

Chapter Six

Through the Cinematic Looking Glass

*Walt Disney's 1951 Animated Version and
Tim Burton's 2010 Film*

Sarah Boslaugh

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When Lewis Carroll (1832–1898), aka Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, published *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*¹ in 1865, he could hardly have anticipated the influence his book, and its central character, would exert on popular culture, nor how long lasting that influence would be. One hundred and fifty years later, *Alice's Adventures* and Carroll's follow-up, *Through the Looking Glass*² (1871), remain popular among children and adults alike. Both have been adapted for other media, including television, theater, and film. The Internet Movie Database lists eighty-two films and television productions in which Alice appears, from the 1903 Georges Méliès short *Alice in Wonderland* to the 2016 feature film *Alice Through the Looking Glass* directed by James Bobin.³ Among the best known are two feature films produced by Disney, both titled *Alice in Wonderland*. The first is the 1951 animated film⁴ directed by Clyde Geronimi, Wilfred Jackson, and Hamilton Luske, featuring the voices of Kathryn Beaumont (Alice), Ed Wynn (the Mad Hatter), Richard Haydn (the Caterpillar), and Verna Felton (the Queen of Hearts). The second is the 2010 live-action film⁵ directed by Tim Burton, starring Mia Wasikowska (Alice), Johnny Depp (the Mad Hatter), and Helena Bonham Carter (the Red Queen).

While the films share common elements, many drawn from Carroll's texts, they are notably different in theme, tone, and other aesthetic aspects. In particular, they differ in their presentation of Alice's character and the manner in which her journey through Wonderland ("Underland" in Burton's film) relates to Alice's life above ground.

THE ANIMATED ALICE

Disney's interest in *Alice* dates back to at least the 1920s, when he produced a series of "Alice comedies" mixing live action and animation. Elements from Carroll's texts were incorporated into the 1937 Mickey Mouse "Thru the Mirror."⁶ Disney twice considered feature-length, live-action versions, initially with Mary Pickford and later Ginger Rogers potentially assuming the role.⁷ Neither project came to fruition, partly because, according to Disney, "Practically everyone who has read and loved the book of necessity sees the Tenniel Alice, and no matter how closely we approximate her with a living Alice, I feel the result would be a disappointment."⁸

In 1946, Disney decided to produce an animated adaptation. The studio considered basing its visual style on the illustrations by Sir John Tenniel included in the first edition of Carroll's *Alice* but abandoned this approach as impractical.⁹ Nonetheless, the spirit of Tenniel is evident in the completed film's title sequence, which includes artwork resembling colored versions of some of Tenniel's illustrations. Both story development and animation proceeded slowly. According to Bob Thomas, "Everyone felt relief when *Alice in Wonderland* was finished. Especially Walt. He vowed never again to undertake a tamper-proof classic."¹⁰

Disney's *Alice* was released by RKO Radio Pictures on July 28, 1951. Like other Disney features, many individuals worked on the key elements, including ten animating directors and thirteen people credited as contributing to the story.¹¹ This collaborative process, standard for Disney animated features, caused problems during this film's creation. One of the animating directors, Ward Kimball, said that directors working on the project competed with each other, "trying to top the other guys and make his sequences the biggest and craziest in the show"; as a result, the film "degenerated into a loud-mouthed vaudeville show."¹²

This version is, above all, an animated Disney film. It draws on elements of both *Alice* and *Through the Looking Glass* but transforms many of Carroll's original concepts to render them more typical of other Disney films. For instance, the White Rabbit is a key character in both the Carroll novels and Disney's version. But in the film, he has become a comical bunny with a hugely oversized watch, rather than the dignified, rather stern-looking rabbit featured in woodcuts by Tenniel.¹³ Other characters, such as the talking doorknob, do not derive from Carroll, added to facilitate comic bits clearly in the Disney spirit. Simply put, this is not just an animated presentation of Lewis Carroll's *Alice* but truly the Disney Version, that is, a film made by Disney and company for their loyal ongoing audience—for better or worse.

A musical, Disney's film includes numerous original songs and musical settings of some of Carroll's poems, including "Old Father William" and "'Twas Brillig" (the latter with lyrics adapted from the poem "Jabberwocky,"

which appears in *Through the Looking Glass*). Disney employed a variety of pop music and film industry veterans, including Bob Hilliard, Sammy Fain, Oliver Wallace, and Ted Sears.¹⁴ In keeping with the Disney process of making the story “theirs,” such tunes are typical of and reminiscent to songs in other popular Disney films, rather than intended to create a musical match for the spirit of Carroll’s texts.

Whereas most Disney animated projects feature a singular look the team appropriated for their take on a particular classic, several different visual styles are here employed. Most obviously, the framing story is animated in a semirealistic manner, similar to that employed for Disney’s *Bambi*, with depth suggested through use of the multiplane camera. In contrast, the Wonderland scenes are replete with comical exaggerations and talking animals reminiscent of short cartoons such as Disney’s ambitious *Silly Symphonies*.¹⁵ Some episodes in Wonderland are more adventurous: the influence of Salvador Dali can be seen in the final chase sequence before Alice awakens.¹⁶ This belies any question of whether the supposedly old-fashioned Disney was aware, and open to the influence of, experimental forms of modern art.

Upon release, *Alice* proved neither a critical nor popular success. The Disney Company lost an estimated one million dollars on the project.¹⁷ Contemporary critics did not greet *Alice* with the same enthusiasm as other Disney films, dismissing it with phrases that complained of Disney’s film “owing more to the culture of popcorn and bubble gum than to the genius of either Dodgson or Tenniel,” while criticizing the songs as “cheaply pretty.”¹⁸ Contemporary scholars and academics also criticize *Alice*: Leonard Maltin finds it “flash and generally entertaining” but lacking in “that essential thread that made Disney’s best features hang together.”¹⁹ Maltin also notes that the film “has trouble maintaining pace and continuity,”²⁰ while an anonymous critic writing in *Sight and Sound* in 2010 called it “a Tex Avery-style parade of diverting, cute, instantly forgotten cartoon gags.”²¹ Interestingly, *Alice* enjoyed a resurgence of interest in the 1960s and 1970s due to its drug references (the Caterpillar does smoke a hookah, after all) and the psychedelic, countercultural vibe many college-age viewers found in the Wonderland episodes.²² These connections were played up in a 1974 promotional campaign for the theatrical rerelease, claiming the film offered “visual euphoria” and referencing the Jefferson Airplane song “White Rabbit” with the slogan, “Should you go see it? Go ask Alice.”²³

ANIMATED ALICE’S WONDROUS JOURNEY

The animated *Alice* is an episodic film, a quality it shares with Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures* as well as with many other popular children’s books,

including Frank Baum's Oz novels. Disney adopted Carroll's framing story of Alice becoming bored in the company of her older sister, falling asleep by a riverbank, and experiencing her adventures as a dream that Alice relates to the older sister when she awakens. In the film, Alice's sister tries to teach her a history lesson; the sister's role as a representative of the sensible adult world is emphasized, in contrast to Alice's imagined world in which animals can talk and books can be made up entirely of pictures. However much this varies from Carroll's brief setup, the approach is in line with what Disney does with the successive anecdotes.

Disney employs familiar comic devices such as the enormous, shrewish wife and the tiny, meek husband (the King and Queen of Hearts).²⁴ Disney also creates visual gags by transforming familiar objects into surreal projections: flowers become musical instruments while the oysters appear to be humanlike babies, their upper shells serving as bonnets, their lower shells as cribs.

When we first meet the animated Alice, she is a girl in the care of her older sister, preferring the world of her individual imagination to school lessons. When Alice returns from Wonderland, she is very much the same person. Her experiences are clearly presented as having taken place within a dream; thus, when Alice wakes, she tries to tell her older sister about it. But her sensible sibling will have none of this, instead declaring it's time for tea. Many critics have commented on Alice's lack of transformation, the absence of any tangible arc, as a result of her adventures. M. Keith Booker notes that *Alice* "seem[s] to celebrate the individual imagination only ultimately to advise individuals to accept the status quo"²⁵ as Alice is compelled to return to the sensible world of her older sister, where wild flights of imagination have no place. William Verrone notes that Alice may actually be more of a conformist when she returns than before, since at the film's start she at least rebelled against a boring lesson, whereas at the end she seems submissive and accepting.²⁶

In contrast, when Carroll's Alice wakes and at once returns to the normal world, her sister takes the time to listen to the girl's story before sending her in to have her tea. More remarkably, the sister stays in the meadow, falling into her own waking dream in which she sees many of the characters described by Alice. While the older sister knows none of this is real—the sound of the teacups is only sheep bells; the wind, not the White Rabbit, rustles the grass—she too is reluctant to give up this imaginary world. In the final paragraph she imagines Alice grown up, but keeping "the simple and loving heart of her childhood" and how she would hence "gather about her other little children, and make THEIR eyes bright and eager with many a strange tale, perhaps even with the dream of Wonderland."²⁷ With this paragraph, Carroll underlines his respect for the beneficial powers of the imagination, a point omitted from Disney's animated *Alice*.

In the final analysis, Disney's 1951 *Alice* is a conventional Disney film that includes some beautiful animation but remains too tame to do justice to Carroll's anarchic world and too episodic and stylistically inconsistent to satisfy as a feature-length project. It's worth noting that the character of Alice was something of an anomaly in a Disney film of the time: as Amy Davis notes, in the period from 1937 to 1967, only *Alice* and *Peter Pan* had female leads, and only Alice and Wendy "ever enjoy real adventures in new, strange worlds."²⁸ However, there is no sense that Alice has had a true hero's journey, returning transformed by it; instead, she is oddly, perhaps surprisingly passive even during her adventures.²⁹ Also, Alice is constantly pressured to behave like a conventional Victorian English girl even in a world populated with talking rabbits and humanized playing cards.³⁰ Most important, the post-adventures Alice does nothing to challenge the existing social order—instead, she fits into it perhaps even better than she did before her unrewarding journey.

TIM BURTON'S 2010 *ALICE IN WONDERLAND*

Tim Burton's 2010 *Alice* departs much further from Carroll's *Alice* than did the 1951 film. Burton's most significant changes are replacing Carroll's simple framing device with a wholly original, much more developed story line, while making Alice a young lady of marriageable age (nineteen years) rather than a prepubescent girl. The Underland section also departs from Carroll; traditional characters and story elements are used within a new story of a sibling rivalry leading to a war between the Red Queen (a figure analogous to the Queen of Hearts in Carroll's text) and the White Queen. References to Carroll's books are salted throughout, though assigned to different characters and employed in other contexts, creating alternative meanings for the repeated phrases. The importance of the characters are also altered, the Mad Hatter elevated almost to a co-leading role in the Underland sequences; Johnny Depp, who plays that character, received over-the-title billing in publicity materials.³¹ The decision to emphasize Depp's role may have been due to his status as an established star, whereas Mia Wasikowska (Alice) was considerably less well known.

Burton's film freely mixes live action and CGI (computer-generated imagery) in the Underland sequences, while the frame story remains primarily live action. Critical response was mixed, with *Alice* praised for visual inventiveness (Oscar winner for Best Art Direction and Best Costume Design, also nominated for Best Visual Effects) while criticized for narrative incoherence in Underland as well as for changes made to Carroll's text. Owen Gleiberman called the film "a strange brew indeed: murky, diffuse, and meandering," criticizing the decision to transform Alice from "the spunky girl we