

**MEDIA EDUCATION
FOUNDATION
STUDY GUIDE**

Mickey Mouse Monopoly
Disney, Childhood & Corporate Power

A video by Chyng Sun

Study Guide by

Robert B. Pettit, Ph.D.
Professor of Sociology
Manchester College

In collaboration with

The Media Education Foundation

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NOTE TO EDUCATORS

This study guide is designed to help you and your students engage and manage the information presented in this video. Given that it can be difficult to teach visual content – and difficult for students to recall detailed information from videos after viewing them – the intention here is to give you a tool to help your students slow down and deepen their thinking about the specific issues this video addresses. With this in mind, we’ve structured the guide so that you have the option of focusing in depth on one section of the video at a time. We’ve also set it up to help you stay close to the video’s main line of argument as it unfolds.

Key Points provide a concise and comprehensive summary of the video’s main points. They are designed to make it easier for you and your students to recall the details of the video during class discussions, and as a reference point for students as they work on assignments.

Questions for Discussion & Writing encourage students to reflect critically on the video during class discussions, and serve as a guide for their written reactions before and after these discussions. These questions can be used as guideposts for class discussion, as a framework for smaller group discussion and presentations, or as self-standing, in-class writing assignments (i.e. as prompts for “free-writing” or in-class reaction papers in which students are asked to write spontaneously and informally while the video is fresh in their mind).

Assignments encourage students to engage the video in more depth – by conducting research, working on individual and group projects, putting together presentations, and composing formal essays. These assignments are designed to challenge students to show command of the material presented in the video, to think critically and independently about this material from a number of different perspectives, and to develop and defend their own point of view on the issues at stake.

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

The Walt Disney Company is synonymous with childhood innocence and magic. Disney’s iconic movies, television shows, characters, and products are endorsed the world over by parents and teachers, and enthusiastically embraced by children everywhere, for their entertainment value and wholesome messages. But beneath the image of innocence, Disney is also a transnational media empire, a global conglomerate consisting of media production companies, studios, theme parks, television and radio networks, cable TV systems, magazines, and Internet sites – all of them engaged in a cutthroat quest to maximize profits in an increasingly competitive global media system. Taking this basic fact as its starting point, *Mickey Mouse Monopoly* examines how the commercial logic of this giant company informs the stories and images it presents to children.

PRE-VIEWING QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION & WRITING

1. What are your impressions of Walt Disney films and characters and stories? Did you grow up with them? What are your memories of Disney as a kid?
2. What sorts of values would you say Disney embodies? What kinds of messages does Disney send kids?
3. Do you think the fact that Disney is a massive, profit-driven corporation has any effect on the kinds of stories it tells? Why or why not, and in what ways, if any?

KEY POINTS

- A shrinking number of corporations now own the world's major media outlets, and therefore increasingly control the kinds of narratives and information people have access to.
- The control of information exercised by the Walt Disney Company, one of the largest of these global media conglomerates, is especially important given its influence on the imaginative lives of children.
- The female characters in Disney movies tend to present a distorted version of femininity—highly sexualized bodies, coy seductiveness, always needing to be rescued by a male.
- Snow White cleans the dwarfs' cottage to ingratiate herself; Ariel gives up her voice in order to win the prince with her body in *The Little Mermaid*; Mulan almost single-handedly wins the war only to return home to be romanced; and *Beauty and the Beast's* Belle endures an abusive and violent Beast in order to redeem him.
- Representations of race and ethnicity are similarly skewed in the world of Disney.
- People of color in Disney's animated features are perhaps most notable for their general scarcity. But when they do appear, they tend to reinforce the most regressive racial and ethnic stereotypes.
- Latinos are portrayed as irresponsible Chihuahuas in *Lady and the Tramp* and *Oliver and Company*.
- African-Americans are presented as "jive" crows in *Dumbo*, as human-wannabe orangutans in *Jungle Book*, and are totally absent in *Tarzan's Africa*.
- Other examples include Latinos and African-Americans depicted as street-gang thugs in *The Lion King*; Asians as treacherous Siamese cats in *Lady and the Tramp*; Arabs as barbarians in *Aladdin*; and Native Americans as savages in *Peter Pan* and *Pocahontas*.
- Beyond racial and ethnic stereotyping, the stories Disney tells are full of commercialism and commercial values.
- The seemingly innocent stories Disney movies tell seem to be secondary to their being used as vehicles for the merchandising of videos, toys, clothing, video games, etc.
- Similarly, the product tie-ins and toys and games have displaced children's spontaneous creative play in favor of merely replicating the ready-made Disney version of play.
- This kind of commercialization should not be surprising. As former Disney CEO Michael Eisner said a few years back, "To make money is our only objective."

POST-VIEWING QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION & WRITING

1. Do you think Disney is an appropriate choice for examining corporate media power? Do you think other media conglomerates are any better or worse in what they teach our children? Do you agree with the filmmakers that Disney is a special case?
2. What does the film say about how a media company's status as a corporation can influence how it constructs reality and fantasy? And how these constructions can in turn shape perceptions?
3. How, if at all, is the analysis of Disney presented in the film generalizable to the very nature of corporate capitalism in the late 20th and early 21st centuries?
4. What examples of gender stereotyping have you noticed in Disney films? Do you find gender stereotyping to be more pronounced in the depictions of male or female characters?
5. Do you think gender portrayals in Disney films have changed over time? If so, how? If not, what's been most consistent about them?
6. In addition to what's described in the film, what examples of racial and ethnic stereotyping, if any, have you noticed in Disney films?
7. Do you find racial/ethnic stereotyping to be more pronounced in the depictions of any particular minority group?
8. Do you feel racial/ethnic portrayals in Disney films have changed over time? If so, how? If not, in what ways have they remained consistent in your view?
9. Why do you think Disney arouses such passionate reactions, both pro and con, in people? How do you think The Walt Disney Company would react to this documentary?
10. What steps toward media literacy and media education can you think of that we should teach children to help them critically evaluate Disney and other popular culture products for themselves? Should this kind of thing be taught in schools, the same way that analyzing literature is taught in schools? Why or why not?

ASSIGNMENTS

1. Research the extent of The Walt Disney Company's holdings and enterprises. After researching Disney's corporate structure, write a paper summarizing what you find and responding to these questions: Were you surprised at any of the company's holdings? In what ways is Disney different from the other media giants operating on the global stage? In what ways is it similar? Are criticisms of Disney's power equally applicable to the other media giants, or do you see Disney as a special case in some ways?
2. Watch two Disney films, one from the early days of Disney, and one from more recently. As you watch, keep a list of all of the characters that appear, and record the following:
 - List their name and their gender (if identifiable). This won't always be evident, so do the best you can. In cases where it seems ambiguous, or unknown, simply note this fact, explain why, and move on.
 - Write up a brief description of how each character fits – or does not fit – within traditional gender roles. In other words, take notes on whether you think the character has ***stereotypical masculine traits*** (achievement-oriented/ambitious, self-reliant, self-confident, independent, responsible, decisive, rational, dominant/aggressive/violent) or ***stereotypical feminine traits*** (obedient, submissive, dependent, anxious to please, emotional, nurturing, affectionate, gentle, understanding, sensitive, sacrificing, family-oriented, overly attentive to physical appearance).

Once you're done compiling your notes on the two films, write up a summary and an analysis of your findings. Pay special attention to whether or not you see any differences in how the two films portray gender. And also be sure to talk about whether or not you think the films reinforce – or defy – stereotypes. Be as specific as possible, and use examples, to illustrate and support your analysis throughout.

3. Watch two Disney films, one from the early days of Disney, and one from more recently. As you watch, keep a list of all of the characters that appear, and write up the following for each:
 - First, list the name of each character and describe his or race or ethnicity (if identifiable). This won't always be evident, so do the best you can. In cases where it seems ambiguous, or unknown, simply note this fact, explain why, and move on.
 - Next, write up a brief description of the role each character plays in the overall story. Is the character a hero? A villain? A main character? A bit player?
 - Then make note of any racial or ethnic stereotypes you notice. And be sure to explain why you see it the way you see it, with specific examples from the film to back up your point.

Once you're done compiling your notes on the two films, write up a summary and an analysis of your findings. Pay special attention to whether or not you see any differences in how the two films seem to portray (or hint at) the race and/or ethnicity of certain characters. And also be sure to talk about whether or not you think the films reinforce – or defy – racial and ethnic stereotypes.

4. Read “A Point-Counter Point Exchange About *Mickey Mouse Monopoly*,” by Dr. Robert Pettit, and follow the directions at the beginning of the document. Essentially, you’ll be writing up a series of responses to the discussion questions posed at the end of each section.

A POINT-COUNTER POINT EXCHANGE ABOUT *MICKEY MOUSE MONOPOLY*

By Robert Pettit, PhD.

A note on this assignment from the Media Education Foundation

Mickey Mouse Monopoly is a good example of a "point of view" documentary. Instead of simply presenting a comprehensive overview of all possible opinions about Disney, it offers its own distinctive analysis of Disney and its wider impact on the culture. Point-of-view documentaries can challenge our assumptions. If we don't like the point of view, this can make us uncomfortable, defensive, and even short-circuit our ability to think with an open mind. And it goes the other way around as well. If we agree with the point of view, and simply accept everything that's being said at face value, we're not challenging ourselves either. In both cases, we're failing to question our assumptions, and we're stopping short of doing the hard work of actually thinking.

Education goes beyond confirming what we already know. That's why it's education. It's about challenging ourselves to suspend judgment. It's about learning how to take a step back, reflect, and think critically not only about the information being presented to us, but also about our own reactions to that information. In other words, it's about reflecting on our own thoughts as much as anything else.

The goal of this intriguing assignment, authored by Dr. Robert Pettit, is to inspire just this kind of critical thinking and reflection. You'll read a fictional exchange – a debate, essentially – between a defender and a critic of *Mickey Mouse Monopoly*. Through six different sections, the defender and the critic go back and forth on different themes related to the movie, challenging each other's arguments, and forcing each other to refine and strengthen their positions. In the end, Pettit leaves us with a model of the kind of restless critical reflection that should be the goal of all media education.

-- Jeremy Earp, Media Education Foundation

Directions

Your assignment here is simple: read through the Point/Counter-Point exchanges in each of the six sections that follow, and write up your reactions to the discussion questions at the end of each of the sections.

Media Power

POINT: Because Disney is one of the six or seven largest media conglomerates in the world, it has enormous power to shape perceptions and attitudes. This power is a problem because it is concentrated in the hands of a small number of people who are neither elected nor accountable to those affected by that power. And this power is especially troubling because it is directed primarily at those who are least able to resist it or critically evaluate it—our children.

COUNTERPOINT: All of this stuff about power and accountability and targeting kids might be true, but why single out Disney? What about the other five or six global media conglomerates, some of which are even larger and more powerful than Disney? The significance of Disney—its merits as well as its sins—can be evaluated only within some context of comparison. Although we may all agree that Disney messages fall short of what we would like to see in our children's culture, is it fair to judge Disney without some context? We might also ask: Are Disney films better or worse than other animated movies over the past 70 years? Is Disney better or worse than Max Fleischer, or Walter Lantz, or Warner Brothers, or Hanna-Barbera, or UPA, or Don Bluth? How does the record of The Walt Disney Company compare to other media conglomerates such as AOL/Time/Warner, or General Electric/NBC/MSNBC, or Universal/Seagram's, or Bertelsmann, or Viacom, or Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation? Why not examine the *whole* story?

POINT: I think you're missing the point of making a documentary. *Every* documentary undertaking is necessarily selective, and this one is no exception. This documentary is a *case study*, an effort to expose this worldwide, industry-wide problem through the critical examination of one illustrative, well-known corporation. Be realistic—you can't very well survey all these media giants in any useful detail in just one 50-minute documentary! So why is Disney such an appropriate choice? Because 1) it is so recognizable to the general public (just try marketing a documentary on Bertelsmann!); 2) it is so identified with all things American that its lessons are more easily generalized to other U.S. media giants; 3) its targeting of our children as profit centers should offend us more than any comparable marketing aimed at adults; and 4) Disney tries to hide its true motives beneath a cloak of innocence and fantasy, to immunize itself against fair criticism, to the extent that it understandably provokes the scrutiny of academics and others not so beholden to the corporate world.

So don't get too defensive here: The point is not so much to attack Disney as to try to understand what types of stories get invented, circulated, and perpetuated in the public imagination, and why.

COUNTERPOINT: O.K. I guess I can accept the practical necessity of limiting your attention to Disney, based on your reasons #1 and #2. But reasons #3 and especially #4 raise another issue. Are you perhaps holding Disney to higher standards because of Disney's own self-presentation as being "wholesome, innocent, family entertainment"? That is, do you particularly resent what you perceive to be its *hypocrisy*?

Isn't this a bit moralistic? I mean, if Fox and Hanna-Barbera and Universal want to market violent, sexist schlock to our kids but don't pretend they're out to do anything but make a quick buck, should we hold them less accountable because of their *honesty*?! At the end of the documentary, Disney CEO Michael Eisner is quoted as saying that Disney has no obligation to make history, art, or a statement, but simply to make money. That's pretty aboveboard, isn't it? And isn't that the essence of corporate capitalism? First you excoriate Disney for trying to hide its economic motives and then you condemn it for admitting them. You can't have it both ways, can you?

POINT: I'm glad you understood and could accept reasons #1 and #2. I still think you're missing the point of #3 and #4. Don't you think the educators of our children should receive special scrutiny? ? Shouldn't we hold *anyone* who purports to teach our children to higher standards? Don't you think that entertainment itself teaches cultural values and expected behaviors to our children? Remember, it was Walt Disney himself who said, "We have long held that the normal gap between what is generally regarded as 'entertainment' and what is defined 'educational' represents an old and untenable viewpoint" [p.44 in *Walt Disney: Famous Quotes*, The Walt Disney Company, 1994]. In fact, through its entertainment products, Disney is making a powerful and pervasive statement—about approved cultural narratives, identities, and values.

QUESTIONS: *Do you think this documentary is fair in singling out Disney for special scrutiny? Do you think Disney is an appropriate choice for examining corporate media power? Do you think other media conglomerates are any better or any worse in what they teach our children? Does it matter who is better or worse, or is the point just to understand the very process of what is going on with regard to any media conglomerate's influence on constructing reality and fantasy? In what ways are the accusations against Disney unique to the case of Disney, and to what extent are they generalizable to the very nature of corporate capitalism in the late 20th and early 21st centuries?*

Anecdotal Evidence or Scientific Research?

COUNTERPOINT: If I may be permitted to bring up another point of contention....

POINT: Go ahead. Shoot.

COUNTERPOINT: The examples presented in this documentary make no pretense of being representative of all Disney products, nor even of the universe of Disney animated feature films. While they may indeed be representative, the evidence is presented as anecdotal, not as a quantitative content analysis. A fair question to raise, it seems to me, would be whether a systematic quantitative content analysis would find the same patterns to the same degree. Since perception is always selective, a fair question is whether these examples selected to prove the theses of the documentary may say more about the observers making the comments than they do about Disney *per se*. Certainly, conservative Christians who boycott Disney are critical of Disney as well, but their reading of the texts is quite different from yours or mine, I think.

POINT: I think I'd agree with you that the examples presented in this documentary make no pretense of being representative of all Disney products, nor even of the universe of Disney animated feature films. But again, I remind you that this is a 50-minute documentary, not a lengthy scholarly dissertation. Hopefully, it will stimulate the very sort of research you call for. Even so, your faith in numbers-crunching content analysis may be greater than mine, I'm afraid. There are subtleties and nuances of meaning which may be difficult to grasp simply by counting and measuring. In the final analysis, the testimony of thoughtful and informed experts is valid and valuable evidence in and of itself, in my estimation.

COUNTERPOINT: I think we do have a difference of opinion over the value of quantitative content analysis. Certainly, qualitative analysis and commentary add texture and depth to quantitative analysis, but to reject out of hand quantitative analysis—with its attendant requirements of

validity and reliability--leaves your experts' opinions dangling as plausible hypotheses, not as sound empirical evidence.

QUESTIONS: *How important do you think it is whether the documentary has quantitative research to back up its contentions? Are all the arguments presented amenable to scientific verification, or are some of them value judgments? What other criteria might be used to assess the validity of the arguments presented besides quantitative content analysis?*

Representations of Gender

COUNTERPOINT: If I might offer some examples of what I referred to as "selective perception" in the interpretation of Disney films...

POINT: Please do. That would help.

COUNTERPOINT: There are a number of examples cited by the documentary's experts that I don't think are as unambiguous in their meanings as you seem to think. For instance, some examples cited of feminine seductiveness are understandable—the centaurettes in *Fantasia*, Thumper's bunny girlfriend in *Bambi*, Tinker Belle in *Peter Pan*, Jasmine in *Aladdin*. But you need also to admit that there has been some progression in the portrayals of female characters over time. Belle of *Beauty and the Beast* is far more interested in reading books than in the overtures of the macho Gaston. Pocahontas saves the life of Captain John Smith and averts a war, not by her figure but by her words. Hercules' Megara was modeled on the strong female stars of old Hollywood such as Barbara Stanwyck ("See ya 'round, Herc!") and actually saves Hercules' life. The *Hunchback of Notre Dame*'s Esmeralda is every bit a match for Captain Phoebus in fencing and verbal repartee. Mulan saves the lives of Captain Shang and the emperor, and proves herself a war hero. To read these portrayals as unambiguously stereotypically feminine—weak and seductive—is to ignore a lot of evidence to the contrary, and to ignore that as society has changed, so has Disney.

And you need to account for other possible interpretations of gender representations in Disney films. For example, Ariel's giving up her voice to win her prince in *The Little Mermaid* was portrayed as an unwise bargain with the devil (Ursula) that almost turned out disastrously, not as a strategy worthy of emulation. If Shang comes to visit Mulan at the end of the film, it is because he is attracted to her strength and independence. And Belle does not approve of or submit to the Beast's abuse or violent rages—she refuses to eat or come out of her room; she is attracted to his sweetness and kindness only after he begins to transform himself. The terms of his curse require that he learn to love another and earn her love, an explicit acknowledgment that it is he who must change his unforgivable behavior. And it's also clear that Belle rejects the macho masculinity of Gaston; in fact, his sexism and aggressiveness make him the villain of the movie. Pocahontas and Esmeralda are both women who have political interests and dare to intervene in the masculine realm of power to challenge injustice and prejudice.

POINT: Sure, even as I reject your interpretations here, I'll admit that there will always be some ambiguity in textual interpretations (that's why we call them *interpretations*), but you are also ignoring the continuity throughout these depictions (as well as in society, I might add). Every female lead in Disney movies always has to be stereotypically beautiful—big breasts, tiny waist, highly sexualized. Every one of them has to find love and romance to be happy. And no matter how

adventurous or empowered they may initially seem, they always settle for traditional roles of security and domesticity in the end. The male leads are always handsome, strong, and independent.

COUNTERPOINT: But isn't that true of fairy tales and cultural ideals in general? You just mentioned the continuity of gender stereotyping in the larger society.

POINT: My point is that, even if there is disconfirming evidence (and I agree that we may never agree on textual readings), there is still a continuity of gender stereotyping in our society made even more pronounced by the caricaturing process of cartoon animation and simplified scripting. And this is one of the ways—although surely not the only way—that these cultural depictions get transmitted from generation to generation. What also concerns me about Disney is its practice of regularly re-releasing its "classic" movies to each successive generation. This means that all kinds of outdated stereotyped portrayals—whether of gender, race, ethnicity, whatever—get re-cycled to each new generation as if these were accurate reflections of contemporary society, oblivious to all the social-cultural changes that have happened since the first release of these films. What might have been understandable if not excusable in the context of the times of their original release now becomes a new offense. Every household video library of Disney films contains a veritable archive of outdated and offensive cultural stereotypes that parents do not even think to challenge because they feel safe with Disney. Disney itself recognizes these offensive characterizations as it regularly edits such offensive stereotypes from the classic cartoon shorts shown on the Disney Channel, but no such practice exists for editing classic animated feature films.

QUESTIONS: *What examples of gender stereotyping do you see in Disney films? Do you find gender stereotyping to be more pronounced in the depictions of male or female characters, or do you see any difference? Are your readings of gender portrayals closer to those of **Point** or **Counterpoint**? Can you cite examples from other Disney films or products to support your view? Have gender portrayals in Disney films changed over time? What evidence do you see for continuity or change in gender portrayals? How do you think parents should handle outdated offensive stereotypes that still exist in Disney films from earlier eras? How are gender portrayals in Disney movies influenced by the fact that most Hollywood executives (including Disney's) are white males?*

Representations of Race and Ethnicity

COUNTERPOINT: While we're on the subject of stereotyping, may I raise the same sort of questions with regard to racial and ethnic portrayals in Disney films?

POINT: I thought you might be headed in that direction. What do you think of the documentary's arguments on this issue?

COUNTERPOINT: My reaction is much the same as it was with regard to its arguments about gender portrayals in Disney movies. That is, the experts in the documentary seem to select only examples that support their assertions while ignoring other examples to the contrary. And even if I accept those particular examples, I don't think they are as unambiguous in their meanings as those experts seem to think.

POINT: Can you please be more specific?

COUNTERPOINT: Sure. Let's start with Disney's depictions of blacks. I'll grant you, there have been plenty of racist portrayals over the years—from the black centaurette shining hoofs in *Fantasia* (1940) right down to the total absence of black Africans in *Tarzan* (1999). But some depictions are not so simple. Take the black crows in *Dumbo* (1941). They are undeniably black, but I don't think they're negatively portrayed. They are strong characters, not stereotypes. They are witty, funny, and smart—it is they who devise and suggest the "magic feather" stratagem to Timothy Mouse. They speak in a black dialect, to be sure, but to criticize this fact is to criticize them on the basis of their regional culture (theirs is a Southern black dialect) and their class (their speech is assuredly not middle-class).

POINT: You're being altogether too kind and generous in your interpretation, I think. Why is the lead crow named "Jim Crow"?! How can an allusion to the reprehensible institution of Jim Crow be seen as any kind of joke? And why does Cliff Edwards, a white man who also did the voice of Jiminy Cricket, voice that character? You call that an authentic black dialect? Why is it that no other characters in *Dumbo* speak with in any dialect—either regional or class? They all speak in Standard English, and that serves to marginalize the black crows into the status of outsiders. Where are the black characters who don't speak in marginalized dialect?

COUNTERPOINT: Actually, other characters in *Dumbo* do speak with accents—Timothy Mouse with a working-class Brooklyn accent, and the ringmaster with a heavy Italian accent. Timothy is certainly a heroic little character . . . but then the ringmaster is a buffoon. So maybe it's a split decision?

POINT: More like 8-1, in my favor. But back to Disney's depictions of blacks. What about those apes in *The Jungle Book* (1967) who want to be like humans? Aren't they just the traditional Hollywood stereotypes of buffoonish jungle natives? Look at their leader, King Louis, who speaks in a black-coded voice and who sings about wanting to "be human, too" in the black musical idioms of scat and jazz. Don't you think that's an outrageously offensive suggestion of "uppity" blacks wanting to be like whites? And did you ever notice the head on that battering ram the monkeys use against Baloo—it looks like one of those racist caricatures of blacks from old advertisements and cartoons!

COUNTERPOINT: Unfortunate portrayals, at the very least.

POINT: So you agree with me?

COUNTERPOINT: I don't think I can help but see your point in this regard. But skip ahead a few years to *The Aristocats* (1970). Black musician Scatman Crothers is cast a Scat Cat, a hip jazz trumpeter in a band of cat musicians. Their signature number is "Everybody Wants to be a Cat," in which they sing, "Everybody wants to be a cat, because a cat's the only cat who knows where it's at . . . A cat's the only cat who knows how to swing Everybody digs a swinging cat." The message here seems to be that being black (a cat) is cool, hip, and eminently desirable—quite a contrast to the message about blackness in *The Jungle Book*. Maybe Disney was trying to atone for its racist sins of three years before.

POINT: I doubt that, but I'll agree that the implicit message is indeed improved over that of *The Jungle Book*. Can we skip ahead even further to take a look at *The Lion King*? This film was released

in 1994, years after the initial cultural changes wrought by the civil rights movement. How can you possibly excuse in this day and age the representation of the villainous hyenas as racial and ethnic minorities speaking inner-city street dialect? And casting African-American Whoopi Goldberg and Latino Cheech Marin in those roles?

COUNTERPOINT: Again, you've got me. I don't think I could excuse those choices. The best I could offer in explanation would be that the inner-city street dialect perhaps betrays a class prejudice rather than a specifically racial or ethnic prejudice, but I'll have to admit that's a weak response. Perhaps even Disney itself did not want to have to defend these portrayals again, considering that the hyenas did not appear in the direct-to-video sequel, *The Lion King II: Simba's Pride*.

I think the problem is not so much racial prejudice—a fear and hatred of blacks or Latinos – but institutional racism, the perpetuation of patterns of inequality and exclusion that continues simply by everybody doing what they've always done. If there had been many and varied black or Latino characters in Disney films, these roles would not stand out as singularly racist. As it is, however, when you have two villainous characters who distinguish themselves from other characters by their ethnic dialect, the inescapable implication is racist.

I would, however, hasten to point out the casting of African-Americans in positive leading roles in *The Lion King* as well—James Earl Jones as Mufasa, Robert Guillaume as Rafiki, and Niketa Calame as Young Nala. The fact that Mufasa and Young Nala speak in Standard American accents (Rafiki speaks in a mixture of Caribbean-accented English and Swahili phrases) may not make their race readily apparent, but I say give Disney credit where credit is due. In some other Disney films, African-American actors give voice to popular characters while being recognizably black—Samuel E. Wright's Caribbean-accented Sebastian in *The Little Mermaid* and Eddie Murphy's Mushu in *Mulan*. These are surely positive developments, aren't they? And look at *Hercules*—there you have attractive and talented African-American women singers serving as a sort of Greek chorus to narrate the movie. Isn't that a positive portrayal?

POINT: A positive development one, yes, but too little too late if you consider the fact that these were the *first* black women who appeared *as* black women in a Disney animated feature film. And Disney has thus far *never* portrayed an animated black man in its entire history of feature-length animated films.

COUNTERPOINT: Point taken. Why don't we take a look at Disney's portrayal of another ethnic group?

POINT: O.K. I'd like to go back to your citing that "Everybody Wants to be a Cat" sequence in *The Aristocats*. You neglected to mention that this very scene also depicts a Siamese cat who plays the piano with chopsticks, wears a cymbal as a "coolie" hat, is cross-eyed and bucktoothed, has a maniacal laugh, and sings out, "Oh boy, ferras, ret's rock this joint!" Quite a compilation of offensive stereotypical Asian characteristics!

COUNTERPOINT: Again, you're right. It's an offensive characterization. I suppose the most I could claim for that movie is that its ethnic portrayals are mixed, with elements of both positive and negative portrayals. That's all I'm saying—that Disney's record on this sort of thing is mixed.

POINT: Mixed perhaps, but I don't see the mixture as a balanced one. How can you explain the continuity of this racist portrayal of Asians, going at least back to *Lady and the Tramp*? The Siamese cats there are given the same offensive stereotypical Asian characteristics, plus they are depicted as sinister, cunning, manipulative, and insidious, a sort of "Yellow Peril."

COUNTERPOINT: I certainly can't begin to excuse such a portrayal, but perhaps I can try to explain it. *Lady and the Tramp* was released in 1955, soon after the Korean War and in the midst of Cold War fear of China. The story is set in turn-of-the-century America, a time when fears about Chinese immigration were running high (as they come to Lady's home for a visit, the Siamese cats sing, "Now we are looking over our new domicile / If we like we stay for maybe quite a while"). The film is a reflection of its times, for better or worse—and certainly worse in this regard. At least, as the video points out, comparing these Siamese cats to Mulan, Disney has made very significant improvements in the visual portrayal of Asians.

POINT: But, as the video also points out, only at the expense of portraying China as an extremely oppressive and sexist society. And, as for visual portrayals of Asians, the Mongols didn't come off too well in *Mulan*. We need to move on to other topics. Anything else on this one?

COUNTERPOINT: Did you know that Native American activist Russell Means (also the voice of Powhatan in *Pocahontas*) described *Pocahontas* as "an important and historic achievement for Hollywood and, I believe, the best and most responsible film that has ever been made about American Indians"?

POINT: So? Native American activist Winona LaDuke (also 2000 candidate for Vice-President on the Green Party ticket with Ralph Nader) has called *Pocahontas* a travesty against Native Americans and a distortion of their history.

COUNTERPOINT: Oh. One last thing. I think the song sung by the gypsy Esmeralda, "God Help the Outcasts," in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, represents a plea on behalf of all minorities—not only by ethnicity, but also by race, class, gender, or sexual orientation:

*God help the outcasts
Hungry from birth
Show them the mercy
They don't find on earth . . .
I know so many
Less lucky than I
Please help my people
The poor and downtrod
I thought we all were
The children of God
God help the outcasts
Children of God*

Considering its timing, I think it might have been a jab at the homophobic religious right who were organizing a boycott of Disney.

POINT: I think you may be right.

QUESTIONS: *What examples of racial and ethnic stereotyping do you see in Disney films? Do you find racial/ethnic stereotyping to be more pronounced in the depictions of any particular minority group, or do you see any differences? Are your readings of racial/ethnic portrayals closer to those of **Point** or **Counterpoint**? Can you cite examples from other Disney films or products to support your view? Have racial/ethnic portrayals in Disney films changed over time? What evidence do you see for continuity or change in racial/ethnic portrayals? How do you think parents should handle outdated offensive stereotypes that still exist in Disney films from earlier eras? How are racial/ethnic portrayals in Disney movies influenced by the fact that most Hollywood executives (including Disney's) are white males?*

Textual Analysis or Audience Analysis?

COUNTERPOINT: May I raise one more point?

POINT: Why stop now?

COUNTERPOINT: I think we should remember that textual analysis is not the same thing as audience analysis; that is, just because a particular textual reading is valid, that is no assurance that all audiences will read it as such or be affected in the ways we might think. Audience effects are always an open empirical question, separate from textual analysis of the content. There is in fact little empirical analysis of actual audience effects of Disney products. Audiences are not dopes and can be very creative in their receptions, perceptions, and reactions to mass media messages. We still have to ask whether audiences in fact "learn" what Disney is "teaching."

POINT: That's a valid point. I agree that we should have more research on this point. But can't we expect there to be some plausible correlation between media messages and audience reactions? Until more research is available, I don't think this is an unwarranted assumption. I mean, there's research already, for example, that shows that people who are heavy television watchers not only have a worldview that reflects their TV world, but also that their worldviews resemble one another's regardless of class, race, gender, religion, or politics. Can't we generalize from that? You also need to remember that, even if an individual rejects a particular media message, that does not mean that individual is not affected by that message. Media create a cultural environment we all have to live in, like it or not. And one more thing—audiences may not be entirely "dopes," as you put it, but some are children, with less experience and developmental ability to evaluate media messages. They are more likely to accept media portrayals as valid if they have no experience to the contrary. Their critical thinking skills are not yet developed. Any media corporation that targets children as their favored demographic audience deserves special scrutiny.

COUNTERPOINT: But I think my point still stands: the research is just not there on what are the actual effects of watching Disney films. Maybe your expectations and generalizations are correct, maybe not; we just don't have the evidence to settle this. There are so many contextual factors that affect what people actually look at, what they actually see, and what they actually remember—not to mention their developmental level--that two different viewers may come away from watching the same movie with very different interpretations—*just as you and I have*—and then react quite differently to it. And I think there's plenty of research that finds such things as

social class, race, and gender are far better predictors of people's attitudes and behaviors than their TV viewing habits.

QUESTIONS: *What does it mean to say that textual analysis is not the same as audience analysis? Do you agree with this statement? How might viewers creatively, even subversively, interpret messages and portrayals in Disney films? Do children always replicate the stories they see in films, TV, and videos, or do they ever juxtapose the characters and story elements into narratives of their own making? What is the relationship between the content of media messages and their reception by consumers? That is, what factors may determine whether media messages are taken as gospel truth or whether they are rejected as unrealistic fantasy? Are we also affected even by messages we reject?*

And In Conclusion . . .

POINT: Anything else?

COUNTERPOINT: Yeah. Do you really think that *Hercules* was a "new peak" in using a film to sell products, with its anachronistic urns, mugs, and sneakers with Hercules symbols on them? The creators of that film certainly knew those products were anachronisms—that was the joke! Wasn't it more of a satirical commentary on the merchandising of celebrity? And wouldn't that make it more subversive of commercialization rather than supportive of it?

POINT: Well, I agree that the movie *Hercules* tried to offer a satirical commentary on the excesses of modern merchandising. But that didn't stop it from being merchandised excessively and obscenely itself. Call it a postmodern ironic sensibility if you wish, but the result was still the same—Disney winks at itself while it commits the very outrages it is satirizing.

COUNTERPOINT: I'm going to Disney World. Want to go with me?

POINT: I'm going to a Disney store to protest Disney merchandise produced by Third World slave labor while Michael Eisner gets obscenely excessive pay. Want to go with me?

COUNTERPOINT: **Point**, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

[Fade to black]

QUESTIONS: *How would you assess the overall effectiveness of this documentary? Have you ever before considered the points presented in this documentary? How do you think most people would react to this documentary? Why does Disney arouse such passionate reactions, both pro and con, in people? How do you think The Walt Disney Company would react to this documentary? What steps toward media literacy can you think of that we should teach children to help them critically evaluate Disney and other popular culture products for themselves? Should this be taught in schools, even using Disney as an object of study?*

FURTHER READING AND VIEWING

Allan, Robin (1999). *Walt Disney and Europe: European Influences on the Animated Feature Films of Walt Disney*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press. Detailed scholarly study of the ways European culture influenced Disney in the making of classic animated features.

Bell, Elizabeth, Lynda Haas, and Laura Sells (1995). *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press. Essays addressing the Disney film legacy from feminist, Marxist, and other critical perspectives. Special attention to issues of gender, race, and class.

Bryman, Alan (1995). *Disney and His Worlds*. London: Routledge. The best single overview of the scholarly literature on Disney, covering Disney the man, the company, the films, and the theme parks. Addresses issues as diverse as the organizational structure of the corporation with and without Walt, and the theme parks as sites of consumption, tourism, and postmodernism.

Byrne, Eleanor and Martin McQuillan (1999). *Deconstructing Disney*. London: Pluto Press. This revisionist leftist book questions traditional exposés of Disney's racism, sexism, cultural imperialism, etc. by arguing that the historical, social, and political context of Disney texts has so changed that so must the task of deconstruction. In the words of the authors, "Quasimodo is not Pinocchio and Pocahontas is not Snow White."

Dorfman, Ariel and A. Mattelart (1975). *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic*. New York: International General. Chilean Marxist dissects the imperialist messages embedded in Disney comics (P.S. They're *not* the same comics you and I were given to read in the U.S.).

Eliot, Marc (1993). *Walt Disney: Hollywood's Dark Prince*. New York: Birch Lane. A biographical "exposé" of Walt Disney, summarizing a host of uncomplimentary facts and dubious rumors about Uncle Walt—his psychosexual obsessions and neuroses, his anti-Semitism and anti-Communism, his inadequacies as a family man, and his anti-labor management style.

Fjellman, Stephen M. (1992) *Vinyl Leaves: Walt Disney World and America*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press. An anthropologist examines lands and attractions of Disney World in extensive detail, locating them in a larger social-cultural context.

Flower, Joe (1991). *Prince of the Magic Kingdom: Michael Eisner and the Re-Making of Disney*. New York: John Wiley. Business biography of Eisner.

Frantz, Douglas and Catherine Collins (1999). *Celebration, U.S.A.: Living in Disney's Brave New Town*. New York: Henry Holt. A husband-and-wife team (he's a reporter for *The New York Times*, she's a free-lance journalist and full-time mom) who, with their two school-age children, lived for two years in Disney's bold experiment in community-building, its new town of Celebration.

Giroux, Henry (1999). *The Mouse that Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield. Giroux (featured in *Mickey Mouse Monopoly*) attacks Disney for its attempts to hide beneath a cloak of innocence and magic even as it teaches children deeply conservative values and treats them primarily as consumers.

Griffin, Sean (2000). *Tinker Belles and Evil Queens: The Walt Disney Company from the Inside Out*. New York: New York University Press. Although Disney has long been identified with conservative family values, Griffin traces the contributions of gays within the corporation and their resulting influence on mainstream American culture.

Grover, Ron (1991). *The Disney Touch: How a Daring Management Team Revived an Entertainment Empire*. Homewood, IL: Irwin. Business Week journalist Grover examines the rescue of the Disney corporation by the Eisner/Wells/Katzenberg management team.

Hiaasen, Carl (1998). *Team Rodent: How Disney Devours the World*. New York: Ballantine. Amusing muckraking monograph by journalist who is a lifelong Florida resident and now disgruntled Disney neighbor. Writes Hiaasen, "Disney is so good at being good that it manifests an evil: so uniformly efficient and courteous, so dependably clean and conscientious, so unfailingly entertaining that it's unreal, and its therefore an agent of pure wickedness."

Lainsbury, Andrew (2000). *Once Upon an American Dream: The Story of Euro Disneyland*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas. Lainsbury, who holds a Ph.D. in American studies and once worked at Euro Disney, examines Europe's love/hate relationship with Euro Disney within the context of cultural imperialism and global corporatism.

Maltin, Leonard (2000). *The Disney Films* (4th ed.). New York: Hyperion. The definitive comprehensive guide to all Disney films, both animated and live-action, both features and shorts. Included are plot summaries, production credits, and critical commentaries, as well as interviews with Disney staff members.

Maltin, Leonard (1990). *Of Mice and Magic: A History of American Animated Cartoons* (rev. ed.). New York: New American Library. Like the subtitle says, a comprehensive history of animated cartoons in America. Useful in locating Disney within the context of other studios and their products.

McChesney, Robert W. (1999). *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press. Media historian McChesney examines the growing corporate control of media and how it contributes to the decline of democratic participation. While not about Disney alone, this book traces the developments that have characterized The Walt Disney Company as well as other global media conglomerates.

Mickey Mouse Goes to Haiti: Walt Disney and the Science of Exploitation (1996). 17 min. National Labor Committee, 275 7th Ave., 15th Floor, NY, NY 10001. www.nlcnet.org. 212-242- 3002. Interviews with Haitian workers who sew Disney children's clothing for sale in the U.S. describe their starvation wages and oppressive factory working conditions.

Project on Disney, The (1995). *Inside the Mouse: Work and Play at Disney World*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. Blending personal meditations, interviews, photographs, and cultural analysis, the authors offer an alternative take on why Disney World embodies the American leisure experience. Best chapter: "Working at the Rat," drawn from interviews with Disney World cast members.

Raz, Aviad E. (1999). *Riding the Black Ship: Japan and Tokyo Disneyland*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center and Harvard University Press. Sociologist Raz looks at how Tokyo Disneyland is experienced by its employees, management, and visitors, providing an ethnographic account from the Japanese point of view. Contrary to previous critiques characterizing Tokyo Disneyland as an outpost of American cultural imperialism, Raz argues that its success has been due to its becoming Japanese while marketing itself as foreign.

Ross, Andrew (1999). *The Celebration Chronicles: Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Property Value in*

Disney's New Town. New York: Ballantine. Based on his living in Celebration for a year and his interviews with fellow residents, employees, and Osceola County locals, Ross asks: What does Celebration reveal about contemporary culture? Is this model town a cause for celebration or alarm? Can we entrust the public interest to giant beneficiaries of the marketplace like Disney?

Schickel, Richard (1997). *The Disney Version: The Life, Times, Art and Commerce of Walt Disney* (3rd edition). Chicago: Ivan R. Dee. One of the best critical biographies of Walt Disney—his life, his work, and his influence on American popular culture, by *Time* magazine film critic.

Schweizer, Peter and Rochelle Schweizer (1998). *Disney: The Mouse Betrayed: Greed, Corruption, and Children at Risk*. Washington, DC: Regnery. Detailed right-wing hatchet job on Disney, implicating it in pornography, pedophilia, Satanism, pandering to Chinese Communism, and promoting "the gay agenda." How they missed Disney's sordid roles in the heartbreak of psoriasis and the assassination of the Kennedys, I just don't know.

Smoodin, Eric, ed. (1994). *Disney Discourse: Producing the Magic Kingdom*. New York: Routledge. An American Film Institute reader. Includes essays from humanities and social- scientific perspectives that both celebrate and critically examine the contributions and global impact of Disney.

Steinberg, Shirley R. and Joe L. Kincheloe, eds. (1997). *Kinderculture: The Corporate Construction of Childhood*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press. Essays examining the corporate construction and manipulation of childhood culture in pursuit of corporate profit. Includes a chapter by Henry A. Giroux, "Are Disney Movies Good for Your Kids?"

Thomas, Bob (1976). *Walt Disney: An American Original*. New York: Simon & Schuster. The authorized biography of Walt Disney, by an Associated Press entertainment reporter, presenting the "official" version of Disney as the Disney Company likes to portray him. Full of hagiographic anecdotes.

Wallace, Mike (1996). *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press. A historian looks at the Disneyfication of American history. The two relevant chapters are "Mickey Mouse History: Portraying the Past at Disney World" (pp. 133-157) and "Disney's America" (pp. 159-174).

Watts, Steven (1997). *The Magic Kingdom : Walt Disney and the American Way of Life*. New York: Houghton Mifflin. Undoubtedly the most comprehensive, thoughtful, and balanced biography of Walt Disney, by a respected historian of American culture.