

**MICKEY MOUSE MONOPOLY:  
DISNEY, CHILDHOOD, AND CORPORATE POWER  
A VIDEO BY CHYNG SUN & MIGUEL PICKER**

**STUDY GUIDE**

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**Overview**

The **Walt Disney Company** is a powerful force in creating childhood culture all over the world. Presenting a worldview based on innocence, magic, and fun, its products are endorsed by parents and teachers, and are enthusiastically embraced by children.

\*Behind the images of innocence and fantasy, however, is a **transnational media corporation** owning media production companies, studios, theme parks, television and radio networks, cable TV systems, magazines, and internet sites. Disney is now one of the six or seven largest media corporations that dominate control most of the mass media in the world.

\*A troubling question concerns the extent to which our view of the world may be skewed by such a concentration of power in these corporations that mediate images of our world to us, and the resulting impact on informed participation in our democratic society.

\*Disney's impact is especially worrisome in view of its role as a major purveyor of the stories that will be used to construct children's imaginary worlds as well as their notions of the real world.

\***Gender representations:** The female characters in Disney movies 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:** Representations of race and ethnicity in Disney animated features are notable for their general scarcity, and when they do appear, they tend to reinforce cultural stereotypes about these groups (for example, Latinos as irresponsible chihuahuas in *Lady and the Tramp* and *Oliver and Company*; African-Americans as jive crows in *Dumbo*, as human-wannabe orangutans in *Jungle Book*, and totally absent in *Tarzan's Africa*; Latinos and African-Americans 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*).

**\*Commercialization of children's culture:** The stories Disney tells in its movies seem to be secondary to their being used as vehicles for the merchandising of videos, toys, clothing, video games, etc. Similarly problematic is the pervasive power of these Disneyfied versions of cultural narratives to displace children's spontaneous creative play in favor of merely replicating the ready-made Disney versions. Such commercialization should not be surprising in light of Disney CEO Michael Eisner's pronouncement: "To make money is our only objective."

## Discussion Questions

### Introduction

**Mickey Mouse Monopoly** is a powerful and effective documentary that owes its power and effectiveness to its unswerving and persuasive marshalling of evidence and testimony to argue its case against Disney. It is a good example of a "point of view" documentary, that is, one that does not purport to present an "objective" or "balanced" overview of all possible points of view regarding its subject, but rather presents a clear and consistent point of view. Please note, however, that "point of view" most assuredly does *not* mean biased or unfair, only that the creators of and experts in this documentary are honest and straightforward in making clear their value judgments as they critically examine Disney's power, influence, and responsibility.

As a teacher, you will probably face a variety of challenges in presenting such a video to your students. On the one hand, there may be some students who will be angered or defensive at the very thought of questioning such a sacred icon of American culture and source of pleasant childhood memories as Disney surely is. Your task in dealing with such students will be to encourage them to harness their emotional reactions in the service of critical thinking—to set aside evaluation in favor of understanding, to suspend judgment in favor of explanation. On the other hand, there may be some students who, already antagonistic toward Disney, will eagerly and unquestioningly embrace the arguments of the documentary, thereby failing to subject those arguments to any critical scrutiny. Your task in dealing with these students will be to challenge them to be open to alternative readings of the evidence, and to articulate and examine the unquestioned assumptions of their own arguments. (Of course, every teacher will also be familiar with yet a third type of challenge—those students who resist being engaged at all, who fail to register any passion on either side of the questions raised! You're on your own here.)

The task of this study guide, as I see it, is to confront both sides of this debate with "inconvenient facts"—those facts which are dissonantly inconvenient to any single-minded intellectual position. My belief is that the point of any pedagogy is not simply to indoctrinate some "right belief" (however strongly I myself may hold to that belief and find it preferable to other beliefs), but to model and stimulate informed critical thinking, to encourage students to become more comfortable with the enormous complexity and ambiguity of the social world, even (perhaps especially) as they stake out passionate positions.

Accordingly, the format of this discussion guide will be a "Point/Counterpoint" exchange. For each of the main points of the documentary, I will lay out the documentary's strongest possible case for it, and also offer a strong and fair alternative perspective (a sort of devil's advocate). Then I will pose some questions for discussion, based on that exchange.

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### **A Point / Counterpoint Exchange with Questions for Discussion**

#### **Media Power**

**POINT:** The thesis of this documentary is that, as one of the six or seven largest media conglomerates in the world, Disney has enormous power to shape our constructions of reality and fantasy alike. The problem is that, as a private corporation, this power is concentrated in the hands of a few who are neither elected nor accountable to most of those affected by that power. More troubling still is the fact that this power is directed primarily at those least able to resist it or critically evaluate it—our children.

**COUNTERPOINT:** I can hardly disagree with that. But why single out Disney? What about the other five or six global media conglomerates, some of whom 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, Is Disney 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. (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. 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 your documentary you quote Disney CEO Michael Eisner 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 much disconfirming evidence, and to ignore that as society has changed, so has Disney.

And if I could add still some other interpretations regarding the complexities and ambiguities of gender portrayals.... 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 quite 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? Is the casting of black bandleader Louis Prima as their leader, King Louis, merely a coincidence? Isn't that clearly a negative portrayal of blacks when they are marginalized in casting and then given lines about wanting to "be human, too"?

**COUNTERPOINT:** An unfortunate coincidence, at the very least. I think the problem is not so much racial prejudice—a fear and hatred of blacks, 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 characters in Disney films, this role would not stand out as racist. As it is, however, when you have only one black actor in the film, and he sings a song about wanting to be human like the others, the inescapable implication is racist.

**POINT:** So you agree with me?

**COUNTERPOINT:** I don't think I can help but agree with you in this regard. But skip ahead a few years to *The Aristocats* (1970). Another 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 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?

**The production team of *Mickey Mouse Monopoly* is very interested in your feedback and criticism. You can reach them at: Let's Talk Media <[letstalkmedia@aol.com](mailto:letstalkmedia@aol.com)>**

## **Alternative Projects**

### **CORPORATE MEDIA INFLUENCE**

Research the extent of The Walt Disney Company's holdings and enterprises. An excellent article in this regard may be found online:

McChesney, Robert W. "[The Global Media Giants: The Nine Firms that Dominate the World](#)," *Extra!* November/December 1997.

Were you surprised at any of the company's holdings? In what ways is Disney different from the other eight media giants profiled in this article? In what ways is it similar? Are criticisms of Disney's global power equally applicable to the other media giants, or is somehow Disney unique?

What do you think are the consequences of this concentration of mass media into fewer and fewer, larger and larger corporations? Take a look at another online article by McChesney for his view:

McChesney, Robert W. "[Oligopoly: The Big Media Game Has Fewer and Fewer Players](#)," *The Progressive* 1999.

## **GENDER REPRESENTATIONS IN DISNEY FILMS**

Collect a sampling of videos of some of the most famous Disney animated feature films spanning the decades from the 1930s to the present: e.g., *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1938), *Pinocchio* (1940), *Dumbo* (1941), *Bambi* (1942), *Cinderella* (1950), *Alice in Wonderland* (1951), *Peter Pan* (1953), *Lady and the Tramp* (1955), *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), *One Hundred and One Dalmatians* (1961), *The Sword in the Stone* (1963), *The Jungle Book* (1967), *The Aristocats* (1970), *Robin Hood* (1973), *The Rescuers* (1977), *The Fox and the Hound* (1981), *The Black Cauldron* (1985), *The Great Mouse Detective* (1986), *Oliver and Company* (1988), *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *The Rescuers Down Under* (1990), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Aladdin* (1992), *The Lion King* (1994), *Pocahontas* (1995), *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996), *Hercules* (1997), *Mulan* (1998), *Tarzan* (1999), *The Emperor's New Groove* (2000). Probably you or members of your class own copies of at least some of these videos, and they are also readily available for rental at video stores or for borrowing at public libraries.

Assign each selected film to a student or group of students. Ask them to watch the film and keep a list of all characters in the film. Categorize each of the characters listed by gender (if identifiable) and by whether it is a major or minor role. Describe each of the characters, especially those in major roles, according to some selection of the following traits:

- \* ***stereotypical masculine traits***: achievement-oriented/ambitious, self-reliant, self-confident, independent, responsible, decisive, rational, dominant/aggressive/violent
- \* ***stereotypical feminine traits***: obedient, submissive, dependent, anxious to please, emotional, nurturing, affectionate, gentle, understanding, sensitive, sacrificing, family-oriented, obsessed with physical appearance

Are the major roles in Disney films given primarily to males or females? Has this changed over time? Are the male and female characters in Disney films stereotypically masculine and feminine in their traits and behaviors? Has this changed over time? For the lead character in each film, what is his/her primary goal or wish to be realized in the course of the film? Does this vary by gender? Has this changed over time?

How can you relate the gender depictions in Disney films over the years to the changing roles of men and women in American society? How accurately have Disney films reflected those changes?

## **THE ABSENCE OF WOMEN IN MAKING DISNEY FILMS**

Collect a sampling of videos of some of the most famous Disney animated feature films spanning the decades from the 1930s to the present (see list of suggested films above).

Using the slow-motion and freeze-frame functions of your VCR, examine carefully the credits of your selected movies. How many names of *women* do you find among the major credits—i.e., directors, producers, executive producers, story and screenplay writers, and supervising animators? Count all the names listed and calculate what *percentage* of all major credits lists female names. Do the numbers and percentages vary over the years? Why do you think this is? Is this minuscule representation of women in Disney animated features merely an unconscious reflection of the times in which the films were made, or was Disney conscious of its exclusion of women? [Animator ward Kimball recalls that the employment ad that brought him to Disney Studios in the 1930s specified "male artists"!]

What effect do you think this relative absence of women in major credited capacities had on the stories and characters of Disney films? Do these films therefore reflect a specifically *masculine* sensibility and neglect a specifically *feminine* sensibility? Are the portrayals of female characters more stereotypical than the depictions of male characters? Be prepared to cite specific examples to support your conclusions. [Note that the first Disney animated feature to receive praise for its stronger female lead was *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), and that this was also the first Disney animated feature to be scripted by a woman—Linda Woolverton.]

## **REPRESENTATIONS OF RACE AND ETHNICITY IN DISNEY FILMS**

Collect a sampling of videos of some of the most famous Disney animated feature films spanning the decades from the 1930s to the present (see list of suggested films above).

Assign each selected film to a student or group of students. Ask them to watch the film and keep a list of all characters in the film. Categorize each of the characters listed according to these characteristics: race/ethnicity (if identifiable), major or minor role, and positive/sympathetic or negative/unsympathetic portrayal.

What conclusions can you draw from your content analysis? What racial/ethnic groups are most frequently portrayed in these films? What is the racial/ethnic identity of the major sympathetic characters? What is the racial/ethnic identity of the major unsympathetic characters? What characteristics seem to be associated with each identifiable racial/ethnic characterization? [If the race/ethnicity of any characters are not easily identifiable, do you think they are nonetheless portrayed in the mold of white Americans—e.g., no identifiable accent / standard American accent, middle-class American values, etc.?] Do you notice any changes in these portrayals over the years? How can you relate the racial and ethnic depictions in Disney films over the years to the changing attitudes toward race relations and ethnic diversity in American society? How accurately have Disney films reflected those changes?

## **DISNEY ANIMATED FILMS IN THE CONTEXT OF CINEMATIC HISTORY**

Try to obtain video copies of some major animated features from non-Disney sources, spanning the decades from the 1930s to the present: e.g., *Gulliver's Travels* (Max

Fleischer, 1939), *Mr. Bug Goes to Town* (re-titled *Hoppity Goes to Town*; Max Fleischer, 1941), *Raggedy Ann and Raggedy Andy—A Musical Adventure* (Richard Williams, 1977), *The Last Unicorn* (Rankin-Bass, 1982), *The Secret of NIMH* (Bluth, 1982), *The Care Bears Movie* (Nelvana Studios / American Greetings, 1985), *An American Tale* (Bluth / Spielberg's Amblin Productions, 1986), *The Land Before Time* series (Sullivan & Bluth / Spielberg & Lucas, beginning in 1988), *All Dogs Go to Heaven* (Sullivan & Bluth, 1989), *Kiki's Delivery Service* (Japanese, 1989), *Rock-A-Doodle* (Sullivan & Bluth, 1990), *The Swan Princess* (Rich Animation Studios / Columbia TriStar, 1994), *Thumbelina* (Bluth & Goldman / Warner, 1994), *Anastasia* (Bluth & Goldman / Fox, 1997), *Cats Don't Dance* (Turner Feature Animation, 1997), *The King and I* (Rich Animation Studios / Rankin-Bass / Warner, 1999).

Pair each non-Disney film you have selected with a Disney film of approximately the same year of release. Assign each selected film pair to a student or group of students. Subject each selected film to the same analysis as suggested for Disney films in the exercises above (regarding representations of gender, credited female contributors, racial and ethnic representations).

Regarding their representations of gender, race, and ethnicity, in what ways are Disney and non-Disney animated films similar? In what ways are they dissimilar? Is Disney unique in its portrayals, or are these portrayals reflective of cultural stereotypes that pervade all cultural products? Again with regard to these portrayals of gender, race, and ethnicity, would you consider Disney films to be better, worse, or no different from other studios' films over the years? Cite examples from the films analyzed to support your evaluation.

To what extent are Disney and other producers of mass culture responsible for creating, disseminating, and sustaining these stereotypes, and to what extent do they simply reflect deeper social, cultural, political, and economic realities neither of their making nor particularly subject to their influence?

## **CHALLENGES TO DISNEY**

Giroux outlines a strategy for addressing the formidable presence and influence of Disney in American life ("Are Disney Movies Good for Your Kids?" pp. 53-67 in Shirley R. Steinberg and Joe L. Kincheloe, editors, *Kinderculture: The Corporate Construction of Childhood*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997):

1. Schools should study popular culture as a serious object of social knowledge and critical analysis.
2. Parents, educators, and community groups must challenge and re-write popular culture's messages about family values, history, and national identity.
3. In order to be fully grasped, Disney's influence must be analyzed within a larger historical, social, political, and economic context.

4. Parents, educators, and cultural analysts must develop new forms of literacy for understanding electronically produced visual media and be attentive to the diverse ways different groups of kids "read" these media.
5. Disney's public responsibilities extend beyond those of its role as entertainer to include its role as educator of the young; accordingly, Disney must be challenged and held accountable not only in economic terms, but also in political and ethical terms.

A very different challenge to Disney and attempt to hold it accountable in economic, political, and ethical terms, is the boycott of all things Disney spearheaded by the Southern Baptist Convention, the American Family Association, Operation Rescue, and other religious-right groups (see the [Official Disney Boycott](#) website).

What, if anything, do these two challenges to Disney have in common? Compare their professed reasons for challenging Disney, as well as their tactics. Why does Disney draw such fire from both sides of the political spectrum? What do you think should be the proper response, if any, to Disney's perceived offenses?

## 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 unflinchingly 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.

\_\_\_\_\_ (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.