

A Formal Analysis of Disney and Dali's *Destino* (2003)

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The opening of the animated short film *Destino* (2003) declares, in both English and French, “In 1946, two legendary artists began collaboration on a short film. More than half a century later, their creation has finally been completed.”<sup>1</sup> The film, which was conceived by two legends of early 20<sup>th</sup> century art, Walt Disney and Salvador Dalí, has a tangled history. When work began on *Destino*, both artists were extremely well known. Disney’s string of popular animated shorts and feature films alike, such as *Three Little Pigs* (1933) and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), skyrocketed his already well-known studio into superstardom. However, Disney’s dips into “high art” had failed both commercially and critically, seen most notably in *Fantasia* (1940). Disney, not one to turn away from a challenge, brought many fine artists into the Disney studio in an attempt to enhance his productions, like Thomas Hart Benton, Franklin Lloyd Wright, and, of course, Salvador Dalí.<sup>2</sup> *Destino* combines the artistic brilliance and vision of both Walt Disney and Salvador Dalí into one surreal creation, showing animation’s ability to be a “high” art form.

By 1946, Walt Disney Productions had been putting out successful feature-length films for nearly a decade. Before these films, they had similar success with shorts in the form of Silly Symphonies and Mickey Mouse cartoons. At the head of it all stood Walt Disney, now an American icon. At this point in his career, Salvador Dalí had made ripples in the world of fine art and within surrealist circles with dreamlike and otherworldly works like *The Persistence of Memory* (1931) and *Lobster Telephone* (1936). He also gained notoriety for his eccentric personality and the unusual manner in which he presented himself. By 1946, however, both artists had something to prove. Disney’s *Fantasia* (1940), while boasting a unique look separate from much of his catalogue, was a box office flop and did not earn the respect of the art world as he had intended.<sup>3</sup> Walt Disney Productions also struggled during World War II.<sup>4</sup> Dalí,

meanwhile, always the showman, was eager to make a name for himself in Hollywood, where he had already been busy at work on an Alfred Hitchcock film.<sup>5</sup> Disney had already expressed some interest in surrealism with sequences in feature films like the Haunted Forest scene in *Snow White* and the Pink Elephants on Parade sequence in *Dumbo* (1941). In the former, benign branches transform before the viewers' eyes into frightful faces (Fig. 1-2); in the latter, Dumbo, drunk, hallucinates a barrage of elephants which metamorphose into various delightful and grotesque versions of themselves and other objects (Fig. 3-4). When Disney and Dalí met, they realized their common interests and shared love of the film medium and immediately decided to combine their efforts to collaborate on a project.<sup>6</sup> Thus *Destino* was conceived; however, the short film would not be finished until 57 years later, long after the deaths of both Disney and Dalí.

*Destino* proved to be a massive undertaking, with an extremely complex structure and vague narrative. In just nine months, extensive work had already been done on *Destino*, including storyboards, pencil sketches, and original oil paintings by Salvador Dalí himself.<sup>7</sup> Despite this progress, the project was scrapped. Disney had foreseen *Destino* as being part of a package feature, and in 1946, he declared that compilation films were dead (despite the fact that he released three of them within the following three years).<sup>8</sup> The project was revisited decades later by Disney's nephew Roy E. Disney, while working on *Fantasia 2000* (1999).<sup>9</sup> He found that, through a legal loophole, the studio did not actually own any of the Dalí originals—which were worth millions—until *Destino* was made.<sup>10</sup> Work began to finish it, which was even more complex than making it the first time around as the story had become harder to decipher without its original creators there to explain it.<sup>11</sup> Eventually, though, the film was completed, though one and a half minutes were edited out of the original, and the storyboards may have been rearranged

completely.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, the *Destino* which is available today is potentially far from what Disney and Dalí had envisioned in 1946, but still mixes both artists' styles into one beautiful film.

*Destino* opens with a brief description of the long process of its creation, mentioned in the first line of this paper. A song, also named *Destino*, begins, boasting light and airy orchestral notes and a vintage feel to its static-laden recording. From there, the words fade and a horizontal line appears. On top of it, Salvador Dalí and Walt Disney's animated signatures flourish. The screen transforms, with the line forming the horizon of a barren desert with rocky mountains in the background and a dark blue sky, the only pop of color in an undersaturated scene. This landscape is a staple of Dalí's paintings (Fig. 5-6). The song picks up with a woman humming over soft strokes of guitar. Out of a mountain walks a nude woman, with a signature Disney look to her, characterized by her body type, face shape, and the way she moves.

The woman, whose name is Dahlia, approaches a tall pyramid-shaped, bronze patina statue with a depiction of a faceless man with a muscular build, named Chronos, bursting out of it.<sup>13</sup> Dahlia, who has long, black hair and tanned skin, closes her eyes and enters a dreamlike state, signaled by the dramatic shift to nighttime. A gigantic version of Dahlia takes the statue into her chest, which holds the moon walking on four spindly legs. A normal-sized Dahlia, wearing a translucent white gown, climbs down off of the statue, taking Chronos's place, and watches the hands melt wax-like off the clock. She dances away, into the still face of an old man. When she leans in to kiss him, time passes abruptly and suddenly she is transported, looking sad and lonely, to a spiraling structure scattered with sculptures. On thin legs, with her long dress trailing behind her, Dahlia ascends the structure. The camera shows that the structure is actually that of a deformed, headless body (Fig. 7). Dahlia dances gleefully among floating dandelion seeds and statues of human forms playing instruments and drinking. At the top of the structure,

Dahlia twirls past a valley of little alien-like, still creatures, entangling her dress on one's outstretched finger (Fig. 8). Dahlia crawls out of the dress and into a large shell. The shell crashes down into a pit of eyes extending from a new structure, which Dahlia narrowly avoids. Dahlia then wakes up, exiting the dream world, shown by returning to the same shot of her before she closed her eyes. She looks down at the ground, her eyebrows knit together in an expression of longing and sorrow. She notices a shadow from a nearby bell tower and falls into it, clothing herself in the bell's shadow. She tosses her long hair and her head becomes a dandelion. A dandelion seed floats away into the statue of Chronos, allowing the bird to break free from his chest and the statue to come to life.

Chronos is sent back into the dream world, where the melting clock's wax strings entangle his wrists like chains. He struggles towards Dahlia's dancing dandelion figure and finally breaks free, breaking the chains in the dream and escaping his statue in real life. Triumphant, he falls to the ground, where a bird pecks at the melted clock on his wrist. Ants crawl out of his palm and transform into bikers wearing bread loaves atop their heads. Chronos briefly catches a dandelion seed before it floats away. Landing on the floor, the seed morphs into Dahlia, who then spots Chronos. When she tries to run to him, the ground turns to sand, revealing a series of dilapidated walls. Chronos runs to her, but they are separated by a great wall. Dahlia sends a flock of birds over the wall, where they guide Chronos to an opening. Chronos smiles at Dahlia as she turns into a statue. Chronos morphs into a baseball player and watches a parade of grotesque figures on turtle shells meet to create a ballerina dancer with a mobile ball for a head (Fig. 9). The ballerina twirls about before tossing her head to Chronos, who bats it away. The final shot shows the bell in its tower through a crack in the statue, which Chronos has returned to, with dandelion seeds blowing towards the camera.

The technique of combined traditional 2D animation and 3D computer animation is seen in several places throughout the film, notably with the more complex architectural structures, the statue of Chronos, and with the eyeball-heavy alien creatures at the top of the first structure. In some scenes, the animation isn't the smooth animation Disney viewers are accustomed to seeing, but rather the animation dissolves from shot to shot to form an illusion of slow movement. Mostly these scenes are the ones which feature closeups of the characters' faces, highlighting their expressions.

The emotional tone of the film is set in large part by the characters' expressions and the bleak colors of the film. The blues, greens, browns, and grays which color the film convey a tone of sadness and a lack of excitement, the same themes which characterize Dahlia's life. The earthy tones also match the palette which Salvador Dalí used in many of his paintings. However, the music of the film truly instructs the viewer how to feel. The song is slow and the singer sings in a sad tone lyrics like, "Destino, my heart was sad and lonely." The song also speaks to the plot and themes of the song, as another lyric says, "For you came along/Out of a dream I recall."

While the animation style screams Disney, many of the images which populate *Destino* are iconic Dalí trademarks. The ants, melting clocks, bicycling men, and bell shape are all images which frequently appear in Dalí's works. As previously stated, the color scheme and barren landscape are also Dalinian. These features and many more, as well as the confusing narrative, all show that *Destino* is truly a collaboration that boldly mixes the styles of both Dalí and Disney.

It is hard to say if *Destino* really did allow Disney and his studio to enter the world of high art without pushback, as *Destino* was not finished until long after its inception. The fact that the project was scrapped shows that perhaps Disney thought the world was not ready for *Destino*,

or that, more likely, he thought it would not be profitable. However, given how much he allowed Dalí's style to influence *Destino*, it is likely that Disney wanted *Destino* to be respected as fine art just as much as a Dalí painting. *Destino* was well received when it was finally released. It was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Animated Short Film in 2003 and has been exhibited in many art museums, such as the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne, Australia.<sup>14</sup> This illustrates *Destino*'s acceptance into the high art and fine art catalogue today, proving that Disney truly deserves a place in these circles as well, not just for his work on *Destino* but also for the genius way in which he reinvented the art of animation.

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<sup>1</sup> MovDoc. "Walt Disneys Destino (Full)." YouTube video, 6:31, October 17, 2012, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y\\_TlaxmOKqs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y_TlaxmOKqs).

<sup>2</sup> Steven Watts, *The Magic Kingdom: Walt Disney and the American Way of Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 106.

<sup>3</sup> Watts, *The Magic Kingdom*, 68.

<sup>4</sup> Chris Pallant, *Demystifying Disney: A History of Disney Feature Animation* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011), 54.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>6</sup> John Canemaker, "When Dali Met Disney," *Print* 59, no. 5 (2005): 78.

<sup>7</sup> Pallant, *Demystifying Disney*, 56.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Canemaker, "When Dali Met Disney," 81.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Allison Benedikt, "Dali, Disney Short Debuts After 57 Years," *Chicago Tribune* (Chicago, IL), Dec. 26, 2003.

<sup>14</sup> "Destino," Wikipedia, accessed Feb. 9, 2019, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Destino>.

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## Images



Figure 1. A tree in the Haunted Forest in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*



Figure 2. The same tree transformed into a menacing face



Figure 3. A bubble transforms into an elephant.



Figure 4. An elephant's nightmare within Dumbo's hallucination



Figure 5. The opening scene of *Destino*, featuring a trademark Dalí landscape



Figure 6. For comparison, Salvador Dalí's *Shades of Night Descending* (1931)



Figure 7. The twisted spiral structure which Dahlia climbs



Figure 8. Dahlia's dress is caught by a little eyeball creature.



Figure 9. The figures atop turtles meet to birth a ballerina.