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Haunted Sketches: Analyzing the Foundations of Horror in Early Works by Tove Jansson and Walt Disney

Abstract

This article explores the early artistic influences and beginnings of Tove Jansson and Walt Disney, focusing on their works' gothic and surreal elements. Both Jansson and Disney are renowned for their contributions to children's entertainment, yet their creations are complex and multifaceted, often transcending the boundaries of "children's art." While prominent, the idyllic nature of their works is intertwined with darker, more surreal themes. Jansson's Moomin characters, initially depicted with fiery eyes and horn-like ears, reflect a blend of horror and Expressionism, influenced by her visits to Germany and many other European cities. Similarly, Disney's early animations, such as Skeleton Dance, showcases a macabre and anarchic energy, pushing the boundaries of enchantment and the uncanny in mainstream avant-garde cartoons. The article delves into the surrealist techniques and aesthetic qualities in Jansson's and Disney's early works, highlighting their impact on popular culture and their ability to enchant and liberate through horror.

Tove Jansson; Walt Disney; surrealism; expressionism; Moomins; enchantment



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Idyll can be found in the origins of both Walt Disney and Tove Jansson. When comparing the cultural productions of Disney and the Moomin characters by Tove Jansson, certain similarities become apparent. Both represent expansive multimedia and multimodal storytelling worlds, initially created for children but later evolving into complex symbolic universes.

The comparative examination of Disney and Tove Jansson in the 1930s does not point to direct influences or intentional borrowings but rather to a shared cultural context characterized by the proliferation of visual storytelling, the rise of character-driven narratives, and the emergence of commercialized fantasy worlds. Both creators operated within a milieu, increasingly shaped by mass media, the commodification of characters, and the expanding reach of animation and illustrated narratives. The similarities between Disney's anthropomorphized animal characters and Jansson's early depictions of creatures like the Moomins suggest a convergence shaped more by the zeitgeist than by any direct interaction.

Moreover, after World War II, both Disney and Jansson developed business models that could be interpreted as forms of Disneyization, expanding their respective fictional universes into multimedia franchises encompassing books, merchandise, and theme parks. However, as we argue in our yet-to-be-published article (see Pluciennik, Suvilehto 2025), these models of Disneyization are notably different in both intention and execution. While Disney's approach centered on creating a tightly controlled, highly commercialized global brand, Jansson's expansion of the Moomin universe maintained a more personal, artistically driven ethos, emphasizing creative integrity over mass market appeal. Thus, the comparison not only highlights parallel developments in character-driven world-building but also underscores the distinct cultural and ethical frameworks underpinning their respective modes of commercial storytelling.

Both personalities, of Disney and of Jansson, are associated with children's play. However, their image is complex and cannot be fit only into the formula of "children's art". However, this idyllic nature (not always associated only with rurality) appears often. The source of the legend spread by Walt Disney also lies in his dream of the idyllic

town of Marcelline, Missouri, a legend of an idyllic childhood for him, even though he spent only a few years there with his family (see Watts 1997: 3–23). Idyllic nature and pastoralism come to mind here, which must be considered when we think about the idyll. The idyllic perspective as a specific genre frame appears irresistibly in “Moominology” literature because many elements of Tove Jansson’s world can be inscribed in this perspective. Such an idyllic perspective does not mean unequivocal idyll and all-encompassing optimism. The world of Tove Jansson, like that of Walt Disney, is complex. As Ryszard Waksmund notes in his genealogy of characters created by Jansson:

Such a rich scale of borrowings and allusions could burst the stylistic form of Jansson’s cycle, were it not for the idyllic perspective, which imposes specific roles on trolls, animals, people, ghosts and comets. In this respect, it meets the requirements of a literary fairy tale, and what grows beyond its genre horizon is, as usual in such cases, an expression of the author’s aspirations and experiences. (Waksmund 1995: 83)¹

Such an idyll and idyllic perspective is undoubtedly reinforced by the specific geography of the Moomin Valley, which was once associated with the Finns’ summer vacation on one of the numerous Finnish islands and islets. Biographers also point to specific inspirations for Tove’s life, both as an adult and as a child: “The Hammarsten house on the Ängsmarn estate on the island of Blidö [Sweden] quickly became identified with the prototype of the Moomin house. A sentence from the introduction to *The Sculptor’s Daughter* represented Tove Jansson’s autobiography:

Grandfather was a clergyman and used to preach to the King. Once, before his children and his children’s children and his children’s children’s children covered the face of the earth. Grandfather came to a long field which was surrounded by forests and hills so that it looked like Paradise. At one end it opened out into a bay for his descendants to bathe in. Then Grandfather thought, here will I dwell and multiply, for verily this is the land of Canaan. (Jansson 2016: 13)

Tove recalls this idyllic valley in her first diary from 1926. Her grandfather was already dead by then, but her grandmother, who had welcomed the Jansson family for many years, stands on the jetty at Ängsmarn. The area is full of parents, cousins and children of all ages: “We have become quite a group of children in the garden,” notes the almost twelve-year-old Tove in the summer of 1926, not failing to draw this group under the title “We, the children of Ängsmarn” (Westin 2007: 54). However, this idyllic nature, often identified with either as a function of a fairy tale or a consolatory function, covers up the somewhat more complex nature of Jansson’s creation, as Tove Holländer writes very analytically in her dissertation (Holländer 1983). Moreover, it is not just about selected, so-called negative characters such as the infamous Groke, the Giant Edward, or Spirit, or the sea dog (Ługowska 1995: 64). “It is no coincidence that the texts mentioned to which Tove Jansson refers, i.e. *The Little Prince*, *Winnie the Pooh*, *The Wind in the Willows* are fairy tales in extenso. If an adult reaches for fairy tales, they usually

¹ If not otherwise noted, all translations — J.P.

do so for sentimental reasons (a return to readings from the past) or — if one may call it that — axiological. However, there is another important reason: reading fairy tales is a kind of Sunday activity, a journey to a spaceless space, towards Proust's "found time" (Leszczyński 1995: 89). The author of this quote also clearly refers to Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* when he sums up that "reading fairy tales is, therefore, an experience of freedom proper to childhood, it is unpunished roaming through the heavenly, endless meadows of time" (Leszczyński 1995: 89–90). Such idyllic nature will undoubtedly be reinforced by the so-called "public paintings" or murals by Jansson recently collected at an exhibition at HAM in Helsinki (Harni, Huovinen 2024, especially Ruohonen 2024). However, other archetypes of the dream of an island of happiness also come to the fore. In her final chapter ten of the classical book by Maria Nikolajeva (2000: 230–258) there is a detailed elaboration of "Moomin suite" in the context of the collapse of the idyll by Tove Jansson. However, the author describes the novels and short stories in a very peculiar order, not following the original appearances (Nikolajeva 2000: 231).

Expressionist genealogy of the non-literary Snork

However, when one traces the graphic genealogy of the Moomin character (here, we can also follow the already mentioned analyses of Holländer's illustrations and text), one is struck not only by the desacralizing, debunking legend of his creation on the wooden walls of the "outhouse" of the summer cottage, where the author and her family often rested. She writes about this very cautiously (Waksmund 1995: 81), but how interesting this legend is from the point of view of the mostly Lutheran Finnish society because, according to legend, Luther's theses were also supposed to have been created in the outhouse in Wittenberg. The genealogy of the toilet character Snork associates him not only with desacralization but also with Kant's name because Tove wanted to use this character drawn on the wall of a wooden toilet, called Snork, to oppose Kant's philosophical argumentation in the discourse with her brother (Finnish wooden toilets had several positions in one room). All this can be seen on the preserved toilet boards at the exhibition in HAM (see also Westin 2007 publishes the so-called original of Snork, which is not dark, however it is in the dark place).

It is Waksmund who refers to the genealogy of the graphic character in an inspiring way, although his considerations are very logocentric because he mainly analyzes the etymology of malicious trolls and all the symbolism that is associated in Nordic countries with these imaginary creatures. (Earlier, the dispute on this topic, "Are trolls our Polish dwarves?" was led by Polish writers who were also fans of the Moomins: Anna Kamińska and Jadwiga Żylińska). At one point, however, Waksmund also mentions artistic inspirations: "In the artistic evolution of Moomin, there was a period when his physiognomy changed — from a mischievous sharp-nosed animal, he transformed into a creature with rounded shapes and a completely different disposition" (Waksmund 1995: 77).

This graphic and artistic juxtaposition sheds much more light on the subject of artistic inspirations and possible influences of Tove Jansson's mature work. It is at this point that horror appears. In a sense, as a contextual splinter of the dominant time and various environments with which the author of the later Moomins is associated.

“At first, most Moomins were dark, with fiery eyes and horn-like ears. They were not at all pleasant creatures, more like something out of nightmares or expressionist films like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. They appeared around the same time Tove visited her Aunt Elsa in Germany in 1934, a woman she described as having ‘a real moral complex.’ The relatives’ household was characterized by biblical piety, and Cousin Karin was eventually committed to a mental institution for religious musings.” Peter Karlsson describes the origins of the Moomins in this way: It seems that, apart from the personal themes of the 1930s, the general cultural atmosphere also supported an atmosphere of horror rather than idyll (see Karlsson, Wanselius 2014: 60). We must bear in mind that the figures in the paintings representing black Moomins with red eyes are not entitled “Black Moomin” but they represent a figure with which Tove Jansson as an artist probably identified and it is rather Snork, than Moomin.

This context of German Expressionism is not indifferent to the issue of the presence of horror as an artistic technique and aesthetic quality in children’s art. In the interwar period and during the war, Tove Jansson can be called the author of “laughter and horror” pictures: “For Tove, the sale of her pictures was a good source of additional funds, but she drew a regular income from her work as an illustrator, which she did more and more of after completing her studies. In addition to the Christmas and New Year cards she created for the Art Card Centre (Taidekorttikeskus) in 1941–1942, she also created Easter cards and cards with bird and animal motifs, earning a decent amount of money from them. Above all, she created illustrations for many magazines, numerous Christmas almanacks, newspapers, and magazines for children, and she drew caricatures, book covers, and artwork for various publishers and magazines. She was employed by publishing houses such as Garm, Lucifer, Svenska Pressen, the weekly Astra, Hepokatti and many others in Finland and Sweden. She was a highly regarded graphic artist, and in 1946 Garm advertised itself by stating that Tove Jansson, “undoubtedly Finland’s most important cartoonist”, was its “court illustrator” (hovtecknare)” (Karjalainen 2004: 44). That the terrible beast Garm is the origin of the Moomin-troll figure is also written by Göran Schildt in Svenska Dagbladet as early as 1956:

For over a decade, she illustrated jokes in the now-defunct humour magazine Garm; it was here that she perfected and developed her unique narrative style, characterized by a sense of domesticity, familiarity and physiognomic expression. And so Moomintroll was born: She began drawing the little animal in the corner of her comics as a signature, which gradually gained importance. (Schildt 2018 [1956] trans. from Swedish — J.P.)

This cooperation with, among others, the activist, anti-fascist and anti-Russian “Garm” is connected with a family history because earlier, Tove Jansson’s mother, Signe Hammarsten-Jansson, the so-called Ham, designed the graphic symbol of this satirical weekly, referring to Norse mythology with its name. Garm is the guardian of Helheim in this mythology; it is a nomen omen — a beast whose role resembles the Greek Cerberus — it guards the gates of the land of the dead and announces the coming of Ragnarök. In the Edda, the most important source of Nordic mythology (Sigfursson, Sturluson 2019: 247), is Garm depicted as a fearsome hound chained in the cave of Gniphellir until Ragnarök. It is described as a powerful dog or wolf that howls in front

of the cave, heralding the end of the world and the release of the forces of chaos. During the final battle, Garm breaks free and fiercely confronts the god of war, Týr, resulting in the death of both. Garm symbolizes unleashed chaos and destruction, serving as a grim harbinger of the world's end. In some interpretations, it is identified with Fenrir, embodying the forces of destruction and fate.

His character fits into the broader mythological motif of the guardian of the underworld, which is also present in other Indo-European traditions. It is therefore worth constantly reminding that the illustration of this Garm, which is the hallmark of the satirical magazine, was made by Tove Jansson's mother, Signe Hammarsten-Jansson, and Tove herself worked as a graphic artist for the magazine as a fourteen-year-old in 1928. As Finnish biographer Tuula Karjalainen writes about her, Tove was already reading Edgar Allan Poe's horror stories at the age of nine (see also Suvilehto 2014, young writers and horror stories), and among her favourite writers in adult literature were Victor Hugo, Thomas Hardy, Robert Louis Stevenson and Joseph Conrad. They are all dark authors. She received free copies of books illustrated by her mother, so one can assume that she was familiar with more than just the superficial dark and cruel Norse mythology. There were always plenty of books in their home, and the whole family read a lot. Her brothers also started writing their own stories very early. The story about the debate in the outhouse on Kant further emphasizes the erudite nature of her childhood, which is full of books (Karjalainen 2014: 125). The presence of Poe and Stevenson on the young girl's reading list recalls the irresistible horror that appears in the early expressionist paintings featuring Moomintroll (who was then still nonsensically called Snork). Moreover, we can also find examples of early horror as early as in 1925 when Tove was just eleven years old, she drew a figure of death called "Döden" (Karlsson, Wanselius 2014: 57).

From a psychological perspective, the early representations of the Moomins reveal a darker, more unsettling dimension. In a 1947 interview for the periodical *Vår Tid*, J.O. Tallqvist asked Tove Jansson about the origins of the Moomintrolls. Jansson's response was notably psychological: as a child, she would steal food from the pantry, prompting her uncle to warn her about the "cold Moomintrolls." According to the uncle, these creatures would emerge from their hiding places, rub their snouts against the legs of pantry thieves, causing them to freeze and thus revealing their guilt to everyone (Westin 2007: 202–203). This depiction of the "cold Moomintrolls" is far from idyllic and suggests a more sinister, punitive aspect of these early trolls.

Interestingly, this motif of coldness and eerie presence evolved over time, eventually manifesting in the haunting character of the Groke. The Groke is a spectral, chilling figure who extinguishes warmth and light wherever she goes. Lamps dim and fires die in her presence, creating an atmosphere of desolation and fear. This chilling effect, reminiscent of the earlier "cold Moomintrolls," emphasizes the character's role as a metaphor for loneliness and emotional detachment, further intensifying the surreal, psychological undertones of Jansson's Moomin stories. However, over time, the Groke was also portrayed as a figure deserving of the reader's sympathy, not just fear. Beneath her terrifying exterior lies a character marked by profound isolation and unfulfilled longing for warmth and connection, thus rendering her both a source of dread and a symbol of existential loneliness.

It is worthy to notice that in the interview with *Weird Fiction Review*, Johanna Sinisalo (see Mills 2012), a prominent figure in Finnish Weird literature and a sanctioned continuator of the Moomin legacy in agreement with Moomin Characters, highlights the dark and unsettling elements in Tove Jansson's Moomin stories, particularly in *Comet in Moominland*. She describes it as a blend of science fiction thriller and eerie fairy tale, which profoundly impacted her as a child. Sinisalo notes that while often perceived as children's literature, the Moomin stories contain layers of fear and unease, serving as an early introduction to horror and the weird. We could also add the recent production of Björk who made a music clip with the "Comet".

Angular surrealistic creatures and the horror of the image

So, if, when trying to understand the "enchantment" of the Moomin world with an idyllic dominance, we reach only for literary texts or personal letters, then the admixture of dark "enchantment" associated with horror will not be entirely clear — compare the use of enchantment in Nikolajeva (2000: 233). However, if we reach for the Snork's prehistory of the Moomin and analyze the poetics of the original visual Snorks, expressionism and artistic angularity may also suggest other contexts. Interestingly, Disney's famous Mickey Mouse was also more angular at the beginning of his career, at a similar time in 1929. So, the framework of Disneyization may help us to understand the process in this case better. However, we must clearly go beyond text-centricity towards the image. And an image that — as in the case of Moominvalley — becomes a universe based on all-encompassing creation. The image creates space, and space becomes flesh, flesh and blood. Walter Benjamin's words about Surrealism are relevant in this context. He lived an active intellectual life during Tove's formative years. He stated:

Here the view contained in *Traité du style* [Treatise on Style], Aragon's last book, which demands a distinction between comparison and image, gains validity. A fortunate view in matters of style, demanding an extension. Extension: These two things — comparison and image — nowhere meet so drastically and irreconcilably as in politics. For organizing pessimism is nothing more than drawing a moral metaphor from politics, and on the plane of political activity discovering the one hundred percent space of the image. Contemplatively, this space cannot be measured at all. (Benjamin 1996: 70)

It should be added that immediately afterwards, in Benjamin's work, this space of the image becomes a corporeal space (Benjamin 1996: 71).

In accord with our interpretation, Erika Hallhagen also wrote about Surrealism in Tove Jansson's illustrations for *Alice in Wonderland* (2016). In Moomins, immersion in the painting is a separate subject in Moominmamma painting the Moominvalley on the wall in *Moominpappa and the Sea*.

Moominmamma got up and went up to the attic. When she came down again she had found three bags of dye, brown, blue and green, a tin of lead paint, a little lamp brushes. So she began to paint flowers all over the wall. They were large, substantial flowers because the brushes were large, and the dye soaked right into the plaster and looked intense and transparent. How wonderful they looked! This was much more fun than sawing

wood! Flower after flower appeared on the wall, roses, marigolds, pansies, peonies... No one was more surprised than Moominmamma herself. She had idea she could paint so well. Near the floor she painted long, waving green grass, and had no yellow paint. When the others came back for lunch she hadn't even lit the fire. She was standing on a box, painting a little brown bee with green eyes. (Jansson 1974: 128–129)

This is precisely the representation of immersion in the universe of the image's creator. A creative person can get lost in creation; the image becomes the only existing universe.

Tove Holländer writes about Surrealism in the case of Moominland, commenting on the evolution of the stories and illustrations themselves: “In *Moominsummer Madness* [...] a theatre serves as a setting for the book, which may be why this work abounds in absurd, almost surrealist pictures where seemingly incompatible elements meet; a stage floating on water, a floating sewing basket that is caught with a fish hook and so on. These pictures inevitably bring to mind surrealism and one of its definitions: the meeting of an umbrella and a sewing machine on an operating table” (Holländer 1983: 73–74, see also the Swedish main text 26 and 32). It is worth remembering that Surrealism does not have to be directly revolutionary in terms of morality through reaching for intoxicating substances; subversive elements can be objects of everyday life but decontextualized. Those elements are real surgical (operator) techniques of horror in the service of enchantment. Walter Benjamin writes:

What a mistake it is to think that from “surrealist experiences” only religious or narcotic ecstasies are known to us. “Opium for the people” is how Lenin defined religion and thus brought these two things closer together than the surrealists would have liked. However, the true, creative overcoming of religious revelation should not be sought in drugs. It is contained in the secular revelation of materialistic, anthropological inspiration, in relation to which hashish, opium and everything else can only be a kindergarten. (Benjamin 1996: 57–58)

Dancing Skeletons and Dark Snorks — The Technical Surgery of Horror as a Device for Secular Revelation

The lesson of Surrealism must have been a shock for many. However, it undoubtedly had an impact on popular culture as well, not necessarily on educated elites. Such popular art could be comics and films, especially animated ones. At its beginnings, the creators' intentions were not at all obvious, solely for entertainment. It is enough to recall the famous dispute over Disney between two critics of the Frankfurt School, Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno; one approved of Disney's early works (1920s and 1930s), while the other roundly condemned the entire cultural industry, which after World War II seemed unequivocally bad for him (see Leslie 2002, Majewski 2007). It is no wonder that Disney's “Silly Symphonies”, created simultaneously, aroused the admiration of experts such as Panofsky or literary figures such as Witkacy or Schulz. (Kaufman, Merritt 2016: 3; see Panofsky 1995: 104–105, and about Polish Disney fans such as Antoni Słonimski, Bruno Schulz, Karol Irzykowski or Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz see Sitkiewicz 2012: 7). Disney enjoyed its triumphs in Finland in the

1930s. Disney productions, especially the character of Mickey Mouse, gained enormous popularity in Finland, becoming part of the period's dynamically developing children's culture. Although Mickey Mouse's animated debut occurred in the United States in 1928, the character appeared in Finnish newspapers as a comic book character. It appeared on cinema screens as animations a few years later. Mickey quickly became an icon of children's entertainment and a symbol of the modernization of popular culture in Finland, reaching both children's imagination and the everyday experience of families. Mickey's popularity was so significant that the Helsinki Revy cinema changed its name to "Mikki." His image appeared both in children's books and on numerous everyday objects, such as tableware and toys from the Arabia factory and the Nokia rubber factory (*Mikki Hiiren...* 2018, see also Ronkainen 2020; we also reviewed Gartz 1978 at Valve, Oulu, courtesy of Sauli Pesonen).

Importantly, the Disney phenomenon in Finland was not limited to industrial products — the culture of home handicrafts also played an important role. Patterns for sewing Mickey Mouse mascots were published in newspapers and passed from hand to hand, indicating this character's deep roots in the everyday life of Finnish families. Mickey was a hero consumed passively and actively co-created by children and their parents. The popularity was additionally fueled by Georg Malmsten's songs, especially *Mikki Hiiri merihädässä*, which were broadcast on children's music programs for decades. Mickey Mouse thus became an export success for Disney and one of the foundations of the children's culture emerging in Finland during the interwar period (*Mikki Hiiren...* 2018). Therefore, the most appropriate context for understanding the culture around dark Snorks is children's culture in the form of séances, comics and gadgets such as dolls. And not just children's literature (we called the figures "dark snorks" in order to distinguish them from the proper and later Moomins).

Commenting on the famous debut of the "silly symphonies," namely *Skeleton Dance* (1929), the authors of the guide to these symphonies wrote that based on *Skeleton Dance*, Disney significantly expanded the boundaries of enchantment and the uncanny in the mainstream cartoon industry. (Disney dramatically enlarged the boundaries of enchantment and the uncanny for the mainstream cartoon industry; see Kaufman, Merrit 2016: 9). They also stated that metamorphosis has always been the source of the magic of cartoons. (9) Of course, this element of horror was not new; one can find many earlier visual realizations in the history of cinema, the history of literature, or even in the history of music because Saint-Saëns used a piece from the 1860s by Henri Cazalis entitled "Danse macabre". These themes were based on a schematic and straightforward *Dance of the Skeletons* plot. In the middle of the night, when cats howl in the cemeteries and spiders with cobwebs, an owl and bats can be seen, four skeletons emerge from their graves and begin a strange dance. The pale moon illuminates their scene, and rhythmic sounds are created when bone strikes bone. The spine of one of them serves as a xylophone, on which is played with leg bones. The skeletons dance and create music for two minutes, then disappear, returning to their graves as a tragicomic mass. Nevertheless, the plot was not the point here; somewhat, the fun of horror and very schematic Gothic elements of the scenery: cemetery, church tower, midnight, moon, black cats, spiders, bats... The most important thing, however, was the rhythm of the image and music, or rather their synchronization. This was the

essence of this technical, surgical enchantment. The synchronization procedure was once called “mouse-mousing” (Mickey Mousing, see Gartz 1978: 75). However, the key role in the revolutionary approach of the authors of “Dance” was also the use of the “face and eyes” of the dancing skeleton in the culminating moment of the invasion towards the viewer. This was a direct destruction of the fourth wall in the form of a screen, it is a kind of equivalent of literary narration in the second person in this animation. (See Rembowska-Płuciennik 2025 about the influence of “new” media on literature in respect to second person narrative.)

In this context, we would like to use an analogy again: In 1929, Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí’s *Un Chien Andalou* saw the light of day. In this film, the visual essence of horror is the approach of a razor to the eye. This act is very suggestive, as would be the use of a sharp scalpel. We claim that this dancing approach of the skeleton’s skull to the eye of the viewer in *Dance of the Skeletons* is a surrealist gesture like the approach of a razor to the eye. In other words, using another analogy: it is like the rocket projectile landing in the eye of the moon in Georges Méliès’s classic science fiction from the beginning of the century *A Trip to the Moon* (1902). This is a question of understanding the mechanisms of camera narration, which is different from linguistic narration. Walter Benjamin was aware of this at the time, writing about *The Work of Art in the Age of Technical Reproduction*; he compares filmmakers to surgeons and painters to sorcerers. While the painter keeps a distance and creates complete images, the filmmaker penetrates reality, breaking it into parts that are reassembled. This method of representation is more relevant today, allowing a deeper connection to reality (Benjamin 2002: 112–113).

The word ‘surgery’ (Benjamin 2002: 112) comes from the Greek ‘cheirurgía’, meaning ‘work with the hands’, which reflects the essence of this field as a manual action on the body, requiring precision, intervention and direct contact. Walter Benjamin, writing about the cinematographer in *The Work of Art in the Age of Technical Reproduction*, compares his role to that of a surgeon. Unlike a painter who surrounds the object with an aura and contemplation, the cinematographer ‘penetrates’ reality, dissects it and reassembles it through the frame selection, cutting and zooming in. The surgeon and the cinematographer make precise, technical interventions — the former in the body, the latter in the image — showing the world in a way impossible to capture with the naked eye and destroying the illusion of an indivisible whole. We want to take Benjamin’s words as a clue: the cameraman and the animator are surgeons, while the painter is a sorcerer, but in the case of surrealist horror tricks, which are the subject here, the element of secondary enchantment does not disappear, even though we can no longer speak directly of the function of the original, straightforward sorcerer. It is similar to the case of a painter like Tove Jansson — she wants to enchant her world through the dark colours of the fantastic Snork. She is a sorcerer, and at the same time, she can no longer be one. In Benjamin’s work, the operator and the painter are opposed because the painter is a sorcerer in the strict sense of the term. The operator is a technical sorcerer, armed with tools, but his function is similar if we consider surrealist procedures. Surrealist procedures, whether in animated films or in painting, are procedures not intended to affect consciousness but rather the body and — if one may say so — the subconscious, which is why they are not persuasion but enchantment. Of course, animation is a much closer operation to the eye, but Tove’s painting technique is also

a secondary enchantment. Neither is a “simple story” (as in Joles). It is not an oral telling of a story, as in the case of traditional storytelling. In Tove Jansson’s painting, the phantasmagorical figure of the dark Snork with red eyes and almost horns against the background of an expressionist landscape is a technical device of re-enchanting a disenchanted yet terrifying world. (On disenchantment and secularization, see Weber 2020, but also in this context Bernstein 2001, Chatterley 2011, on secularization and re-enchantment, see Taylor 2007 and 2024). Similarly, like the dancing skeleton leaning out towards the audience. However, in the latter case, the avant-garde would reduce the enchantment in liberating laughter. The essence of these actions, both of the operator and the painter, would bring the viewer closer to the deconstruction of normality. Benjamin talks about this when he describes Surrealism, which indicates transgression, which is the machine of deconstructing routine.

This is not to claim that Walt Disney was a surrealist. His artistic and commercial trajectory diverged significantly from surrealist principles, as his work became increasingly oriented toward realistic, three-dimensional representations that aimed to simulate life-like movement and emotional expression. Disney’s pursuit of realism is evident in the technological advancements he championed, such as the multiplane camera, which created a sense of depth and spatial coherence in animated films like *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) and *Bambi* (1942). This commitment to realism was further reinforced by the detailed, anatomically accurate animations of animals and humans, aiming to evoke a sense of naturalism rather than the fantastical or dream-like.

Walt Disney was drawn to surrealism, particularly its capacity to generate visually striking and dreamlike imagery that could captivate audiences. He admired the surrealist techniques employed by artists like Salvador Dalí and considered animation a medium capable of expressing surrealist visions through its fluid, transformative nature. Disney’s interest in surrealism is evident in his appreciation of the “Silly Symphony” cartoons, which he described as “dazzling cataclysmic rainbows” that evoke dreamlike experiences. However, despite his fascination, surrealism ultimately did not align seamlessly with Disney’s business model and artistic framework, which prioritized coherent narratives, emotional clarity, and mainstream commercial appeal. The collaboration with Dalí on “Destino” exemplifies this tension: while Disney appreciated Dalí’s artistic genius, the project’s abstract, alchemical imagery was perceived as too avant-garde and esoteric for Disney’s mainstream audience, leading to its eventual suspension. (see Allen 2020, Bossert et al. 2015) Moreover, the article by Esther Leslie (2010), explores the intersection of avant-garde abstraction and popular animation through the work of Oskar Fischinger and his short and unsuccessful collaboration with Disney. Leslie discusses how Fischinger’s films, influenced by the poetic abstraction of Kandinsky’s paintings, were among the first to blend high art with mass entertainment. His animations aimed to visualize music, creating a synesthetic experience that challenged traditional boundaries between fine art and popular culture.

In contrast, Tove Jansson never abandoned her fantastical, dream-like aesthetic, even as her work evolved. While Disney’s visual style moved toward polished, cinematic realism, Jansson remained committed to a more whimsical, idiosyncratic visual language characterized by disrupted idylls and surreal landscapes. Her Moomin characters inhabit a world that is both familiar and otherworldly — a space where the boundaries

between reality and fantasy are fluid, where creatures of various shapes and sizes coexist in a timeless, almost allegorical setting. Jansson's art, particularly in her book illustrations and comics, maintained a sense of intimacy and personal expression that resisted the homogenizing commercial polish that Disney's productions increasingly embraced.

Deconstruction and Liberation through Horror

In his essay on Surrealism, Walter Benjamin notes that "since Bakunin, Europe has lacked a radical concept of freedom" (Benjamin 2005). However, the Surrealists found one because "they are the first to liquidate the sclerotic liberal-moral-humanistic ideal of freedom" and understood it as a state that, when it does occur, must be enjoyed to the full, without pragmatic constraints. We find a similar attitude in Tove Jansson's early paintings, especially in her expressionist paintings with dark, deformed Snorks. There, her liberating imagination — combining drowsiness and rebellion, grotesque and empathy — is revealed, breaking away from bourgeois aesthetic and moral norms. Her figures are disturbing but unrestrained: they emerge from the darkness as if from the subconscious, expressing the conviction that true artistic freedom is incompatible with conventional order. Among the numerous artistic movements of the 20th century, abstractionism is the least suited to Tove Jansson; in addition to Expressionism and Surrealism, Henri Matisse's Fauvism and Paul Cézanne's Post-Impressionism also appear in the context of her painting (Kihlman 2024: 63).

In her youth, however, Tove Jansson was intensely interested in Surrealism, one of the main trends of the avant-garde art of the 1930s. As Tuula Karjalainen notes, Jansson was "very much involved in the Surrealism of her time, although for some reason she abandoned it in her painting. However, we see visual echoes of this period in her later monumental works, fairy-tale works and paintings inspired by paradise motifs" (Karjalainen 2014: 25). Her early fascination with Surrealism was primarily related to her access to the international art circuit, which was made possible by her family connections. Unlike most Finnish art students of the period, Tove had the opportunity to study in Sweden and visit the exhibition "Paris 1932," which was so strongly saturated with Surrealism that it was dubbed "The Surrealist Expo" (Karjalainen 2014: 26). Although she declared in a press report for "Svenska Pressen" that this kind of art "leaves her indifferent" and that she did not understand it (Karjalainen 2014: 26), the subcutaneous presence of Surrealist influences is visible in both her early expressionist paintings and her later work (e.g. in *Moominsummer Madness*). Moreover, we cannot exclude the influence on the first Moomin books, that is *The Moomins and the Great Flood* [Swedish original has no name of Moomins in the title and the text], a surrealist in imagery country song called Big Rock Candy Mountains, first recorded and copyrighted by Harry McClintock in 1928. Tove Jansson is an author of more than seventy songs (Klingenberg 2025).

In the pre-war phase of her painting, Jansson created expressionist visions with dark, deformed Snorks, which resemble figures emerging from a dreamlike space of the subconscious. Although far from classical figurativeness, these figures embody a visual idiom close to the surrealist dream of combining — or instead creating a border area — dream and reality. Regardless of the formal distance that the artist declared towards Surrealism, both her paintings and her later literary and illustrative works

contain “irrational moods and a fairy-tale character,” which, in Karjalainen’s opinion, “were very close to the spirit of surrealism” (Karjalainen 2014: 112).

In letters to friends, Jansson compared Surrealism to “a sensational dress that cannot be worn for more than one season” (Karjalainen 2014: 112), contrasting it with the lasting inspiration of impressionism and Cézanne. Nevertheless, in the 1940s, in her circle of friends gathered around the magazine “1940-luku”, Surrealism remained a hotly debated subject (Karjalainen 2014: 111). Unlike many of her peers, Jansson defended artistic independence over the ideological servitude of art, emphasizing that creativity should be based on “freedom and joy”, contain “despair but also desire”, and not be subordinated to duty (Karjalainen 2014: 112).

Significantly, we later find the same tensions in the world of the Moomins — in their setting on the border between dream and reality, in the visual richness of the illustrations, and in the motifs of adventure, travel, and freedom. The characters from Moominvalley, although more cheerful than the dark Snorks from the early paintings, retain the features of surrealist figures: they are embodiments of emotions, anxieties and dreams, and the world presented balances between idyllic security and unpredictable, disturbing dynamics. As Karjalainen aptly suggests, echoes of the youthful fascination with Surrealism did not disappear but transformed into a permanent element of Jansson’s aesthetics and creative philosophy (Karjalainen 2014: 25). Those inspirations will be especially relevant in relation to the late Moomins, which begin with the madness of the *Moominsummer Madness* (Jansson 1991). As Suvilehto considers in her article (2016) about psychoanalytic theory, dream and fantasy, these are seen as sources of power. With a little help of these, a person may understand and deal with reality (see also Freud 1925/1962: 77–82). And when a person is writing creatively, something special may happen during the session: The writer and also a fantasy reader may find a way to process inner issues. According to Freud (1969: 18, 39), children’s drawings, dreams, hopes, imagination and other expressions of creativity and play may be manifestations of young children’s unconscious drives, hopes and fears.

Importantly, Tove Jansson’s opposition to abstractionism is visible in all of her work and may also be an offshoot of the opposition of abstractionism to Surrealism. As Sandra Zalman (2020: 156) writes, Julien Levy, the author of a book on Surrealism, deliberately placed Surrealism at the intersection of various disciplines and cultural practices, contrasting it with elitist abstract painting. Similarly, Barr, in the MoMA exhibition catalogue, emphasized that Surrealism was not only an artistic movement but also a philosophy and a way of life. Unlike earlier shows of abstract art, Surrealism was supposed to break modernist conventions, according to him. Barr tried to show the connections between Surrealism and everyday life and other art forms, including advertisements, stills from Disney films, drawings by children and psychiatric patients, and folk art. Despite its broad approach, the exhibition did not consider the political dimension of Surrealism — its relationship with Marxism and anti-colonial and anti-imperialist attitudes. It was not until the second edition of the MoMA catalogue that George Hugnet’s essay introduced these aspects to the public in the United States.

In this context, it will also be important for Benjamin when characterizing a contemporary work of art; an operation on the subconscious was essential: A distinct nature addresses the camera compared to what is perceived by the human eye. It is

different mainly because instead of space imbued with human consciousness, a more subconscious realm emerges and asserts itself. This subconscious action is accompanied by the reception as if half-asleep or daydreaming:

Reception in distraction — the sort of reception which is increasingly noticeable in all areas of art and is a symptom of profound changes in apperception — finds in film its true training ground. Film, by virtue of its shock effects, is predisposed to this form of reception. In this respect, too, it proves to be the most important subject matter, at present, for the theory of perception which the Greeks called aesthetics. (Benjamin 2002: 120)

That is why the appearance of *Skeleton Dance* was such a revolutionary, para-Gothic horror event. The rhythmic synchronization with operations — nomen omen — on the fourth wall and reaching out to the viewer, to their subconscious, must have fascinated many. We have already written about this. However, the themes of such surrealistic plein air appear in many animations in the first half of the 20th century. As Merritt and Kaufman note, swamps and hells were particularly popular spaces: shrouded in an aura of mystery, magic and nocturnal frolics (Kaufman, Merritt 2016: 9). Similarly to surrealist collages and dreams, these animated landscapes were places of subconscious discharges and grotesque metamorphoses. What reasons can be found to explain why we write, read, and take an interest in horror, including for children? Are there any connections between the search for feelings of fear and a child's age? As Ogden says, the experience of anxiety can be without name, shape, or boundaries (Ogden 1989: 39). According to psychoanalytic theory, fantasy allows for the expression of hopes and desires that are otherwise forbidden, but through symbols, they come to light: for instance, Oedipal issues and various internal fears can be addressed symbolically (Freud 1925/1962: 82–83; Tyson, Tyson 1990: 312; see Honig 2009; Gupta 2009). These motifs can be found in folktales and fairy tales worldwide. In a way, there is a sense of weaving fantasy and reality — simultaneously and in one moment. This provides both the thrill of adventure and a sense of security (see different version of that statements in Suvilehto 2016).

It is worth noting that this type of aesthetic had its earlier precedents. As early as 1898, the French film *Le Squelette Joyeux* [The Merry Skeleton] by the Lumière Brothers showed a living skeleton that disintegrates into bones, only to be reassembled immediately — a moving ossuary straight from the danse macabre. Of course, this was still a silent film, lacking the all-important synchronization with music. Georges Méliès, the Master of Film illusions, introduced animated ghosts, skeletal dancers and magical transformations to the screen in his early films, such as *Le Château hanté* [The Haunted Castle] (1897) and *La Lanterne Magique* (1903). It is no coincidence that the surrealist fascination with Méliès, although it would fully resonate later, has its roots in this anarchic energy of early cinema. Critics in the 1970s emphasized that this energy comes from the plotless, free-form structure (Kaufman, Merritt 2016: 7).

This energy found its expression in Disney's "Silly Symphonies" (1929–1939). Desolate landscapes, such as those in *The Old Mill* (1937), eventually took on quasi-religious meanings, where abandonment and loneliness took on an almost sacred character (Kaufman, Merritt 2016: 9). This "outsider film" depicts the natural cycle of life,

indifferent to the fate of sentient beings (Kaufman, Merritt 2016: 29). Interestingly, in contrast to Mickey Mouse's tamed world — populated and technically subordinate — Symphonies explored the wilderness, the wild spaces of dream, and untamed imagination. Its beginnings are the skeletons dancing in the cemetery and immediately followed by the devils in hell in *Hell's Bells* from the same year, 1929.

This theme of animated “subconscious worlds” also returns in lesser-known films from the period, such as *Alice's Spooky Adventure* (1924), in which the heroine dances with a hooded goblin (Kaufman, Merritt 2016: 8), or in Méliès's Arabesque, fairy-tale visions, such as *Le Palais des mille et une nuits* (1905), combining dance, magic, and oriental fantasy.

Disney's *The Mad Doctor* (1933), featuring Mickey Mouse, shows signs of German Expressionism in its use of chiaroscuro and dramatic lines, as noted by Charles Solomon in *The Walt Disney Film Archives* (2020: 48–49). This influence completes the image of early animation as a space for the interpenetration of aesthetics of horror, grotesque, and anarchic humor. These elements have also been realized in Suvilehto's case-study (2016) and in children's written stories. “Sigmund Freud's idea of understanding dreams as manifestations of unconscious hopes and fears will be seen as new in the horror stories that children write. Through the dream-like and violent-story elements, a child deals with activated energy, but in a controlled manner: through writing, through a story.”

This creates a rich context for understanding *Skeleton Dance* as not only a cult Disney film but also a link in a larger cultural chain of surrealist animation landscapes: sites of ritual, transformation, and an anarchic dance of unsettling forms that move beyond the confines of conventional narrative toward the viewer's instincts, dreams, and fears (Kaufman, Merritt 2016: 56). As Suvilehto (2016) mentions, aggressive energy may also be derived from our society, which uses many varieties of media to bring violence to adults, and also to children's eyes and ears. Re-phrasing Maria Tatar: “Behind closed doors there exists a secret, which one is not allowed to watch. If you do that, you will start something that cannot be easily stopped. In folk stories and tales, there may lie secret knowledge behind doors, and they should not be opened. But a closed door raises one's curiosity” (Tatar 1987: 169). “Sometimes one needs a victim, a person going underworld, for example, going down into a cellar or ascending into an attic. Different stages of the story are psychological chains of events, and they are related to an initial process. Stairs can be a symbol for that” (Suvilehto 2016; see Rönnerstrand 1992: 85, 106).

Departing from surgical enchantment is not disenchantment

In the 1930s, Disney's work underwent a clear evolution — from surrealist and gothic experiments to gentler, more family-friendly stories, which was the result of both cultural changes and censorship pressure. Early animations, such as the previously discussed *The Skeleton Dance* (1929), part of the “Silly Symphonies” series, took full advantage of the freedom of the so-called pre-Code era, combining macabre grotesque with anarchic energy in the Spirit of Surrealism. (perhaps not in the intentions of the movement...) The blackly humorous vision of dancing skeletons in a cemetery was a spectacle balancing on the edge of moral tolerance — it aroused mixed reactions

at the time of its premiere: “Variety” warned “not to take children”, and the Danish authorities banned it entirely in 1931 as too grim and “macabre” (Cohen 1997: 29). Similar controversy also surrounded *The Mad Doctor* (1933), whose grotesque-ghostly atmosphere, as Charles Solomon notes, betrayed the influence of German Expressionism, visible in the expressive chiaroscuro and dramatic stylization of the film’s promotional poster (Solomon 2020: 48–49), but the subject matter directly betrayed the possibility of a sadistic use of the plot. Mickey’s participation in it deepened the controversy. These influences led to the cartoon being banned in Great Britain and Germany, among others, even before the Hays Code came into full force (Cohen 1997).

However, this direction began to change significantly by the middle of the decade. With the increasingly rigorous enforcement of the Hays Code from 1934 onwards — which also covered animations — Disney began to soften the macabre tone of its films, avoiding direct references to death, hell, or skeletons. The creators adopted a more conservative aesthetic, in which horror themes were at most mildly suggested rather than exposed in a grotesque spectacle (Cartoon Brew 2023).

Paradoxically, although the surreal atmosphere (again: not intentions and not surrealist ideology) of earlier productions caused controversy, it was their anarchic energy, formal freedom, and courage in exploring themes on the border between dream and nightmare that contributed to Disney’s success as an innovator in the field of animation (Kaufman, Merritt 2016). In *Fantasia* (1940), the “Night on Bald Mountain” sequence depicts a gathering of spirits and demons. This is followed by the “Ave Maria” scene, which introduces contrasting imagery to soften the gothic mood and comply with censorship requirements (Mitenbuler 2021). Similar mitigating measures were becoming standard in the second half of the 1930s.

This evolution can also be interpreted more broadly as a reflection of the changing role of animation in American popular culture. Early Disney animations were primarily aimed at adult viewers, for whom macabre spectacles were an attractive form of entertainment on the border between horror and cabaret. However, with the development of television and the strengthening of the belief in the child audience for animation, such dark elements were almost completely replaced by safer, more moralizing narratives (Klein 1993; Cohen 1997).

As a result, the 1930s became a transitional period for Disney: from macabre to “purer” plots, adapted to the growing demands of social and censorship. *The Skeleton Dance* remains an icon of this lost freedom today — an example of how close Disney was, despite all differences, to the avant-garde aesthetics of Surrealism and “gothic” grotesque, before he fully accepted the conventions of the Hays Code era.

Against this background, it is also easier to understand the relation to horror in Tove Jansson’s own works for children. She wrote: “Safety becomes an accumulation of habits, and the magical threat of catastrophe is only fear, a constant fear of everything that may happen or may never happen. The doors are closed, and what is written is no longer literature for children. It would be dishonest to continue writing fairy tales whose fairy tale nature no longer has any justification” (Jansson 1978: 7). However, all the time she thought about children, she wanted to alleviate fear — inevitable in her world as well — also with drawings and, therefore, lead readers to comfort. Abandoning surgical enchantment is not disenchantment, it is not regular persuasion. Tove Jans-

son accepted the imperfect, not very illusionistic medium of stop-motion animation with the use of convex puppets, because such a non-illusionistic medium clearly suited her. The workshop of the Se-Ma-For studio was not a Disney factory. Yet reflections of secular revelation can be found in them, just as in the stark linework of Tove Jansson's children's illustrations.

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