’d ever purchased, aye.<sup>3</sup>

The Parish priest, having opposed the opening of the Ritz, *astonished* us all by telling all the children of the town to see this film on a Sunday afternoon at *his* expense... I’ll never forget it or the generosity of the Parish priest.<sup>4</sup>

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I remember *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* very well! That was a real eh, a major thing... I don't think we'd ever had anything like it before. And em, you know, everywhere you went it was *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and everything was decorated with pictures of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. And I can remember doing things at school, you know. For school work. And doing drawings of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. Em, it really was, you know, for quite a long while, it was a very, eh, major thing.<sup>5</sup>

However, there is far more than saturation media coverage and popular appeal to the story of *Snow White* in 1930s Britain. The closing years of the decade were a key moment of transition for Britain's cinema culture, and there is considerable evidence to suggest that a sea change in general attitudes towards cinema and in tastes in films took place in these years (Kuhn 1996). This was also a time when official and semi-official discourses around cinema and its audiences – in particular child audiences – were undergoing significant shifts. When *Snow White* arrived in Britain in 1938 to loud fanfares, this early blockbuster slotted into a series of events and a set of discourses that raised the film's profile even further and lent a highly distinctive quality to its reception in the British context. The story of *Snow White* in the 1930s interweaves several plotlines and engages a number of discourses, the most prominent three of which will be examined here, under the shorthand headings Horror, Hype and Home.

### *Horror*

A fortnight before the UK release of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, it was announced that the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC) had recommended that the film be given an 'A' certificate – meaning that under-16s should be accompanied by an adult. This was on the grounds that parts of the film were considered “‘nightmarish’ and undesirable for children’ (*The Times*, 7 February 1938). The passages concerned are Snow White's flight through the forest early in the film, the queen's transformation into a witch and the witch's death towards the end. Disney Studios seemed unfazed by the prospect of an 'A' certificate, however, and no cuts were made for the British release (*Daily Herald*, 8 February 1938). Nevertheless, the censor's decision prompted a small flurry of debate in the British press.

A few days after the BBFC's announcement, on 12 February 1938, the *News Chronicle* printed a think piece on 'the question of how far children should be protected from terror': sometimes terror can be enjoyable, it pointed out, but 'to enjoy being afraid we must know

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there is an element of make-believe in our fear'. Some children lose their sense of make-believe very easily, the article continued, and 'it is probably because of this over-sensitive minority that the new Disney film is marked A'. However, in the following week, on 19 February 1938, the writer of another article on the subject agreed with the censors on account of the peculiar power of the visual image 'which terrifies by its clarity and by the way it exaggerates what the story has merely outlined'. In the meantime, *The Times* of 9 February 1938 had published a leader attacking the 'A' certificate – not because the writer disagreed that the film was frightening, but because the certification and its rationale were thought to be the work of child psychologists, a group of professionals habitually demonised in the press. In a letter to *The Times* published after the film's release, Susan Isaacs, a Kleinian analyst and child psychologist based at the University of London's Institute of Education, responded on 12 March 1938 by stressing the importance of age in debates about films suitable for children. Isaacs considered the film 'splendid entertainment' for children above the age of seven or eight, but not for younger ones, who, she argued, could not yet distinguish between what is real and what is imagined. She advised parents not to take very young children to see the film. From a different perspective, the noted *Daily Herald* columnist P. L. Mannock defended *Snow White* on artistic grounds, acknowledging that while children might be frightened by some scenes, 'it would have been a pity to cut this wonderful picture, with its exquisite pictorial experiments in shadows, tintings, reflections and perspectives' (21 February 1938).

These exchanges are in fact part of a debate about children and cinema that had been going on in Britain for several years, and which by the late 1930s had achieved a considerable degree of sophistication. From the very earliest years of cinema, the effects of the medium on children had been the subject of considerable public concern. This was centred at first on cinema's supposed physical ill-effects, such as damage to eyesight, fatigue and so on, as well as on its potential for 'demoralising' children and the working class (Kuhn 1998: 120–2). However, the 1930s saw a new focus for anxieties about young people's cinema-going, now directed less at cinema's negative effects and increasingly on what was held to be good for children and on how cinema might detract from, or make a positive contribution to, children's psychological welfare. In the early years of the decade, concerns about a cycle of frightening or 'horrific' Hollywood films (such as *Frankenstein*, *Dracula* and *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (all 1931)) were widespread, and there was considerable pressure group activity around the issues of children, 'A' films and frightening films. This was

directed largely at the efficacy and the extent of observance of the 'A' certificate. The way in which censorship arrangements worked meant that the BBFC could only recommend a certificate, not enforce it; local authorities had the final say, and in any event children could easily find ways of circumventing the rule about being accompanied by an adult. The debate around certification of films touched in particular on the question of parental rights and responsibilities in choosing the films which children should see, on the problem of non *bona fide* guardians taking children into 'A' films, and also, importantly, on the issue of what was and was not a film suitable for children.<sup>6</sup>

Within a few years, however, the tenor of public opinion about children's cinema-going had begun to shift, with ideas about young people's psychological vulnerability to 'unsuitable' films giving way to calls for films to be produced and programmed especially for children. The impending release of *Snow White*, however, revived earlier concerns about the psychological effects on children of 'frightening' films or scenes from films, and about the role, on the one hand, of censorship or film certification in protecting the child audience and, on the other, of the promotion of films suitable for children. The problem with *Snow White* was that it was seen both as a frightening film and as a film suitable for children. The BBFC's recommended 'A' certificate was intended to deal with this conundrum. As it turned out, though, many local authorities (including those in London and the neighbouring Home Counties) disregarded the BBFC's recommendation and certificated the film 'U' (for universal exhibition).

Were the young cinema-goers of the 1930s really frightened by any scenes in *Snow White*? Some undoubtedly were, and although the film's potentially frightening passages are few in number and relatively brief in duration, these are the very moments that seem to remain firmly fixed in memories of the film itself. While these particular memories (as against memories of the occasion of going to see the film) are not numerous, they do betray a marked, and highly revealing, energy and vividness: as such, these recollections perhaps offer an insight into how cinema memory, and especially the earliest memories of cinema, works (Kuhn 2002: 39–62; Kuhn forthcoming). Nor are memories of being frightened by *Snow White* necessarily negative, as is suggested by the film critic Philip French's recollection of being 'entranced, frightened and captivated' when first seeing the film in 1938 at the age of five (1987). A number of responses to the *Snow White* questionnaire endorse French's memory: Joy Matthews saw *Snow White* on her very first visit to the cinema at the age of two, and she remembers

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that she both loved the film *and* was frightened by the queen.<sup>7</sup> For others remembering their early cinema-going experiences, though, the timbre of the horror, and the images that provoked it, are vividly and unequivocally recollected. Philip Barnsby recalls being unusually susceptible for an eight-year-old. He writes: '*Snow White* was the film of [the 1930s] best suited to my tender years, but even in that film I didn't care for the wicked stepmother. For most of my years as a juvenile cinema-goer I seem to remember being terrified.'<sup>8</sup>

Other childhood memories of seeing *Snow White* lend support to Susan Isaacs's advice on the appropriate minimum age for seeing the film. Leonard Finegold and the children's author Alan Garner were only three when they saw the film. The former states: 'I still recall the (green?) witch/stepmother/queen looking out of a frame. I ran out of the cinema. My mother said she didn't catch me for several hundred yards,<sup>9</sup> while the latter recalls:

I was three years old. Nobody had told me what a cinema or a film was, and certainly nothing about the concept of an animated cartoon; and I was taken into the largest enclosed space I'd ever seen... Figures fifteen feet high loomed over me. The film was *Snow White*; and I felt my sanity slipping until the moment the queen metamorphosed into the witch. Then I screamed and screamed, and could not stop. My mother called an usherette to have me removed, and I was handed into strange-smelling arms behind a bright beam that dazzled me. The arms hugged my squirming form and carried me out, while my mother stayed to watch the rest of the film. But the exit was at the foot of the screen, and I was being borne up towards that great and drooling hag, away from safety, pinioned by someone I couldn't see, and the witch was laughing.

When we got home I was thrashed for making my mother 'look a fool'. The nightmares began and have haunted me ever since. The witch has my mother's face. (Garner 1990: 9)

### *Hype*

As noted above, there was widespread coverage of *Snow White* in various sectors of the British media in the weeks leading up to its UK release. But readers of film fan magazines would have been aware for months, if not years, that something unique was in production at Disney Studios. Much of this coverage laid stress on the new cinematographic technology developed for the film, especially the multiplane camera, as well as on the intensive labour involved in making the thousands of drawings required for such an extended piece of animation. As the UK release date drew nearer, the film's characters – the dwarfs in

particular—were introduced to readers of the fan press in painstaking detail. Thus the January 1938 issue of *Screen Pictorial* devotes three pages to *Snow White*, with a synopsis of the story, drawings of some of the film's characters and a careful naming of each of the dwarfs and their individual character traits, while an illustrated double-page spread in the 25 December 1937 issue of *Picturegoer* stresses the ingenuity of the film's sound effects and colour, and again introduces the dwarfs ('natural Disney characters') by name, claiming that 'when you see the picture in the early part of next year, you will find that, but for a few minor changes, the story clings closely to the Grimms' fairy tale'. The similarity of the tone and content of this material to those of an early Disney trailer for the film (promising the 'thrill of a lifetime . . . in Multiplane Technicolor') suggests that the former was also a product of the studio's publicity machine.

Other pre-release media coverage, however, appears to be more straightforwardly motivated by the interests and preoccupations of journalists and readers. In the fortnight before the London opening, the *Daily Mirror* ran two appreciative items on this 'lovable' film's rapturous reception in the USA, one of them written by 'the only man in England who has seen "Snow White"' (10 and 17 February 1938). On the other hand, a *Times* leader voiced the opinion that the Grimms must be turning in their graves (9 February 1938). As already noted, the weeks leading up to *Snow White's* London premiere also saw widespread press reports on and discussion of the certification of the film. Soon after the London opening, a play based on the film was broadcast nationwide on BBC Radio no less than three times in one week, eliciting a tart *Listener* review by Grace Wyndham Goldie on 23 March 1938. In the face of the actual film, however, any condescension on the part of the Establishment soon melted away. Even *The Times* allowed that despite its 'roughness of humour' and the dwarfs' scenes' obvious appeal to 'the fat men in their [*sic*] stalls', *Snow White* was both 'magical' and faithful to the Grimms' original (22 February 1938). Reviews in all branches of the press, and also on radio, ranged from the positive—albeit with occasional minor reservations—to the furthest extremes of enthusiasm. The ultimate seal of approval came with the announcement in *The Times* on 15 March 1938 that the young Princesses Elizabeth and Margaret, along with adult members of the royal family, had enjoyed a private screening of *Snow White* at Buckingham Palace.

Although it was commonplace at this time for distributors' press books to set out suggestions for advertising tie-ups, the breadth, scale and range of *Snow White* promotional material was unprecedented.

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The BBC's embrace of the tie-up, in the shape of its *Snow White* play, was quickly followed by others. Soon after the film's release, HMV issued a recording, with a pictorial album cover, of songs ('recorded with all the incidental sounds') from *Snow White*, while Faber & Faber brought out a new translation of the Grimms' story (1938). Indeed, an avalanche of *Snow White* merchandise of all kinds was launched in what was probably the first national campaign promoting consumption of film-related goods. Disney-licensed *Snow White* products made and sold in Britain included toothbrushes and nailbrushes, pottery, Bakelite ware, magic lantern slides, paper serviettes, linen tablecloths, balloons, bibs, sweets, novelty jewellery, dress fabrics, colouring books, electric lamps, wallpaper, handkerchiefs, train sets, fireplaces, postcards and greetings cards, children's nightwear, embossed glassware, handbags, embroidery transfers, pencils and pencil boxes, and many other items.<sup>10</sup> A number of *Cinema Culture in 1930s Britain* informants remember having *Snow White* merchandise at home. Barry Blain's bedroom sported *Snow White* wallpaper and curtains, and his father made him a set of wooden models of Snow White and the dwarfs. 'I played the record incessantly', he adds. Joy Matthews had a celluloid Snow White doll and also a brooch of Snow White and the dwarfs. Ann Gray owned the gramophone record and a set of characters made of felt.<sup>11</sup>

During the seven-month interval between *Snow White's* London opening and its nationwide release, the intense promotion of the film continued alongside the marketing of tie-in merchandise. A Disney Studios press book produced in London and directed at exhibitors outside the capital included a letter signed by Roy Disney urging exhibitors to direct their publicity efforts so that 'every man, woman and child in your community will know that *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* is showing in your theatre'. Numerous promotion suggestions are offered: posters, lobby displays, animated displays and other decorations for cinema vestibules, for example, as well as materials aimed at children such as masks and materials for painting competitions.<sup>12</sup>

Meanwhile, an advance guard of Mass-Observation, an organisation set up in 1937 with the aim of collecting information on all aspects of the lives of ordinary people in Britain, had established itself in the cotton manufacturing town of Bolton ('Worktown') with the aim of documenting the townspeople's daily lives and leisure pursuits – cinema-going being foremost among the latter (Mass-Observation 1943; Spender 1982). In April 1938, five hundred or more patrons of the town's newly opened Odeon cinema answered

a Mass-Observation questionnaire about their film preferences. The responses included several spontaneous references to the 'eagerly-awaited' *Snow White* (Richards and Sheridan 1987: 61). In the event, Boltonians had to wait until November to see the film, by which time the town was evidently abuzz with anticipation. *Snow White* opened at the Odeon on Friday, 4 November (with a 'U' certificate, interestingly). From the Monday of that week, the *Bolton Evening News* had featured large front-page advertisements daily: 'the greatest success the screen has ever known' was coming to the Odeon for one week only, with continuous matinees from noon to 6 p.m., plus two bookable evening performances. The paper's weekly 'Cinema Chat' column noted on 3 November 1938 that *Snow White* 'has topped all records for the Odeon and in comparison with the previous record picture at this cinema [the Odeon], *Victoria the Great*, had it beaten in advance bookings alone' (3 November 1938).

*Snow White*'s arrival in Bolton was clearly a significant event also for Mass-Observation. Conversations about the film, overheard in public and private, were documented by Observers, the burden of exchanges between adults being that while the film was really for children, its technical and musical innovations were most impressive. Children were more overtly enthusiastic. One Mass-Observation recorded the following exchange:

N: Did you go to the Odeon last week, Percy?

Percy [clerk, 45]: Yes.

N: How did you like it?

Percy: Well it was so-so for me you know.

J (35): Oh aye, there was nowt about it.

Percy: I appreciated the cleverness of it, mind you.

J: Oh aye, and the music's very nice. It's a bit too long, though.<sup>13</sup>

Another Observer compiled notes on the opening night queues outside the Odeon, while yet another produced a nine-page record of (timed) audience laughs during part of a screening of the film. A visit by an Observer to the junior department of the Bolton Central Public Library elicited the information that staff had fielded hundreds of inquiries for the new Faber translation of the *Snow White* book. Their original copy had worn out and had had to be replaced. 'There are many children waiting for it', said the librarian. The town's shops were full of *Snow White* merchandise. In one street a stationer's had on display calendars and ceramic figures of the dwarfs and animals; a wallpaper retailer's window featured a scene from *Snow White* (the

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Observer's notes are accompanied by a pencil sketch) with 'cut-outs for use on walls of children's nurseries, etc.' Elsewhere a florist was selling *Snow White* garden ornaments and a jeweller's had on display 'chain bracelets with the Seven Dwarfs hanging from them intended to look like charms'. In the Market Hall on the day after the film's local opening, 'Grimshaw's stall... had a card giving the prices of *Snow White* record albums... A *Snow White* Record was beside it. The full set cost 6/6d [32 pence]'. Another stall was displaying a '*Snow White* book in centre of row at side of stall. There were *Snow White* song sheets beside it'. Woolworths was selling *Snow White* brooches, necklaces, toys, dolls' tea sets, figurines, sweets, jigsaw puzzles, story books and colouring books.<sup>14</sup>

Bolton's embrace of *Snow White* was clearly repeated across Britain, and the nature of *Snow White* merchandise and other tie-ins suggests there was something for everyone, the moneyed and the less well-off, the middle class and the working class, patrons of jewellery emporia and children spending their pocket money in Woolworths. In general, the character of and the target consumers for the merchandise fall into two main categories: items for infants and children (story books, colouring books, toys and sweets) and articles for the home (figurines, tableware and so on). Some items addressed both markets simultaneously (wallpaper and stickers for children's rooms, lunch boxes), and the prominence of a childhood/home topos in these tie-ins and promotions is a reminder of the provenance of the original *Snow White* folktale: the Grimms' *Kinder und Hausmärchen*, which translates as 'children's and household tales'.

### Home

Notwithstanding the various claims that the film version of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* stuck closely to the Grimms' story, the two do diverge in a number of ways. In particular, the film condenses or omits key elements of the folktale's plot.<sup>15</sup> Most prominently, it omits the prologue, in which Snow White's mother pricks her finger and wishes for a child as white as snow, as red as blood and as black as ebony. It also leaves out the ending – the wedding of Snow White and the young prince, at which the wicked queen is punished by being made to dance in red-hot shoes. The Snow White of the film is several years older than the seven-year-old of the folktale, and the core plot's duration is condensed into several days as against the folktale's (unspecified) several years. The film also condenses the witch's three poisoned articles (comb, bodice, apple) into a single one – the apple.

As a number of scholars have pointed out, the Disney version also adds to the folktale several generic elements characteristic of Hollywood live-action films of the time: for example, operetta (à la Nelson Eddy and Jeanette MacDonald) and screwball comedy, as well as the above-noted 'horrific' (Martin Wright 1997). Given that genre is the point at which film industry imperatives and audience expectations meet, this is an important point for an understanding of the film's reception. Of key significance here are the ways in which the film's plot, settings and iconography interact not only with what the audience brings to the cinema in terms of prior knowledge and expectations of film genres but also with aspects of their own daily lives. Elsewhere, I have argued that in the cinema culture of 1930s Britain, people located their cinema-going within the ensemble of their everyday lives and practices, literally bringing home—*domesticating*—that 'other' world, that heterotopia, the world in the cinema (Kuhn 2004). With Disney's *Snow White*, the domestication topos is a central element both of the film itself—its themes, images and address—and also, importantly, of the 'hype' that surrounded its first British release.

Perhaps the most significant point of divergence between the plots of the folktale and the film versions of *Snow White* occurs at the point in the story when Snow White discovers the dwarfs' house and is given refuge there. In the folktale, after her flight through the forest the heroine comes upon a little house in a wooded glen. She enters and finds it spotlessly clean. The dwarfs' subsequent suggestion that she be their little housekeeper is thus an act of generosity on their part rather than an expression of need. Furthermore, in the folktale the period of story time when Snow White is living at the dwarfs' house is relatively long—years seem to pass—while in terms of plot duration it is quite brief—it is narrated in just a few words or a sentence or two. However, the exact opposite is true of the same plot element in the film version, where scenes set in the dwarfs' house take up a considerable proportion of the film's 80 or more minutes of running time (excluding the passages in which the witch goes to the house to tempt Snow White with the poisoned apple and the later scene in which the dwarfs mourn her), accounting for roughly half an hour.

However, these scenes do not move the story along; indeed, this is not what they are for. Snow White first of all spring cleans the dwarfs' house with the help of the animals; she then explores upstairs and falls asleep. The dwarfs return and we witness their reactions on discovering Snow White; she offers to keep house for them, and preparations for dinner are set in train. Later, there is a hoedown, and Snow White sings to the dwarfs before they all go to bed. It is evident that what is at

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stake in the film (aside from a self-conscious display of the wonders of animation) is a meditation on homemaking and childcare: the dwarfs figure here as Snow White's children, whereas in the folktale they are her protectors. The Disney version, then, is in considerable part about domesticity and keeping house, and also about proper behaviour at home. The film, of course, also adds an audiovisual element to the folktale, and in light of this the spatial organisation of the dwarfs' house is worthy of note. The building has a rustic, *Mittleuropa*, gingerbread look, and its interior boasts an abundance of wooden furniture and fixtures, along with the innovation of an upper storey and staircase, with the attendant graphic and comedic possibilities offered by such spaces.

Much could be written on the issue of *mise en scène* and organisation of filmic space, as well as on the significance of animation as against live action. In the present context, however, the key point is that *Snow White* the film condenses, and also embellishes, different elements of both the plot and the settings of the folktale, and that the burden of these changes of emphasis is to foreground the topos of home and domesticity in the film's address to, and its engagement of, its spectators and its audiences. The marketing and promotion of the film – and above all the merchandise tie-ups, with their emphasis on household articles and children's toys – are part of, and support, this discourse of domesticity.

Among the promotional ideas set out in a UK press book for the film is a short article on the dwarfs' house and the expertise behind its creation. Alongside pictures of items of furniture from the house is proffered the suggestion that 'practically everything in this fantastic but charming abode could be easily adapted to a modern country home or mountain lodge'. This rather far-fetched notion may indicate the depth of misunderstanding in Burbank, California, of daily life in Britain in the late 1930s, when not all Britons were strangers to aspirations of domestic perfection. At a time when hundreds of thousands of new houses were being built on the fringes of Britain's cities, dreams – especially among lower-middle-class women – of the desirable (albeit suburban-modern rather than rustic) home found expression in the annual Daily Mail Ideal Home Exhibition in London (Ryan 1995). It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that the 1938 exhibition featured a replica of the dwarfs' house, its scale suggesting that it was made for small people – dwarfs and children. This suggests something of how Disney's film and its promotion, at a time when consumerism had barely begun to emerge in Britain, keyed into popular, and perhaps profound, imaginings of 'home' and 'homeyness'

to sell a dream of possessing things—tableware, ornaments, and the like—and above all an ordered and beautiful home.

And indeed there is contemporary evidence to suggest that *Snow White*'s domestic topos and its homemaking scenes made a considerable impression at the time on audiences of all ages, an impression at least as marked as that made by the film's vividly recollected 'frightening' passages. Anecdotally, C. S. Lewis' biographer, A. N. Wilson, recounts that Lewis and his brother—who rarely went to the pictures—booked tickets to see *Snow White* and thought it 'first-rate... It was well worth going to it if only for the scene of the spring cleaning of the dwarfs' house' (1990: 160). The more scientific efforts of the Mass-Observer who recorded the reactions of a Bolton audience at a screening of *Snow White* revealed that the most marked responses (measured in terms of number of seconds of laughter) were to the scenes set in the dwarfs' house.<sup>16</sup> The Bolton Mass-Observation office also collected 25 children's drawings inspired by, or on the theme of, *Snow White*, many of them portraying a generic young child's picture of a house. For the children who made the drawings, it appears to have been the film's 'home' sequences—as opposed to its 'frightening' passages—that made the deepest impression.

While they may not add up to the last word on this fascinating film, these tantalising fragments of contemporary evidence about *Snow White*'s extraordinary adventures in the cinema culture of 1930s Britain may convey something rather profound about the ways in which British audiences engaged with and experienced the film. They add up to more than merely a hint of the centrality of 'home' in the imaginations of British cinema-goers. At least one scholar has in fact suggested that the main ideological impulse of Disney's *Snow White* is allegiance to home and family, and that the film's narrative trajectory is towards family stability and social cohesion, an argument derived entirely from a textual reading of the film (as opposed to actual audiences' response to it) (Inge 2004).

The key concern for the present article, however, is with the ways in which the film and the discourses surrounding it interacted or engaged with people's daily lives and activities in the Britain of the late 1930s. If we understand this, we can then begin to consider the nature of the *imaginational* exchange between the film and the actual cinema-goer, and to think about how the film might have figured in people's negotiation of their inner and outer lives. The children's drawings collected by Mass-Observation call to mind Carolyn Steedman's book *The Tidy House* (1982), and Steedman's discussion of the imaginings and meanings of the ordered home for

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young children perhaps connects with ideas about the psychodynamics of cinematic engagement and the figuration of the real and the imaginational spaces of home—especially of the childhood home—in these imaginings. The circumstances surrounding the first British release of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* offer much to explore in these areas.

On the basis of a variety of contemporary evidence on, and recollections of, *Snow White*'s initial British release in 1938, this article has considered how the particular circumstances of the film's British reception context interacted with some of its distinctive features as a piece of cinema to produce not only certain particular contemporary intertextualities but also distinctive modes of recollection on the part of men and women who saw the film in the 1930s. *Snow White*'s British release coincided with a moment of change in Britain's cinema culture, a time when official and semi-official discourses around cinema and its audiences—and its younger audiences in particular—were undergoing significant shifts. The unprecedented media coverage that the film attracted had a great deal to do with its appropriation to a pre-existing set of discourses around horror films, censorship (in particular children's use of cinema), domesticity, home and consumerism more generally. The ensemble of these circumstances lent a markedly distinctive quality to the film's British reception at every level—and above all to cinema-goers' experience of the film as a remarkable, and highly memorable, 'event'.

#### Acknowledgement

This essay derives from the 2007 Raphael Samuel Memorial Lecture, delivered at the Bishopsgate Institute, London in November of that year. Most of the documents in the Cinema Culture in 1930s Britain (CCINTB) Archive referred to may be consulted in Special Collections, Lancaster University Library.

#### Notes

1. British Film Institute, Library and Information Service, Special Collections, 'Extracts from story conference. Notes relating to *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, 26 July 1934 to 8 June 1937'. Copied from Disney Archives, Burbank, California by David R. Williams.
2. In *Film Pictorial*, 24 December 1938, John Milford's ten best films of the year include *Snow White*; in *Picturegoer*, *Snow White* is awarded four stars ('outstanding') and is listed among the magazine's outstanding films of the year (*Picturegoer*, 17 September 1938); the fan annual *Stars and Films of 1938* calls *Snow White* 'one of the most eagerly awaited films of 1938' (CCINTB 92-1-20c).
3. CCINTB T94-9, Tom Walsh, Glasgow. Mr Walsh was seventeen at this time.
4. CCINTB 07-004, Doris M. Daly, London. Mrs Daly was born in 1931 and as a child lived in County Leitrim, Ireland.

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5. CCINTB T95–94, Fred Curnick, Harrow.
6. National Archives, HO45/17036/20, FCCC report to Home Office on Children and ‘A’ Films, 21 December 1932; HO circular, ‘Children and “A” Films’, 596,323/20, 6 March 1933.
7. CCINTB 07-002, Joy Matthews, Caerphilly. Mrs Matthews was born in 1936 and as a child lived in Suffolk.
8. CCINTB 95-16-1a, Philip Barnsby (born 1930), letter to CCINTB, March 1996.
9. CCINTB 07-008, Leonard Finegold, Philadelphia. Mr Finegold was born in 1935 and grew up in Hackney, East London.
10. British Film Institute, Library and Information Service, Special Collections, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* . . . Exploitation supplement [n.d]. Upwards of 130 such items (including pottery items, badges, wall plaques, postcards and birthday cards) are preserved in the Bill Douglas Centre for the History of Cinema and Popular Culture, University of Exeter, <http://www.ex.ac.uk/bdc/>.
11. CCINTB 07-007, Barry Blain; CCINTB 07-002, Joy Matthews; CCINTB 07–003, Ann Gray, Beaconsfield. Mrs Gray was born in 1931 and grew up in Dublin.
12. British Film Institute, Library and Information Service, Special Collections, *Snow White* . . . Exploitation supplement.
13. University of Sussex, Mass-Observation Archive, Worktown Collection, Box 36, W36/F, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* [sic].
14. Ibid.
15. References to the folktale draw on the Faber & Faber 1938 edition.
16. University of Sussex, Mass-Observation Archive, Worktown Collection, Box 36, W36/F.

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