

MEDIA EDUCATION
FOUNDATION
STUDY GUIDE

MICKY MOUSE MONOPOLY:

DISNEY, CHILDHOOD & CORPORATE POWER

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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

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.)

Media Power

1. Do you think this documentary is fair in singling out Disney for special scrutiny?
2. Do you think Disney is an appropriate choice for examining corporate media power?
3. Do you think other media conglomerates are any better or any worse in what they teach our children?
4. 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?
5. 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?

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

Representations of Gender

1. What examples of gender stereotyping do you see in Disney films?
2. Do you find gender stereotyping to be more pronounced in the depictions of male or female characters, or do you see any difference? Cite examples from other Disney films or products to support your view.
3. Have gender portrayals in Disney films changed over time? What evidence do you see for continuity or change in gender portrayals?
4. How do you think parents should handle outdated offensive stereotypes that still exist in Disney films from earlier eras?
5. 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

1. What examples of racial and ethnic stereotyping do you see in Disney films?
2. Do you find racial/ethnic stereotyping to be more pronounced in the depictions of any particular minority group, or do you see any differences? Cite examples from other Disney films or products to support your view.
3. Have racial/ethnic portrayals in Disney films changed over time? What evidence do you see for continuity or change in racial/ethnic portrayals?
4. How do you think parents should handle outdated offensive stereotypes that still exist in Disney films from earlier eras?
5. 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?

1. What does it mean to say that textual analysis is not the same as audience analysis? Do you agree with this statement?
2. How might viewers creatively, even subversively, interpret messages and portrayals in Disney films?
3. 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?
4. 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?

Conclusion

1. 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?
2. Why does Disney arouse such passionate reactions, both pro and con, in people?
3. How do you think The Walt Disney Company would react to this documentary?
4. 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?
5. Should media literacy be taught in schools, even using Disney as an object of study?

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.

Assign a 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.

Using the slow motion and freeze-frame functions of your DVD player, 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?

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.

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.

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

Henry 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 unfailingly entertaining that it's unreal, and its therefore an agent of pure wickedness."

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

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

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

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

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

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

Raz, Aviad E. (1999). *Riding the Black Ship: Japan and Tokyo Disneyland*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center and Harvard University Press. Sociologist Raz looks at how

Tokyo Disneyland is experienced by its employees, management, and visitors, providing an ethnographic account from the Japanese point of view. Contrary to previous critiques characterizing Tokyo Disneyland as an outpost of American cultural imperialism, Raz argues that its success has been due to its becoming Japanese while marketing itself as foreign.

Ross, Andrew (1999). *The Celebration Chronicles: Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Property Value in Disney's New Town*. New York: Ballantine. Based on his living in Celebration for a year and his interviews with fellow residents, employees, and Osceola County locals, Ross asks: What does Celebration reveal about contemporary culture? Is this model town a cause for celebration or alarm? Can we entrust the public interest to giant beneficiaries of the marketplace like Disney?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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