6. *Inside Magoo (1960): Comedic Commentary on 1950s America and Cancer*

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**Abstract**

This chapter traces the role of humour in *Inside Magoo* (1960), an educational film released by United Productions of America (UPA) for the American Cancer Society (ACS). Humour, I suggest, provided 1) a response to ACS’s concerns that public fears of cancer led people to avoid appropriate medical help, and 2) a commentary on 1950s America from the perspective of someone — Mr. Magoo — who rejected the post-war world of white, male, middle-class, consumerist suburbia. This film was thus not only about cancer. It wrapped the ACS message within humorous observations on life in the 1950s to charm audiences into adopting ACS approaches to the disease; a technique, I suggest, that was common to other UPA cancer educational films of the 1950s.

**Keywords:** Mr. Magoo; educational film; United Productions of America (UPA); American Cancer Society (ACS); *The Lonely Crowd* (Riesman)

In 1959, Stephen Bosustow appeared on television to discuss the role of the arts and entertainment in cancer control. Bosustow was the head of United Productions of America (UPA), the film company that had, in 1949, created the nearsighted character, Mr. Magoo, one of the most popular animated figures in the cinema of the 1950s. Bosustow was asked how he would try to persuade a man who was ignorant of the warning signs of cancer and who likely wouldn’t act on them anyway. ‘There are several ways we can do this’, he answered, using the example of an educational film storyboard with Mr. Magoo. ‘One, we can scare the daylights out of him—and in this case all he
has to do is turn the dial to avoid the experience. Second, we can charm him into accepting the information and leave it up to him as to what happens afterwards.’ The following year, Bosustow turned the storyboard into a cancer education film, first called Magoo’s Check-up, later Inside Magoo.2

There are two forms of charm to consider here. One is that Magoo himself lives a charmed, almost magical life. His poor eyesight means that he constantly mistakes what is going on around him, which takes him on an improbable, comedic route to the doctor and a check-up. The details of this journey will come later in this chapter. Suffice to say here that the film revolves around Magoo’s frantic efforts to avoid the cancer message of the film’s sponsor, the American Cancer Society (ACS), and that the message only gets through to him because of his misinterpretation of a series of accidents as warning signs of cancer. A further series of lucky events and misinterpretations then delivers him to the doctor’s office and his salvation. This form of charm is wholly within the world of the film, and results in relief and joy for Magoo at the news that he does not have cancer. This is not only a story about how to control cancer, but also about how physicians could control anxiety about the disease.

The second form of charm—the one to which Bosustow refers—concerns the relationship of the film to its audience. The figure of Mr. Magoo, his quasi-magical life, the improbable course of events, the humour of his misconceptions, and the film’s comic commentary on life in the 1950s were all intended to charm an audience, and to engage its loyalty to Mr. Magoo, to UPA, and to the educational message of its sponsor, the ACS. Charm in this form in Inside Magoo was a type of cultural capital that could be converted into other forms of capital: income and audience loyalty for UPA, support for the ACS’ view of cancer control, and (the promise of) health and well-being for audiences. This is a film that used the animated body of a seemingly nearsighted, old, bald, small, and portly man to ensure that UPA flourished commercially and to approach a disease that, in the early 1960s, could lead, in the world outside the cartoon, to death, debility, financial ruin, broken families, and social stigma. No small wonder then that Bosustow and the ACS wanted to avoid scaring the daylights out of the viewer.

1 Quoted in Corwin, ‘Tactic’, p. 10, emphasis added.
2 For the storyboard, see ‘Inside Magoo’ (Cancer News); ‘ACS Re-signs UPA’. The film was distributed by Columbia Pictures and was available free from the ACS; ‘Magoo Cancer Cartoon’. There are few archival records on this film; see the sparse documentation in the Technicolor and the Abe and Charlotte Levitow collections held in Special Collections at the Margaret Herrick Library.
This chapter has two main goals. First, it explores how UPA deployed Mr. Magoo to address the problem of fear. The American Cancer Society had long had an ambivalent attitude towards fear. On the one hand, the Society argued, a healthy fear of the disease could drive people to the doctor and ensure timely medical intervention, early in the natural life of this group of diseases or some precursor. The disease, the ACS explained, began as a small circumscribed anomaly, and intervention was best undertaken early, ideally before it turned malignant, grew too large, or spread to other parts of the body. On the other hand, however, the ACS also argued that fear of the disease or its treatment could also dissuade people from this course of action, with the result that they delayed seeking appropriate medical help and arrived in the doctor’s office with untreatable cancers. So, the question was how to promote the healthy fear of the disease without encouraging the unhealthy sort that resulted in delay. UPA’s solution was to make audiences laugh at their own fears, as expressed by cartoon figures such as Mr. Magoo. The actor Jim Backus (the voice of Magoo) captured the point when, in the live-action section of Inside Magoo, he tells his viewers that ‘by being funny I hope I can make you watch and think about something you maybe don’t want to think about’.

A second goal of this chapter is to explore the film’s commentary on 1950s America. This will be done by comparing Inside Magoo with two earlier films UPA made for the ACS—Man Alive! (1952) and Sappy Homiens (1956)—both of which, like Inside Magoo, were animated health education cartoon comedies targeted at men. However, whereas the two earlier films were comic parodies of middle-class suburbia, Inside Magoo approached its subject from a very different perspective. Whereas the protagonists of Man Alive! and Sappy Homiens were harassed men trying to navigate their way through middle-class life (and the fear of cancer), Mr. Magoo, with his homburg and fur-lined coat, came from a higher social and economic class, his nearsightedness a metaphor for a personality type that did not easily fit into post-war white, middle-class suburbia. These films were thus much more than films about cancer. They sought to persuade men to seek early detection and treatment for this group of diseases by embedding their fears of cancer within humorous observations on life in the 1950s. It was such comedic commentaries that UPA hoped would charm an audience into thinking about cancer.

UPA and the ACS

Founded in 1943, the company that came to be known as UPA got its start creating commissioned films (industrials, political campaign films, and
educational and training films for the United States government) and, later, theatrical shorts and, still later, in the 1950s, television programmes. It quickly gained a reputation for pioneering new approaches to animation. With a smaller staff than larger established rivals such as Disney, UPA adopted a method of cel animation, eventually labelled limited animation, which lessened the work of producing cartoons. In part, this meant that UPA reduced or limited the number of frames it used to construct movement within a film, but it also, compared to Disney, limited movement within the film itself in at least two ways. First, in Disney films such as Snow White (1937), Pinocchio (1940), or Fantasia (1940), a character’s face might be drawn and redrawn to accompany the movement of its eye or nose; UPA cut much of this movement, limiting it, at times, to a single body part, the rest of the body frozen in place. Second, compared to the distinctive, individuated complex of movements that made up a Disney animated character, UPA’s characters often had a much more limited repertoire of movements (produced by the repeated use of a series of cels, at least more repeatedly than in Disney productions). In such ways, UPA hoped to reduce the workforce needed for artwork, speed up the production time, and cut costs.

Man Alive! was the first film the ACS commissioned from UPA and it marked a transformation in cancer education film-making. It was the first to pair limited animation with humour in the United States. Some earlier films had had humorous moments, but, in general, cancer educational films were not known for comedy. Man Alive! was the first to use humour throughout and was followed by Sappy Homiens and Inside Magoo, both, like Man Alive!, targeted at men. Comedy cartoon animation was not aimed at women in this period, except for some advertising spots. Their cancer education films tended to be melodramas and how-to films such as Breast Self-Examination (1950).

All three films followed the UPA house style of limited animation with minimal detail, quick edits, abrupt scene transitions, a borrowing from a wide range of artistic influences, and an imaginative flexibility towards size, shape, colour, timing, and visual perspective. Some of the humour was slapstick, the central characters undergoing humiliation and embarrassment before being saved by medicine. Ed Parmalee (the star of Man Alive!) and Sappy, for example, are Everyman figures whose pride and fear lead to discomforting mistakes before they are restored to dignity, emotional equilibrium, and health by medical advice. (Two of UPA’s founders, John

3 Abraham, When Magoo Flew; Barrier, Hollywood Cartoons.

4 Cantor, Man Alive; Cantor, ‘Uncertain Enthusiasm’. On health education films more generally, see, Bonah et al., Health Education Films.
Hubley and Zachary Schwartz, had argued that the nature of animation demanded a return to symbols such as Everyman.\(^5\) Magoo, by contrast, never seems to be aware of his humiliation, despite his pessimism when he fears he may have cancer. The humour resides in the audience seeing what he cannot see, his misinterpretations of what is going on around him, and his improbable passage to the doctor.

There is also humour in the bodies of the main protagonists. Ed and Sappy both have malleable bodies: They physically shrink with fear, expand with (over)confidence, joyfully leap impossible heights, gain some extra arms (Figure 6.1a) and legs, change into other figures (a child dunce [Figure 6.1b], devil, Eskimo, or caveman), among other transformations. Magoo does not transform to the extent of Ed and Sappy: His eyeballs occasionally expand, but gross transformations are often in his imagination, such as when he sees his distorted self in a fairground mirror, which he mistakes for a real change in his body. Such transformations and exaggerations help create the antic humour of the films, as do other visual tricks and sleights of hand. In Man Alive!, Ed does not dress himself—his clothes fly off the valet stand and apply themselves to his body. Sappy’s wife does not remove his coat—it magically appears in her hands. Magoo does not crash blindly through a fence on-screen, but the jarring sound effects, the hole in the fence, and the tire marks on the ground indicate what has happened.

None of the protagonists know their bodies or what, if anything, might be wrong with them; part of the humour is Ed’s, Sappy’s, and Magoo’s misguided,
anxious efforts to understand their conditions. Occasionally, the films take us inside the body to show us what cancer is, such as illustrations of how cancer is formed and spreads at the cellular level in *Man Alive!* (8 mins. 34 secs.), *Sappy Homiens* (4 mins. 42 secs.), and *Inside Magoo* (1 min. 48 secs.), the last of which is lifted from *Man Alive!* But none of the three protagonists can see cellular changes without the aid of technology; their knowledge is limited to gross symptoms (or their absence) that might or might not denote cancer. The technology in *Inside Magoo* is that of film production: The narrator describes how animation can take the viewer places where live action could never go. But, in general, it is not the technology of the educational film that does this, but that of medicine. Ed's stomach problems, for example, are examined through a fluoroscope (Figure 6.2a), an image that was later taken up playfully by UPA (Figure 6.2b) in a 1955 print advertisement (coincidentally, also called *Inside Magoo*), and then in stylized form (Figures 6.2c–6.2d) in the film *Inside Magoo* as a coy means of highlighting where in the body cancer often affects men. Ironically, the narrator never speaks the name of that part, and the fluoroscope-cum-highlighter does not show much besides some bones.
Physically, Ed and Sappy are the opposite of Magoo. Ed and Sappy are white and middle-class, of working age and in good health, although stressed; Ed is more heavily built than Sappy. Magoo, by contrast, is stout, wealthy, elderly, retired, and bald—commonly compared to the American actor and comedian W. C. Fields. They also differ graphically in other ways. Ed and Magoo are closer to what Robert Cannon, the director of one of UPA's most successful modernist theatrical cartoons, *Gerald McBoing-Boing* (1950), describes as three-dimensional characters set in the illusion of a three-dimensional, scaled setting (the house, the car, the doctor’s office). Howard Rieder notes that, in Magoo, this is ‘a halfway point between the extreme literalism of Disney and the stylized animation of the more off-beat UPA films’. The same can also be said about Ed. Sappy is a different sort of graphical character, closer to Cannon’s description of Gerald. Sappy shares a flat nearly two-dimensional shape with Gerald, with minimal detail. He is also sometimes, like Gerald, part of the overall design of the frame, his movements within the frame what Cannon called ‘design in motion’. Thus, when Sappy comes home, he does not change his distracted leaning-forward, looking-down posture, so his wife, son, and daughter all must adapt to him as they kiss him welcome. As with Gerald, Sappy’s background is sparse: His lounge, for example, is little more than a television, side table, and chair set against a single flat block of colour, just as Gerald’s rooms are denoted by the presence of a stylized sofa and lamp with hardly any other detail.

I write of these as tendencies, for all the films shade into one another. The background in *Sappy Homiens*—as in the bathroom scene (Figure 6.1a)—sometimes edged more towards the three-dimensional, as does, sometimes, the figure of Sappy himself. Similarly, the three-dimensional illusion of the background for Ed and Magoo sometimes disappears. Ed’s anger is illustrated when the background detail disappears and is replaced with a block of red; his icy distain by a block of blue. Both also draw on German expressionism: Both Gerald and Ed are dwarfed by a railway crossing sign that signals the dangers of the outside world for Gerald and the danger signals of cancer for Ed. *Inside Magoo* also makes a ‘vivid use of color’, suggesting graphically, as Cannon puts it, ‘that there is a great deal in the world to see, but Magoo walks blindly through it’.

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8 Quoted in Rieder, ‘Memories of Mr. Magoo’, p. 19.
9 Rieder, ‘Development of the Satire’, p. 87. For the use of perspective in Magoo cartoons, see Bashara, *Cartoon Vision*, pp. 32, 35.
The Paths to the Doctor and *Inside Magoo*

The narratives of all three films trace the reluctance of their protagonists to go to the doctor, the circuitous, sometimes improbable paths by which they get there, the reasons why they delay (often fear), and the comforting results of their decision to seek medical help. Neither Ed nor Magoo have cancer, despite the fears which prompt them to delay seeking help. Indeed, *Man Alive!* and *Inside Magoo* end with their relief and joy at not having cancer and, learning from this experience, their determination to go for regular check-ups. Such reassuring messages—that most warning signs do not turn out to be cancer—were a common theme of ACS cancer education programmes, seeking to counter the fears that prompted people to delay seeking help.¹⁰ For example, Oliver Dancer—the star of a 1956 UPA-like spot—comes to a similar conclusion. Despite his belief that a diagnosis of cancer is a death sentence, the lump that Oliver finds while shaving turns out not to be cancer.¹¹

Ed's path to joy and relief begins inauspiciously. He dreads he may have cancer and avoids going to the doctor for fear of the diagnosis, just as he fears going to a reputable mechanic when his car's engine makes a strange noise. In the case of the car, the result is disastrous: Clyde, a crooked car mechanic, destroys the engine. Ed narrowly avoids a similar disaster with his body, when he is dissuaded from going to a quack (Clyde's identical twin) and seeks medical attention from a regular physician. As the narrator explains to him, his body is like a car engine—a metaphor never deployed in cancer education films aimed at women at this time—in that it gives warning signs of impending trouble.¹² The good news for Ed is that he does not have cancer, and his relief melts away all the fears that led him to delay. According to the ACS, ‘[h]umor is mixed with its grim significance as a Mr. Everyman avoids having his car properly serviced, or going to a doctor for checking of a symptom that may mean cancer. Both car and disease give their warnings.’¹³ The film, the ACS claimed, was ‘easier to take than many of the purportedly educational films that produce only boredom instead of knowledge.’¹⁴

*Man Alive!* was a major hit for the ACS.¹⁵ Most cancer educational films were shown in informal settings: workplaces, clubs, clinics, classrooms, tents, tents,

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¹⁰ For other examples of relief, see Cantor, ‘Uncertain Enthusiasm’, pp. 67–68.
¹¹ ‘Strange Case’.
¹³ ‘Coast Reviewers’, p. 4.
¹⁴ ‘Coast Reviewers’, p. 4.
¹⁵ Cantor, *Man Alive*. 
fundraisers. They were rarely shown in the cinema, unless it was hired for a special event. *Man Alive!,* by contrast, was one of a select few cancer educational films that was regularly shown in theatres as part of the regular film schedule, as a short subject that accompanied the feature. Demand was so great that the ACS found itself rushing to produce more copies. The film thus attracted attention far beyond the world of cancer education. It was the subject of a four-page spread in *Life Magazine,* with around 13 million readers, and was nominated for an Oscar in 1952.¹⁶

The success of *Man Alive!* prompted the ACS to partner again with UPA to release *Sappy Homiens* in 1956. As with Ed Parmalee, Sappy’s journey to the doctor begins unpromisingly. Sappy, like Ed, avoids a visit to his doctor by hiding in the bathroom, secretly examining himself, and finding no danger signals of the disease. Sappy changes his view, however, when he watches television. Every channel has the same programme, with Sappy-like figures talking and singing to him, even when he turns the TV off. Eventually, he is pulled into the set, where he joins his other selves. There, he learns to save his life by going for a regular medical check-up since, as he is informed, it is quite possible to have cancer without realizing it. ‘The cartoon moves briskly and brightly through the trials and tribulations of Sappy Homiens and his all-too human fears’, noted the ACS, ‘[t]he film provides humour, but with an important lesson that can save lives’.¹⁷ Part of the briskness was provided by a special jazz composition for the film, composed by the West Coast jazzman, Shorty Roberts, who had composed scores for other UPA films.¹⁸

There were several different versions of the film: some black-and-white, some colour, some longer, and some shorter. One film was 14 minutes long, with live action in which the UPA writer, Leo Salkin, contemplates how to do the task set up by the ACS (called *Sappy Homiens—The Story of an Animated Cartoon*); a shorter version of this film (under a shorter title) runs for 7 minutes and comprises the cartoon alone.¹⁹ Some of these films were destined for television, as well as for the usual informal places where ACS films were shown.²⁰ Moreover, with the success of *Man Alive!* in mind, in 1958, the ACS began putting prints of *Sappy Homiens*—along with *Man Alive!* and a live-action educational, *The Other City* (1957)— into the hands of commercial

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¹⁶ ‘Grim but Funny’.
¹⁷ ‘This Is Your Life’.
¹⁸ Feather, *Encyclopedia,* pp. 19, 142.
film distributors for screening in cinemas as part of the regular schedule.\textsuperscript{21} The film was honoured at the 1956 Edinburgh International Film Festival.\textsuperscript{22} However, despite this, and Sappy’s ‘irresistible but hard-hitting humor’, it did not gain the same recognition and distribution as \textit{Man Alive}.\textsuperscript{23} The smaller budget and the cruder animation perhaps worked against the film.

\textit{Sappy Homiens} was followed by \textit{Inside Magoo} in 1960. Magoo, like Ed and Sappy before him, avoids going to the doctor. We first meet him when he bursts out of his house, not by the front door, but through the glass window beside it. His cheerful obliviousness and myopia are established, as he mistakes a sprinkler for rain, and the sudden stop of his car by crashing into a water hydrant as a sign of good brakes. Although he has already tried to avoid the warnings about cancer on the car radio, he is pursued by an advertising billboard mounted on a truck that warns of the early warning signs of cancer, and to go to a physician the moment one is spotted. Magoo escapes the truck: ‘Magoos never get cancer’, he claims.

Then follows a series of mishaps. Magoo visits a funfair, mistaking it for a cinema. He sees his misshapen self in a distorting mirror and remembers the warning about sudden growths being a warning sign of cancer. He knocks a painter on his ladder and mistakes the red paint that falls on his head for blood coming from somewhere unexpected, another warning sign. He is hit by a hammer and a lump forms; the unexplained pain is yet another warning. Finally, some candy floss flies into his face and he starts coughing, another warning sign—a persistent cough. The viewer knows that Magoo is not exhibiting any of these symptoms, but Magoo does not and he begins to worry. He has many warning signs of cancer.

Magoo now goes to the doctor, but via an unlikely route. Mistaking a removal van for a doctor’s office, Magoo climbs in and seats himself, his pessimism growing as he watches what seems to be a corpse under some sheeting: It is nothing of the sort. Then, removal men carry Magoo into a doctor’s waiting room, where Magoo cheers up thinking that a table lamp is an attractive female nurse. He enters the doctor’s office fearful of his fate—‘the last of the Magoos’, he mourns. The hands of a clock move a couple of hours and then Magoo exits the office elated. He does not have cancer—he leaps in the air and dances with the table lamp/nurse. (There are echoes here of Ed Parmalee’s joyful leap when he gets the same news.)

\textsuperscript{21} Ross, ‘Motion Pictures’, p. 29.
\textsuperscript{22} ‘29 American Films’, p. 28.
\textsuperscript{23} US Public Health Service, \textit{Cancer Film Guide}, p. 22.
Then Magoo turns to his audience facing the camera and tells us all to get a check-up.

As with *Sappy Homiens*, there are several different versions of *Inside Magoo*. One was a 6-minute version for motion-picture theatres, which comprised only the cartoon. There were also two 15-minute versions for television, clubs, organizations, and Crusade training sessions. Both the longer films included additional live-action sequences. The first dramatized the Society’s April Cancer Crusade, explaining the importance of public contributions to the ACS. The second bookended the cartoon with two live-action sequences directed by John F. Becker, a two-time Peabody winner, and head of the ACS’ motion-picture production, who had joined the ACS in 1954. The sequence at the start of the film provides a short history of the motion picture, culminating in the development of animation and the cancer cell scenes described earlier. The sequence that follows the animation echoes themes in the cartoon: A lamp turns into a nurse (played by Joi Lansing), Jim Backus is suddenly undressed for a medical examination, and Bosustow disappears to make way for a doctor (Jim Corey). Corey’s examination of Backus is lightened by the latter’s comedic reactions, before Magoo himself returns, entering the live action.

1950s America

If UPA film-makers hoped to charm male audiences through humour and visual style, they also sought to charm them through commentaries, sometimes parodies, of 1950s America. *Man Alive!*, for example, sought to entice its male audiences by wrapping its cancer-control message in a story about the dangers of the city, the psychology of fear, and the pleasures and pains of affluent white suburbia, car ownership, and companionate marriage. It portrayed a world in which men had to identify and confront their inner fears, listen to the wisdom of their wives, and turn to reputable professionals when necessary, be they car mechanics or physicians.

Wives, in particular, were important to this film. The ACS argued that many men were not only fearful of the disease but regarded an interest in their own health as a sign of weakness. Someone had to persuade them otherwise, and, as an ACS slogan put it, ‘a nagging wife can save your life’. *Man Alive!* thus turned the stereotype of the nagging wife (and the henpecked

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24 I have not found a copy of this version.
26 Ross, ‘Motion Pictures’, p. 31.
husband) around to make a comedic virtue of them both, just as it turned male humour about women drivers on its head. Ed is shown to be a stubborn figure who ignores the warning signs of his car (and body) going wrong as well as the wise advice of his wife Marion that he go to a reputable mechanic (and doctor). His claims to knowledge are shown to be bogus by know-nothings and charlatans who only make things worse. Yet, paradoxically, it is not his wife who eventually persuades him to go to the doctor, but the male narrator. A woman might nag, the suggestion is, but it takes the calm reasoning of a male narrator (or a comic film) to get a man to the doctor.27

*Sappy Homiens* also sought to wrap its cancer message in a comic commentary on 1950s America. The film begins with a careworn Sappy returning home (likely from the office), his wife and kids welcoming him home with a kiss, before (after the panic of his self-examination) he sits down in front of the TV. He is portrayed as a good father, a good husband (doing the washing up in a woman’s frilly apron, a mixed symbol signifying both emasculation and a good helpmate), and as a hard worker (in an office with a teetering pile of paper in his in tray and a mess of documents around an overflowing bin) trying to pay off the mortgage (to a sinister banker in a top hat), keep the wolf from the door, and retire at 65. But all this is endangered by his foolishness, as a Sappy-like figure within the TV tells him: his unwillingness to take time off for a check-up. Thus, unlike with Ed, it is not the film’s narrator who urges him to go to the doctor, but his television alter egos, who show him how self-diagnosis can be misleading. Cancer, they tell him, can happen without any symptoms, and only a doctor can spot its presence. Thus, this surreal, fantastical story also playfully gestures towards contemporary faith in the unique ability of the new medium of television to transform beliefs and behaviour.28 After all, it is the Sappy-like figures within the television who persuade Sappy himself to change his attitude and behaviour towards cancer.

*Man Alive!* and *Sappy Homiens* thus do much more than present anxieties about cancer. They evoke both the promise of post-war affluence—spacious modern houses, television, automobiles, freeways peppered with advertising billboards, the suburbs—and also the many anxieties that went with this world: broken cars, costly repairs, financial ruin, con men, and grasping financiers.29 Ed, more than Sappy, captures another issue—what it meant

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27 Cantor, *Man Alive*.  
28 Seed, *Brainwashing*.  
29 Cantor, *Man Alive*. On efforts to redefine masculinity more generally, see Gilbert, *Men in the Middle*.  

to be a man within the context of a companionate marriage. He fails to see the reality of his wife's greater wisdom and is unwilling to compromise with her because of his fears, screaming his anger at her, until he is told by the narrator to go to a professional and to listen to his wife. More generally, Ed is a man who constantly represses his anxieties, as does Sappy, and their films suggest that it is only by understanding the psychology of fear and how it clouds a man's judgements that they will be able to adapt to this post-war suburban world, seek professional help, and listen to the advice of organizations like the Cancer Society and (in Ed's case) their wives. Here, cancer is both a metaphor for the anxieties of living in post-war suburbia and a real cause of such anxieties: Contemporary reports suggested that the high cost of cancer care often resulted in immiseration, and that the disease disrupted families and 1950s gender roles, with men taking over care from their sick wives and wives having to go out to work.

*Inside Magoo* also provides a commentary on the post-war world. However, where *Man Alive!* and *Sappy Homiens* are accounts of how men might live in white, consumer, suburban culture, *Inside Magoo* is, in part, a rejection of that world, or at least a failure to adapt to it. Ed and Sappy both live in modern houses—sparsely furnished and orderly—which they share with their wives and, in Sappy's case, children. Ed also drives a sports convertible (albeit one with some engine trouble). Magoo, by contrast, apparently lives alone in a Victorian house (cluttered with newspapers collecting on his roof) and drives an ancient jalopy, which meets its end in this film when it is wrecked on the fire hydrant. Ed is anxious about his car problems. Magoo is blithely unaware of his.

Moreover, while Ed is prey to the temptations of the city from which white suburbanites were fleeing in the 1950s, Magoo, in this film, is not. Ed is an innocent in a world of urban predators: the dodgy car mechanic, the fraudulent quack, and the know-nothings who offer bad advice. He is always tempted by this dangerous world, where his claims to knowledge are revealed as phoney. Magoo is faced with shysters and con men in his other films, which, combined with his nearsightedness, inevitably carries him almost to his doom, which he improbably avoids. Here, he faces no such threats. Instead, he cheerfully wanders through this film, misinterpreting

30 UPA's educationals often explained the psychology of maladaptive behaviours such as bad driving, dangerous flying, not going to the doctor, or not listening to wives; Cantor, *Man Alive*, p. 6.

31 For further discussion of this, see Cantor, *Man Alive*, pp. 7–9.

32 In other 1950s films, Mr. Magoo shares his house with his nephew Waldo.
the world as he goes, until his unfounded pessimism prompts him to see a physician. The clutter and disorder of the city are threats to Ed and to his path to a recognized physician, unlike the clutter and mayhem around Magoo, which somehow delivers him to the doctor. 

*Inside Magoo* thus presents a very different view of post-war America to those of *Man Alive!* and *Sappy Homiens*. Magoo lives in this world, but seems unaware of it, mistaking everything around him. As the historian of UPA, Adam Abraham, puts it, he ‘perceives a world that everyone else—conformist, suburban-migrating, baby-booming consumers—fails to see’. In *Inside Magoo*, such elements of consumer culture are represented by the newspaper headline on cancer Magoo fails to see; the advertising billboard that Magoo tries to ignore, but which follows him wherever he goes; the radio that Magoo cannot turn off no matter how he tries, until, paradoxically, the radio announcer tells him how; and the Playland fairground where the ACS’ message finally gets through. It is there that Magoo mistakes paint for blood, a distorted mirror reflection for growths, a hammer blow for an unexplained pain, and a cough caused by cotton candy for another early warning sign of cancer. Even the doctor’s office is a playful parody of modern medicine. There is a copy of *Life* magazine in the reception, a play on *Life*, the magazine that Ed Parmalee pretends to read while fearfully waiting for the doctor, and which Bert Hansen tells us was in every physician’s waiting room at that time.

**Rejecting Consumer Culture?**

There is an irony to Magoo’s rejection of consumer culture, for, since 1956, he had increasingly turned his hand to marketing. Magoo had started life in theatrical shorts—short films shown before the feature film in commercial cinemas, or during a matinee show for children. However, by the end of the 1950s, the market in theatrical shorts seemed to be drying up and UPA’s own ventures into the new medium of television seemed to be stymied. So UPA turned Magoo into an advertiser and educator as the company sought to navigate the leaner years of the late 1950s—the very promotional activities Magoo so casually ignored in his films.

Bosustow first licenced Magoo for advertising purposes in 1956, when he was employed to sell Rheingold beer. The following year, the Radio Corporation

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35 On UPA and advertising, see Abraham, *When Magoo Flew*, Chapter 8.
of America (RCA) put out a long-playing record, *Magoo in Hi-Fi*: a promotion of high-fidelity records and music equipment of which RCA was an innovator.\(^{36}\)

In 1958, he could be found promoting the Carling Brewing Company’s Stag Beer. Then, in 1959, the film producer Henry G. Saperstein took out a licence on Mr. Magoo, and Bosustow sold him the entire company a year later.\(^{37}\) Under Saperstein, Magoo became the focus of a complicated set of co-promotions all linked to Mr. Magoo’s first feature film, *1001 Arabian Nights* (1959). The film was co-promoted with a General Electric campaign that used Magoo to sell their light bulbs,\(^{38}\) and with another campaign to sell US Savings Bonds: ‘Your magic carpet to the future—US Savings Bonds—Says Mister Magoo of “1001 Arabian Nights.”’\(^{39}\) A third co-promotion was with *Inside Magoo*.\(^{40}\)

Magoo’s efforts to ignore the world of marketing in *Inside Magoo* were thus a paradox.\(^{41}\) He might have tried to ignore this world in the film, but he had been driven into it by changing consumer habits after the arrival of the television which had threatened UPA. Many animators had moved to better paid positions in television commercials, so that, when Bosustow sold UPA in 1960, only a few of the best remained. The company was a ghost of its earlier incarnation, but it had a strong film back catalogue and characters, such as Magoo, which Saperstein could licence or use in other formats, including television. Mr. Magoo followed the money, moving from theatrical shorts to the small screen (*Inside Magoo* itself was a regular feature on television well into the 1960s).

*Inside Magoo* was thus as much about the health of UPA as it was about promoting healthy bodies. It also came to be used to combat calls for greater film censorship, weakened during the 1950s by competition from television and antitrust legislation that opened the door to foreign films that did not follow to the Hays Production Code. Such developments, in turn, prompted demands for a return to stricter censorship. This is not the place to describe in full the industry’s response to such demands. However, one of the ways they did so was to highlight the educational role of film. In this context, *Inside Magoo* was screened for this purpose by the film distributor, Robert W. Selig, to parent-teacher associations to illustrate family entertainment and educational films produced by the industry.\(^{42}\)


\(^{37}\) On Magoo as an advertising icon more generally, see ‘Inside Magoo or What Makes’.

\(^{38}\) ‘Near-sighted Magoo was Far-sighted’; ‘Myopic Magoo’.

\(^{39}\) ‘Treasury Department Tie-in’; ‘Near-Sighted Magoo Helps’.

\(^{40}\) ‘Inside Magoo’, p. 11.

\(^{41}\) On UPA and consumerism, see Klein, *Seven Minutes*, esp. Chapter 22.

\(^{42}\) ‘Selig Plan’.
Inner- or Other-Directed

Magoo, Ed, and Sappy are also commentaries on the 1950s in another way: They are light-hearted spoofs of the inner-directed and other-directed personalities found in David Riesman’s influential book, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (1950).43 In 1957, the psychologist Milton Rosenberg portrayed Magoo as a comic ‘inner directed personality’.44 ‘Inner-directed’ types were individualists, according to Riesman, who navigated social life by using moral codes internalized in childhood, instead of external codes imposed by sensitivity to the views of others. For Rosenberg, Magoo’s values parody some of the features of the inner-directed personality. His character was made ‘in equal parts of eccentric individuality, square shooting, get-up-and-go vigor, and classic persistence’.45 Magoo, for Rosenberg, never questions the tenets of his existence, speaks his mind, and is unconcerned about what others think. Indeed, Rosenberg argues, ‘this belief in himself, rooted in his internal loyalty to a moral view of existence, keeps him whole and secure in the face of dangers that, because of his faith rather than his myopia, are not visibly real’.46 Magoo, he concludes, ‘may have his greatest appeal in the eyes of lonely “inner-directed” persons caught up in an increasingly “other-directed” round of existence’.47

From such a perspective, Magoo’s nearsightedness becomes a metaphor for his inner-directedness, allowing him to make sense of the crazy world around him. Indeed, at times, it is joined by another, more curmudgeonly, metaphor for inner-directedness, where Magoo is not so much someone who cannot see the world as it is, as someone who refuses to see that way. As the advertising executive, Art Bellaire, put it: ‘He opens his eyes once in a while, but he doesn’t always like what he sees, so he closes them again.’48 Bellaire’s agency had surveyed Magoo’s theatrical shorts while working on the advertising campaign that used Magoo to sell General Electric (GE)

43 Riesman, *Lonely Crowd*.
46 Rosenberg, ‘Mr. Magoo as Public Dream’, p. 342, emphasis in original.
47 Rosenberg, ‘Mr. Magoo as Public Dream’, p. 342. Bashara refers to Magoo as having a premodern understanding of the modern world; *Cartoon Vision*, p. 63. In fact, Riesman associated inner-directed types not with the premodern world, but with nineteenth-century urban industrial modernity.
lightbulbs (if he wants to see, he can with GE), and his observation also applies to *Inside Magoo*. Magoo does not want to listen to the radio (his eyes open briefly) that he cannot switch off, and he does not want to see (his eyes open briefly again, perhaps surprised) the advertising billboard that chases him. Paradoxically, it is only when he returns to his myopic, inner-directed world that the messages about the danger signals get through, his old certainty that Magoos never get cancer disappears, and he goes to the doctor. Thus, it is his myopia that metaphorically opens his eyes, and, after the good news that he does not have cancer, he urges the viewer to get a check-up. Posters produced as part of the advertising campaign echoed this point: ‘Mr. Magoo says you can’t afford to be near-sighted about cancer. Too dangerous. Too much to lose. Maybe your life. Got to look ahead.’ (Figure 6.3b) Magoo, however, is still in his myopic state, looking ahead with closed eyes, playfully warning the viewer not to follow his lead or maybe to enter the myopic world that opened his eyes.

If Magoo represents a comic version of an inner-directed personality, Ed and Sappy seem to represent comic versions of other-directed personalities—younger men than Magoo, whose character type reflects the demands
of a bureaucratized society. Riesman argued that, instead of listening to their own voices and following a set of embedded principles, other-directed men cultivated a special sensitivity to the actions and wishes of others. They monitored colleagues for signs of approval or disapproval and succeeded within bureaucratic structures by this constant management of self. In fact, such men, Riesman suggested, had no core of self. Instead, they adapted to circumstance with a series of superficial masks. Never confident that they were evaluating the situation accurately, they were chronically anxious, constantly trying to figure out what others thought of them and to modify their self-presentation accordingly.

Like Magoo, Ed and Sappy both seek to avoid the ACS' message. But, whereas Magoo is converted to the ACS message when he returns to his comfortable myopic, inner-directed world, Ed and Sappy are converted when they follow the dictates of the mass media and advertising that Riesman thought unduly shaped the other-directed personality. The problem as set out in these films is not that Ed and Sappy are manipulated by the mass media, but that they resist it. Both films suggest that it is when Ed and Sappy are true to their other-directed selves that they convert to the message of the ACS. They also suggest that the boundaries between Ed's and Sappy's inner selves and the world of the media are quite blurry. Thus, Ed is converted by the narrator of the film, who may also be his inner voice, or the voice of expert male authority. Sappy is converted, as I've mentioned, by his other selves, the ones he joins inside the television. As such, where Magoo's conversion comes about because of his nearsightedness (the metaphor for his inner-directedness), Sappy and Ed are converted by their other-directedness (metaphorically indicated by the narrator's voice for Ed and the television alter ego for Sappy). UPA has turned Riesman's critique of other-directed personalities on its head.

Yet, all these films also suggest that health and well-being come from setting limits on personality, whether inner- or outer-directed. In the case of Ed and Sappy, the films show how such limits could be set by recognized experts. Such experts would, the films suggest, allow them to reduce their anxiety about cancer and, indeed, of other aspects of contemporary life: broken cars, unpaid bills, nagging wives, shysters, and greedy bankers. Thus, experts teach Ed or Sappy how to listen to wives and the media, avoid tricksters and charlatans, seek sanctuary in the suburbs, cultivate self-understanding, and recognize the limits of their own knowledge and the psychological motivations behind their maladaptive behaviours. For example, Ed's anxieties about the health of his body are constantly exacerbated by the advice of con men and the ignorant. It is only when he turns to recognized experts that he can discount their suggestions, and, despite
his continued fears of cancer, seek appropriate help. Experts, in short, are presented as a means by which other-directed personalities can anchor their beliefs and behaviours and adjust their sensitivity to the opinions of others in ways that promote healthy bodies and psychological well-being.

Something similar is also true for inner-directed personalities such as Magoo. Magoo’s anxieties about cancer are not matched by anxieties about the contemporary world of the sort that afflict Ed and Sappy. Indeed, he seems cheerfully, perhaps wilfully, to ignore such anxieties, until the messages on the advertising billboard—representing consumer marketing—prompt him to briefly doubt his inner certainty that Magoos never get cancer. His world turned upside down by advertising is only returned to normal by a recognized expert—the off-stage doctor. Magoo now has perspective in which a regular check-up can prevent both cancer and the anxiety about it. Indeed, given that his eyes are closed, this new view seems to come from within his myopic, inner-directed world view. Magoo’s myopic personality, out of tune with the 1950s, has changed slightly because of expert opinion and luck.

Conclusion

The three films under consideration in this chapter portray bodily and emotional health as things that could be converted into what Bourdieu describes as various forms of capital: social, economic, symbolic, and cultural. Thus, on the one hand, Man Alive! and Sappy Homiens both invoke the tropes of post-war suburban prosperity and status to which Ed and Sappy aspire, the anxieties that come with such a life, and how their fears of cancer hobble their enjoyment of such a life. Furthermore, in Sappy Homiens, in particular, cancer is also invoked as a threat to all that a man may work towards—a home, family, and retirement—and the loss of status that might follow. On the other hand, Inside Magoo is, in some ways, a comedic rejection of the post-war world that Ed and Sappy embrace. Magoo has none of the anxieties of Ed or Sappy, and he ambles through the film seemingly blind to what is happening around him. However, just as Ed and Sappy are troubled by the ACS’ message, so, eventually, is Magoo. Magoo might have rejected the world of post-war consumer culture, but, like Ed and Sappy, his world is disturbed by symbols of modern advertising and marketing: advertising billboards, radio, television, and pamphlets.

All three men share one handicap—they are paralyzed by fear, and much of the comedy of the films focusses on how it makes them avoid going to the doctor. In this sense, Ed and Sappy are both like Magoo,
unwilling or unable to see the world as it is. Indeed, Magoo’s other handicap—his nearsightedness—can be seen as a comic metaphor for the fantasy worlds into which those fearful of cancer might retreat, and the ignorance which individuals (including Ed and Sappy) may have of what is going on in their bodies. The ACS argued that only a recognized physician could determine whether a patient had cancer. And it is such physicians—and experts and expert knowledge more generally—that are presented as a solution to the anxieties produced by consumer advertising, even that produced by the ACS. The films thus evoke broader cultural concerns about the ability of marketing to manipulate and mislead, and the roles of experts in countering such effects. The irony here is that Magoo himself turned to advertising in the 1950s, to sell beer, light bulbs, and UPA’s feature films, and that Inside Magoo was a part of this turn.

But there is a further paradox here. The very solution that the films propose—going to the doctor at the first sign of the disease—itself raised the spectre of financial hardship, and the stigma of dependency and pauperism.49 The National Cancer Institute (NCI), the Federal government’s main anticancer agency, noted that the high cost of cancer treatment strained family finances, as did the unwillingness of employers to hire ‘cured’ patients because of the increased risk of compensable illness, to say nothing of the disablement and disfigurement that often followed surgery. Families lost status and self-respect, the NCI argued, and were forced to accept charity or other relief, as their dreams of sharing in post-war prosperity slipped away. UPA might have sought to project medical reassurance about cancer, but it could do little to solve the conundrum of such high costs. Had Ed, Sappy, or Magoo in fact been treated for or even cured of cancer, the forms of capital outlined by Bourdieu might have been much more difficult for them to obtain.

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