

The Country Cousin: Advocating an Arcadian America

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The Country Cousin, a cartoon short in Walt Disney's Silly Symphony series, premiered in theaters across the United States on 31 October 1936 (Figure 1).¹ Echoing the populist politics of its day, it won an Academy Award in 1937 and provided a sympathetic and empowering portrait of modern life expressed in a visual language that viewers could easily understand. Playing before films like Frank Capra's *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* and Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*, *The Country Cousin*, like these features, reaffirmed and reinforced small-town values and traditional beliefs while advocating rural simplicity and portraying the dangers of technology and urbanity.² This paper proposes that *The Country Cousin* invoked the utopian myth of an arcadian America in order to enact a critique of the modern American city and high society.

Based on Aesop's fable, "The Town Mouse and the Country Mouse," the Disney cartoon combines technical, artistic, and musical skills to update a classic morality tale for a

specific, adult American audience.³ Working with composer Carl Stalling, Disney created seventy-five Silly Symphonies, which advanced Technicolor filmmaking, the integration of sound and film, special effects, and storytelling techniques.⁴ Unlike the Mickey Mouse series produced simultaneously, the Silly Symphonies were conceived as an opportunity for music and animation to cooperatively propel narratives without the aid of dialogue.⁵ Directed by Wilfred Jackson, with a score by Leigh Harline and animation by Art Babbitt and Les Clark, *The Country Cousin*, like other work at the Disney Studio, was a collaborative process, and it is widely held by scholars that Walt Disney himself contributed story ideas and tightly oversaw the execution of the short.⁶

Despite its artistic innovations and compelling story, *The Country Cousin* has received limited critical consideration.⁷ During the past decade historians like Steven Watts and Eric Smoodin have demonstrated how cartoons, as cultural artifacts, are intertwined with behavior, socialization, and

This paper developed from a course on the art of Walt Disney under the direction of Dr. Robert Neuman. I am grateful to Professor Neuman for his guidance throughout this project, and to Drs. Karen A. Bearor, Adam Jolles, and Roald Nasgaard for their helpful suggestions. I am equally indebted to Florida State University for providing a forum for the presentation of my ideas and to the audience and the key note speaker, Michael Leja, for their insightful comments.

¹ For the music of Disney and the Silly Symphonies see Daniel Goldmark, *Tunes for Toons: Music and the Hollywood Cartoon* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2007); David Tietyen, *The Musical World of Walt Disney* (Milwaukee, Wis.: H. Leonard Publishing Corp, 1990); and Darlene Geis, *Walt Disney's Treasury of Silly Symphonies* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1981). Other Silly Symphonies to win Academy Awards include: *Flowers and Trees* (1932), *Three Little Pigs* (1933), *The Tortoise and the Hare* (1934), *Three Orphan Kittens* (1935), *The Old Mill* (1937), *Ferdinand the Bull* (1938), and *The Ugly Duckling* (1939).

² *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* is the story of a simple small-town man, Longfellow Deeds, played by Gary Cooper, who inherits a fortune, visits the city, and encounters people who want to use his money for their own aims. He is able to fight all of them off until a scheming newspaperwoman (Jean Arthur) comes on the scene. The script was written by Clarence Budington Kelland and Robert Riskin, and directed by Frank Capra. The film earned Gary Cooper his first nomination for Best Actor, and was voted Best Picture of the year (1936) by the New York Film Critics and the National Board of Review. It was also nominated for the Academy Award for Best Picture. Capra won an Academy Award for Directing.

Modern Times is one of the last silent films; it was written, directed, and produced by Charlie Chaplin in 1936 when everyone else was making talkies. In the film, Chaplin's Little Tramp character

struggles to survive in the modern, industrialized world. The film is a comment on the desperate employment and fiscal conditions many people faced during the Great Depression, conditions created, in Chaplin's view, by the efficiencies of modern industrialization.

³ Other Aesop fables produced by Disney include *The Grasshopper and the Ants* (1934) and *The Tortoise and the Hare* (1935). Other Silly Symphonies were drawn from the stories of the Brothers Grimm, Hans Christian Anderson, Greek mythology, and the Bible. *The Wise Little Hen* (1934) is based on the Russian folk tale *The Little Red Hen* and has a similar moral message to that of Aesop's *The Ant and the Grasshopper*.

⁴ The Silly Symphonies also provided the studio with an opportunity to develop ideas they could use in animated features. One can see references to *The Country Cousin* in *Dumbo*, which was released in 1941. These include the drinking scene and the modeling of the mouse.

⁵ Tietyen 25.

⁶ Steven Watts, *The Magic Kingdom: Walt Disney and the American Way of Life* (Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1997); Leonard Maltin, *The Disney Films* (New York: Disney Editions, 2000); Richard Schickel, *The Disney Version: The Life, Times, Art, and Commerce of Walt Disney* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968).

⁷ *The Country Cousin* was recently included in Russell Merritt and J.B. Kaufman's *Walt Disney's Silly Symphonies: A Companion to the Classical Cartoon Series* (Gemona: La Cineteca del Friuli, 2006) 180-182. This invaluable reference text provides information on each animated short, including detailed production credits, release dates, and story synopses.

even transnational politics, and Esther Leslie's *Hollywood Flatlands: Animation, Critical Theory and the Avant-Garde* has situated Disney within a theoretical framework.⁸ Following Walter Benjamin's assertion that film's montages reconfigure the representation of the modern world, Leslie compellingly argues that Disney constructed "restitutive utopias" that offered "therapy for damaged lives."⁹ Continuing in this vein and following Donna M. Cassidy's contention that Regionalism embodied a set of nostalgic values that appeared in various and diverse forms of 1930s cultural production, this paper will situate *The Country Cousin* within this discourse and argue that Disney, like Regionalist artists of the 1930s, advocated a realistic, indigenous art grounded in a nostalgic and idyllic past and accessibly reproduced for a wide audience.¹⁰

America's shift from a producer to a consumer culture manifested itself in society's passive consumption of images. The 1930s was the golden age of movies, a period when hundreds of feature-length films and animated shorts were watched by millions of adults who had not only grown accustomed to the relatively new technology, but also craved it.¹¹ Inexpensive to attend, theaters dropped their ticket prices after the 1929 crash, and viewers could opt for movies that avoided or confronted the societal issues of the Great Depression. In this context, Disney's cartoons provided a piercing social commentary couched in the language of the burlesque. Like Chaplin and the Marx Brothers, Disney elevated the quotidian through parodic caricatures. Seek-

ing to restore the self-confidence of the common viewer, Disney invested timeless children's tales with new meaning that resonated with the economic situation of contemporary adults. In *Three Little Pigs* (1933) and *The Wise Little Hen* (1934), Disney celebrated hard work and industry during a period when the myth of Horatio Alger and the self-made man were collapsing under what Alan Trachtenberg termed "the debris of the [1929] crash."¹²

Fables were popular with Disney, a modern moralist and pedagogue who updated stories in order to satisfy the demands of contemporary society. Aesop's fables have a long history: the earliest collections bearing Aesop's name were compiled in Greece sometime between 250 B.C. and 200 A.D, and many versions of the approximately two-hundred morality tales exist, so that it is difficult to ascertain which of the translations were consulted by the Disney team.¹³ Aesop's themes were famously adopted by Theocritus and Virgil, and his fables enjoyed a resurgence of popularity during the Renaissance that has lasted to the present.¹⁴ In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries artists began illustrating Aesop's collections, most notably Gustave Doré in 1868 and Alexander Calder in 1931. These illustrations could range from detailed color compositions to simple line drawings, but Disney was the first artist to animate the story for the silver screen.

Part of Disney's construction involved valorizing agrarian life and looking backwards into American history for those elements of what Van Wyck Brooks terms the "us-

⁸ Eric Smoodin, *Animating Culture: Hollywood Cartoons from the Sound Era* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers UP, 1993); J. Michael Barrier, *Hollywood Cartoons: American Animation in its Golden Age* (New York: Oxford UP, 1999); and Esther Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands: Animation, Critical Theory and the Avant-Garde* (London: Verso, 2002).

For a brief sampling of the vast literature on Walt Disney, his company, and his visual sources see: Bruno Girveau, *Once Upon a Time: Walt Disney: The Sources of Inspiration for the Disney Studios* (New York: Prestel Publishing, 2007); Robin Allan, *Walt Disney and Europe: European Influences on the Animated Feature Films of Walt Disney* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1999); Christopher Finch, *The Art of Walt Disney: From Mickey Mouse to the Magic Kingdoms* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1975).

⁹ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproduction," in *Art and Interpretation: An Anthology of Readings in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, ed. Eric Dayton (Toronto: Broadview Press, 1998), 415-428, and Leslie 23.

¹⁰ Donna M. Cassidy, "'On the Subject of Nativeness': Marsden Hartley and New England Regionalism," *Winterthur Portfolio* 29 (1994): 227-245.

¹¹ For the history of Hollywood and film in the 1930s see David Thomson, *The Whole Equation: A History of Hollywood* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005); Gerald Clifford Weales, *Canned Goods as Caviar: American Film Comedy of the 1930s* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1985); and Walter Wells, *Tycoons and Locusts: A Regional Look at Hollywood Fiction of the 1930s* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 1973).

¹² Alan Trachtenberg, "Signifying the Real: Documentary Photography in the 1930s," in *The Social and the Real: Political Art of the 1930s in*

the Western Hemisphere (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State UP, 2006) 3-19.

¹³ Joseph Jacobs, *The Fables of Aesop* (New York: Schocken Books, 1894).

¹⁴ *The Eclogues* (Selections), also known as the *Bucolics*, were Virgil's first major work. These ten poems were written between 42 and 39 B.C. and take the form of the pastoral, which the Sicilian poet Theocritus (c. 280 B.C.) had developed in his *Idyls*. Leonardo da Vinci owned numerous copies of Aesop's fables, which were referred to in his notebooks. See Paul Barolsky, "Leonardo, Satan, and the Mystery of Modern Art," *Virginia Quarterly Review*, 74 (1998): 393-414.

Several versions of this story were published in the mid-to-late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries including: Joseph Jacobs, *The Fables of Aesop* (New York: Schocken Books, 1894); M. Gaster, *Rumanian Bird and Beast Stories* (London: Folk-Lore Society, 1915); Peter Christen Asbjørnsen and Jørgen Moe, *Fairy Tales from the Far North*, trans. H. L. Brækstad (New York: A. L. Burt Company, 1897); and Roger l'Estrange and Alexander Calder, *Fables of Aesop* (Paris, 1931). The seventeenth-century writer, Jean de la Fontaine wrote fables which included "The Town Rat and the Country Rat." They enjoyed resurgent popularity when they were illustrated in 1868 by Gustave Doré. The original tale features two large dogs instead of a cat. Perhaps the most similar retelling is found in the Norwegian version, "The House Mouse and the Country Mouse." This is the only tale I have found that includes drunkenness, although it is from Christmas ale rather than the Champagne of the Disney version. The Romanian tale, "The Town Mouse and the Field Mouse," is rather grim, with the city mouse plotting the demise of the field mouse. It does, however, have a single cat like the film.

able past."¹⁵ *The Country Cousin* used the visual tropes of high art to depict idyllic views of America's history and reinvent the nation for a better future. The past and the present, representative of utopia and dystopia, or producerism and consumerism, were reflected in the creation and representation of a rural and urban dichotomy. In high art this binary system manifested itself in the division between Stuart Davis's city scenes like *New York Mural* (1932, Figure 2) and Grant Wood's Midwestern landscapes like *New Road* (1939, Figure 3). While one painting pulses with the vibrant jazz-like rhythms of the chaotic city, the other speaks in the slow-paced monosyllabic language of rural small-town life. In *The Country Cousin* images of the city are depicted with multiple perspectives and fractured planes evoking movement and chaos, while the interior scenes employ a sentimental realist style that recalls the past and visually expresses what James Truslow Adams's 1930 best-selling book, *The Epic of America*, termed the "American Dream."¹⁶

The film begins with an Expressionistic title card, which shows a small mouse caught between a rustic sign for Podunk and a foreboding city stoplight. He stands apprehensively in the shadow of an ominous city skyline replete with eerie-looking, dangerously leaning skyscrapers (Figure 1). This portentous nightscape is reminiscent of the sets in *Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and foreshadows Joseph Stella's view of the city in *Brooklyn Bridge: Variation on an Old Theme* (1939, Figure 4). Through the use of this visual language, the city is connected to chaos and danger; but when the camera turns to the country mouse walking along train tracks, the background, as well as the music he whistles, takes on a folksy and familiar feeling. Scored for the film, the fiddle plays a melody based on the popular tune "The Chicken Reel."¹⁷ Composed in 1910, "The Chicken Reel" was often used in animated scenes of barnyard animals or, in this case, to give a sense of rural "hickness" to the country mouse. The sense of familiarity evoked by the music is further enhanced by the scene's action because a very high percentage of the American rural population moved to urban centers to escape agricultural instability in hopes of finding a better life, while

still others resigned themselves to an itinerant life riding the rails.¹⁸ This journey was well represented by Resettlement Administration photographs like Dorothea Lange's *Toward Los Angeles, California, March 1937*, which shows two men following a dusty beaten path to their urban destination (Figure 5).

The cartoon protagonist Abner Countrymouse is, like many people, seduced by the purported offerings of the city. The promise of the city is embodied in Monty Citymouse who inhabits a posh domestic interior. His name evokes supercilious urbanites, like Monte the cowardly brother in Howard Hughes's 1930 war epic *Hell's Angels*, while Abner alludes to Lil'Abner, the simple-minded denizen of humble Dogpatch and paragon of virtue in Al Capp's popular comic strip.¹⁹ The reference to Lil'Abner encourages the viewer to identify with the small town values of the title character. Additionally, Disney re-titled the cartoon, possibly referring to a popular silent serial of the twenties, *The Adventures and Emotions of Edgar Pomeroy*. This sentimental series of twelve two-reelers written by Booth Tarkington featured an episode entitled *Edgar's Country Cousin* (1921) which showed a hapless cousin visiting the city and embarrassing the title character. While Disney's version utilizes the phrase, it inverts the conventional understanding of the aphorism to celebrate the simplicity and dignity of country life.

When Abner arrives at 66 1/8 Parkritz Row, Monty, dressed ridiculously in top hat, tails, spats, and red bowtie, greets him with an emphatic "Shush" before rudely ushering him inside. Although Monty is well-dressed, he lives on the "row" and is, in fact, just a mouse stealing bits off someone else's table. Confronted by the innumerable delicacies of a lavishly laden banquet and an urbane, Gershwin-esque jazz melody, the stereotypes of the rural and urban are depicted in the mice's distinct values as embodied in the foods they choose, clothes they wear, and manners they exhibit. While Abner greedily eats a large piece of Cheddar and noisily blows his nose with a red-and-white polka dot bandana, Monty, in connoisseur-fashion, opts for a slice of Swiss and daintily wipes his mouth on a silk handkerchief before mov-

¹⁵ Van Wyck Brooks, "On Creating a Usable Past," in *Van Wyck Brooks: The Early Years*, ed. Claire Sprague (New York: Harper, 1968) 219-26.

¹⁶ James Truslow Adams, *The Epic of America* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1931).

¹⁷ Thanks to Russell Merritt and Daniel Goldmark for their assistance in identifying the musical inspirations for Harline's score.

¹⁸ Droughts, floods, and depressed futures markets were among the agricultural conditions that contributed to the Great Depression. There is a vast literature examining the conditions and consequences of the Great Depression. For a sampling see, David E. Kyvig, *Daily Life in the United States, 1920-1940: How Americans Lived During the Roaring Twenties and the Great Depression* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2004); Ludwig Von Mises, *Between The Two World Wars: Monetary Disorder, Interventionism, Socialism, and The Great Depression*, ed. Richard M. Ebeling (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2002); William Solomon and

Richard Perren, *Agriculture in Depression, 1870-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995).

¹⁹ Released in 1930, *Hell's Angels* was Howard Hughes's air spectacle that was the first multi-million dollar talking picture. Written by Harry Behn and Howard Estabrook, it features two brothers, Roy and Monte Rutledge, played by Ben Lyon and James Hall, who enlist in the Royal Air Force when World War I breaks out. Monte is a freewheeling womanizer, even with his brother's girlfriend Helen, played by Jean Harlow. Monte proves to have a yellow streak when it comes to his Night Patrol duties, while Roy is made of strong moral fiber and attempts to keep his brother in line.

"Li'l" Abner, a hulking man-child, was the frequent foil for Capp's satirical stories about American life and politics. Like Mr. Deeds, the Little Tramp, and Abner Countrymouse, he often found himself far from home. Whether in the company of the unscrupulous industrialist General Bullmoose or in hapless snowbound Lower Slobbovia, Li'l Abner was a heroic hillbilly whose small town values and naiveté shined a reflexive light on the corrupt world.

ing on to the caviar. Here Great Britain and France, foreign and classed signifiers, become the culprits and corrupters of the American mouse. Indeed, Abner burns his mouth on hot English mustard and then gets drunk on Champagne.

Drunkness is not a traditional feature in the Aesop fable, but it was an important part of the Disney adaptation for two reasons: first, it provided a social commentary on Prohibition; and, second, it offered Art Babbitt an opportunity to include animation gags that enhanced the comedic value of the film. Prohibition, in effect from 1920 to 1933, was ignored by wealthy socialites like those parodied in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, where drinking and the perilous journey between Long Island and Manhattan led to death and disaster. Similarly, the presence of alcohol on the city banquet table and the country mouse's accidental drunkenness associate alcohol with the degenerate morality of urbanites. Through this sequence, the homespun innocence of specifically "American" and rural ideals is presented in humorous contrast to the snooty and "foreign" values of the city, a city that was meant to be read as New York, a signifier of wealthy Robber Barons but not of the Midwestern values continually constructed by Disney for the pleasure of his "everyman" viewer.

The struggle of enacting a specifically American identity (one separate from its European heritage) and the division of the individual into two selves is explored in a classic reflection gag that evokes humor, while also eliciting a psychoanalytic exploration. Topsy from his Champagne, Abner leans on his umbrella in direct mockery of Monty and a parody of the Little Tramp. Noticing himself in a large molded piece of raspberry Jell-O, "America's Most Famous Dessert," he then imitates a Marx Brothers routine in which he tricks his double into a reflection that does not mirror his own movements (Figure 6).²⁰ Lacan has argued that one's sense of self or identity is created externally through the confrontation with one's reflection (what he terms the *imaginary*).²¹ In this model, one's self is constituted in and constructed through the recognition of the Other.²² Abner recognizes his ego through a clever interaction (what Derrida terms an *event or rupture*) with his reflection.²³ The molded Jell-O becomes a mirror in which Abner, and by extension the American viewer, discovers his true self.

After tricking his double, Abner falls onto a saucer that spirals off the table, taking with it a surprised Monty, as

well as food, drink, and china. Landing in close proximity to a sleeping housecat, Monty, as usual, retreats from the cat that he generally evades, but Abner, with new-found bravado—indicative of the recognition of his identity as a rural, masculine, American—kicks the cat in the behind, signaling his readiness to stand up to the challenges of New Deal society (Figure 7). This example of courage is an interesting addition to the tale that does not exist in any of the earlier translations. Like the Big Bad Wolf in *Three Little Pigs*, the housecat operates as a symbol for societal ills that, in the Disney version, cannot be tiptoed around. Through this thinly veiled allusion, Disney asserts his belief in the power of the little guy and small-town values to confront poverty, unemployment, and social inequities and restore prosperity to the country. While the wealthy, urban, and impotent mouse prefers a peaceful coexistence that avoids the menace of the cat and thus the larger societal issues of the period, the strong work ethic and morality of Abner force him to confront adversity, just like the "common man" or film viewer who was likewise dealing with the hardships of the Great Depression.

The film viewer is positioned to identify with Abner—the movie screen acts as a mirror in which the American audience is reflected. Disney refracts that constructed image onto the audience. Specifically, Abner and the viewer see themselves, not in the splendor of the city but in the accessibility and strength of the rural poor. By changing Aesop's title to *The Country Cousin*, Disney parodied the conception of agrarian people as backward-thinking and presented rural Americans as authentic and heroic. Like Roy Stryker, the director of the Historical Section of the Resettlement Administration (later Farm Security Administration), who insisted that his photographers construct "real" images of the idealized masses, Disney possessed a certain small-town nostalgia and interest in cultural constructions.²⁴ These would later be most notably manifested, not to mention physically constructed, in Main Street, USA at Disneyland Park, but are already present in *The Country Cousin*.

Having tricked his double, embraced his authentic self, and confronted the cat, Abner determines it is time to return to his rural, American home. Finally out of the house, however, he has still not achieved safety as high-heeled shoes, roller-skates, and bicycles threaten his escape (Figure 8). Here the scenery abruptly shifts from a realistically and

²⁰ Although invented in the nineteenth century and featured in print advertisements as early as 1902, Jell-O became widely known in 1934 when Jack Benny began radio spots for the product. For more information on the history of Jell-O see Carolyn Wyman, *Jell-O: A Biography* (San Diego: Harcourt Press, 2001).

²¹ Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," in *The Norton Anthology of Literary Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2001) 1285.

²² For further discussion on establishing subjectivity through the recognition of another/object, see Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1993) and Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

²³ Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discovery of Human Sciences," in *Writing and Difference*, ed. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 2001) 278-294.

²⁴ Trachtenberg 3-19.

sentimentally depicted interior to a dizzying Surrealist montage of flying motorcycles, cars, trucks, and trains that hurtle toward Abner and the viewer while atonal music assaults our ears. In this powerful scene, the city is shown offering more danger than salvation, a concept echoed by the historical record, since few of the impoverished refugees of floods and droughts found prosperity in the city. Instead, they were confronted with poor sanitation, high unemployment, and deplorable living and working conditions.²⁵ Thus, the argument against a mechanized, urban, and foreign world is made explicit in the film as angry, anthropomorphized horns honk loudly and various modes of transportation zoom toward the viewer. The film closes with Abner escaping this technological nightmare by running down the railroad tracks toward the horizon's full moon (Figure 9).

Unlike Aesop's original—which both opens and closes in the country—Abner never reaches Podunk, because it exists elusively off-screen. So where is Podunk? In 1846 some widely-read and humorous letters published in New England answered this question stating: "It is in the world, and more than that, it is a little world of itself, a bright and shining light amid the surrounding darkness,"²⁶ and in 1933 the Boston Herald observed "Podunk, like Atlantis, has no locus."²⁷ Podunk, then, is a mythical place that exists both within the world and apart from it, outside the frame of the film and of everyday reality. Like utopia and identity, Podunk is impossible to represent. As pointed out by Amy Bingaman, Lise Sanders, and Rebecca Zorach in the introduction to their anthology *Embodied Utopia*, "the word invented by [Thomas] More—from the Greek *ou* meaning 'not' or *eu* meaning 'happy', and *topos* meaning 'place'—remains today a source of theoretical speculation. Is utopia the good place or the impossible place? Is the good place, in fact, no place at all?"²⁸ Historically, Podunk is less a reality than an abstracted signifier, and it exists in the film only as an abstract marker—a

signpost indicating its direction, a place that Abner and the viewer never reach. Its conception and (de)materialization reside in the imagination of Disney and the viewer. Podunk is the non-place, the off-screen, and the non-site of nostalgic cultural production.

Because Podunk exists only *in absentia*, it is possible to expand upon Robert Smithson's theory of sites and non-sites to further understand the space enacted by its (non)existence. According to Smithson, a non-site is an abstracted picture or diagram of an actual site, yet it does not resemble the site to which it refers. In the distance between the non-site and the actual site, or in the "psychological topography," Smithson hoped to create a metaphorical space in which one could encounter an authentic experience.²⁹ Abner is traveling between two places, or negotiating the space between the elusive Podunk and the dystopic mechanized city. It is in this journey—a nostalgic metaphorical journey to a pre-Depression era of economic sustainability—that Abner and the viewer recover their authentic identity as rural Americans.

It is clear that in *The Country Cousin*, Disney invoked various and divergent artistic and musical tropes to update Aesop's fable and reflect the concerns of contemporary audiences. He quoted European avant-garde artistic styles to depict and critique the city and framed the vista of Podunk with signifiers of salvation, including cross-like telephone poles and the setting full moon. Like the Regionalists, Disney privileged a realistic and indigenous art grounded in a nostalgic conception of a usable past that offered hope for a broken America. Yet even Disney had trouble representing the pre-Depression small town of his idealized memory, because utopia, like "happily ever after," is an elusive space persistently defined, not by what it is, but by what it is not.

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²⁵ See Randall E. Parker, *The Economics of the Great Depression: a Twenty-first Century Look Back at the Economics of the Interwar Era* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2007); Susan Currell, *The March of Spare Time: the Problem and Promise of Leisure in the Great Depression* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2005); and Edward C. Weideman, *A Hobo Life in the Great Depression: a Regional Narrative from the American Midwest* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellon Press, 2005).

²⁶ Anonymous, *Buffalo Daily National Pilot* [Buffalo] 13 January 1846: 3a. Cited in Allen Walker Read, "The Rationale of 'Podunk.'" *American Speech* 14 (1939): 108.

²⁷ F. W. Buxton, *Boston Herald* [Boston] 2 February 1933: 4b. Cited in Louise Pound, "The Locus of 'Podunk.'" *American Speech* 9 (1934): 80.

²⁸ Amy Bingaman et al., eds. "Embodied Utopia: Introduction," in *Embodied Utopias: Gender, Social Change, and the Modern Metropolis* (London: Routledge, 2002) 1.

²⁹ Robert Smithson, *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, ed. Nancy Holt (New York: New York UP, 1979). See also Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," *Diacritics* 16 (1986): 22-27 for his analysis of heterotopias.



Figure 1. Film Still, "The Country Cousin," 1936, © Disney Enterprises, Inc.



Figure 2. *New York Mural*, Stuart Davis, 1932, oil on canvas, 84 x 48 inches, Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach, Florida, Purchase, the R.H. Norton Trust, 64.17 © Estate of Stuart Davis / Licensed by VAGA, New York, New York.



Figure 3. Grant Wood, *New Road*, 1939, oil on canvas on paperboard mounted on hardboard, 13 x 14 7/8 inches, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Irwin Strasburger, 1982.7.2.

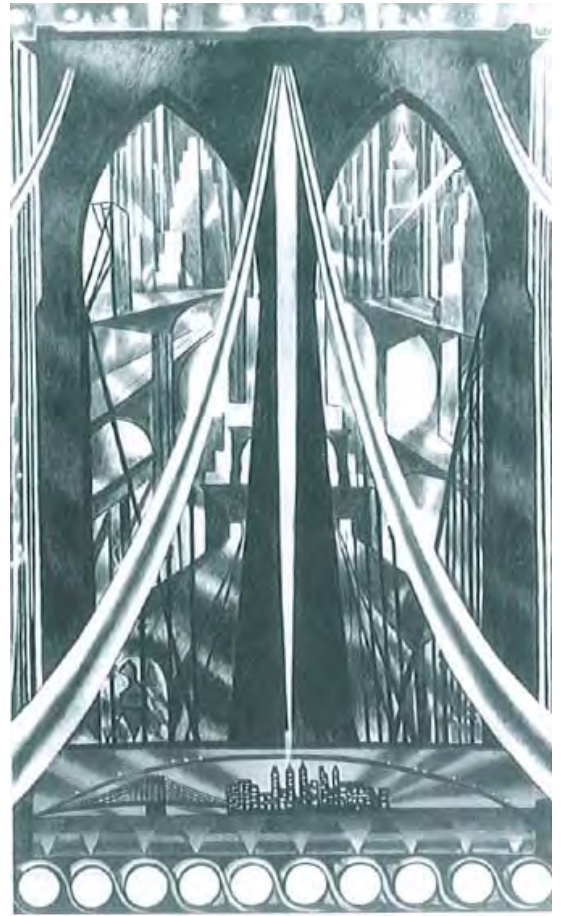
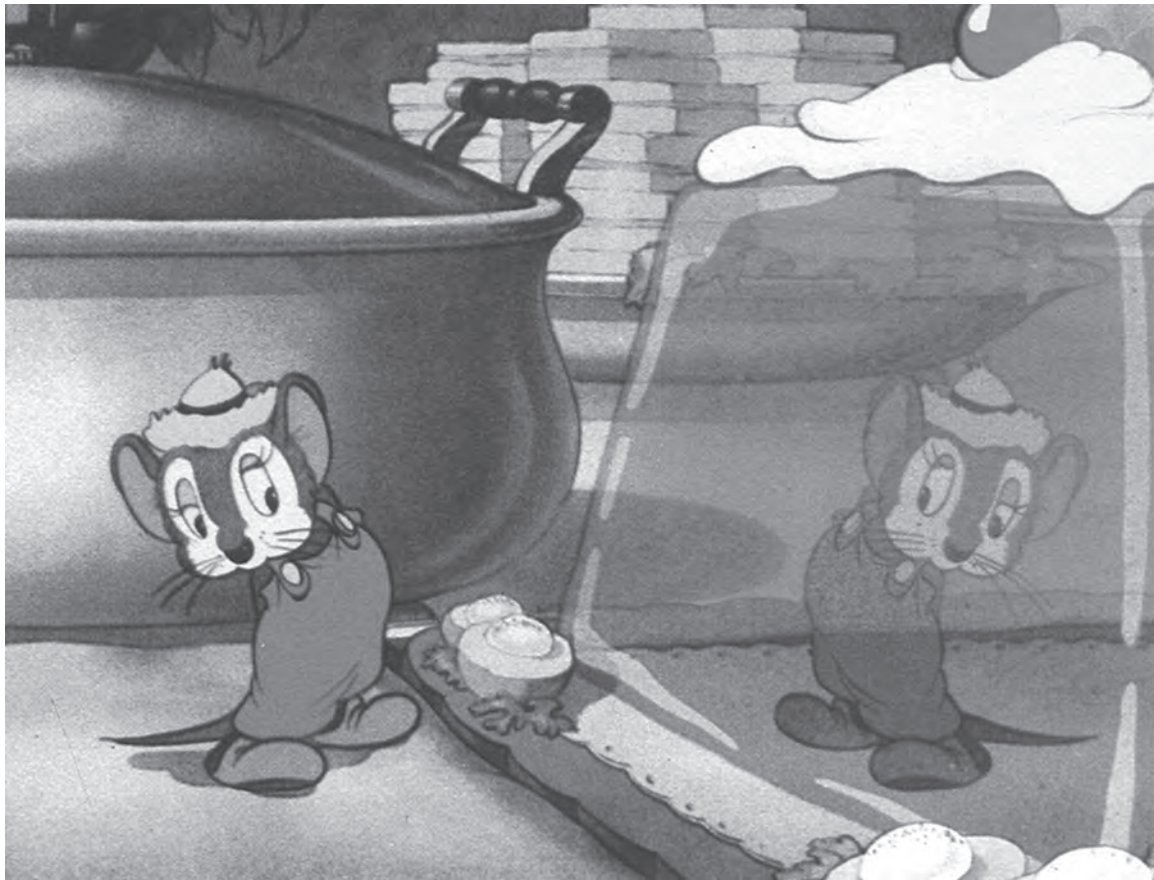


Figure 4. Joseph Stella, *Brooklyn Bridge: Variation on an Old Theme*, 1939, oil on canvas, 70 x 42 inches, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, purchase 42.15.



Figure 5. Dorothea Lange, *Toward Los Angeles, California, March 1937*, B&W photograph, Farm Security Administration, Library of Congress.



[opposite page, top] Figure 6. Film Still, "The Country Cousin," 1936, © Disney Enterprises, Inc.

[opposite page, bottom] Figure 7. Film Still, "The Country Cousin," 1936, © Disney Enterprises, Inc.

[right] Figure 8. Film Still, "The Country Cousin," 1936, © Disney Enterprises, Inc.

[bottom] Figure 9. Film Still, "The Country Cousin," 1936, © Disney Enterprises, Inc.

