

Student Podcast Transcript

Los Angeles: On Film and On Record digital exhibit

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Podcast Transcription: Mirror Mirror in the Hollywood Studio: Exploring the socio-economic and appearance parallels of L.A. and *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*

**TB:** Hi everyone, my name is Tori and I am majoring in Honors English literature, and I'll be graduating this December.

**CY:** And my name is Calista, I'm also majoring in Honors English Literature, and I'll be graduating in Spring 2021. In this podcast, recorded on December 2nd, 2020, we will be discussing the film *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*. Our specific topics of discussion within this film will be: social class and societal dynamics in relation to race. We will also discuss the appearance of imagery in ToonTown in relation to Los Angeles booster ads and noir. And finally we will be discussing our analysis of the film's villain Judge Doom. This film is relevant to archival L.A. studies because it depicts the social struggles and misrepresentation of L.A. during the developmental stages of the city and the freeway system.

**TB:** After listening to this podcast, the goal is for the listener to have obtained a clearer understanding of the social injustices and misleading appearances that shaped the city of Los Angeles. Our podcast is going to be focused on how The film *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, directed by Robert Zemeckis, serves as a critique of LA Booster era ads through the polarizing imagery of Toon town and utilizes the interactions between cartoon characters and humans in order to portray the social injustices of Los Angeles during the 1940's.

**CY:** The appearances and representation of Toon town relates to booster ads during this era of LA development. Booster ads were specifically targeted toward white, wealthy investors who were drawn to L.A. during this era. Postcards and fruit crates often depicted images of snowy mountains, sunny skies, and abundant sunny orange groves, two images that depicted LA as a land of opportunity, leisure, and warmth. The sunny and exciting imagery of Toon Town parallels the California booster ads. They draw people in with the promises of sun and fun, but when you enter ToonTown it is run down, dirty, and crowded. This imagery is implicit in noir ideas as well. Britannica defines Noir as: Film noir, or in French “dark film”, a style of filmmaking characterized by such elements as cynical heroes, stark lighting effects, frequent use of flashbacks, intricate plots, and an underlying existentialist philosophy. The genre was prevalent mostly in American crime dramas of the post-World War II era. In the article “Disney Noir: ‘Just Drawn That Way.’” JP Tolette says “The major studios were already producing some of the classic noir films with their insistently dark view of the American cultural landscape, most of the animation industry had rather different concerns. Tolette continues to explain “these hybrid films evoke that earlier cinematic vision, frame it by matching up live and animated action and characters, in part because noir’s cultural darkness so tellingly parallels the darkness that settled on animation itself in that late 1940s era in which Who Framed Roger Rabbit is set”. This imagery is Speaking to LA history - it references not only to social injustice but also the LA transportation and development of the highway system which led to the erasure and destruction of entire neighborhoods, which were usually lower class. This relates to toontown, on the surface level, because toontown is depicted as a sunny, happy place to be. The sun is smiling and the characters are smiling and frolicking in the meadow, representing happiness and a strong connection to nature. The sun in the film sings, “Smile, darn ya, smile!” “Oh this old world is a

great world after all!” This imagery is directly contrasted by Valiant’s experience in ToonTown. As he’s driving through ToonTown, he crashes and the imagery quickly reflects a dark, chaotic, overcrowded version of ToonTown.

**TB:** Yeah, so, I definitely see that this is a jolt back to reality for Valiant, where the town is no longer just a facade of sunshine and happiness. Valiant gets distracted and crashes his car immediately upon entering the town. Suddenly the sun and happiness are gone, and we’re in the actual town. There are buildings, which are all highrises, and everywhere the streets are crowded, buildings have no space, and they’re all touching one another. And then later on when Valient is chased through ToonTown, he goes from the sun lit city streets to a dark, wet, dirty alleyway.

**CY:** Absolutely Tori. The false representations and manipulated version of Toontown are reflected also in the specific way that the toons are drawn. This perspective that the toons were drawn in depicts the specific mold they are forced to conform to within a white male-dominant society. Toons represent the minorities within this film, and in such they represent minority groups in LA during the 1940’s. Humans within this film represent the upper-middle white class. Additionally, due to this dynamic, toons can not create their own identity since they’re expected to merely fit into a pre-created mold. This relates specifically to Jessica Rabbit, in her infamous “I’m not bad, I’m just drawn that way” quote. Speaking of this line, in his article “Disney Noir: ‘Just Drawn That Way.’ JP Tolette says “It is a memorable and evocative line, particularly given how excessively “bad” she indeed looks and the jaw-dropping effect that this “drawn” character clearly has on the various males in this neo-noir hybrid of live action and animation.” In his analysis, Tolette focuses on the evocative physical appearance of how Jessica is drawn in relation to her statement, although I feel that at a larger scope, her line is representative of the metaphorical way that minorities were drawn during the 1940s in LA. Minorities in LA during

this time were depicted in a negative light due to stereotypes, to maintain the notion of white male dominance within society.

**TB:** Talking about how Jessica Rabbit is drawn really makes me think of how we are shown that toons are of a lower class than the humans. The Toon's can technically live forever and humans can draw as many of them as they want, so they're very cheap labor.

We know this based on the scene where the owner of the toon company shares with Valiant that Dumbo and half the cast from Fantasia, the mops and brooms, are on loan from Disney Studios to help with menial labor tasks. And Dumbo is even paid with peanuts, so you can see the cost of their labor is very very low. I also noticed in the film that there are no human people of color, not even as background characters. So this makes the role of the toons as representations of people of color that much more apparent. This definitely parallels the people of color of 1947, which is the year the film takes place, and people were most definitely discriminated against. Even the Civil Rights movement itself did not even begin until 1954. So you can only imagine how people of color were treated. People were openly racist toward them and forced them into low paying jobs and low-income housing and neighborhoods, just like that of ToonTown.

**CY:** Your commentary on race reminds me of Jon Brooks' article "Who Framed Roger Rabbit", specifically in his comment on how "Beneath the well-crafted jokes and cartoon high spirits, the film gnaws at the nostalgia felt for an Old Hollywood that so blithely manifested deep American racial disparities". This film utilizes jokes and comedic relief in a way that also exposes the injustices of their society which mirrors LA society during the rise of its expansion. Brooks also explains that "These "toons," make up a kind of movie-industry underclass that is exploited for profit-making laughs. That's a pretty audacious motif in a work ostensibly for children, and when you add the superimposition onto the crowded thematic canvas of a top-notch

spoof on film noir, you've got a movie working overtime in the ideas department.” Brooks continues to say, “The toons, in fact, pack the repressed power of an underclass, and if they were ever released from their servitude as manufactured entertainment, there's no telling what they might do.”

**TB:** I definitely agree that the toons are a part of a lower class, and I think the toons are a representation of real poor individuals living in “slums”. The toons are forced to live apart from the humans, and where they live is even called ToonTown, so it was created specifically for them. I would consider ToonTown a slum because the only people that live there are the toons. And as I discussed previously, they are very low paid. And probably not even paid at all. So you can see that they are low income and that the town is over-crowded, and the buildings are squished together, and there is also the dark, damp, and insidious alleyway that is full of trash and drain water throughout the city. So, in the article "Is Disney Safe for Kids?—Subtexts in Walt Disney's Animated Films", Andreas Müller-Hartmann points out “in the nightclub scene, [at the beginning of the movie] which plays heavily on the colors of black and white, the only animal in color is the octopus behind the bar, the roles toons play become overly clear: they are entertainers such as Daffy duck, Donald duck, or Jessica Rabbit, or they are servers, such as the penguin waiters... or the ape who guards the door at the nightclub.” Additionally Müller-Hartmann states “based on its combination of human actors and cartoon characters, the film plays with the relationship between African-Americans and whites. Both the storyline and characters are closely related to the development and representations of American race relations.” So this made me think about the fact that Judge Doom is the one responsible for dismantling the Red Car system and for the formulation of the plan to destroy ToonTown, so he is the very obvious villain in the film. But, as we discover at the end of the film, Judge Doom is

actually a Toon disguised as a man. SO he is a toon in a human suit of a wealthy, white older man. So, if we equate this to the aforementioned race relations that Müller-Hartmann mentioned, Doom is capable of passing. So if you're unfamiliar with the term passing, it's synonymous to the idea that African-American individuals that have light pigmentation in their skin can pass as either white American or European individuals, which could give them access to more opportunities than someone with darker skin. And Judge Doom is capable of both working alongside humans and having a high ranking job because he is a toon that can pass as a white middle aged human man.

**CY:** Continuing the conversation on Judge Doom, I absolutely agree that he is the villain within this film *Tori*. Toward the ending of the film it is revealed that the company Cloverleaf, who's sole stockholder was Judge Doom, bought out the red car system and wanted to get their hands on Toontown next, which is seen in the line "Doom wanted to get his hand on Toontown, and he wouldn't stop at anything". Additionally a newsreel reveals a real estate deal between Cloverleaf industries and R. K. Maroon, who was the owner of the film industry that the toons worked under. This deal reveals how the toons were merely pawns in a larger scheme of exploitation for profit. Judge Doom's plan was to completely destroy Toontown and develop a freeway system that would allow for the development of new businesses at every entrance and exit ramp. All of Toontown and the toons would have been murdered and erased from society for the sole purpose of gentrification and economic profit. I personally found the company name Cloverleaf to be ironic, since it has distinct ties to the natural world although the intentions of the company's stockholder is to urbanize and develop while simultaneously destroying an entire community. Doom even expresses his lack of care for Toontown, and he says "who's got time to wonder what happened to some ridiculous talking mice when you're driving by at 75mph." This

statement reveals not only Doom's lack of concern for ToonTown, but also the lack of concern during the expansionary phases of LA life explicitly revolving around the development of freeways.

**TB:** So we can see gentrification at work via the dismantling of the red car system, which is something that also happened in real life in Los Angeles. The Red car system was a trolley system that ran all across LA county and only cost 5 cents to ride. So, by dismantling this system, many lower class and poor individuals were stranded. They either had to figure out how they were going to afford a car, or they would have to pay to ride a bus. And even a bus couldn't take them all the way across the county. Just like today, you would have to get off a bus and board another bus line multiple times, just to travel across the full expansion. In the article, "The Transformation of the Pacific Electric Railway: Bradford Snell, Roger Rabbit, and the Politics of Transportation in Los Angeles" by Sy Adler, he states, "...Valiant counters that no one will drive the freeway when they can take the Redcar for a nickel. The Redcar of course, was the PE railway...Doom shot back that he - Cloverleaf Industries - had bought the red cars in order to dismantle the system." Adler also mentions that in real life "... By 1947 the Hollywood freeway had been under construction for several years; that many thousands of people had been displaced to make way for this and other freeway projects around Central Los Angeles; that the California legislature was in the midst of, or had just concluded, an extremely controversial special session devoted to massively accelerating the freeway building program; and that CPUC or the California Public Utilities Commission files had been bulging with complaints about the poor quality of the PE (power electric) rail service for many years prior." So in reality, this form of public transportation had begun to be run down, and while it was a cheap way to get from point A to point B in LA, it seems there was a deeper reason that it was dismantled. From what I can

see, the companies that purchased the Power Electric rail service or the Red Car, were big companies that owned car companies and bus companies and gas companies, and so they had a reason to dismantle the Red Car system because it was an inexpensive public transportation system that allowed people to travel great distances and they would not have to use a car or a bus because the Red Car was cheaper. So I feel that using the excuse that the Red Car had begun to be run down was the reason that they used in order to dismantle them.

**CY:** That's a really interesting point Tori. Overall, this film depicted multiple layers of societal disparities and inequalities, which are linked to the appearance of both ToonTown and Los Angeles during its developmental phase in the 1940's. The booster ads in LA parallel life in ToonTown, in the sense that minorities were exploited for the profit of white wealthy men. Additionally, Booster ads are reflected in both LA and ToonTown, in the way that ToonTown creates a facade of sunshine and happiness, only to be destroyed by the true, dark history behind the town. Overall I enjoyed this film, and I found it to be very interesting and evocative of LA history. Tori, what were your final thoughts of the film?

**TB:** Yea, I'm sorry for cutting you off, I wanted to talk about how you had mentioned the booster ads. I was thinking that it definitely does connect back to LA noir films, because you know noir films are essentially the dark, insidious part of the city, you know? Like you usually focus on a detective or an officer of some kind, solving crimes, you know? The mystery of LA, of noir films, is generally that kind of premise, and I feel that in connection to the booster ads, you would think oh a city is actually lively and happy, but in reality and in noir films, towns are actually dirty, and crowded and you know full of insidious things happening. Like the dark underbelly of the city. Which is, you know, what we can see with Judge Doom. You thought he's a nice guy in general and he's wealthy, and he has this company named Cloverfield, which like

you were saying sounds really nice and naturey, but I feel that, you know, under the surface he was actually buying out the Red Car system and planning to murder all of the toons just so that he could lay a freeway down where their town is. And, I just really feel like that is the core of the noir idea for a film, is that there's just a lot going down in the dark underbelly of the city that most people are unaware of.

**CY:** Absolutely Tori. And going back to your commentary about the central detective concept, I actually found it interesting. Speaking to my point earlier about identity and the lack of identity for toons, I found it interesting that Roger and Jessica both had to seek Valient's help, and they desperately sought it, and they worked hard to convince him to help them, only to have a voice to represent themselves that Roger in fact was being framed.

**TB:** Yea, because, you're right - They did have to beg Valient to help them, and he was kind of the only person present to help them, you know? And what I think is interesting about Valient is that he hated toons for a majority of the film, and we found out it's because a toon, which later turns out to be Judge Doom, murdered his brother. And so, I feel like he throughout the film has kind of like a racist view about toons, like a stereotypical view, like he just thought they were very dumb and sappy, but under all of that, they are capable of killing, you know? And I think in the scene where they're at the movie theater, after they discover that the owner of the toon company is actually in cahoots with Doom, that's when Valient tells Roger Rabbit exactly what happened to him. And Roger is just so upset and distressed, and he's like I understand why you hate me, because toons have emotions, and they are self-aware, and even though they're drawn by people, they still feel things, and so he could understand his anguish in why he hated toons so much. And I think Valient's growth from resenting toons so much for the murder of his brother

to willingly saving them instead of just letting them be killed at the end of the film, is just a really big growth for his character, if that makes sense.

**CY:** Absolutely. You also pointed to the notion that Valiant disliked toons for the majority of the movie, and I believe that has to do with the stereotypes that we were discussing earlier, and how minorities in LA similar to how toons in this film were misdrawn under these stereotypes and for that specific reason, they were misunderstood and often neglected by society, or overlooked by society, or exploited by society, due to the stereotypes that were created about them.

**TB:** Yea, and I think that the film as a whole is just very interesting, besides the fact that it's meant to be a children's film, but so many adult topics take place, I felt like I learned a lot more from the film than I thought I was going to, because personally I hadn't heard of the Red Car system or knew much about LA history, and so I think that the film is very informative. Even though the Red Car system was the sole focus but it also wasn't because it is kind of the main turning point at the very end on Judge Doom's whole plan of how he's going to destroy everything, and he bought out the system and everything. But it was really interesting to learn that the Red Car wasn't something that had just been invented for this film, it was actually a very real thing that happened to LA in the 1940's.

**CY:** Definitely Tori, and I have to agree with you. I did really enjoy watching this film, and I absolutely learned a lot about LA's history through this film, so I'd absolutely recommend anybody who wants to learn more about LA's history revolving the freeway system and social injustices to definitely watch this film.

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]

