The Why, the What, the How: Disney, the Population Council, and the Pre-Production of *Family Planning*

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Family Planning, a short, animated film made by Walt Disney Productions in 1968, is a touchstone for historians of global population. Since Matthew Connelly’s Fatal Misconception: The Struggle to Control World Population (2008) re-energized the field, the film has become a fixture in histories of population control; an irresistible opportunity to namecheck Donald Duck and inject some levity into otherwise sober accounts. Analysis has concentrated on salient features of the film: its construction of an ethnically generic “everyman,” its consumerist message, and its coyness about contraception. It typically figures as one of the most significant products of a sustained effort to mobilize mass media in the service of international family planning. The Marxist critique of Donald Duck as an imperialist emissary from around the same time has not escaped notice. Details about the film can be unreliable—the number of translations, for instance, varies; possibly the first scholar to encounter the film, in the U.S. National Archives, presumed a white audience; and a more recent account has Donald painting images of birth control devices (he doesn’t) — but, otherwise, the substance is accurate enough: Family Planning was produced by Disney for the Population Council (PC), an NGO created by John D. Rockefeller 3rd in 1952, to promote the “nuclear family” in Asia, Latin America, and Africa. As director of the Council’s Communication Research Program, Bernard “Barney” Berelson, phrased it, “The broad purpose of this film is to popularize, legitimize, motivate for, and ‘sell’ family planning throughout the world.” As part of a modernizing program rooted in direct trade-offs between fertility, on the one hand, and family health, wealth, and happiness, on the other, it targeted the paterfamilias and argued that his capacity to adequately provide for his children, not the number of his offspring, should be the measure of his manhood.

Insights and errors notwithstanding, historical accounts of Family Planning largely draw on the film itself as evidence. Our research mobilizes previously neglected lines of evidence, especially unpublished documents held by the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC), to shed new light on hidden negotiations and contestations. In drawing from the materials at the RAC — and beyond — we aim to contribute to an increasingly concerted effort to embed questions about
media and communication more centrally in histories of reproductive politics. As a historically significant media object for which an unusually rich archival repository exists, *Family Planning* presents a strategic opportunity for revisionism. We came to Sleepy Hollow with the question: How does reckoning with evidence of the film’s production, circulation, and reception change the historical understanding of communication in the service of international population control? This preliminary report concentrates on the pre-production phase; we will address the latter stages in a full-length article. Here, we begin with a brief synopsis of the PC and of *Family Planning*.

The history of the Population Council is well documented. For our purposes, it is important to note that it emerged as a global leader in family planning in the 1960s, as national governments, NGOs, and the UN increasingly turned their attention and allocated resources to the perceived problem of world overpopulation, the famine and hardship it was predicted to cause, and not least, the potential for communism to take root in India and other poor countries with already large and rapidly growing populations. Family planning, a softer euphemism for a highly personal, politically, and religiously sensitive topic that encompassed contraception and was often conflated with population control, was the proposed solution. The idea behind its internationalization was to modernize family size and reestablish demographic equilibrium in a postwar world where scientific and medical progress had effectively reduced infant mortality (“death control”) but not fertility (“birth control”). This was easier said than done; it required entirely new methods of contraception, distributional infrastructures, educational campaigns, and cultural change on a mass scale. To these ends, the PC invested in four key areas: (a) advisory assistance on family planning to poor-world governments; (b) contraceptive R&D; (c) demographic data collection, evaluation, and training; and (d) information exchange. Most famously, the PC developed, tested, and distributed a new generation of less expensive plastic intra-uterine device (IUD). Nor was communication left to chance. To facilitate the circulation of knowledge, the PC launched a journal, *Studies in Family Planning*, in 1963, established a circulating film library in New York, and created “prototypic aids that could be adapted to the needs of particular countries.” Of the aids, *Family
Planning represented the PC’s single largest investment; it was also a compromise with Disney.

As the Population Council explained in the January 1968 issue of Studies in Family Planning, the film “makes about 15 elementary but important points about family planning.” It opens with a disclaimer: “The characterizations and situations used in this film may not apply directly to your community, but the basic problems presented are of concern to people everywhere.” This tension, between a disparate global audience, on the one hand, and an ultimately misplaced faith in the universal appeal of Donald Duck, would persist as the film circulated far and wide. The disclaimer cuts to the inverted red triangle — the iconic symbol of India’s family planning program — illuminated by a spotlight shining on a red curtain. The triangle contains an isotype-style depiction of a nuclear family: mother, father, girl, boy.

About a minute in, Donald Duck rushes on stage, easel in hand. His clumsiness in setting it up provides comic relief, while the more sober voice-over introduces the subject of the film: Man. This narrator then introduces the “Common Man,” who is intended to be an amalgamation of various ethnicities and cultures found throughout the world; and then “Woman,” explaining that the “upward rise” of Man is being slowed by the “sheer rate of numbers.” We learn about the historic “balance” between births and deaths, especially of young children, until recent progress in medicine, science, and sanitation disrupted the age-old equilibrium. As a result, families are becoming larger, and poorer. This is depicted by way of example: a small, healthy, happy family that can also afford a radio, is contrasted with a large, sickly, miserable family, that is barely able to feed itself. Donald transforms into a doctor, complete with white coat, medical bag, and head mirror, as the narrator explains that “modern science” has provided the “key” to a “new kind of personal freedom”: family planning.

The final third of the film does not get into the nitty gritty of contraception, but rather coyly explains that family planning means the freedom to “have only the children you want, and when you want them.” Gradually winning over the initially fatalistic Everyman, the narrator discloses the existence of “several
effective methods,” including “pills” and “simple devices.” The Woman, who
does not speak for herself, but whispers in her husband’s ear, asks if the
methods are acceptable and safe. The narrator reassures them that the methods
are not only safe, but improve the health of mother and children. The measure
of a man, in turn, is not the number of children he has, but how well he takes
care of them. “And all of us,” the narrator intones as Donald, imitating Uncle
Sam, points directly at the viewer, “have a responsibility towards the family of
man, including you!”

The curtains draw closed.

While *Family Planning* was in pre-production, Walt Disney Productions was
segueing from an ambitious postwar slate of films that have become classics
(*Alice in Wonderland*, 1951; *Peter Pan*, 1953) to a subsequently less well-
regarded, more economical model of production that would abide through the
refer to this as the shift from the Silver Age to the Bronze Age of Disney films,
reflecting a perceived drop in quality that is often associated with the passing of
Walter Elias Disney in 1966. At the same time, using models of for-hire
production that Disney had developed while making propaganda films during
World War II, the studio was producing educational and industrial films for a
variety of institutions and companies, including the Coordinator of Inter-
American Affairs, Kotex, and Upjohn.

Disney, the man, did not live to see the completion of *Family Planning*, but an
early meeting between him, Bernard Berelson (again, head of the PC’s
Communication Research Program), and Raymond “Ray” Lamontagne, a friend
of John D. Rockefeller 3rd’s son Jay, occurred in the months prior to his death.
In March 1966, Berelson recorded that he and his colleagues were “impressed”
with the Disney staff, and that Ken Petersen (a longtime animator and producer
for Disney, and then “head of the 16mm documentary work”) had “fallen for’
the population problem and wanted to get in on it.” There is some evidence that
Disney himself was concerned with overpopulation. In 1964, he had contributed
to *Golden Opportunity*, a short advocacy film concerned with the impact of
population growth on California’s natural environment. Read or unread, he
kept a copy of *Family Planning and Population Programs*, the proceedings of
a 1965 conference edited by Berelson and others, in his private office. And he proposed a (later discarded) premise for what would become *Family Planning*, “having to do with an analogy in animal reproduction.”

Another principal area of discussion at the meeting was what — of the many possible topics that fell under the banner of population control — should be emphasized in the film (or films; a trilogy was also considered). As Berelson framed it, should *Family Planning* focus on “the Why (rationale for family planning), the What (physiology of reproduction), [or] the How (contraceptive methods)”? There was some disagreement. Disney staff argued that *What* and *How* had more sales potential. The Population Council, meanwhile, advocated for *Why*. These fundamental questions of emphasis and goals would bedevil *Family Planning* in pre-production and beyond.

Curiously, the potential risk of fallout from depicting *What* and *How* — which is to say procreation and contraception — even euphemistically, in an animated film was not addressed as a meaningful topic. As Berelson recalled, “The question of whether Disney should back off from this possibly controversial subject in his own commercial production never really came up. It was skirted once, but dismissed. He doesn’t seem worried about it, to my surprise.”

Disney, the man, officially disavowed politics and insisted that his studio was nonpartisan. As one critic framed it, in reference to the Disney sexual educational film *VD Attack Plan* (1973): “The corporation is determined to keep separate their educational and entertainment branches. The two images, they believe, clash. VD and Snow White simply do not mesh.” Of course, many scholars have subsequently demonstrated how porous this separation was in fact, and have outlined the implicit politics of the studio, not to mention the material evidence that shows Disney participating in many political minefields in the decades preceding and following *Family Planning*.

In any case, the plans for *How* were, for much of the pre-production process, quite detailed. Into July of 1966, the film was still to include up to ten minutes regarding “Information on Contraceptives” in which “the loop,” the plastic IUD developed by the PC, as well as “sterilization, condom and the pill” would be
described, with a strong emphasis that contraception “doesn’t interfere with your pleasure.” As for “the nature of human conception,” the goal was to include “only enough to establish our bona fides. Don’t go into detail.” Comparatively, at this stage the Why — “The Population Problem”— which would ultimately prove central, received short shrift, only five planned minutes of a longer intended runtime.

The debate is further evidenced in the project’s shifting title. In informal, internal usage, PC staff typically referred to The Population Picture, allowing for a capacious perceived focus; or The Disney Film, showcasing their collaborator. In 1967, the working title was The Family of Man, clearly capitalizing upon the celebrated Edward Steichen exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art in 1955, and its popular accompanying book. Perhaps hewing too close to the exhibit and risking conflation, they then reversed the title, opting for Man and His Family. Language that refers to this formulation is maintained in the film’s final script. Finally, as late as August 1967, Disney’s Carl Nater — who had worked on educational films for the company since World War II — advocated for the more direct, but still euphemistic, Family Planning, which ultimately prevailed.

This title posed its own problems, however, and discussion of it sometimes revealed the low regard that Population Council staff had for the film’s intended viewers, namely, the “low literacy, low income, uninformed audiences of men and women of reproductive age in the developing world.” In an internal list of “problems we have to deal with in making the picture,” one PC staffer worried that for the imagined viewer, “the idea of ‘planning’ is a foreign notion. We live in the future — they live in the present only.” A further concern was that “family planning” would be misinterpreted as synonymous with abortion. The PC thus wished to emphasize different contraceptives in the film, contraceptives that existed “in various forms that are suitable to every cultural and religious group. There is an acceptable way for everyone, i.e., for you.” PC staff emphasized that the film should “illustrate and make the definition clear, i.e., family planning is not abortion.” As it transpired, no contraceptives would be depicted in the final version.
The Why, What, How debate often overshadowed more prosaic questions about the film as entertainment. How was a Disney animated short meant to convey the idea of overpopulation, discuss the physiology of reproduction, and introduce contraceptive methods, and still be entertaining enough that audiences would willingly pay attention? PC staff had hoped that the Why, What, and How could be conveyed within the context of a story. However, per an internal complaint in late 1966, they perceived Family Planning as “not a bad animated lecture but it should have been an animated drama.”

The relative weight of drama versus lecture in Family Planning would continue to hang over the film. As RAC documents reveal, the production, distribution and reception of the film continued to be fraught, a process of contestation that we shall more fully explore in a planned longer article. In the meantime, readers can watch Family Planning online, where unofficial copies of the film are widely available, and where this fascinating media object and relic of a postwar obsession with global overpopulation has in recent years reached larger and more diverse audiences than ever.


5 C.f., Matthew C. Gutmann, Fixing Men: Sex, Birth Control, and AIDS in Mexico (Berkeley, 2007).


11 The Population Council, 71.

12 “The Disney Film on Family Planning,” Studies in Family Planning 1, Jan. 1968, unpaginated.


14 On the iconography: Sarcar, “The Inverted ‘Red Triangle.’”


16 Chris Pallant, Demystifying Disney (London, 2011); Animation and America (New Brunswick, 2002), 128.

18 Memorandum by Bernard Berelson, March 15, 1966, PCR, RG2 AC2 54, box 519, folder 4806, RAC.
19 Made with Californians for Beaches and Parks, an advocacy group, the film is available only in archives, including the RAC. Undergoing rapid suburbanization, postwar California was a hotbed of environmentalism and population control advocacy: Adam Rome, The Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism (Cambridge, 2001); Jesse Olszynko-Gryn and Patrick Ellis, “Malthus at the Movies: Science, Cinema, and Activism around Z.P.G. and Soylent Green,” Journal of Cinema and Media Studies 58 (2018), 47–69.
20 Steve Mannheim, Walt Disney and the Quest for Community (Aldershot, 2002), 172n91.
21 Memorandum by Bernard Berelson, March 15, 1966, PCR, RG2 AC2 54, box 519, folder 4806, RAC, 1.
22 Ibid., 2.
23 Ibid., 3
24 Paul Wells, Animation and America (New Brunswick, 2002), 108.
26 Wells, Animation and America, 108.
27 Memorandum by Bernard Berelson, August 8, 1966, PCR, RG2 AC2 54, box 520, folder 4817, RAC.
28 Memorandum from Bob Gillespie to Ken Peterson, August 8, 1966, PCR, RG2 AC2 54, box 520, folder 4817, RAC.
30 Memorandum by Bernard Berelson, August 8, 1967, PCR, RG2 AC2 54, box 519, folder 4808, RAC.
31 Bernard Berelson, “The Disney Film,” background report for Population Council field staff, February 1968, PCR, RG2 AC2 54, box 520, folder 4811, RAC, 2.
32 Minutes from meeting on September 29, 1966, PCR, RG2 AC2 54, box 520, folder 4811, RAC, 4.
33 Memorandum from Bob Gillespie to Ken Peterson, August 8, 1966, PCR, RG2 AC2 54, box 520, folder 4817, RAC, 1.