"The Portrayal of Women in World War II Cartoon Shorts"

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by

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The nineteenth century gave birth to one of the world's most influential forms of entertainment—the motion picture. With the rebirth in popularity of high moral values in the 1930's and 1940's the motion picture industry decided to regulate itself. This was a way to keep the government from regulating the industry and to prevent many potential customers from boycotting the films. The 1930 Production Code provided rules concerning many things: crimes against the law, sex, vulgarity, obscenity, profanity, costume, dances, religion, locations, national feelings, titles, and repellent subjects. In 1942 the U.S. government imposed a code which contained guidelines for the depiction of such things as work and production, the home front, and the fighting forces. The makers of one type of film, however, seemed to ignore these production code standards—the animated films. The portrayal of women and sex during the war years in cartoons as contrasted with the rules and regulations established in the 1930 and 1942 codes is the focus of this paper.

In 1920 the 36th state ratified the woman's suffrage amendment making legal nationwide a woman's right to vote. This gave a sense of freedom to American women to express themselves in new areas and created many "kinds of women" that had not existed previously. The flappers were women
who reveled in their new found independence and rebelled against many of the moral institutions of the day. They often wore provocative outfits, shimmied when they danced, smoked cigarettes, and supported birth control. Though Hollywood gave these exciting young women quite a bit of coverage they were by no means the only kind of new woman.  

There was the campus coed, now imbued more with hopes of marriage than with a sense of mission; the modern housewife, who adopted the role of companion and consumer; the new professional and business woman, who sought to integrate marriage and career; and the postsuffrage feminist, sometimes embroiled in battles over legal and constitutional change and sometimes preoccupied with the new ideal of economic independence.

Women in the 1920's attempted to combine marriage and a career. During the 20's there was an increase in employment in the field of business, which created an increasing demand for, "office clerks, stenographers, typist, switchboard operators, and sales women." In 1925, Denver judge Ben Lindsey, who had helped Margret Sanger in 1916, wrote that the youth of the decade had been transformed...by the modern environment-by its economy and culture, by science and technology; by the car, movies, and radio; and by the very speed of change.

During the 1920's the ideal of marriage also changed.

The new ideal of marriage in the 1920s was a romantic-sexual union, with a primary focus on the relation between husband and wife rather than on the family as a unit.

The role of the wife as a companion to her husband, as well
as chief purchaser for the household, had a strong impact on the advertising industry. "Between 1921 and 1929 the total output of electrical goods tripled in value." Vacuum cleaners, electric toaster ovens, refrigerators, and sewing machines all made housework easier and quicker to do for the housewife, giving her more freedom to devote to the pursuit of beauty and expanding herself intellectually, politically, and professionally. By 1930, 2 million women workers, such as secretaries, typist, and file clerks comprised one-fifth of the female labor force. Even magazines, like the Ladies Home Journal, promoted the woman office worker. But this did not last long.

"The Great Depression and World War II were disruptive 'emergencies' that changed women’s roles at home, at work, and in public life." During the depression society encouraged women, especially married women, to stay home and quit their jobs in order to permit an opening for the male to work. If a woman worked the general public saw her as greedy and selfish, stealing a job from a breadwinner of some poor family.

In 1936, when the Gallup Poll asked whether wives should work if their husbands had jobs, a resounding 82 percent of all respondents (including 75 percent of women respondents) said no.

Many women lost their jobs during the depression. The federal government would only allow one member of the family to work for them, and as a result, "women were three-quarters of those federal workers forced to resign." Although
employment among single women declined, overall employment among married women in the 30's slowly rose. Married women found it necessary to work outside the home or to domestic chores like others laundry in order to make ends meet. Often the husband's job (if he could find one) would not pay enough to support the family.

"During the years between the world wars, the basic image of the American woman had been as wife and mother." Working women were no longer held in high regards.

While it is clear that attitudes of this sort were perpetuated by male-dominated institutions ... it is equally necessary to note the complicity of the most respected women in the reification of female characteristics. As the previous quote states, women complied with these rules.

Viewed as a 'chiseler,' who stole jobs from family men only a few years previously, the American working woman was heralded as the "glamour girl of 1942" on magazine covers and in advertising copy across the land.

This drastic switch in the public image of the working woman was brought about by the drastic need for women in the work force as a result of World War II. War created an increased demand for products. Everything from uniforms to airplanes was needed, and the longer the war went on the less men were around to make them. In order to fill this manpower void society encouraged women to go to work outside the home to support the war effort.

During World War II, over 6 million women took jobs for the first time, increasing the
number of working women by 57%. In 1940, women represented under 25% of the labor force; by July 1944, 35%.

This was a great increase in the number of women working.

Even during the war, the male-controlled institutions told women that their greatest patriotic duty was the role of motherhood. Mothers of young children were not as encouraged as other women by society to work outside the home. A woman's primary task, as portrayed by such people as J. Edgar Hoover, was to have children and raise families successfully.¹²

The number of working women who had young children, who were mostly in the 25-34 age group, was low. One survey showed that only 32% of women workers had children under fourteen and over 50% of those had one child only.¹³

Thus, although the war caused an unprecedented expansion of the female labor force, it was women whose housekeeping and childcare responsibilities were lightest who contributed most to that expansion.¹⁴

This was further compounded by an inadequate day-care system, and the inflexibility of American businesses.

The ideal woman worker was either single or married and had no young children. "The number of married women holding jobs doubled, and the age of the female labor force rose."¹⁵ This meant that the average woman worker was older than 34.

To lure women to war jobs there was an attempt to glamourize the working woman. The Woman's Home Companion ran a campaign which took four women war workers to Hollywood
to be made-over, outfitted, and photographed. While Rosie the Riveter was the new "ideal" presented to the American woman there was a startling difference between her and her real-life counterparts. Many of the skilled women workers (like welders, riveters, etc.) hoped that they could continue to work after the war. "A survey done by the Women's Bureau of Baltimore in 1944 showed that 75% of the employed women hoped to continue working after the war." 33 Rosie, however, seemed to slip obediently back into the role of subservient housewife after the war emergency was over. Rosie, who had once stood for the independent, self-contained, new skilled woman, had abandoned her role as the rest of the women were expected to do, at the end of the war.

In a repeat of that 1944 survey group, done in 1946, only 64% still had a job or were seeking employment. "However, only 28% of the women had remained with their war time employer during the two year interval." 34 Most had switched back to a traditional woman's job; this is further illustrated by the type of industry in which these women worked. In 1944, 133 women were employed in the aircraft industry, 85 in electrical production, and 40 in shipyards; in 1946 the numbers fell to 28, 41, and 2 respectively. 35

With the switch to the more traditional jobs came a reduction in their average pay, from fifty dollars per week to thirty-seven. 36 Suprisingly in 1946 most women rated themselves happy with their position, and there was little discontent. 37
During the war job segregation between men and women had been virtually eliminated, but as soon as the war was over these strict boundaries again appeared. Women did not feel discriminated against, surprisingly, and for the most part widely accepted the return to their pre-war status. This may be partially due to the fact that the War Manpower Commission decided that it was, "preferable to promote female employment within a context of volunteerism and noble sacrifice which was, after all, quite familiar to women." This concept of volunteerism and sacrifice made it much easier to reduce female employment when the war was over. Once the "emergency" of the war was gone, women could once again return to their place within the home.

In light of the wartime woman's new found independence a fear of female sexuality as a destructive force developed in society. This is strikingly true when one looks at the "Nose Art" which embellished the front of many military planes of the period. Nude or semi-nude women were a common motif, "suggesting that the iconography, like the machine that it decorated, held the potential for aggressive, destructive force." The fear of "promiscuity" among young women and men was prevalent. "During the war, single women were often seen as potential threats to stable family life and to the moral fiber of the nation." Societies widely accepted opinion of the time was that, "social freedom and employment for women would cause sexual laxity, moral decay, and the dest-
ruction of the family."

Some people worried not only about prostitutes or "loose women," but also about the "good girl" whose morals may decline during wartime. Unmarried,

women in wartime were suddenly perceived as aggressors, threatening to weaken the war effort and the family. Soldiers and happy homes would be the sorry victims of female sexuality on the loose."

Women at home were encouraged to remain "pure" for the returning men, and were urged to keep their behavior and aspirations focused on the home. This was to counter the fear that many of these young single women may not want to get married. Unlike World War I, this war had employed women for a longer period of time as it removed the men from society, thus demonstrating that women could manage without men. Single women in the post-war period became targets of government sponsored campaigns urging women back into their domestic roles. The idea of women working during the war created a great deal of mixed feelings. Some men became worried about the changes taking place while they were gone. To try to counter this fear the American society encouraged women above all "to remain 'feminine' - a term that implied submissiveness and allure along with sexual chastity- and to embrace domesticity after the war."*

One of the most influential ways to show women how to "properly" behave was the movies. Motion pictures were one of the developments of the 20th century that could effectively reach many people. During the war years, "the average weekly attendance in American film theaters was about 85 million."*
Motion pictures could portray a single message uniformly, throughout the nation. Films reached large numbers of people in rural areas or cities; they were for the young, the old, the wealthy, and even the poorer classes could afford a movie. Due also to the fact that they were visual they had a greater emotional appeal to their audience than a book. Unlike the reader of a book the viewer of a film had to imagine nothing. The mood, music, lighting, and actors all combined to make the visual image much more emotional and true to life than a book. To answer protest by many adults that, "movies are ruining our youth," Hollywood organized to form the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, and drum up some general guidelines for films in the 1920's. Due to the growing pressure from the Catholic Church, Hollywood was forced to establish the Production Code of 1934 to avoid a potential boycott of films. This contained self-imposed restrictions that were applied to films for the good of the people. The Production Code of 1934 was technically in effect until its replacement in 1968 with the current rating system. The Code began to lose its effectiveness as early as 1948 when the high court decided that the major firms' complete control violated the anti-trust laws. The Code lost even more control when, in 1952, the Supreme Court decided that motion pictures came under the protection of the first amendment.

During World War II motion pictures became the most
effective means of spreading "propaganda". The term "propaganda" itself was disliked by the American government because it implied deceit and brain-washing that was attributed solely to our enemies; if the United States did it, it was persuasion.

Midway through the war Walt Disney wrote: "The use of the screen for outright propaganda is resented by our people and I believe the people of other nations feel the same way. That is why I feel the motion picture will be limited in its propaganda approach. After all, one of the things we are fighting for is the right of all peoples to think, read and speak as they will, not to have others' views foisted upon them. Moulding opinion is something else again."

In fact this "molding" of American opinion became so important in the motion picture industry that by 1945 five major government offices were working with propaganda to maximize its development: 1) The State Department; 2) the Department of Commerce; 3) the Office of War Information; 4) the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs; and 5) the Justice Department. Most departments operated on the threat of denying export of a particular film until it met their specifications. American films were so popular overseas that many companies relied on this market to make a profit. If the export privileges were denied a film would probably fail to make enough money to cover expenses. Since the start of the war Nazi Germany, Japan, and their occupied territories refused to show American films. The diminishing European market became increasingly vital. In order to
help Hollywood understand more precisely what the government wanted from them the Government Information Program published Washington's Information Manual for Hollywood, 1942. In 1943, along with screening films before they were released, the Office of War Information (OWI) began to read and review scripts before production, giving them even more control over the industry.

In 1943 OWI read 466 scripts, in 1944, 744. The 1,210 scripts reviewed in those 2 years represented almost three-fourths of the 1,652 scripts the Hollywood office read between May 1942 and its demise in August 1945...During this period OWI managed to have 277 of the 390 cases of objectionable material corrected, a success ratio of 71 percent.²

As much as the OWI, the Bureau of Motion Pictures (BMP), the Production Code of America (PCA), and the Hayes Office censored the motion picture industry during the war one group of films went by seemingly untouched—the animated films.

Animation first started as early as 1906 with J. Stuart Blackton's, Humorous Phases of Funny Faces.²⁵ The earliest cartoon star was Gertie the Dinosaur in 1914 who was created by Winsor McCray. "Animated films grew rapidly in the 1920s as more talented people entered the field."²⁶ By the 1940's there were seven major studios producing the majority of the cartoons: Warner Brothers, run by Leon Schesinger; Famous Studios (for Paramount), run by Max Fleischer; Twentieth Century Fox, run by Paul Terry; Universal, run by Walter Lantz; RKO, which was Walt Disney Studios;
Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, and Screen Gems for Columbia. Disney and Warner Brothers also made cartoons for the government that were not released to the general public.

Many of these cartoons contained blatant discrepancies with the Production Code of 1934 and Washington's Information Manual for Hollywood,1942 in the films regard for women and the home front. The Production Code of 1934 states, in its section on sex, that

1) impure love must not be represented as attractive or beautiful, and
2) it must not be the subject of comedy or farce, or treated as material for laughter.

Yet in the 1944 Warner Brothers' release, Plane Daffy, Hata Mari, the infamous Nazi spy uses sex appeal and seduction to try to get information out of Daffy Duck. She is not only impure love personified but also dangerous, and yet she is portrayed as beautiful and sexy. Her come-ons to Daffy, and his subsequent retreats, are extremely comical—a violation of the second point.

Another violation of the code is in regard to nudity. The code, under the subheading of "Costume" states the following:

1. Complete nudity is never permitted.
   This includes nudity in fact or in silhouette, or any licentious notice thereof by other characters in the pictures...
2. Indecent or undue exposure is forbidden...
3. Nudity or semi-nudity used simply to put a "punch" into a picture comes under the head of immoral actions. It is immoral in its effect on the average audience.
Once again Daffy Duck, this time on *Daffy Duck The Commando* (1943), is the star. After our hero parachutes into the film at the start of the movie he temporarily distracts those looking for him with a search-light finger-shadow kickline. His fingers miraculously make silhouettes of several nude women dancing in a kickline, much to the enjoyment of one of his pursuers, Schultz.

The most outrageous violations of the "costume" regulations were not in those cartoons produced for commercial release in theatres across the United States— they were in the government sponsored instructional cartoons starring Snafu. That these government sponsored films should violate the very codes that the government imposed or allow the production company to forsake their self-imposed code is a double standard. Of the twelve Snafu shorts screened three contained nudity. In *Three Brothers* Snafu's brother, who cares for the army's carrier pigeons, rips a pin up girl off the wall and places the fully nude beauty on top of an egg in a nest (which promptly gets so excited that it cooks itself). The second Snafu short to violate this rule was *A Lecture on Camouflage*. The cartoon ends as the technical fairy tells the audience that the secret is to blend in with your environment. He then leaps up on a rock in the sea disguised as a mermaid, clutching two topless mermaids on either side of him. These mermaids
did not need to be topless. Mermaids are commonly seen with their scales extending up their torso into a nice green bodice, or even with a halter on that is composed of two sea shells. In some drawings of mermaids, who obviously are without their sea shells, their long hair modestly covers their breast; however, Snafu's mermaids are lacking any coverage, and even keep their long hair behind their shoulders. To add to the fact that these two mermaids are bare from the navel up, is the fact that the technical fairy seems almost lewd. As he grasp them tightly around the waist, clutches his cigar in his teeth, and proclaims with a crooked smile in his Brooklyn accent to, "blend in," we get the impression that he will really enjoy himself when the camera leaves. The final film was suggestively titled, Booby Traps. At the opening Snafu is on an island somewhere in the South Pacific, when he comes upon a house with many scantily clothed cardboard cut-outs of women at windows and doorways. Ever ready Snafu, of course, falls for this "honorable booby trap" and quickly rushes inside where he finds a pretty girl (cardboard) to his liking. As Snafu eagerly eyes her large barely clad chest we see that he has noticed that something does not feel right about the young lady's fanny, which he has been fondling. Upon closer investigation he discovers that in place of two cheeks (lower cheeks) she has two round bombs, as he draws back in surprise her top falls away to reveal two more bombs which then have "booby trap" superimposed across them.
Washington's Information Manual for Hollywood, 1942 contained restrictions dealing with the nation at war. One of the guidelines was, "Remember, too, there is now a woman's army. It is not a lipstick, hairpin affair. It is a serious business." In Warner Brothers' The Weakly Reporter the audience sees some women in uniform ready for action, but when the battle call is sounded these ladies whisk to a "sale" sign at a store and fight over stockings. This was hardly the way the government asked that the WACs or WAVEs be treated.

Although sexism did not break any codes in the 1930's-1940's it is blatantly obvious in these films. Women in The Home Front (a Snafu film) are pictured gossiping like chickens. Snafu also imagines that his girlfriend is about to become the innocent victim of a wolfish Frenchman. In Swooner Crooner (WB), Porky Pig owns an eggcraft factory and has a problem among his female employees (hens) with absenteeism— not due to any real problem facing women in the war, but because they wanted to watch rooster versions of Frank Sinatra and Bing Crosby sing. Women are not as frequently shown in the Warner Brother's pictures as they are in Snafu. All women in the Snafu pictures screened (with the exception of his mother and her bridge partners) were portrayed as gorgeous, young, and not particularly intelligent. Snafu's girl friend never speaks a word in all the pictures; she is there simply to look pretty and for him to lust over. This makes women look very submissive
and dumb.

In a nation that was trying to get women to join the army and the work force why would such demeaning representations be allowed? It could be because in the Information Manual it states that, "We must portray the American way of life. What is it? It is a 1942 version of 1776, of the day the pilgrims landed on American shores." In trying to portray this it would be impossible to give women any role but subservient since that is what they were then. Another reason for the lack of censorship was probably because of the audience which was viewing it. The commercial releases were notably tamer than Snafu. Snafu was produced for a primarily male audience, and therefore female nudity or stereotypical female behavior was acceptable.

Perhaps they were not censored because they are animation and not taken seriously. Even today cartoons are not highly regarded by many scholars.

When a man goes about writing an inclusive history of film, throwing out cartoons seems to be the first order of business, right after rolling up the sleeves and clearing the desk of any rubber bands.

This cannot be the case though, for if the government did not take animation seriously then why would it have had Snafu made? Why would cartoon characters be employed by the treasury department to sell war bonds? Why would Disney have been hired to produce so many training films? Finally, why would the military have requested (and received) over 1,100 Disney insignia to adorn their planes, tanks, shields,
etc.

In a country that had been under an almost puritanical structure in motion picture censorship, why did cartoons have so much leeway? Perhaps because these humorous, satirical shorts provided a release valve for millions of Americans.

Even in most of the serious war-oriented feature works, Hollywood projected an ambience of insouciance with elements of humor. This good-natured self-confidence, or outright cockiness, even amid melodramatic moments of cinema duress and in the middle of a struggle against militaristic regimes seeking world dominance, was perhaps one of the greatest strengths of American film. And it was in cartoons that this humor was often presented in its purest, albeit often crudest form.  

When an individual went to a movie to be entertained that person saw newsreels—often depressing—and the feature, which had been censored and was dreadfully serious about the war, and then a cartoon—in some cases their only chance to laugh. These animated cartoons with crass humor definitely getting its origins from burlesque were an American phenomenon.

Aside from allowing catharsis, they more than likely (subliminally if not consciously) instilled a greater confidence within the viewer of the ultimate triumph of the United States and its allies.

The ability of the United States to laugh at itself in the face of all the hardships of World War II sent a reassuring message to our allies.

In conclusion, though women had been making advances prior to World War II, the war (while seeming to promote the cause) actually re-installed some women’s wishes for
a "normal" life as a homemaker. Though the OWI and the Hayes Office fought to keep film under their censoring thumb they let the cartoons slip through their fingers. These cartoons, while affirming women's status as subservient to men, did so in a way that did not offend women at the time. These cartoons sought to relieve the tensions of Americans, for a few minutes, that were brought on by war. The sexism is flagrant in these films, especially those to be seen exclusively by a predominately male military. These films were in clear violation of the Production Codes but due to the expenuating situations of the time were allowed to slip through the censors fingers.
ENDNOTES


4. Ibid., 382.

5. Ibid., 390.

6. Ibid., 399.

7. Ibid., 407.

8. Ibid., 410.

9. Ibid., 390.

10. Ibid., 439.

11. Ibid., 439.

12. Ibid., 441.

13. Ibid., 441.


15. Ibid., 53.

16. Ibid., 49.


20. Ibid., 5.
24. Ibid., 347.
25. Ibid., 348.
26. Ibid., 348.
27. Ibid., 348-349.
28. Ibid., 349.
31. May, Homeward Bound, 70.
32. Ibid., 68.
33. Ibid., 69.
34. Ibid., 69.
35. Ibid., 71.
36. Ibid., 71.
39. Walsh, Womens Film and Female Experience, 32.
40. Ibid., 210-211.
41. Koppes, Hollywood Goes to War, 327.


Ibid., 2.

Shull, *Doing Their Bit*, 2.

Walsh, *Womens Film and Female Experience*, 215.

Ibid., 209, 216.


I have given no name of the production company that produced the Snafu films. There is sufficient information to imply either, Warner Brothers or Disney Studios. While there is an article titled *Walt Disney's Private Snafu*, by David H. Culbert there is also the fact that in Chuck Jones' autobiography, *Chuck Amuck* he states on page 274 that he created Snafu. During the war Chuck Jones worked for Warner Brothers.


Shale, *Donald Duck Joins Up*, 86.

Shull, *Doing Their Bit*, 9-10.

Ibid., 10.
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