

Multimodal Analysis of *DONALD  
DUCK: The Spirit of '43* 1943

<https://youtu.be/XNMrMFuk-bo>



The Japanese bombed the United States at Pearl Harbor in December of 1941, triggering the United States' entry into World War II. The United States was in need of money, due to the Great Depression leaving the country in immense debt, and the American taxpayer carried the burden of the war expenses. The government commissioned Walt Disney Studios to create this animated film to persuade people to pay their taxes to support the war effort. The animated film's message is displayed when Donald Duck pays his taxes; he is shown to be directly supporting the war effort by doing so. When he doesn't pay his taxes, the Axis powers benefit, therefore he is labeled as a traitor to the United States of America. This animated film was produced to tell the American people to pay their taxes on time or the Axis powers will win the war.

A segment from the animated film that is quite persuasive is from 2:15 to 2:58, Donald Duck chooses between the good duck and bad duck. The bad duck is shown to represent the Axis powers, whereas the good duck represents the United States. Since the United States government created this animation, Donald Duck clearly chooses the good side, or the side supporting the country. The purpose of this clip is to emphasize how awful the Axis powers are, no matter if the Axis powers were good or bad, as they are the enemy. The United States government needs more money to pay for the war, and they want to get their money from the people who owe it first.



The filmmakers utilized imagery and framing while also appealing to the viewers' ethos, pathos and logos to effectively deliver the message that if one does not pay their income taxes they are directly contributing to the Axis powers' victory. These strategies work together as the United States government's attempt to influence Americans to pay their taxes. If Americans do not pay their income taxes regularly, they are labeled as traitors because they are not contributing

directly to the war effort.

The filmmakers used symbolism to create ethos as a strategy in this animated film. When the bar doors swing closed at 2:18, viewers and Donald Duck can see that the doors are in the shape of a swastika (pictured to the left). Because the swastika is a well known insignia of the Nazis in the 40s, Donald Duck's reaction to the doors is a model of how the American people should react to the Axis powers (which includes the Nazis): giving them an uppercut, whether physically or financially by paying taxes. Similarly, right after the bar doors shut, the good duck is seen in

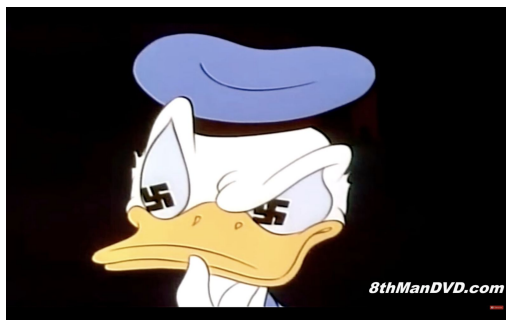


front of a wall with the American flag on it (2:32). The American flag is formed from the rubble; this could be a metaphor for the

United States taking the rubble from the attack on Pearl Harbor and fighting back harder. Correspondingly, the stance of the good duck is in parallel to how Uncle Sam, an American symbol of patriotism, is depicted in political cartoons and history books. Also, the stars on the flag are white and twinkling, which has a heavenly aura, causing the viewer to feel safe. Most Americans at the time were Christians, so appealing to their Christian morals through ethos was a very smart propaganda technique. The viewers Christian morals tie into the filmmakers' use of pathos as well.

The filmmakers also utilized pathos when choosing the music to coincide with the film. At 2:41-2:46, Beethoven's Fifth Symphony plays. This composition is the victory song for the United States during World War II. When Donald Duck punches the bad duck, the audience is meant to feel prideful that Donald Duck fought against the Axis powers. The music instills a sense of patriotism in the audience; they will want to contribute to the victory to help their country. Likewise, the guilt of not providing financial support/aid for the fighting men to have the supplies they need motivates the viewer to pay their taxes on time. The narrator says, "...every dollar you sock away for taxes is another dollar to sock the axis," (2:47-2:52) immediately after Donald Duck pays his taxes. From a psychological standpoint, this quote is positive reinforcement for the viewers. When the audience hears that their money is going towards fighting against the Axis powers, they are more inclined to pay their taxes on time because of the positive reinforcement. The United States government is ery clever to utilize this tactic.

Imagery also plays an important role in conveying the message of the animated film. When the narrator says "Spend for the Axis? Or save for taxes?"(2:27-2:33), Donald Duck looks between the two ducks (bad duck and good duck), his pupils change to the symbols representing the Axis and Allied powers.



A common clichè says that the eyes are the windows to the soul, so the filmmakers are demonstrating that based on who the viewer supports, it reveals their true self and loyalties. After Donald Duck decides that his loyalties are with the United States, he punches the bad duck into the tavern, breaking the swastika doors into a "v" shape (2:43). This encounter symbolizes that the Allied powers are going to take down the Axis powers and rid the world of fascism by coming out of this war victorious; not without the American taxpayers' money though. The

filmmakers intended for the two ducks to be like the devil and angel on the shoulder gag, the bad duck being the devil and the good duck being the angel. The pupils changing shape is the final phase of that metaphor. This metaphor also appears to the majority of the population, Christians, because of the biblical allusion it utilizes.

The filmmakers purposefully conveyed the message that the government needs the citizens to pay their taxes on time. The chosen section of the animated film is perfectly crafted to allude to the idea that paying taxes is the honorable decision to make. According to this clip, if people choose to spend their money rather than pay their taxes, it is viewed as directly supporting the enemy. No one wants to seem treasonous, especially during a world war, so the clip is highly effective; because the United States was recently bombed at Pearl Harbor, the United States government took advantage of the public's fear of treason in this animated film to get them to pay their taxes on time. As a modern viewer, *The Spirit of '43* is quite obviously propaganda and would not work on the public today. However, the use of animated films back in the early 40s was new, therefore the public was more likely to pay attention to the animated film when it played in the movie theater. The government controlled all of the information about international affairs, so this animated film shaped the way the average American viewed the axis powers. *The Spirit of '43*'s propaganda methods are indicative of its time, but the way that the Axis powers are portrayed in the animated film influenced how the average American views fascists and enemy nations to this day; that is the true power of propaganda.