

PART 6:

Petr Bogatyrev: Disney's "Snow White"

The characteristics of each art have their particular development, their effect being quite distinct from the characteristic of any other art. However, that does not mean that we cannot transfer the characteristics of one art to the characteristics of another art. We know many examples when poetry was the inspiration for great paintings or sculptures and, vice versa, when paintings or statues inspired poetical works (1). While slave-like imitation of the characteristics and creative media of one art in another is openly dangerous since the material and its structure are being violated by an alien material and an alien structure, the creative treatment and adoption of characteristics from the sphere of ^{one} art to another can be fruitful, if the structure of the material is respected.

The arts of the theatre and of the film are closely related both in their forms and some points of their historical development. Until now it was possible to talk only about the influence exerted by the old theatrical art on the young film art. Alas, film often took over the theatrical creative media,

(1) Cf. the article "The Statue in Pushkin Symbolics" by R. Jakobson, "Slovo a slovesnost", 3, 1937, p. 2ff.

so foreign to its own art procedures in a merely mechanical manner. A long and courageous struggle was necessary to gain the right for the development and existence of independent forms and expressive media in the film, for the liberation of the art of the film from alien theatrical elements. Lately, a reverse phenomenon can be observed, the influence of the young film art on the theatre. It will, therefore, in my view, be appropriate to point out a number of film procedures in the marvelous Walt Disney film "Snow White", which can be valid, if creatively treated, for the theatrical art as well, and which can help us to clarify many things in the theoretical analysis of the theatre.

In the film "Snow White" there is a striking unusual economy of the expressive media of all the figures that are appearing there. Each trait of Snow White herself, of every dwarf or animal, has its specific function for this or that film expression. The little figures are endowed only with such traits as are useful for their roles, while all that which would have impeded, or been useless, in the film expression was simply left out by the cartoon makers--it was not drawn by them. Snow White has all the characteristics of fairy-tale beauty: red lips, red cheeks, big eyes, but in some positions of the face her nose is practically invisible, being here--as in children's drawings--considered as redundant. Each little animal has details drawn in a striking manner, but they are only necessary

for its typical movements or characteristics.

A live actor creates theatrical characteristics by his body, eyes, hands, legs, height and color of his voice, etc. The individual traits of the actor's appearance often weaken the characteristic created by other traits rather than help the theatrical expression. Thus a strong and powerful voice of the actor playing a giant will lose its effectiveness if the actor is small in physical stature. There is a considerable difference between a cartoon film and a live actor. In the two instances, the creative process develops along opposite directions. In the Walt Disney cartoon film the individual characteristics of the figures are created with a certain intention, given the entire figure and the expressive possibilities of the film medium. Let us offer some actual examples. Every detail in each drawing of an animal in the "Snow White" film was created by the cartoon-maker in such a way, that it can be used in the scene where the animals are cleaning up. Or the way how each limb of the reindeer was utilized when carrying the laundry, and the belly of the turtle during the washing! In a cartoon film the transcourse of the creative process is such, that the individual characteristics are drawn first. Their grouping creates the figure, which then begins to move and live. This approach, from individual characteristics to a group of characteristics and then to the complete figure, pre-supposes perfect functionality of each single trait of each figure and guarantees that nothing

which lacks use or function, will weaken the film expression. We have already mentioned that the face of Snow White has everything typical of fairy-tale beauty. The same can be said of her body: half-girl, half-woman, a figure which with every movement characterizes a fairy-tale transterrestrial being, neither a child, nor a mature woman.

In the entire "Snow White" there is not a single useless gesture, not even a single useless fold or detail on the costumes of all the figures. The black satin cape of the Queen is so drawn and used in the filmic expression, that it is much more effective for the characterization of its wearer than a drawn-out monologue about her mental state. With a live actor the process of the creation of theatrical characteristic proceeds in a totally opposed ^{it} direction. At the beginning of an actor's performance there is a living human being, which has at its disposal very many media of expression from which it means chooses--for the creation of the role--only elements suitable as characteristic of a certain theatrical figure. There is danger, should the actor fail to sufficiently suppress the physical attributes with which he is endowed in his life, that they will uselessly burden him, or even obstruct him in the creation of the stage person.

For example, vigorous movements of a young actor playing the role of an old man weaken the impression that should be generated in the audience by his mask of the old man. In this

case, his movements are in opposition to the make-up. It is up to the actor to suggest to the audience the veracity of his theatrical expression so that his body, his voice, as well as his movements assist in his theatrical performance.

Stanislavski recalls in his book "My Life in the Arts" /Translator's Note: May have been translated into English under a different title/ the famous Italian tragedian Rossi, a small man with a pot belly who, his physical disposition notwithstanding, could create through his marvelous play acting an ideal artistic expression in the role of the young prince of Denmark.

We cannot analyze in detail all the artistic procedures of the film "Snow White" in this single article. We would, however, offer a few remarks about some of them. Those artistic procedures which are frequently repeated lose thereby their emotional impact, and like a tune played too often, can sometimes produce the impression of banality. In order to prevent this and to re-invigorate an old creative medium, the artist then resorts to an ironized variation. This circumstance is used to the hilt in the film "Snow White." Thus the completely banal rendition of a song with an echo is mingled with a comic element when we hear the individual tones bouncing of the water in the well; and the sentimentality of Snow White's song is emphasized by the cooing of a little bird accompanying her. ... The parents of the little bird behave just like a father and mother, overcome by the joy which the success of

their child gives them. The comic element of this accompaniment is further underscored by the fact that this little bird accompanying Snow White in her singing ultimately fails and sings off-tune, whereby his parents are enormously embarrassed.

One of the most complex problems in aesthetics is the question of tragic and comic impression of various artistic procedures. History of art teaches us that the same artistic procedure was perceived tragically in one period and comically in another one. The songs of natural nations which have a serious--for example, religious--function can affect a European as something comical. It is extremely difficult and perhaps even impossible to determine which procedures are unequivocally tragic or comic for all artistic directions.

The very interesting Bergson experiments, attempting to define the comical, especially the comical in the theatre, are only partially correct. All procedures characterized by Bergson as comic, can be perceived as tragic in another structure.

In the film Snow White, Disney very successfully exploited the circumstance that similar procedures in different contexts can have either a tragic or comic effect. Natural landscape, trees, birds, created the semblance of monsters at the moment of the tragic suspense of Snow White's night escape. During the day, when Snow White is in a good mood, that same landscape, trees and birds are the best of her friends, provoking joy in the spectator. We can see how the same detail induces a totally

different impression. Following the travails of the night, a row of threateningly luminiscent eyes appears. After a while we see that they are the eyes of kind and cute little hares. It is an important problem of all the arts that the work which was created should have an echo in the widest layers of the audience without its artistic value being decreased; the new work of art should be avant-garde, i.e., its form and contents should bring much that is new, it should discover and make new roads for the art, ^{without being} ~~although it should not be~~ a chamber work for only the select few. Such works of art did and do exist, ^e the popular art, for example, successful in the widest circles as well as with demanding spectators and specialized connoisseurs, and even among the artists themselves, who have found inspiration in it for their own creative work. In the ^{CINEMA} film it is Charlie Chaplin, enthusiastically received by the widest strata of the public as well as avant-garde critics and film-makers.

It is even more difficult to create a work of art that can be understood by adults as well as children. To write a children's book, to draw pictures or compose music for children, or to stage a performance for children is an extremely difficult, although gratifying, work, since through it we are bringing up the next generation of active and passive workers and consumers of the artistic creative work. The artistic impressions of a child influence its life and create its capacity to perceive artistic forms. Let us merely indicate what influence

children's fairy tales had on many great writers (Pushkin, B. Nemcová). Alas, artistic work for children is not considered worthwhile of the best artists and the attitude to this difficult task is not adequately serious. The film "Snow White" is proof that a work of art destined for children is just as exciting for adults as if it had been created with all the seriousness that it requires. Obviously, a seven- or eight-year old child and an adult person perceive the same scene in the film "Snow White" differently, but they are both equally entranced. It would be very interesting to gather material based on interviews with spectators of different ages as to which scenes of the "Snow White" they liked most and why. The answers of the children and the adults would be bound very different. I believe that such interview would turn out to be very instructive for artists who create for both adults and children.