Chapter Three

Children's Culture and Disney's Animated Films

> Animation as a form of historical memory has entered real space. After all, any space or film that uses manipulated, interactive imagery must be called, by definition, a form of animation; and we are increasingly being submerged in life as a video game, even while our political crises deepen, and our class difference widens. . . . We act out stories inside cartoons now.
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> —Norman M. Klein[1]

Animated Hollywood films, particularly those produced by Disney, have been at the forefront of children's culture for decades. Such films are presented to audiences as exemplary forms of entertainment that stimulate the imagination, protect innocence, and create a healthy sense of adventure, all of which is assumed to be "good" for kids. In other words, in the absence of close scrutiny, such films appear to be wholesome vehicles of amusement, a highly regarded and sought after source of fun and joy for children. However, cultural critics are increasingly viewing these films as much more than entertainment.[2] Disney's animated films operate on many registers, but one of the most persuasive is their role as "teaching machines." The products associated with children's culture now garner at least as much cultural authority and legitimacy for teaching specific roles, values, and ideals as more traditional sites of learning, such as public schools, religious institutions, and the family. Disney films combine enchantment and innocence in narrating stories that help children understand who they are, what societies are

about, and what it means to construct a world of play and fantasy in an adult environment. The authority of such films, in part, stems from their unique form of representation and their ever-growing presence within a media apparatus equipped with dazzling technology, sound effects, and imagery packaged as entertainment, spin-off commercial products, and "huggable" stories.

The significance of Disney's animated films as a site of learning is heightened by the widespread recognition that schools and other public sites are increasingly beset by a crisis of vision, purpose, and motivation. The mass media, especially the world of Hollywood films, constructs a dreamlike world of security, coherence, and childhood innocence in which kids find a place to situate themselves in their emotional lives. Unlike the often hard, joyless reality of schooling, children's films provide a high-tech visual space in which adventure and pleasure meet in a fantasy world of possibilities and a commercial sphere of consumerism and commodification. The educational relevance of animated films makes it all the more necessary to move beyond treating these films as transparent entertainment and to question the diverse, often contradictory, messages that constitute Disney's worldview. The sheer number of viewers of Disney/Pixar films alone would warrant exploration and critical understanding of the political messages they contain, but doing so is all the more critical because they captivate the imaginations of very young children.

CRITIQUING WHAT CHILDREN LEARN FROM DISNEY

The contradictory world of Disney is further evident in an analysis of some of its animated films produced since 1989. These films are im-

portant because they received enormous praise from the dominant press and achieved blockbuster status.[15] For many children they represent an entrance into the world of Disney. Moreover, the financial success and popularity of these films, which rival many adult features, do not engender the critical analyses often produced in response to adult films. In short, critics and audiences are more willing to suspend critical judgment about children's films. Animated films, promoted as fantasy and entertainment, appear to fall outside the world of values, meaning, and knowledge often associated with more pronounced educational forms such as documentaries, art films, or the news media. Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, and Laura Sells capture this sentiment: "Disney audiences . . . legal institutions, film theorists, cultural critics, and popular audiences all guard the borders of Disney film as 'off limits' to the critical enterprise, constructing Disney as a metonym for 'America'—clean, decent, industrious—'the happiest place on earth.'"[16]

Given the influence that Disney products have on children, it is imperative that parents, teachers, and other adults understand how its animated films influence the values of the children who view them. As a producer of children's culture, Disney should not be given an easy pardon because it is defined as a universal citadel of fun and good cheer. On the contrary, as one of the primary institutions constructing childhood culture in the United States and around the globe, it warrants healthy suspicion and critical debate. Such a debate should not be limited to the home but included as a central feature of the school curriculum and other critical public sites of learning.

It is important to address Disney's animated films without condemning Disney out of hand as a reactionary corporation deceptively promoting a conservative worldview under the guise of entertainment. It is equally important not to celebrate Disney as an animated version of *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*, doing nothing more than providing sources of joy and happiness to children all over the world.[17] Clearly, Disney offers children and adults visual stimulation and joyful pleasure: dramatic thunderstorms, kaleidoscopic musical numbers, and fanciful transformations of real life into wondrous spectacles. Disney films offer children opportunities to locate themselves in a world that resonates with their desires and interests. Pleasure is one of the defining principles of what Disney produces, and children are both its subjects and objects. Hence, one can appreciate the trademark imaginative

brilliance of Disney's animated films but at the same time interrogate and challenge the films as an important site for the production of children's culture. The fact is that Disney films are often filled with contradictory messages. Disney's influence and power must be situated within the broader understanding of the company's role as a corporate giant intent on spreading the commercial values that erode civil society while proclaiming to support and expand it.

Disney's role in shaping individual identities and controlling the fields of social meaning through which young people negotiate the world is far too complex to characterize simply as a form of reactionary politics. If educators and other cultural workers are to include the culture of children as an important site of contestation and struggle, then it is imperative to analyze how Disney's animated films powerfully influence the way America's cultural landscape is imagined. Disney's scripted view of childhood and society must be engaged and challenged as "a historically specific matter of social analysis and intervention."[18] This is particularly important since Disney's animated films work to provoke and inform children's imaginations, desires, roles, and dreams while simultaneously sedimenting affect and meaning.

having 'reactionary politics' means being extremely conservative, to the point of being backward and opposing all thing progressive

The wide distribution and popular appeal of Disney's animated films provide diverse audiences the opportunity for critical viewing. Critically analyzing how Disney films work to construct meanings, induce pleasure, and reproduce ideologically loaded fantasies is not reducible to a mere exercise in film criticism. As with any educational institution, Disney's worldview must be discussed in terms of how it narrates children's culture and can be held accountable for what it contributes to a significant cultural public sphere in which ideas, values, audiences, markets, and opinions serve to create different publics and social formations. Of course, Disney's self-proclaimed innocence, its inflexibility in dealing with social criticism, and its paranoid attitude are now legendary and provide more reasons why Disney should be both challenged and engaged critically. Moreover, as a multi-billion-dollar company, Disney has corporate and cultural influence too enormous and far reaching to allow the company to define itself exclusively within the imaginary discourses of innocence and entertainment.[19]

The question of whether Disney's animated films are *good* for kids has no easy answer. It can be readily acknowledged, however, that

such films will have *better* educational and entertainment value the more teachers, parents, and young people think about the conscious and unconscious messages and effects the films promote while resisting the temptation to view them as nonideological. The Disney animation studio demonstrated a profound ability to adapt to the changing expectations of a new generation of filmgoers in the 1990s. The series of feature-length films produced over the decade restored Disney's prominence as a purveyor of children's entertainment with *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Aladdin* (1992), *The Lion King* (1994), *Pocahontas* (1995), *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996), *Hercules* (1997), and *Mulan* (1998). Each of these films continues to provide ample opportunities to address how Disney constructs a culture of joy and innocence for children out of the intersection of mass culture, pleasure, and consumerism.[20] All of these films were commercially successful in theaters and also generated a spate of brand franchises. Connecting the rituals of consumption and moviegoing, each of Disney's animated films establishes a "marketplace of culture," becoming a launch pad for endless numbers of spin-off products and merchandise that include DVDs, video games, Internet sites, soundtrack albums, children's clothing, furniture, stuffed toys, and new theme park rides.[21] As a commentator in *Newsweek* pointed out, "The merchandise—Mermaid dolls, Aladdin undies, and collectibles like a sculpture of Bambi's Field Mouse—account for a stunning 20 percent of Disney's operating income."[22]

In the 1990s, *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast* had combined sales of over 34 million videos. Aladdin earned over "$1 billion from box-office income, video sales, and such ancillary baubles as Princess Jasmine dresses and Genie cookie jars."[23] Moreover, the Aladdin video game sold over 3 million copies in 1993. When *The Lion King* was released in theaters in 1994, it became the highest-grossing hand-drawn animated film in history, making over $320 million in box office sales.[24] Disney sold over 3 million copies of the soundtrack.[25] In the first few weeks after *The Lion King* video appeared, it generated sales of more than 20 million, and Disney's stock soared by $2.25 a share based on first-week revenues of $350 million. Ranked as one of the most profitable films every made, *The Lion King* was projected to generate in the range of "$1 billion in profits for Disney over two or three years."[26]

At the launching of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, Disney Records shipped out 2 million sing-along home videos and seven audio products, including the soundtrack CD and a toddler-targeted *Hunchback of Notre Dame* My First Read Along book. Tie-in promotions for the film included products sold by Burger King, Payless Shoes, Nestle, and Mattel.[27] While *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* generated a disappointing $99 million in box office revenues in North America, signaling the beginning decline of the Disney two-dimensional animation renaissance, the combined sales of tickets and spin-off products, according to *Adweek* magazine, would generate as much as "$500 million in profit (not just revenues), after the other revenue streams are taken into account."[28]

One of Disney's biggest promotion campaigns began in the summer of 1995 with the release of *Pocahontas*. A record lineup of tie-in merchandise included stuffed animals, sheets, pillowcases, toothbrushes, games, moccasins, and over "40 different picture and activity books."[29] A consortium of corporations spent an estimated $125 million on cross-marketing *Pocahontas*. Two well-known examples included Burger King, which was basically converted into an advertisement for the film and gave away an estimated 50 million Pocahontas figurines, and the Mattel Corporation, which marketed over fifty different dolls and toys.

The Disney Princess franchise, featuring all the lead female characters in the animated films, along with classic Disney characters such as Mickey Mouse, Winnie-the-Pooh, and Tinker Bell, have become established prototypes for numerous toys, logos, games, and clothing that fill department stores all over the world. Disney theme parks, which made over $2.5 billion in revenues in 2007, made a sizable portion of their profits through the merchandising of products based on characters from the animated films.[30] Disney's culture of commercialism is big business, and Disney's animated films provide goods for hundreds of Disney Stores and other department stores worldwide.

But Disney's attempt to turn children into consumers and to make commodification a defining principle of children's culture does not diminish the aesthetic quality of its films. Disney has shown enormous inventiveness in its attempts to reconstruct the grounds on which popular culture is defined and shaped. For example, by defining popular culture as a hybridized sphere that combines diverse genres and styles and often collapses the boundary between high and low culture, Disney has

challenged conventional ideas of aesthetic form and cultural legitimacy. For instance, when *Fantasia* appeared in the 1930s, it drew the wrath of music critics, who, holding to an elite view of classical music, were outraged that the musical score of the film drew from the canon of high culture. By combining high and low culture in the animated film, Disney opened up new cultural possibilities for artists and audiences alike. Moreover, as sites of entertainment, Disney's films succeed because they put both children and adults in touch with joy and adventure. They provide opportunities to experience pleasure, even when such pleasure must be purchased. Yet, Disney's brilliant use of aesthetic forms, musical scores, and inviting characters must be interpreted in light of the broader conceptions of reality shaped by these films within a wider system of dominant representations of gender roles, race, and agency that appear repeatedly in the visual worlds of television, Hollywood film, and other media.

A number of the films mentioned above draw upon the talents of songwriters Howard Ashman and Alan Menken, whose skillful arrangements provide the emotional glue of the animation experience. The rousing calypso number "Under the Sea" in *The Little Mermaid* and "Be Our Guest," a Busby Berkeley–inspired musical sequence in *Beauty and the Beast*, are indicative of the musical talent at work in Disney's animated films. Fantasy abounds, as Disney's animated films produce a host of exotic and stereotypical villains, heroes, and heroines. The Beast's enchanted castle in *Beauty and the Beast* becomes magical as household objects are transformed into dancing teacups and silverware and a talking teapot. But tied to the magical fantasy and lighthearted musical scores are themes and stereotypes characteristic of Disney's oversimplified worldview.

In *The Little Mermaid*, for example, the villainous Ursula, an obese black and purple squid, oozes with evil and irony, while the mermaid heroine, Ariel, appears as a cross between a typical rebellious teenager and a Southern California fashion model. Disney's representations of evil and good women appear to have been fashioned in the editorial office of *Vogue*. According to a 2001 study of nineteen Disney films, female characters are "adolescents and young adults more than expected."[31] The dearth of positive female role models in Disney films is a commonplace observation, and a 2007 study showed that when older women do appear, they are portrayed "in a particularly negative

light, while older male characters tend to fill authority roles, such as that of clergyman, ruler, and mentor."[32] Negative stereotyping of the elderly includes their stigmatization as angry, senile, and overweight. The risk is that the quick and sweeping visual cues deployed by Disney films not only create strong associations (for example, between moral virtue and youthful beauty) but leave an indelible impression on children's consciousness. Minor characters, particularly ones that serve as sidekicks to the hero, are frequently shown to be of low intelligence, while workers are quite happy to "serve the rich and privileged, never questioning their subordinate position."[33] And male characters share a disproportionate number of villainous roles, prompting one researcher to suggest that this "preponderance . . . should be analyzed for its potential negative impact on children and their relationships with caring male adults."[34] Stereotyping also extends to ethnically coded speech accents. Rosina Lippi-Green observes that Disney films participate in the "sociolinguistic construction" of social dominance and inferiority in which characters who use mainstream American English tend to be associated with "strongly positive actions and motivations" and also to experience the widest variety of life choices.[35] The villainous uncle of *The Lion King*, Scar, masterfully voices scheming and betrayal using a British accent that contrasts with the all-American intonation of the ruddy-maned hero, Simba. All this suggests that the animated objects and animals in Disney films may be of the highest artistic standards, but clearly they do not exist in an ideology-free zone. The characters are tied to larger narratives about, for example, freedom, rites of passage, intolerance, self-determination, greed, and the brutalities of male chauvinism.

Enchantment comes at a high price if the audience is meant to suspend judgment of the films' ideological messages. Even though these messages can be read from a variety of viewpoints, the assumptions that structure these films restrict the number of cultural meanings that can be brought to bear on them, especially when the intended audience is mostly children. The role of the critic of Disney's animated films is not to reduce them to a single ideological reading but to identify the "preferred textual messages" they encode.[36] This includes analysis of the various themes and assumptions that inform these films, both within and outside the dominant institutional and ideological formations that attempt to limit a diversity of interpretations. Such analyses allow edu-

cators and others to broaden our understanding of how such films can become sites of contestation, translation, and critical exchange.

Beyond merely recognizing the plurality of readings such films might foster, there is also the pedagogical task of provoking audiences to reflect upon the ways in which Disney's themes function as part of a broader public discourse, privileging some definitions or interpretations over others. The conservative values that Disney films promote assume such force because of the contexts in which they are situated and because they resonate so powerfully with dominant perceptions and meanings (such as connecting how a character speaks to a particular racial stereotype). Pedagogically, this suggests the need for educators, parents, and others to analyze critically how the privileged dominant readings of Disney's animated films work to generate and affirm particular pleasures, desires, and subject positions that define for young people specific notions of agency and social possibility.

Texts shape their own interpretations, but also form a mutually constitutive relationship with the political, economic, and cultural contexts in which they are read. This means that the focus on Disney films must be supplemented with an analysis of the institutional practices, corporate ideologies, and social structures that work to produce such texts. Such analysis should suggest pedagogical strategies for understanding how dominant regimes of power restrict the range of views that children might bring to reading Disney's animated films. By making the relationship between power and knowledge visible, while simultaneously referencing what is often taken for granted, teachers, cultural workers, and critics can open up Disney's animated films so that students and others can read such films within, against, and outside the dominant codes that inform them.

There is a double pedagogical movement here. First, there is the need to read Disney's films in relation to their articulation with other dominant texts in order to assess their similarities in legitimating particular ideologies. Second, there is the need on the part of parents and others to use Disney's thematization of America and America's thematization of Disney as referents to make visible—and to disrupt—dominant codings and to do so in a space that invites dialogue, debate, and alternative readings. For instance, one major pedagogical challenge is to assess how dominant ideas that are repeated over time in these films and

He is using the word 'articulation' as a synonym for 'connection' (for ex. joints are the places in the body that articulate bones)

reinforced through other popular cultural texts can be examined in terms of how children define themselves within such representations. The task here is to generate readings of such films that might also serve as a theoretical foundation for engaging them in the contexts in which they are shaped, understood, or might be seen.[37] This means exploring pedagogically how we both construct and defend the readings we actually bring to such films, providing an opportunity to expand the dialogue regarding what Disney films mean while simultaneously challenging the assumptions underlying dominant readings of them. Taking a position on Disney films should not degenerate into a doctrinaire reading or legitimate a form of political or pedagogical indoctrination of children or anybody else. Rather, such an approach should address how any reading of these films is ideological and should be engaged in terms of the context, content, values, and social relations it endorses. Moreover, addressing Disney films and the readings they engender both politically and pedagogically establishes the basis for opening up the films to complex levels of inquiry rather than treating them superficially or accepting them uncritically, as mere entertainment.

READING GENDER, RACE, AND HIERARCHY IN DISNEY FILMS OF THE 1990s

The construction of gender identity for girls and women represents one of the most controversial issues in Disney's animated films.[38] In both *The Little Mermaid* and *The Lion King*, the female characters are constructed within narrowly defined gender roles. All of the female characters in these films are ultimately subordinate to males and define their sense of power and desire almost exclusively in terms of dominant male narratives. For instance, modeled after a slightly anorexic Barbie Doll, Ariel, the mermaid in *The Little Mermaid*, at first glance appears to be engaged in a struggle against parental control, motivated by the desire to explore the human world, and willing to take a risk in defining the subject and object of her desires. But, in the end, both the struggle to gain independence from her father, Triton, and the desperate striving that motivates her dissolve when Ariel makes a Mephistophelean pact with the sea witch, Ursula. In this trade, Ariel gives away her voice to gain a pair of legs so that she can pursue the handsome prince, Eric.

Although girls might be delighted by Ariel's teenage rebelliousness, they are strongly positioned to believe, in the end, that desire, choice, and empowerment are closely linked to catching and loving a handsome man. Bonnie Leadbeater and Gloria Lodato Wilson explore succinctly the pedagogical message at work in the film:

> The 20th-century innocent and appealing video presents a high-spirited role for adolescent girls, but an ultimately subservient role for adult women. Disney's 'Little Mermaid' has been granted her wish to be part of the new world of men, but she is still flipping her fins and is not going too far. She stands to explore the world of men. She exhibits her new-found sexual desires. But the sexual ordering of women's roles is unchanged.[39]

Ariel becomes a metaphor for the traditional housewife in the making. Ursula's disclosure to Ariel that having her voice taken away is not so bad because men do not like women who talk is dramatized when the prince attempts to bestow the kiss of true love on Ariel even though she has never spoken to him. Within this rigid narrative, Ariel's maturity and identity are limited to her feminine attractability and embodied by heterosexual marriage. That Ariel's happiness is tied to the reward of marrying the right man and entails the renouncement of her former life under the sea is a telling cultural model for the values and choices presented to women in Disney's worldview.

The ideal of womanhood based on strict gender roles offered by *The Little Mermaid* does not represent an isolated moment in Disney's filmic universe; on the contrary, Disney's negative stereotypes of women and girls gain force through the way in which similar messages are circulated and reproduced, to varying degrees, in many of Disney's animated films. For example, in *Aladdin* the issues of agency and power center primarily on the young street tramp Aladdin. Jasmine, the princess he falls in love with, appears as an object of his desire as well as a social stepping-stone. Jasmine's life is almost completely defined by men, and, in the end, her happiness is ensured by Aladdin, who is finally given permission to marry her.

Disney's construction of gender roles becomes a bit more complicated in *Beauty and the Beast*, *Pocahontas*, and *Mulan*. Belle, the heroine of *Beauty and the Beast*, is portrayed as an independent woman stuck in a provincial village in eighteenth-century France. Seen as odd because she always has her nose in a book, she is pursued by Gaston, the vain,

macho male typical of Hollywood films of the 1980s. To Belle's credit, she rejects him, but in the end she gives her love to the Beast, who holds her captive in the hope that she will fall in love with him and break the evil spell cast upon him when he was a young man. Belle not only falls in love with the Beast but also "civilizes" him by instructing him on how to eat properly, control his temper, and dance. Belle becomes a model of etiquette and style as she turns the narcissistic, muscle-bound tyrant into a "new" man, one who is sensitive, caring, and loving.

Disney promoters labeled Belle a feminist because she rejects and vilifies Gaston, the ultimate macho man. It is possible to interpret *Beauty and the Beast* as a rejection of hypermasculinity, but Belle's reformation of the Beast "implies that women are responsible for controlling male anger and violence. If a woman is only pretty and sweet enough, she can transform an abusive man into a prince—forever."[40] In this reading, Belle is less the focus of the film than a prop or "mechanism for solving the Beast's dilemma."[41] Whatever subversive qualities Belle initially personifies in the film, in the end she simply becomes another woman whose life is valued for how she can patiently solve a man's problems—and withstand emotional and physical abuse along the way.

Disney's next female lead, Pocahontas, appears both to challenge and to reproduce some of these stereotypes. Rather than portray the historical Pocahontas, who as a twelve-year-old once saved John Smith from execution, Disney remakes the Powhatan princess in the image of a shapely, contemporary, high-fashion supermodel. Although Disney's "buckskin Barbie"[42] is articulate, courageous, and politically progressive—challenging negative stereotypes of Native Americans in Hollywood films—her character is still, like most of Disney's other female protagonists, drawn primarily in relation to the men who surround her. Initially, her identity is defined by resistance to her father's attempts to marry her off to one of the bravest warriors in the tribe. But her coming-of-age identity crisis is largely propelled by her struggle to save John Smith, a blond colonialist who looks like he belongs in a Southern California pinup magazine of male surfers, and their subsequent love affair. Pocahontas exudes a soppy romanticism that even convinces the crew of a British ship to rebel against its greedy captain and return to England. If only the emissaries of historical colonialism were that easily put off!

Of course, this is a Hollywood rewrite of history that bleaches colonialism of its genocidal legacy. No mention is made of the fact that John Smith's countrymen would ultimately steal Pocahontas's land; bring disease, murder, and poverty to her people; and eventually destroy their religion, economic livelihood, and way of life. In the Disney version of history, colonialism never happened, and the meeting between the Old and New Worlds is simply fodder for another "love-conquers-all" narrative. One wonders how the public would have viewed this film had it portrayed a Jewish woman who falls in love with a blond Aryan Nazi while ignoring any references to the Holocaust.

The issue of female subordination hits with a vengeance in *The Lion King*. All of the rulers of the kingdom are men, reinforcing the assumption that independence and leadership are tied to patriarchal entitlement and high social standing. The dependency that the beloved lion king, Mufasa, engenders in the women of Pride Rock is unaltered after his death, when the evil Scar assumes control of the kingdom. Lacking any sense of outrage, independence, or resistance, the female felines hang around to do his bidding.

Gender stereotyping is somewhat modified in *Mulan*. The eponymous lead character is presented as a bold female warrior who challenges traditional gender stereotypes of young women. But for all of her independence, in the end, the movie is, as film critic Janet Maslin points out, "still enough of a fairy tale to need a Mr. Right."[43] Mulan may be an independent, strong-willed young woman, but the ultimate payoff for her bravery comes in the form of attracting the handsome son of a general. And if the point is missed, when the heroine's grandmother first sees the young man as he enters Mulan's house, she affirms what she (the audience?) sees as Mulan's real victory—catching a man—and yells out, "Sign me up for the next war!" And there is another disturbing side to Mulan's characterization as an allegedly strong woman. Rather than aligning herself against the patriarchal celebration of war, violence, and militarism, Mulan becomes a cross-dresser who proves that when it comes to war, she can perform as well as any male. By temporarily donning the guise of masculinity and embracing a traditional view of war, Mulan cancels out any radical rupturing of stereotypical gender roles. She simply becomes one of the boys. But lest the fantasy be taken too far, Disney reminds us at the conclusion of the film that Mulan is still just a girl in search of a man, and as in so many other

Disney animated films, Mulan becomes an exoticized version of the all-American girl who manages to catch the most handsome boy on the block, square jaw and all.

Given Disney's long-standing obsession with family values, especially the middle-class family's position at the center of consumer culture, it is curious that with the exception of *Mulan*, very few of the Disney films produced in the 1990s portray strong mothers or fathers.[44] Not only are powerful mothers absent, but Jasmine's father is outwitted by his aides, and Belle's father is an airhead. Only the Little Mermaid has a domineering father in King Triton, whose protectiveness stems from his inherent benevolence as the true patriarch heading a natural hierarchical order (it is those illegitimate usurpers one needs to watch out for!). But Disney's construction of weak or stupid fathers only works to make patriarchy appear unthreatening, if also sometimes foolish and preoccupied with business. Meanwhile, the absence of involved familial figures has the structural effect of thrusting the protagonist into character-testing situations unaided by a social support network. Most problematically, instead of exploring how the family's influence upon identity formation can be at once a source of security and confinement, Disney films conclude that each and every female protagonist, left to her own devices, will naturally discover her "true" feminine, heterosexual self, apparently with no prompting needed from external familial and cultural forces.

Jack Zipes, a leading theorist on fairy tales, claims that Disney's animated films celebrate gender stereotyping and "have an adverse effect on children in contrast to what parents think. . . . Parents think they're essentially harmless—and they're not harmless."[45] Disney films are seen by enormous numbers of children in both the United States and abroad. As far as the issue of gender is concerned, Disney's view of women's agency and empowerment is more than simply limited: it reproduces the idea that a child born female can only realize a gendered incarnation of adulthood and is destined to fulfill her selfhood by becoming the appendage, if not the property, of a man.

Racial stereotyping is another major issue in many Disney animated films. A long history of racism associated with Disney can be traced back to denigrating images of people of color in films such as *Song of the South*, released in 1946, and *The Jungle Book*, which appeared in 1967.[46] Originally, the main restaurant in Disneyland's Frontierland

featured the real-life figure of a former slave, Aunt Jemima, who would sign autographs for the tourists outside her "Pancake House." And in the 1950s Frontierland also featured racist representations of Native Americans as violent "redskins."[47] Eventually Disney executives eliminated the exhibits and the Native Americans running them because the "Indian" canoe guides wanted to unionize. They were displaced by robotic dancing bears. Complaints from civil rights groups got rid of the degrading Aunt Jemima spectacle.[48]

One of the most controversial examples of racist stereotyping emanating from the Disney publicity machine occurred with the release of *Aladdin* in 1992, although such stereotyping later reappeared in 1994 with the release of *The Lion King*. *Aladdin* is a particularly important example because it was a high-profile release, the winner of two Academy Awards, and one of the most successful Disney films ever produced. Playing to massive audiences of children, the film's opening song, "Arabian Nights," begins its depiction of Arab culture with a decidedly racist tone. The lyrics of the offending stanza state, "Oh I come from a land/From a faraway place/Where the caravan camels roam./Where they cut off your ear/If they don't like your face./It's barbaric, but hey, it's home." This characterization plays right into Western stereotypes of a backward and demonic Arab culture and, at the time of the film's release, served to magnify the racist stereotypes deployed by the media coverage of the first Persian Gulf war. The racist attitude toward Arab culture primed by the American media and reinforced in the lyrics introducing *Aladdin* is later confirmed by several of the film's supporting characters, who are portrayed as grotesque, violent, and cruel.

Yousef Salem, a former spokesperson for the South Bay Islamic Association, characterized the film as follows:

> All of the bad guys have beards and large, bulbous noses, sinister eyes and heavy accents, and they're wielding swords constantly. Aladdin doesn't have a big nose; he has a small nose. He doesn't have a beard or a turban. He doesn't have an accent. What makes him nice is they've given him this American character. . . . I have a daughter who says she's ashamed to call herself an Arab, and it's because of things like this.[49]

As Salem suggests, racism in Disney's animated films appears not only in negative imagery but also in racially coded language and accents. *Aladdin* clearly portrays the "bad" Arabs with thick, foreign accents,

while the anglicized Jasmine and Aladdin speak in standard American English.

Jack Shaheen, then a professor of broadcast journalism at Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville, along with radio personality Casey Kasem, mobilized a public relations campaign protesting the anti-Arab themes in *Aladdin*. At first, Disney executives ignored the protest, but responding to the rising tide of public outrage eventually agreed to change one line of the stanza in the subsequent videocassette and worldwide film release. Disney did not change the lyrics on its popular CD release of *Aladdin*.[50] Disney executives were not unaware of the racist implications of the lyrics when they were first proposed. Howard Ashman, who wrote the song, submitted an alternative set of lyrics when he delivered the original lines. The alternative lyrics, "Where it's flat and immense/And the heat is intense," eventually replaced the original lines, "Where they cut off your ear/If they don't like your face." Though the new lyrics appeared in the *Aladdin* video, many protest groups were disappointed because the line "It's barbaric, but hey it's home" was not altered. Equally significant, the mispronunciation of Arab names in the film, the racial coding of accents, and the use of nonsensical scrawl as a substitute for written Arabic language were not removed.[51]

Racially coded representations and language are also evident in *The Lion King*. Scar, the icon of evil, is physically darker than the good lions. Shenzi and Banzai, the despicable hyena storm troopers (voiced by Whoopi Goldberg and Cheech Marin), speak in the jive accents of decidedly urban black or Hispanic youth. Disney falls back upon the same racialized low-comedy formula in *Mulan.* Not far removed from the *Amos 'n' Andy* crows in *Dumbo* is Mushu, a tiny red dragon with a black voice (Eddie Murphy). Mushu is a servile and boastful clown who seems unsuited to a mythic fable about China. He is the stereotype of the craven, backward, Southern American, chitlin-circuit character that appears to feed the popular racist imagination. The use of racially coded language can also be found in an early version of *The Three Little Pigs*, in *Song of the South*, and in *The Jungle Book*.[52] It is astonishing that these films produce a host of representations and codes through which children are taught to laugh at or deride, rather than respect, difference and to think that anyone who does not bear the imprint of white, middle-class ethnicity is likely to be inferior and unintelligent at best, if not also deviant and potentially threatening.

The racism in these films is defined by both the presence of negative stereotypes and the absence of complex representations of African Americans and other people of color. Whiteness is simultaneously universalized through the privileged representation of dominant middle-class social relations, values, and linguistic practices. Moreover, Disney's rendering of history, progress, and Western culture bears a colonial legacy that seems perfectly captured by Edward Said's notion of Orientalism—a particular form of Western imperialism that shapes dominant thinking about the East—and its dependency on new images and exotic narratives in order to affirm and sanction the centrality of Western culture and its ongoing domination of others.[53] Cultural differences are either trivialized or expressed through a "naturalized" racial hierarchy, which is antithetical to any viable democratic society. There is nothing innocent in what kids learn about race as portrayed in the "magical world" of Disney. So even while *Pocahontas* portrays racial differences more positively—viewing the relationship between Pocahontas and John Smith as a respectful partnership of equals—the film's supposedly enlightened perspective on race still upholds Western ethnocentrism when viewed in a larger context. Unlike the other animated films, *Pocahontas* is based on a true story, which means that Disney's metaphorical reduction of actual colonial relations to a fictitious interracial love affair and the film's conclusion of peaceful coexistence between the Powhatan Nation and the colonialists completely erase the historical reality of European racist attitudes about, injustice toward, and oppression of Native Americans (not to mention the tragic plight of the historical Pocahontas herself, who was "kidnapped, held hostage, forcibly 'civilized,' and converted to Christianity, then married off to a colonist who viewed her origins as 'accursed,'" and died by the age of twenty-two).[54]

Another central feature common to all of Disney's animated films is the celebration of deeply antidemocratic social relations. Nature and the animal kingdom provide the mechanism for presenting and legitimating caste systems, hierarchies of gender and race, and structural inequality as part of the natural order. The seemingly benign presentation of fairy tale narratives in which men rule, strict discipline is imposed through fixed social barriers, and leadership capacities are derived from one's inbred social status suggests a yearning for a return to a more rigidly stratified society based on a neofeudal model, if not an absolute dictatorship. In Disney's animated films, "harmony is bought at the price of

domination. . . . No power or authority is implied except for the natural ordering mechanisms" of nature.[55] For children, the messages suggest that social problems such as the history of racism, the genocide of Native Americans, the prevalence of sexism, and democracy in crisis are simply willed by the laws of nature.

Criticism about the gender and racial politics in classic Disney animation has so far resulted in far fewer clever responses from Walt Disney Pictures—certainly as far as can be deduced from the film *Enchanted* (2007). Despite a promising beginning, the film does not sustain the kind of postmodern self-reflexivity familiar to a generation raised on *The Simpsons* and brilliantly applied to fairy tales in *Shrek* (2001). Despite many intertextual references to classic Disney animation that self-consciously expose its reliance on stock characters and formulaic plots, *Enchanted* basically leaves the romance trajectory unaltered. In

fact, the film is a slightly updated, partially animated, and fully Disneyfied version of the corporation's 1990 hit film *Pretty Woman*. Both films borrow from the Pygmalion myth, depicting young women who find themselves in unfamiliar places and out of their comfort zones, but who win the hearts of their male companions after going through classy makeovers and experiencing a sudden awareness of their own desires, which had been to that point overwritten by the desires of others. Although Giselle (Amy Adams) is a sexually inexperienced fairy tale maiden and *Pretty Woman*'s Vivian (Julia Roberts) is a prostitute, both lack the appropriate mannerisms and designer dresses to attract the male leads. Even though Vivian has been hardened by poverty and sexual exploitation, this does not alter the similar trajectory of the heroines. Both charm their male companions, despite the mild embarrassments caused by their uncouth behavior. They win admiration for their gutsy resilience and fierce loyalty. Their beauty bespeaks their internal goodness. A growing love for their men is symbolized in the almighty kiss. And the assertion of newly gained self-knowledge culminates in shopping sprees that provide visual imagery for the metaphorical transformation from caterpillar to butterfly. Disney's version of how women become agents of their own desires is to expand the agency of women into the public sphere of the marketplace. This could not be exemplified more clearly than by *Enchanted*'s ending when Giselle opens her own clothing boutique, called Andalasia Fashions, which outfits little girls with princess gowns (Disney has its own version of such a store/salon called Bibbidi Bobbidi Boutique). All these similarities show that *Enchanted*, despite the initial gesture toward postmodern irony, falls back on tired clichés without so much as debunking a single one.

The film begins in hand-drawn two-dimensional animation with Andalasia's Prince Edward vanquishing an ogre who is threatening the innocent, beautiful country maid named Giselle. Both characters instantly recognize their "true love" and assume they will be married the next day. The prince's jealous stepmother, Queen Narissa, attempts to keep her crown by thwarting their wedding plans. She casts a spell on Giselle that sends her to a place where "there are no happily ever afters." Giselle subsequently emerges alive and no longer animated from a manhole in the middle of Times Square. Giselle's naïveté drives the romantic and comic elements of the plot, as she tumbles into the arms of a jaded and single divorce lawyer named Robert (Patrick Dempsey)

and quickly transforms his domestic space into one full of cleanliness, delightful song, and more authentic-looking computer-generated animal assistants, while waiting for her prince to arrive and take her back to Andalasia. In the meantime, we see Giselle ostensibly transition from a two-dimensional cartoon into a three-dimensional human being when she develops an awareness of herself outside the classic Disney script. The childlike Giselle is eternally optimistic, but she eventually becomes articulate enough (with Robert's coaching) to identify her feelings and state them to others—in this case, her anger and her lust (both toward Robert) signal her emergence as a more assertive female and a better partner for the Manhattan lawyer, who not only has a career-minded girlfriend he respects but who also presents his daughter with a book titled *Important Women of the World*. Giselle's lesson for the too-severe Robert, then, is to convince him that respect in a relationship is less important than romance (and it is the man's duty to direct the courtship) and that his daughter would prefer to be treated as a princess (she's missing the pixie dust from her childhood). Perhaps the most disturbing element of the film is how it provides a point of entry for child viewers by drawing Robert's six-year-old daughter into a commercial web: she presents Giselle with daddy's credit card and then treats her to a shopping spree and salon makeover. And Disney does not shy away from reconstructing good parenting as taking a child on retail adventures. Giselle's quality bonding time with Robert's daughter ends with the little girl's plaintive query, "Is this what it's like to go shopping with your mother?" Film critic Dana Stevens remarks that her disappointment with the film stems not so much from its "retrograde affirmation of true love and happy endings" but from "the movie's solemn celebration of a ritual even more sacred than holy matrimony: shopping."[78]

Despite the film's surface critique of classic Disney, its carries the strong message that every woman's fantasy—no matter how mature and intelligent she may be—is still the Disney princess fantasy. If there remains any ambiguity as to the film's message that heterosexual union is the culmination of every woman's life, then it is fully dispelled in the end: first, by having Robert awaken Giselle with "true love's kiss" and, second, by having Robert's now ex-girlfriend give up her hard-won success and independence (she tosses away her cell phone, a symbol of her career) in favor of jumping into the cartoon world to marry the prince. Just as the film blurs animated fantasy with real life, Disney's

clear preference is for women and girls to be colonized by "enchantment." For those who want to emulate the brides of *Enchanted*, Disney has developed a line of bridal gowns, including one called "Giselle" (www.disneybridal.com). And, of course, Disney also has over forty thousand ready-made Princess items available for young girls, along with the optimistic message that faith in commodities will solve their problems and help define who they want to be, namely, pretty enough to win a man on whom they can depend financially.[79]

Given Disney's reluctance to change the script, it remains to be seen if Disney's new two-dimensional animated film *The Princess and the Frog*—the first to feature an African American princess, named Tiana—can promote stronger as well as more diverse characters, while simultaneously marshaling Disney's trademark nostalgia in both the story line and the traditional hand-drawn medium. Disney has already made Tiana part of its existing Disney Princess franchise in anticipation of the film's release in December 2009. While media coverage has focused on Disney's attempts to make the racial representations in the film as inoffensive as possible (even hiring Oprah Winfrey as a consultant on the film's politics),[80] it is difficult not to be cynical about what appears to be less a tribute to African American culture than a barely disguised attempt to round out the Disney Princess market base by targeting young black girls who may find Tiana dolls and products less alienating than the current Princess options (five white princesses and an Arab one).

It is unfortunate that so-called postmodern Disney has so far fallen back on an earnest affirmation of the iconic elements of Disney culture rather than bravely putting forth an actual critique of the classic Disney formula. We end up with a next-generation advertisement for all things Disney and, if lucky, a token gesture toward feminism, rather than a sincere examination of the inadequacies of Disney culture (such as gearing one's whole life toward heterosexual union). *Enchanted*'s ultimate rejection of ironic self-parody suggests that Disney is not ready to relinquish its perennial appeal to childhood innocence. Yet, the Disney of the new millennium understands better than ever before how it is in the "identity" market. It recognizes how much power it has to provide consumers with identity models and seeks to do so when they are most malleable—in childhood and adolescence. This is a reality not lost on one of Disney's latest star creations, Vanessa Hudgens (tween

idol Gabriella from *High School Musical*), who told reporters, "Disney is an incredible machine. They really have it down and figured it out. There's so much power with the [Disney] channel. Kids will watch anything that's on it. When these kids are put on these shows, the kids at home are living and breathing the channel, and they grow to love these people. It's crazy."[81]

Although it is unlikely that a corporation reaping such huge profits is going to change its game plan anytime soon, cultural producers other than Disney are producing thoughtful entertainment for young people. One example is the film *Penelope* (2006), a revision of classic fairy tale narratives about the eponymous young heiress who is born with a pig's snout instead of a nose because of an ancient curse laid on her family. The curse will be broken, so the story goes, if Penelope is loved by one of her own class. Consequently, her single-minded mother arranges for endless meetings with prospective blue-blooded suitors that always end with the young men fleeing at the sight of Penelope, who turns out to be an astonishingly well-grounded and intelligent young woman in spite of her mother's superficiality. This is demonstrated quite clearly when Penelope becomes an elementary school teacher, even after she gains a human nose. Contrary to her mother's traditionalist interpretation of the curse, Penelope does not need a man to love her—she simply needs to love herself. The moment she rejects her need for a husband and asserts, "I like myself the way I am," the curse is instantly broken. The film teaches young people to value self-respect over romantic love, while also presenting critical views of society's obsession with plastic surgery and the elitism that drives class snobbery. *Penelope* demonstrates the way in which fairy tales could be updated to create narratives that are empowering for youth. It also shows that Disney need not be constrained by the fairy tale genre and demands that parents, educators, and others question why Disney chooses to adhere so closely to the traditional formula. Deborah Ross reminds us that "the overriding goal is self-promotion—because Disney will absorb and use whatever works, or whatever sells the product."[82] What does a Disney production like *Enchanted* say about the way our culture is failing young people if there are so few narratives that promote self-respect among young women? Do we all think it is okay for corporations like Disney to foster young women's dependency on consumer products that promise to help them feel beautiful and generate desire in others? There currently appear to

be so few alternatives to this disturbing trend of passive consumerism that a megacorporation like Disney can appear utterly confident in the existence of a large market for its products and the virtual absence of any public resistance toward its attempt to reduce children's identities to the role of consumer.

CULTURAL PEDAGOGY AND CHILDREN'S CULTURE

Given the corporate reach, cultural influence, and political power that Disney exercises over multiple levels of children's culture, Disney's animated films should be neither ignored nor simply censored by those who disagree with the conservative ideologies they produce and circulate. There are a number of issues to be addressed regarding the forging of a pedagogy and a politics responsive to Disney's shaping of children's culture. In what follows, we provide some suggestions regarding how parents, educators, and cultural workers might critically engage Disney's influence in shaping the "symbolic environment into which our children are born and in which we all live out our lives."[83]

First, parents, community groups, and other concerned individuals must be attentive to the diverse and often contradictory messages in Disney films in order to criticize them when necessary and, more importantly, to reclaim them for more productive ends. At the very least, we must be attentive to the processes whereby meanings are produced in these films and how they work to secure particular forms of authority and social relations. At stake pedagogically is the issue of paying "close attention to the ways in which [such films] invite (or indeed seek to prevent) particular meanings and pleasures."[84] In fact, Disney's films appear to assign, quite unapologetically, rigid roles to women and people of color. Similarly, such films generally produce a narrow view of family values coupled with a nostalgic and conservative view of history that should be challenged and transformed. Educators need to take seriously Disney's attempt to shape collective memory, particularly when such attempts are unabashedly defined by one of Disney's imagineers in the following terms: "What we create is a sort of 'Disney realism,' sort of utopian in nature, where we carefully program out all the negative, unwanted elements and program in the positive elements."[85] Disney's rendering of entertainment and spectacle, whether expressed

in Frontierland, Main Street USA, or its online, video, television, and film productions, is not merely an edited, sanitary, and nostalgic view of history, one that is free of poverty, class differences, and urban decay. Disney's writing of public memory also constructs a monolithic notion of national identity that typically treats subordinate groups as either exotic or irrelevant to American history, simultaneously marketing cultural differences within "histories that corporations can live with."[86] Disney's version of U.S. history is not innocent; nor can it be dismissed as simply entertainment.

Disney's celluloid view of children's culture often works to strip the past, present, and future of diverse narratives and multiple possibilities. But it is precisely such a rendering that must be revealed as a historically specific and politically constructed "landscape of power." Issues regarding the representational politics of gender, race, class, caste, and other aspects of self and collective identity are defining elements of Disney's films for children and youth. Revealing and exploring the ideological nature of Disney's world opens up further opportunities for educators and others to use such texts in order to encourage meaningful critical engagement instead of simply passive absorption. Rustom Bharacuha argues that "the consumption of . . . images . . . can be subverted through a particular use in which we are compelled to think through images rather than respond to them with a hallucinatory delight."[87] One interpretation of the call to "think through images" is for educators and cultural workers to demonstrate pedagogically and politically that history and its construction of national identity must be contested and engaged, even when images parade as innocent film entertainment. The images that pervade Disney's production of children's culture, along with their claim to public memory, must be challenged and rewritten, "moved about in different ways," and read differently as part of the script of democratic empowerment.[88] It is within the drama of animated storytelling that children are often positioned pedagogically to learn which subject positions are open to them and which are closed off. Hence, the struggle over children's culture should be considered as part of a struggle over the related discourses of citizenship, national identity, and democracy itself.

Second, it is crucial that educators take seriously as an important site of learning and contestation the realm of popular culture increasingly appropriated by Disney to teach values and sell goods to children and young people. This means, at the very least, that those cultural texts that

dominate children's culture, including Disney's animated films, should be incorporated into school curricula as objects of social knowledge and critical analysis. If the sinister grip that Disney exercises on children's imaginations is to be taken seriously, the cultural forms through which this happens must be taken seriously as worthy of study. This is a call both for making media literacy an essential part of what kids learn in schools[89] and for reconsidering the meaning, range, and possibilities of what counts as useful knowledge itself, while also offering a new theoretical register for addressing the ways in which popular media aimed at shaping children's culture are implicated in power/knowledge relationships. In simple terms, this means making popular culture an essential object of critical analysis in schools.

The pedagogical value of such an approach is that it alerts educators to taking the needs, desires, languages, and experience of children seriously. In part, this points to analyzing how entertainment can be addressed as a subject of intellectual engagement rather than as a series of sights and sounds that wash over us. Against those who insist that any attempt at a critical analysis violates the entertainment industry's sanctity as an element of popular culture, it must be made clear that there are other ways to engage popular forms than merely through the realm of pleasurable consumption. In this context it is crucial to address not just the pleasure created by the object but the pleasure created by learning and critical engagement. This suggests addressing the utopian possibilities in which children often find representations of their hopes and dreams but not relinquishing critical agency in the process. It also means recognizing the pedagogical importance of what kids bring with them to the classroom (or to any other site of learning) as crucial both to decentering power in the classroom and to expanding the possibility for teaching students multiple literacies, as part of a broader strategy of teaching them to read the world critically.

Third, it is crucial that educators and others pay attention to how diverse groups of kids use and understand these Disney films and visual media differently. We must talk to children and youth about these films and other aspects of popular culture so that we can better understand how young people identify with these cultural forms and what issues raised by them must be addressed. Such discussions would open up a language of pleasure and criticism that facilitates mutual learning and empowerment. If Disney's films are to be viewed as more than narratives of fantasy and escape, becoming sites of reclamation and imagination

that affirm rather than deny the long-standing relationship between entertainment and pedagogy, it is important to consider how we might insert the political and the pedagogical back into the discourse of entertainment. A pedagogical approach to popular culture must ask how a politics of the popular works to mobilize desire, stimulate imagination, and produce forms of identification that can become objects of dialogue and critical investigation. This suggests that we develop new ways of critically understanding and reading electronically produced visual media. Teaching and learning the culture of the book can no longer be the staple of what it means to be literate.

Children learn from exposure to popular cultural forms, which provide a new cultural register to what it means to be literate. Parents, educators, and cultural workers must foster and attend to the cultural practices that shape students' knowledge and experience through their use of popular cultural forms. Youth should be taught to analyze critically the messages they consume as they navigate a vast range of electronic media in popular culture, but they must also be able to master the skills and technology to produce these forms, making their own films, videos, music, and websites. As Lee Artz suggests, it is not enough to hope that "individual subversive readings may prompt a social movement"; instead, "those who oppose Disney's autocratic production model and generic content should replace them with cooperative creations and narratives."[90] Thus, a cultural pedagogy also requires more resources for schools and other sites of learning, providing the opportunities for students and others to become, rather than merely consuming objects, the producing subjects of their own pedagogical creations. As cultural producers, young people will gain even more power over the conditions that influence them, while becoming attentive to the workings of power, knowledge, solidarity, and difference as part of a more comprehensive project for democratic empowerment.

Fourth, Disney's reach into the spheres of economics, consumption, and culture suggests that we analyze Disney within broad and complex relations of power (an analysis of this kind can be found in the following chapters).

Disney exercises institutional and political power through its massive control over diverse sectors of what Mark Crispin Miller has called the "national entertainment state."[93] The availability, influence, and cultural power of Disney's films demand that they become part of a broader political discourse regarding who makes cultural policy. Questions of ownership, control, and the possibility of public participation in deciding how cultural resources are used, to what extent, and for what effect should become a central issue in addressing the world of Disney and other media conglomerates that shape cultural policy. In this context, Disney's influence in shaping culture cannot be reduced to critically interpreting the ideas and values promoted by the corporation. The production, distribution, and consumption of films and other products should be analyzed as part of a wider circuit of power. In other words, any viable analysis must understand and address how Disney, Inc., operates within the context of a larger cultural strategy and public-policy initiatives.