



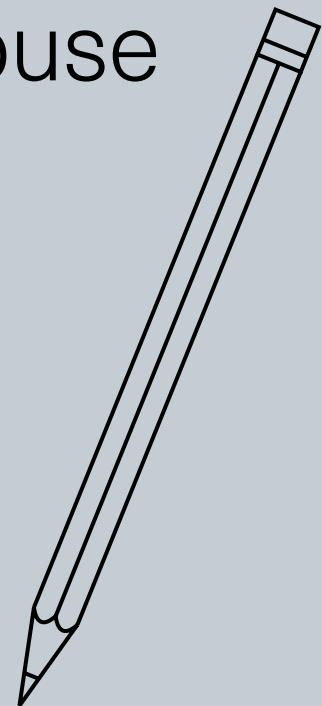
# Mickey: The Story of a Mouse

## STUDY GUIDE

Content written by **Paul Rendón**.

Designed by **Camille Gwise, Soph Schultz Rocha, and Keith Zwölfer**.

All SFFILM Education materials are developed in alignment with California educational standards for media literacy. SFFILM Education welcomes feedback and questions on all printed study materials.



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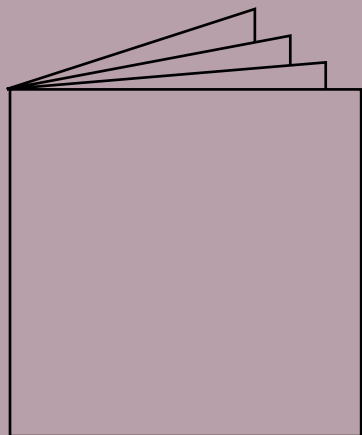


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# About the Film

## **Mickey: The Story of a Mouse**

**Jeff Malmberg, USA 2022, 89 mins**

Walt Disney famously stated that “it all started with a mouse”. Director Jeff Malmberg has put together a loving tribute of one of the most recognizable icons of all time, Mickey Mouse, who soon celebrates his 94th birthday. Malmberg presents Mickey’s legacy as being rooted at the forefront of art and culture throughout his life. In *Steamboat Willie*, Mickey stars in the first animated film with synchronized sound. As the decades passed, he constantly evolves, often reflecting advances in technology as well as the dramatic changes happening throughout society. His influence can be seen in everything from overseas wars to counterculture movements. Throughout the film, we hear from the talented artists who have brought Mickey to life, along with worldwide fans of the beloved character. It also features a brand new Walt Disney Animation Studios hand-drawn animated short, *Mickey in a Minute*, by veteran artists Eric Goldberg, Mark Henn and Randy Haycock.

**Suggested Subjects:** Arts/Media, English Language Arts, History, Peer/Youth Issues, Social Sciences, Social Studies

**Recommended Grades:** 4 – 12

## **TEACHING THE FILM**

Fans (and especially super-fans) of Mickey Mouse will thoroughly enjoy *Mickey: The Story of a Mouse*. The film guides viewers through the history of the characterization of Walt Disney’s famous Mickey Mouse. For teachers, on the surface, it uncovers the full history of this world-known animated character, sharing the various iterations that Disney had for Mickey over the years. Interspersed are colorful montages of fans waxing of the wonders of Mickey, embracing the character at Disneyland, as well as many idealized homages to both the mouse and the man that created him. However, just below the surface, the film glorifies the cultural importance of Mickey Mouse and the values that were infused into him, emphasizing why Mickey is an international icon of Americanism, while carefully avoiding the purposes behind transforming the character into a corporate logo with the mission of selling the brand more than spreading American virtues. With these issues in mind, the film can certainly be used in studying U.S. History and Economics by following the historical moments mentioned in the film and using it in a Thematic Comparative Literature Unit or a U.S. History Unit with a focus on how a film may influence popular understanding and interpretation of history without accounting for the shaping forces of gender, ethnicity, culture, and socioeconomic status.

## **PRE-VIEWING TOPICS**

To prepare your class before viewing, discuss the following: What is an “icon”? What makes someone or something “iconic”? Write a list of American icons and explain why each is iconic. Then, have the students complete a quick response to this prompt: “Is Mickey Mouse an icon? Why or why not?” Also, you may have students create a ‘twist’ on the classic K-W-L chart. On poster sheets, they will create 2-column T-charts titled “What we think we know about...” In one column, the heading is “Walt Disney” and they will write notes about Walt Disney. In the other column, the heading is “Mickey Mouse” and they will write notes about Mickey Mouse. At the bottom of the poster sheet, they will write a list of questions about what they want to learn about Disney and Mickey Mouse. After viewing, these small groups can discuss what they learned from the film and research what they still want to discover.

Imagine someone you would want to make a portrait or profile of (it can be themselves!): What archival materials would you want to use from their life? What could you use? What is okay and not okay to use? How does a storyteller determine what is okay to look closely at? How is portraiture vulnerable? Why is trust in portraiture important?



## Presenter Bio



**Jeff Malmberg (Director)** is a documentary filmmaker whose debut film, **Marwencol**, won more than two dozen awards, including the SXSW Grand Jury Award. It was recently selected for the Criterion Channel and named a Cinema Eye Decade film, as one of the 20 best documentary films in the last ten years. He received a Guggenheim Fellowship for his second film, **Spettacolo**, a Critics' Choice nominee for Best Documentary. Malmberg edited **Morgan Neville's** documentary **Won't You Be My Neighbor?**, which was released by Focus Features. Most recently, he was nominated for a Grammy® for co-directing and editing **Shangri-La**, a four-part series for Showtime about **Rick Rubin** and the creative process.



# Discussion Questions

## Before Viewing

1. What is an “icon”? What makes someone or something “iconic”? Write a list of ten American icons and explain why each is iconic.
2. In the film, a person interviewed will note that Mickey Mouse is “imprinted in everybody’s brain.” Think for a moment and write all that you know about Mickey Mouse, and then tell what meaning this animated character has for you.

## While Viewing

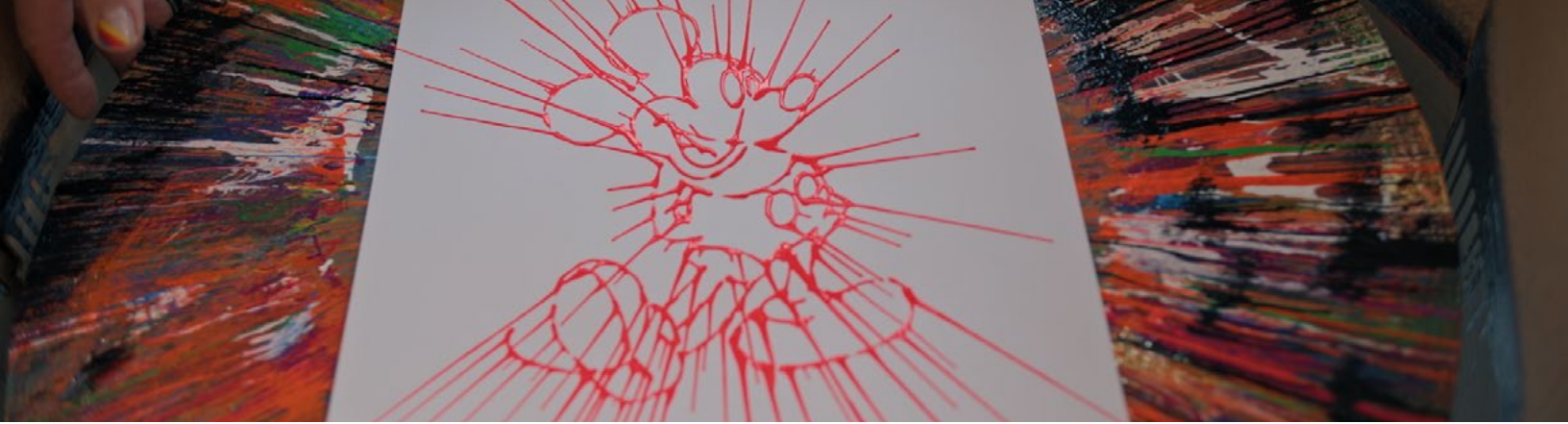
3. Make notes on the progression of the representation of Mickey Mouse in the film. How is Mickey represented in the beginning? What stages does his character pass through over the years? How is the character of Mickey Mouse presented at the conclusion?
4. Find at least five examples of the filmmaker trying to convince the viewer that Mickey Mouse is a true American icon. Look for appeals to logic, emotion, and/or prejudice.
5. Make note of at least five facts described in the film that surprised you and explain how each fact relates to the film’s theme.

## Post Viewing Prompts

6. Briefly describe **Mickey: The Story of a Mouse**. What do you think director **Jeff Malmberg**’s purpose was for creating this documentary?
7. What position does the filmmaker advocate regarding Mickey Mouse? What position does the filmmaker advocate regarding Walt Disney?
8. Is Mickey Mouse a “reflection of who we really are” as stated in the film?
9. Did any of the reasonings given by the film in support of Walt Disney seem to be weak or misleading? If so, describe those moments put forward in the film and explain why you thought the reasoning was flawed.
10. “Russian film director **Sergei Eisenstein** once declared that Mickey Mouse was America’s most original contribution to culture.”\* What effects has Mickey Mouse had on popular culture?

\* From “Mickey Mouse as Icon: Taking Popular Culture Seriously” by **Bruce David Forbes**, *Word & World*, Volume 23, Number 3 Summer 2003.





# Activities

## Reflection and Writing Prompts

- Proclaiming Mickey Mouse's iconic status can lead discussions in many directions. However, the entire world of popular culture is of immense importance and worthy of critical reflection. We can look at our icons to learn more about ourselves and to respond creatively to those influences that envelop us. With this in mind, create an edited video documentary short by interviewing your peers with the goal of discovering who/what are the current icons in their lives. Why do these people or things make their list? What about them makes these people or things truly iconic?
- "Mickey has become a logo for a far-flung family entertainment empire, no longer centered only on the mouse cartoons. This includes full-length animated movies, nature and family films, theme parks (in California, Florida, France, Japan, and soon in China), television shows like the Mickey Mouse Clubhouse and the various Sunday evening programs over the years, an entire Disney cable channel, and extensive Disney merchandise, found in Disney stores and almost every other kind of retail outlet one can name. Mickey has become the symbol for all of these 'family-oriented' offerings. Mickey Mouse is an icon of the commodification of culture." Write about the phrase "icon of the commodification of culture." How does this phrase apply to modern American culture?
- "The Mickey Mouse short film *The Opry House* (1929) reveals how inextricably linked vaudeville performance and blackface minstrelsy were to early animation. Nicholas Sammond writes in his book *Birth of an Industry* that early animators often performed at these shows. They also studied the performances of many of the vaudeville artists and translated those characters studies to paper when they were inventing their own cartoons. Sammond writes, 'Mickey Mouse isn't like a minstrel; he is a minstrel.' Blackface minstrels and vaudeville performers of the time dawned loose-fitting clothes, exaggerated makeup, and they wore white gloves." \*

Starting at 1:07:43 in the documentary, director Jeff Malmberg spends 1½ minutes presenting information on the controversy of the earliest Mickey Mouse shorts where Mickey is represented as a "blackface minstrel." How do these early images of Mickey Mouse speak to the racism of our own society? Research the history of "blackface" in American culture along with viewing these early Mickey Mouse short films: "*Steamboat Willie*," "*The Opry House*," and "*The Haunted House*." See the websites below to start your research. Present your findings in writing.

\* From "Mickey Mouse as Icon: Taking Popular Culture Seriously" by **Bruce David Forbes**, *Word & World*, Volume 23, Number 3 Summer 2003.



# Beyond the Classroom

## Taking Mickey Series

<https://www.hilobrow.com/tag/taking-mickey/>

HiLoBrow

By Joshua Glenn

January 18, 2020

## “Why Cartoon Characters Wear Gloves”

<https://www.vox.com/videos/2017/2/2/14483952/why-old-cartoons-mickey-mouse-wear-gloves>

by Estelle Caswell

Feb 2, 2017

## “Mickey Mouse Proves You Can’t Erase the Racism of Blackface”

<https://melmagazine.com/en-us/story/mickey-mouse-proves-you-cant-erase-the-racism-of-blackface>

By Zaron Burnet III

2020





# Media Literacy Resources: Screening with Meaning

We live in a world where technology mediates a large portion of human interaction and the exchange of information. Every projected image, every word published on a page or a website, and every sound from a speaker reaches its audience through the medium, through the language of the device. The ability to parse the vast array of media messages is an essential skill for young people, particularly in a mainstream commercial culture that targets youth as a vulnerable, impressionable segment of the American marketplace. Most students already have a keen understanding of the languages different media use and the techniques they employ to inspire particular emotions or reactions, but they often lack the skill or awareness to fully deconstruct the messages they continuously receive. Analysis of a media message—or any piece of mass media content—can best be accomplished by first identifying its principal characteristics:

1. **Medium:** the physical means by which it is contained and/or delivered
2. **Author:** the person(s) responsible for its creation and dissemination
3. **Content:** the information, emotions, values or ideas it conveys
4. **Audience:** the target audience to whom it is delivered
5. **Purpose:** the objectives of its authors and the effects of its dissemination.

Students who can readily identify these five core characteristics will be equipped to understand the incentives at work behind media messages, as well as their potential consequences. Media literacy education empowers students to become responsible consumers, active citizens and critical thinkers.

## COMMON CORE STANDARDS

### MEDIUM

#### All Media Is Constructed.

- What is the message, how is it delivered and in what format?
- What technologies are used to present the message?
- What visual and auditory elements comprise the media content?
- What expectations do you bring to the content, given its medium and format?

### AUTHOR

#### All Media Is Constructed by Someone.

- Who is delivering the message?
- Who originally constructed the message?
- What expectations do you have of the content, given its author(s)?

### CONTENT

#### Media Is A Language For Information.

- What is the subject of the media message?
- What information, values, emotions or ideas are conveyed by the media content?
- What tools does the author employ to engage the viewer and evoke a response?
- To what extent did the content meet your expectations, given the format/author?

### AUDIENCE

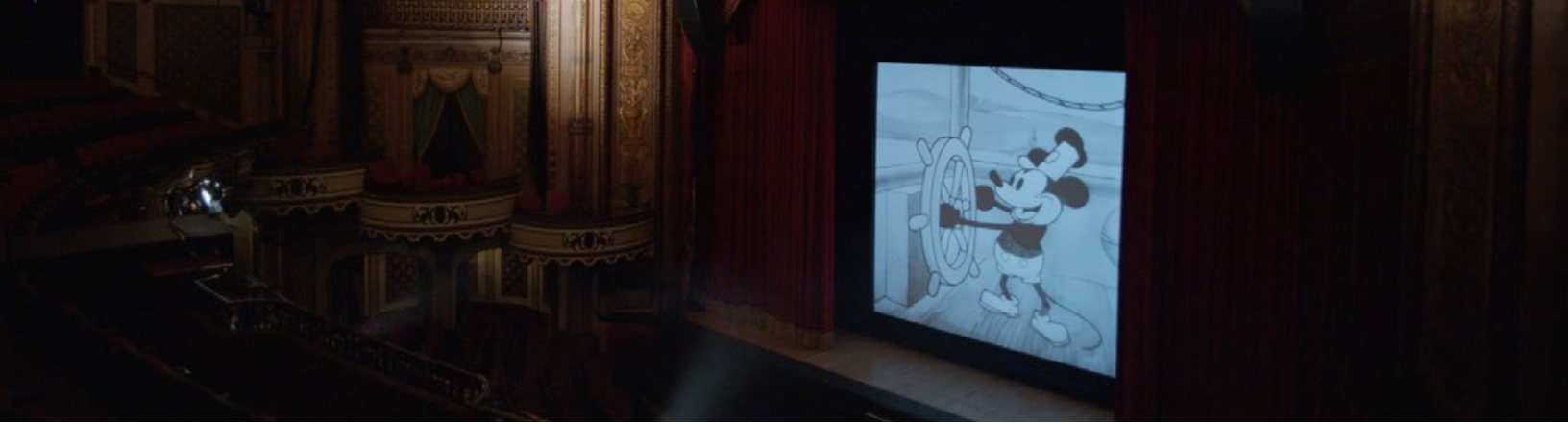
#### All Media Messages Reach an Audience.

- Who receives the message?
- For whom is the message intended?
- What is the public reaction to the media content and/or its message?
- What is your reaction to the media content and/or its message?
- How might others perceive this message differently? Why?

### PURPOSE

#### All Media Messages Are Constructed for a Reason.

- Why was the message constructed?
- Who benefits from dissemination of the message? How?
- To what extent does the message achieve its purpose?
- What effect does the message have on the audience it reaches, if any?



# Common Core Standards

## 6th–8th Grade

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.1-8C

Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6-8.2

Analyze the purpose of information presented in diverse media and formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) and evaluate the motives (e.g., social, commercial, political) behind its presentation.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6-8.8

Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, using search terms effectively; assess the credibility and accuracy of each source; and quote or paraphrase the data and conclusions of others while avoiding plagiarism and following a standard format for citation.

## 9th–10th Grade

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1

Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9–10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.2

Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source.

## 11th–12th Grade

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1

Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11–12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.2

Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) in order to make informed decisions and solve problems, evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source and noting any discrepancies among the data.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.8

Gather relevant information from multiple authoritative print and digital sources, using advanced searches effectively; assess the strengths and limitations of each source in terms of the task, purpose, and audience; integrate information into the text selectively to maintain the flow of ideas, avoiding plagiarism and overreliance on any one source and following a standard format for citation.





# Documentary Guide

## What is a documentary?

A documentary is a film whose goal is to capture truth, fact or reality as seen through the lens of the camera. But there are many kinds of documentaries, and not everyone's idea of truth is the same. The Scottish filmmaker **John Grierson** coined the term "documentary" in 1926 to describe American filmmaker **Robert Flaherty's** romanticized culture studies, but nonfiction filmmaking dates back to the earliest motion picture reels.

The definition of documentary expanded as filmmakers experimented with technology and the goals of nonfiction. Avant-garde documentarians, like **Dziga Vertov** in the 1920s, believed that the mechanical eye of the camera gave a truer image of reality than the human eye and pointed his lens at newly industrialized cities. **Leni Reifenstahl's** propaganda films from Nazi Germany used the nonfiction form to convey a political message, a slanted truth.

The international cinema vérité or observational movements of the 1960s attempted to remove authorship from the documentary. The observational filmmaker hovered like a "fly on the wall" watching the world without commentary. Modern documentaries often seek to raise awareness about a social, environmental or political issue, guiding their audiences toward civic participation and activism.

While watching a documentary, it is important to remember the core concepts of media analysis: who made the film, for what audience and why? The nonfiction format can be deceptively subjective, as all filmmaking involves an inherent selection process: in the images that are shot, the music and narration that accompanies them and, most significantly, the way in which they are all edited together. Media literacy means always analyzing a documentary for its message and authorial intent.

Even though they are nonfiction films, most modern documentaries structure their content around a traditional story arc, with a beginning, middle and end, as well as characters, and a conclusion, theme or thesis to impart to the audience. Documentary filmmakers begin their projects with an idea or an issue that they wish to explore more deeply. Through research and planning, they develop a comprehensive plan before they begin shooting.

## A BRIEF TIMELINE OF THE DOCUMENTARY

1895

The Lumiere brothers develop the first motion picture film reel, capturing brief unedited clips of life around them called 'actualities.'

1900-1920

Travelogue or 'scenic' films become popular showcasing exoticized images from around the globe.

1926

**Dziga Vertov**, with the Soviet Kino Pravda movement, released the experimental nonfiction film, **Man With A Movie Camera**.

1939

**John Grierson** collaborated with the Canadian government to form the National Film Board of Canada, with the initial goal of creating Allied propaganda in the support of war.

1960s

The 'cinema vérité' movement began in Europe, followed by the 'direct cinema' in the US. Portable cameras and sync sound allowed filmmakers to capture intimate footage with minimal intervention.

1968

The Argentine film, **La Hora de los Hornos**, opened the door to activist cinema of the 1970s, using film as a tool to counter capitalist politics in Latin America.

1988

Independent Television Service (ITVS) was founded.

2000s

The widespread use of digital cameras and editing software made the documentary medium more affordable to independent filmmakers.

Present Day The term 'documentary' comes to encompass a wide range of nonfiction cinema. Contemporary filmmakers continue to push the boundaries of truth in film and to explore new avenues and applications for the medium.