

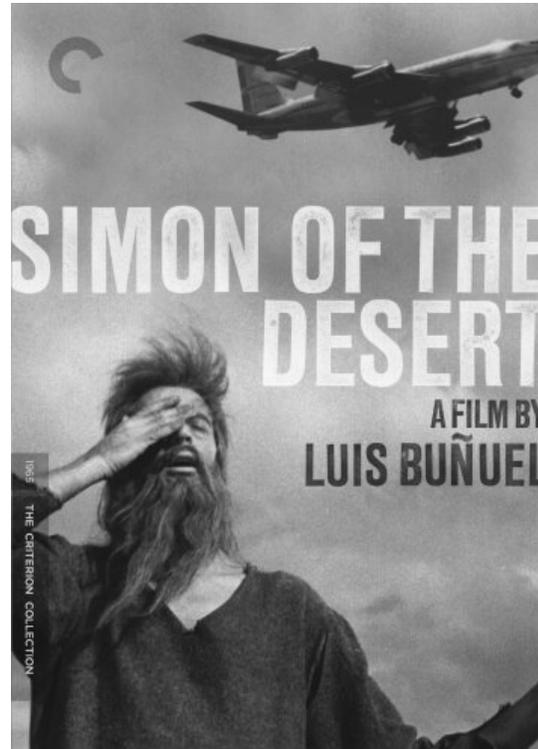
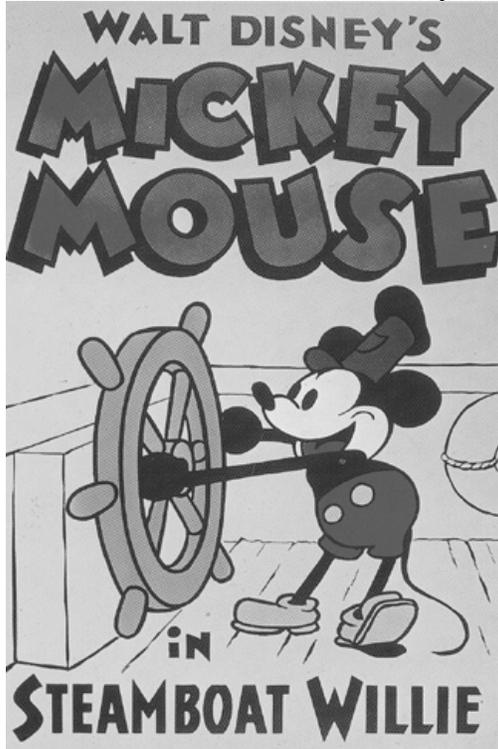
Art in and out of Exile: facing the music.

CSIF Classic Film Series, June 8, 2010, curated by Gerald Saul

Steamboat Willie: Director Ub Iwerks, 1928, 8 minutes

Simon of the Desert: Director Luis Buñuel, 1965, 45 minutes

Two filmmakers, each sent into exile from their homes, one crushed from the experience and the other drawing renewed strength from it. In their challenge of conventions, each of these filmmakers sought to delve into the subconscious of the viewer, to draw upon hopes, dreams, fears, and regrets. The two films I have chosen will entertain and surprise you with their eccentricities and unpredictable storylines. Their characters, one sooner, one later, inevitably must face the music.



While we, as members of the general public, have a tendency to reward predictable entertainment with our ticket money, it is the groundbreaking events which remain in our cultural memories for decades. The first film tonight represents just such an event. The introduction of sound to the animation was just one of its important features. The development of Mickey Mouse into a fresh, aggressive, and anti-establishment character is less remembered but was of equal importance at the time. Head animator, brilliant technical innovator, and once significant shareholder of the Disney Studio, Ub Iwerks is the talent behind this short. Ub worked closely with Walt and single-handedly drew every panel for the first Mickey cartoon, Plane Crazy, in secret while the company was still producing "Oswald the Lucky Rabbit" for Universal Studios. While I rarely suggest that Walt Disney was an underdog in any business affairs, this is the exception. Mickey Mouse was constructed from the ashes of Disney's fallen company and in its creation he pushed the limits of image, sound, and idea. Within five years, this character had become the emblem for his company which by then had a clear agenda to target children as their principle audience. In 1932 all of the edges were smoothed away with no more swinging cats, no more flatulents, and no more peaking under Minnie's skirt. However, in 1928, Mickey Mouse was full of surprises and followed no predictable story structure. His past was suppressed so that Mickey would never again change. Steamboat Willie is a film that is so iconic that we think we know it but we really don't. Its real nature has been buried under a history of iconography to ensure that Mickey (and his audience?) would remain modest, timid, and obedient.

Walt Disney is only open minded and forgiving when compared to Franco. Obsessed with loyalty, Disney treated employees who showed disrespect or who dared to take a job with another animation company ruthlessly, firing them and/or never re-hired them under any circumstances. After Ub Iwerks was given his own studio with ultimate control and authorship during the 1930s (with a contract with MGM), a major rift was driven between these two animation pioneers. However, for once, sentimentality won out and in the late 1930s Walt Disney hired back his old collaborator. Ub would never have creative control of a film again but headed up the Disney effects department to advance blue screen technologies and many other techniques. After three more decades working for the Disney Corporation, he died in 1971.

On the other hand, the brilliantly baffling Luis Buñuel, whom is known to members of the CSIF as the co-director of “Un Chien Andalou”, committed his career to challenging conventions and living unsafely. Spanish-born, Buñuel took the world stage as part of the Paris-based Surrealist movement. His work attacked all types of orthodoxy, not the least of which was the Catholic church. This led to Buñuel’s exile from his home country under the dictatorial Franco government. However, as more and more media attention was drawn to Buñuel, Franco decided to invite him back in 1961 to direct “Viridiana”. Buñuel left the country immediately after its completion with a master copy under his arm. Franco, outraged, attempted to destroy all copies of the film and promptly exiled Buñuel again. He returned to Mexico in 1961 where he continued to direct feature films including “Simon of the Desert”.

The presence of Hollywood was vast but surprisingly un-influential on Buñuel. After spending four years rewriting and dubbing foreign films for American release, Buñuel grew increasingly disappointed in the Hollywood system. He once presented the top screenwriters of the day with a chart which outlined the eight plots that every film they made fell into. Their attempts to debunk the patterns with the revealing of their new “surprising” films failed. The “surprise”, as they saw it, was simply an act of unusual casting, not unusual storytelling. For example, audience were surprised that Janet Leigh was killed so early in “Psycho”, not because of turn of events but because she was a starlet. So embedded were Hollywood studios in this star system that they had a difficult time recognising the rut they are in. Today there are even subroutines within screenwriting programs which tell you if you are writing your script *correctly*.

In his autobiography, Buñuel admits that he accepted contracts on a first come first serve basis which didn’t always situate his career in the most optimal ways but he felt that his honest approach to things was of greater value than maximizing personal gain. Buñuel continued to create notorious films in Mexico and France, often expressing his contempt for the Catholic Church, until his death in Mexico in 1983.

