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Social and Behavioral Sciences Department Senior Capstone
California State University, Monterey Bay

***Almost There: A Totally Awesome Study of Animated Disney Films and the
Development of American Values***

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Spring 2012

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Abstract

Using cultural studies as a theoretical and methodological framework, this capstone explores the development of American values through animated Disney films. This study looks at classic, renaissance, and contemporary films, from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) to *The Princess and the Frog* (2009). By examining these different eras, we can follow the progression of American ideals over nearly seven decades.

I remember Daddy told me, 'Fairytale can come true,
but you gotta make 'em happen, it all depends on you'¹

In a dusty sugar mill on the banks of New Orleans, an aspiring restaurateur sings to her mother about her dreams and ambitions. It is 1926, and Tiana has worked two jobs waitressing to save up enough money to purchase the building. After years of toiling away and saving her tips in tin cans in her dresser, Tiana can finally talk about achieving her dreams without derision from her friends and coworkers – she is, as she tells her mother to the tune of a catchy and cheerful ragtime number, almost there. She just needs to sign the paperwork.

While showing her mother the empty building, with its boarded windows and broken beams, Tiana explains her vision for the restaurant as inspired by a drawing her father gave her before he died. Her career goal, to run a popular restaurant that draws people together with good food, drives the plot of the story, and creates a very updated Disney protagonist.²

As a contemporary heroine, Tiana is very different from some of those that characterize the Disney brand. Classic Disney characters Snow White, Cinderella, and the various charming princes (as well as non-human characters like Dumbo, Pinocchio, and Bambi) had little to no internal motivation for their actions. These early Disney films help cement the Walt Disney Productions as a staple in American entertainment.

¹ *The Princess and the Frog*, DVD, directed by Ron Clements and John Musker (2009; Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment, 2010).

² Ibid.

In the 1920s, Disney Brothers Cartoon Studio created short animations that premiered before the feature films began. These shorts, which eventually included the first incarnation of Disney trademark Mickey Mouse in *Steamboat Willie*, gained popularity among the public. In the 1930s, Walt Disney had a new vision for his company, whose name had been changed to the Walt Disney Studio. In 1934, in the middle of the Great Depression, production began on a film that would forever alter American culture. Walt Disney, then known as the man behind many of the short animated pieces played in theaters before the features began, had the ambitious goal of creating a feature-length animation, with many expecting failure. Three years and a second studio mortgage later, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) premiered to delighted audiences.³ Looking back, it is difficult to imagine a time when Disney animations were not a standard in family entertainment.

The success of *Snow White* led to the production of Disney classics like *Pinocchio* (1940), *Dumbo* (1941), *Bambi* (1942), *Cinderella* (1951), *Peter Pan* (1953), and *Sleeping Beauty* (1959). The continued success of these films allowed the company to expand to suit Walt's visions. In the 1950s Walt Disney, and consequently the rest of the company, focused more attention to live-action films, theme parks, and television. While the company continued to prosper, the animation department "spiraled downwards." Decades later, with the addition of Michael Eisner⁴ and Frank Wells⁵ to Disney as CEO and president in 1984, changes

³ Neal Gabler, *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 131.

⁴ Michael Eisner was CEO of The Walt Disney Company from 1984 until 2005. Prior to working at Disney, he had been president at Paramount Pictures. His time at Disney transformed the company into a media empire. For more information, see Flower, Joe. *Prince of the Magic Kingdom: Michael*

throughout the company greatly affected the animation department, including hiring Jeffrey Katzenberg⁶ and Peter Schneider⁷ to manage the animation department.⁸

The individuals involved in the Walt Disney Company are essential to understanding the final products that the company produces. Joe Flower argues in *Prince of the Magic Kingdom: Michael Eisner and the Remaking of Disney* that the studio process of creating a film is a

deeply human struggle over ideas, values, and hopes for which men and women were willing to give themselves over, values at times so evanescent that some people could dismiss them as silly, values so deep that others became students of them, dedicated their careers to making them come alive, became enraged and embittered when they seemed to be violated, and turned poetic and inspired in their defense⁹

The debates about what should or should not be included in a Disney film have been a very important part of Disney company history, and are driven largely by the people involved. Michael Eisner, though not a Disney family member, is an integral

Eisner and the Remaking of Disney. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1991) and www.michaeleisner.com.

⁵ Frank Wells came to The Walt Disney Company from Warner Brothers, where he was vice president of the company. He served as president at Disney until his death in 1994 from a helicopter crash. For more information, see <http://disney.go.com/disneyinsider/history/legends/Frank-Wells>.

⁶ Jeffrey Katzenberg came with Eisner from Paramount Pictures, where he worked as President of Production. At Disney, among other tasks, he was responsible for the feature animations, which had not been successful in recent years. After Frank Wells' death, Katzenberg left the company when he was not promoted. He then cofounded DreamWorks with Steven Spielberg and David Geffen. For more information, see <http://www.referenceforbusiness.com/biography/F-L/Katzenberg-Jeffrey-1950.html#b>.

⁷ Peter Schneider was the first president of Walt Disney Feature Animation from 1985-1999. He was responsible for helping to revitalize animation at Disney. He now has a theater career, producing and directing shows. For more information, see peterschneiderproductions.com.

⁸ *Waking Sleeping Beauty*, DVD, Directed by Don Hahn, (2009; Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2010).

⁹ Joe Flower, *Prince of the Magic Kingdom: Michael Eisner and the Remaking of Disney* (New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1991), 3.

part of the Walt Disney Company. Flower argues that Eisner brought the company back to life at a time when it was floundering and his influence over the Walt Disney Company brought it into a new era of success. The films were better than ever and the company continued to expand. Despite the lawsuits and tensions in the company, the 1980s and 90s were very prosperous for Disney.¹⁰

Both in spite of and because of the administrative changes throughout the company, animated Disney films became the main product for the company again. In 1984, the team of 200 people from the animation department was moved from their building into a warehouse building in Glendale. They went from “the halls where Walt walked” to cubicles. While that upset the team, it also led to a greater flow of ideas between everyone. Jeffrey Katzenberg was determined to make movies of greater quality than *The Black Cauldron* (1985), which earned less at the box office than *The Care Bears Movie* (1985).¹¹ Competition with Steven Spielberg’s *American Tale* (1986) inspired a goal of releasing one animated feature per year, starting with *Oliver and Company* (1998); it beat *Land Before Time* (1988), but it was not until *The Little Mermaid* (1989) that Disney animated films really brought the company profits from animated films again. This growth continued by bringing in new creative minds like musicians Howard Ashman and Alan Menken on *Beauty and*

¹⁰ Flower, *Prince of the Magic Kingdom*, 8.

¹¹ *The Black Cauldron* was in production at the time of the Disney administrative changes, and consequently was heavily affected. Reportedly, Jeffrey Katzenberg personally edited out three minutes of the film (normally little to no editing is done post-production on animated features) in order to achieve a lower rating. The darker elements of the story earned the film a PG rating, the first for a Disney animation. Also interesting to note is one of the concept artists for this film – Tim Burton, who later went on to successfully make his own features, some with Disney and some without. For more information, see <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0088814>.

the Beast (1991) and *Aladdin* (1992).¹² The success from the animation department influenced the growth of the company through the 1990s.¹³

Seventy-five years after *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* premiered, The Walt Disney Animation Studios continue to fill theaters and imaginations with “fantasies of escape, adventure, and powerful emotional themes about survival, separation, courage, love, and loss.”¹⁴ However, Disney’s messages to its viewers have adapted with the changes of the twentieth century. Mention the word Disney, and a castle appears in the mind’s eye with the ideas that dreams come true, magic is real, woodland creatures willingly help with chores, and the hero and heroine always has a happily ever after. Audience values have shifted in the nearly eight decades since the Walt Disney Corporation revealed the first feature length animated film. While this stereotype – that fairytales come true and blind optimism can solve any problem – is not unfounded, contemporary Disney storytellers approach the material in a different manner than previous generations.

The topic of my capstone is how animated Disney films reflect the progression of American values. The iconic company has undergone many changes; for example, the administrative changes have had a great impact on its creative

¹² Howard Ashman was a lyricist brought to Disney after his work on Broadway shows like *Little Shop of Horrors* (1982). His lyrics contributed greatly to the storytelling in the pre-production stages of Disney animations. He died in 1991 after completing his work for *Beauty and the Beast*, which is dedicated to him. For more information, see <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0039141/>.

Alan Menken has composed the songs and scores of many of Disney’s musical films. He came to Disney with Ashman, having worked with him on *Little Shop of Horrors*. His collaborations with lyricists like Ashman, Tim Rice, and Stephen Schwartz have led to many honors. For more information, see www.imdb.com/name/nm0579678/.

¹³ *Waking Sleeping Beauty*, DVD, directed by Don Hahn (2009; Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2010).

¹⁴ Henry A. Giroux and Grace Pollock, *The Mouse that Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence*. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2010), 7.

products. The influence of Walt Disney, his vision for the company and products, and how his death affected that vision are all important to the research topic. The animation department, once the heart of the company, faded into the background as live-action films, television, and theme parks brought in more profit. In the 1980s, a change in management forced different approaches to the filmmaking process for the animation department. The main questions that guide this capstone include What values do animated Disney films present? and how have social and company changes affected these values (if at all)?

Cultural studies is the social theory that informs the methodological and theoretical framework of this study. The works of theorists such as Henry Giroux help our understanding of how Disney films reflect American society. Cultural studies is a holistic social theory, which allows us to understand the multiple values presented in Disney animated films. I used this theory as a way to examine how the popularity, recognition, and prevalence of these films have an impact on American culture. I used cultural studies to “explore how assorted audiences interpreted and deployed media culture in varied ways and contexts, analyzing the factors that made audiences respond in contrasting manners to media artifacts.”¹⁵ It is important in discussing the concept of ideology, as it “forces readers to perceive that all cultural texts have distinct biases, interests, and embedded values, reproducing the point of view of their producers and often the values of the dominant social groups.”¹⁶

Further, cultural studies helps to explain the analysis of the animated films

¹⁵ Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner, *Media and Cultural Studies KeyWorks* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2001), 15.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

themselves, as the field has had to grow with the introduction of new media (as opposed to print media). Instead of everything being laid out on the page, there are a variety of abstracts to interpret (sights, shapes, sounds) that the creators have made. Through examination of the Disney movies, we see a clear reflection of changes in American society and the company.

Cultural studies explains the power of Disney and why it is important to understand what is portrayed in something so commercially and socially prevalent in American culture. What we know about the world is learned from our surroundings, and in this media culture, Disney is a weighty influence. For instance, Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart write in *Instructions on How to Become a General in the Disneyland Club*, “Disney is part – an immortal part, it would seem of our common collective vision. It has been observed that in more than one country that Mickey Mouse is more popular than the national hero of the day.”¹⁷ While Mickey Mouse is still popular, it seems that the actual film characters are actually more recognizable to modern audiences, perhaps due to generational shifts and changes in the company’s approach to reach audiences.¹⁸

To complete this research, I employed historical and qualitative research methods combined with analysis of cultural studies. I gathered information about the Walt Disney Company, its films, its influence, and Walt Disney himself from a variety of scholarly books, articles, Internet resources, and documentaries. The

¹⁷ Durham and Kellner, *Media and Cultural Studies KeyWorks*, 145.

¹⁸ Mickey Mouse is still quite recognizable as a Disney icon, though recent marketing strategies have shifted to emphasize characters from features as much as, if not more so, than those from Disney shorts (i.e. Donald Duck and Goofy). The princess campaign in particular, did not emerge until recently.

animated films served as primary sources. I determined how each film that I watched (in the order released) demonstrates specific values or beliefs. I noted the changes that occur over the course of the company's history and placed them in the context of a timeline of American history. Also, I compared the more recent films to older counterparts to examine any changes or progression. Below is a list of the films referenced in this research, though not all are analyzed in detail in the final study.¹⁹

<u>Classic</u>	<u>Renaissance</u>	<u>Contemporary</u>
<i>Snow White</i> (1937)	<i>The Little Mermaid</i> (1989)	<i>Enchanted</i> (2007) ²⁰
<i>Pinocchio</i> (1940)	<i>Beauty and the Beast</i> (1991)	<i>The Princess and the Frog</i> (2009)
<i>Dumbo</i> (1941)	<i>Aladdin</i> (1992)	
<i>Bambi</i> (1942)	<i>The Lion King</i> (1994)	
<i>Cinderella</i> (1950)	<i>Pocahontas</i> (1995)	
<i>Alice in Wonderland</i> (1951)	<i>The Hunchback of Notre Dame</i> (1996)	
<i>Peter Pan</i> (1953)	<i>Hercules</i> (1997)	
<i>Lady and the Tramp</i> (1955)	<i>Mulan</i> (1998)	
<i>Sleeping Beauty</i> (1959)	<i>Tarzan</i> (1999)	

Seventy years after Walt Disney premiered his first animated feature and began his company's exponential growth, another movie arrived that could not have been successful without that Disney history. *Enchanted* tells the story of Giselle, a new heroine from the animated world of Andalasia who finds herself in our harsh

¹⁹ This study only includes the traditional hand-drawn animated features. While more recent films include the help of computers to create depth in background images (instead of the older multi-plane photography), full CGI and 3D animated works are not involved in this study. For more information about the technical aspects of the animation process, see Pallant, Chris. "Disney Formalism: Rethinking 'Classic Disney'." *Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 5, no. 3 (2010): 341-352.

²⁰ While not a feature length animation, I included *Enchanted* for this study because it starts off in the animated world and then brings those characters into the real world of modern New York City. It is full of throwbacks to the 'classic' Disney films and exemplifies the changes in what audiences expect in their Disney experiences.

reality. In their article, "Magic Happens: Re-Enchanting Disney Adults," scholars Susan Aronstein and Robert Torry discuss the *Enchanted*'s trailer and how Disney marketed it to mass audiences.

Its trailer explicitly placed the film in the context of the Disney canon, promising that "of all the classic Disney stories, of all the miraculous adventures, of all the magical tales, there has never been anything like *Enchanted*, because no other story has ever taken you to a land as strange and terrifying as ours." As the trailer sought to lure in viewers outside of the studio's usual target audience of children and their parents, it situated *Enchanted* as a comedy—a good natured joke aimed at the princess tale that provides much of the Disney Corporation's revenue...That the *Enchanted* trailer could rely on its audience's recognition of the standard Disney "Princess" narrative speaks to that narrative's integral, if contested, place in American (and, indeed, global) culture.²¹

By forcing Giselle and other animated characters into our world, the filmmakers had the opportunity to respond to criticism that previous films have received. While doing this, they also created an homage and composite of iconic images, or "visual echoes," of classic and renaissance films.²² In the story, Giselle meets Robert, a divorce attorney and single father, who cannot understand how Giselle can see the world the way she does. He represents critics of Disney films who dismiss romantic and idealized notions of the world. When Giselle breaks out in song, he is perplexed and embarrassed instead of breaking into song with her, as her Prince Edward from Andalusia would have.

²¹ Susan Aronstein and Robert Torry, "Magic Happens: Re-Enchanting Disney Adults," *The Contemporary West* 26, no. 2 (2010): 40-54, 41.

²² *Ibid.*, 44; *Becoming Enchanted: A New Classic Comes True*, DVD, directed by Kevin Lima (2007; Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment, 2008).

Over the course of the film and her experiences, Giselle evolves from a classic Disney heroine waiting for her prince into a modern Disney heroine with more agency. In the beginning of the film, Giselle falls from a tree into Edward's arms and after an introduction, they are engaged. By poking fun at the parent company, this scene responds to criticism of classics like *Snow White* and *Cinderella*, in which the heroine marries a stranger.²³ Viewers are encouraged to giggle at the naiveté presented in the characters in Andalasia. Giselle's budding friendship with Robert, though somewhat reluctant on his part, serves as a contrast to her relationship with Edward. Though neither is a bad relationship, Giselle grows to appreciate her conversations and human connection with Robert more than her infatuation with Edward. Audiences want Giselle to choose Robert over Edward as she continues to develop over the course of the film because together they embody a modern vision of romance. When Giselle and Robert are in scenes together, the characters personify the innocence and cynicism that arise in discussions about Disney films. By the end of the film, they have met in the middle – Robert understands a relationship should be more than a business arrangement, and Giselle that there is more to life than singing to woodland creatures about her hopes for a handsome prince.

Another way *Enchanted* demonstrates the progression of Disney films is through its music. Giselle begins by singing songs like "True Love's Kiss," which is reminiscent of *Sleeping Beauty's* "Once Upon A Dream;" both Aurora and Giselle sing to their animal friends about a dream in which they met their prince. While staying

²³ Aronstein and Torry, "Magic Happens," 48.

in Robert's apartment, Giselle decides to clean to the tune of "Happy Working Song," which is full of throwbacks to moments in *Snow White* and *Cinderella* where the characters perform various household chores. In "That's How You Know," Giselle explains the importance of romantic gestures to Robert while frolicking in Central Park in a manner similar to the show stopping numbers from more recent films like *The Little Mermaid* ("Under the Sea") and *Aladdin* ("Friend Like Me"). During "So Close," Robert and Giselle's dance is styled like the scene that includes the title song from *Beauty and the Beast*. The end of the film includes a contemporary pop song called "Ever Ever After," signifying the changes in the films and the company.²⁴

Enchanted served as a way for Disney to return to its hand-drawn animation roots, tell an entertaining story, as well as to,

...remind a fallen-away adult audience that Disney provides magic and endows their everyday world with meaning. *Enchanted*, in spite of the fact that its trailer explicitly appealed to this audience's cynicism about the Disney narrative's viability in the 'real world,' provides a feature-length version of the campaign's message while explicitly responding to feminist critiques of the Princess story, arguing that its absence leads to sadness and sterility. Without Disney, our world is indeed—as the film's villain observes—a world in which 'there are no happy endings'²⁵

Enchanted manages to simultaneously criticize elements of old Disney films and glorify other elements, all while selling the Disney brand.

Over time, Disney films developed certain characteristics that audiences expect in each new release. One trademark and criticism of Disney films is the

²⁴ Alan Menken and Stephen Schwartz wrote the music for *Enchanted*. They both had previously worked on a variety of Disney animations, including *The Little Mermaid*, *Pocahontas*, and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, among others. Schwartz has written many theater productions, including *Godspell* (1971) and *Wicked* (2003). For more information, see www.stephenschwartz.com.

²⁵ Aronstein and Torry, "Magic Happens," 42.

Americanization/ Westernization/Disneyfication of stories, legends, fairytales, and historical events. An example of this is that the original stories are modified to have happy endings and appeal to modern audiences. For instance, Cinderella's stepsisters' feet remain intact²⁶, Ariel survives,²⁷ and Quasimodo is accepted by Parisian society.²⁸ *Aladdin* (1992) is full of references to popular culture, mostly due to impersonations by Robin Williams, voice of the Genie.²⁹ *Hercules* (1997) also includes sight references to things recognizable to American audiences, like licensed footwear and other merchandise characters in the film desire. However, while the film includes elements of Greek mythology, it ignores some (the name Heracles was changed to Hercules, the Roman version of the original Greek name) or made family-friendly (Zeus is a family man and devoted husband, completely different from his origins).³⁰ The stories are modified so they will appeal to as many people as possible in the target audience, but the animation tends to reflect the region of the story (geometric swirls of Greek architecture in *Hercules*, curves and swirls inspired by Arabic text in *Aladdin*, etc.). The blending of the original story with

²⁶ In the Grimm fairytale, Cinderella's stepsisters cut off toes and heels in order to make the golden shoe fit. This was altered for the Disney version, which contains no blood. The story can be read at Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, *Cinderella*, <http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/grimm021.html>.

²⁷ Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid* has a far more tragic ending. She does not get her prince and happy ending, but dissolves into sea foam after he marries another woman. The story can be read at Hans Christian Andersen, *The Little Mermaid*, http://hca.gilead.org/il/li_merma.html.

²⁸ In the original tale, Quasimodo dies of starvation next to Esmeralda's corpse after her execution. For more information, see Victor Hugo, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, (New York: H.M. Caldwell Co., 1831).

²⁹ *Aladdin*, DVD, directed by Ron Clements and John Musker (1992; Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment, 2004).

³⁰ *Hercules*, DVD, directed by Ron Clements and John Musker (1997; Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment, 2011).

elements of the setting of the film with Western ideals is the basis of the Disneyfication.

A film that clearly demonstrates the Disneyfication of a legend is *Mulan* (1998). In it, Mulan disguises herself as a male soldier in order to protect her aging father from seeing battle again. Unlike other Disney heroines, her motivation stems from personal goal rather than any romantic endeavors. Though there is a bit of romance at the end, the filmmakers describe her story as an “unearthing an authentic self.”³¹ In fact, she does not so much change herself by the end of the movie, but the way others see her. Though Disney included elements of Chinese culture, the respect for ancestors and the family, Mulan is a character that embodies many American ideals – she is a self-empowered agent for change. This creates an interesting contrast in the film, which takes place in China but is undoubtedly an American story. Some of this does stem from the original legend, in which Mulan was considered “unconventional,” which may have added to some of her Western qualities.³² By the end of the film, she is only successful in saving China from Hun invaders when she is completely herself; she failed as both a match-seeking bride and a soldier, but triumphs when she lets her own strengths guide her, not the expectations of others.

Another topic that arises in discussions about Disney films is how the films portray specific groups of people. Scholar Neal A. Lester notes, ““As a globally dominant producer of cultural constructs related to gender, race, ethnicity, class and

³¹ Annalee R. Ward, *Mouse Morality: The Rhetoric of Disney Animated Film*, (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002), 95.

³² *Ibid.*, 109.

sexuality, Disney reigns supreme, and part of that supreme reign is an unquestionable privileging of patriarchy and whiteness.”³³ Race issues are especially clear in older Disney films like *Dumbo*, which is full of negative depictions, for instance scholars Mia Adessa Towbin et al indicate,

the crows appear to have African American voices; they depict stereotypically negative characteristics often associated with racist depictions African Americans, such as being poor, unintelligent, and naïve. Also in *Dumbo*, there are images related to slavery, with Black workers doing manual labor while a White man is in charge. They sing, “We work all day, we work all night, we have no life to read and write, we’re happy . . . we don’t know when we get our pay, and when we do, we throw our money away...”³⁴

Dumbo, released in 1940, reflects unfortunate opinions prevalent in American society at the time, though modern audiences may be surprised at some of the material. Later Disney productions demonstrate that some views have changed over time.

Though older Disney films are full of what is now considered questionable beliefs and opinions, recent filmmakers have tried to be more sensitive to other cultures. This is especially evident when comparing depictions of Native Americans in *Peter Pan* (1953) and *Pocahontas* (1995). The five decades that separate the release dates of these two films were full of movements for civil rights that led to greater social awareness among Americans. In *Pocahontas*, Disney animators tried to be more racially sensitive to Native Americans than they had been in *Peter Pan*. The messages or morals in this film are designed to make viewers think about the

³³ Neal A. Lester, "Disney's 'The Princess and the Frog:' The Pride, The Pressure, and the Politics of Being a First." *The Journal of American Culture* 33, no. 4 (2010): 294-308, 294.

³⁴ *Dumbo*; Mia Adessa Towbin et al, "Images of Gender, Race, Age, and Sexual Orientation in Disney Feature-Length Animated Films, *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy* 15, no. 4 (2008): 19-44, 32.

negative consequences of prejudice (especially in the songs “Colors of the Wind” and “Savages”). Singing to John Smith, Pocahontas explains that the English settlers do not understand the environment or land they settle. She tells him that he and the other sailors refuse to see the connection between different groups of people, that the two groups should not fight. In “Savages,” both groups prepare for battle and using the differences between them as a reason.³⁵ The filmmakers use this scene to highlight how stereotypes, ignorance, and fear can have violent consequences. Below are the first sections of the song, which has both groups (English and Powhatan) preparing for a violent battle. Both sides treat the other as an abomination and something to be feared or extinguished.

English Perspective

What can you expect
From filthy little heathens?
Here’s what you get when races are diverse
Their skin’s a hellish red
They’re only good when dead
They’re vermin as I said, and worse!

They’re savages! Savages!
Barely even human
Savages! Savages!
Drive them from our shore!
They’re not like you and me, which
Means they must be evil
We must sound the drums of war!

Powhatan Perspective

This is what we feared
The paleface is a demon
The only thing they feel at all is greed
Beneath that milky hide
There’s emptiness inside
I wonder if they even bleed

They’re savages! Savages!
Barely even human
Savages! Savages!
Killers at the core!
They’re different from us, which
Means they can’t be trusted
We must sound the drums of war!

The lyrics and message of this scene are far different from any perspectives shown in *Peter Pan*, which includes a stereotype-filled song entitled “What Makes the Red

³⁵ *Pocahontas*, DVD, directed by Mike Gabriel and Eric Goldberg (1995; Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment, 2005).

Man Red?" and native characters drawn as caricatures (white characters are represented realistically).³⁶ On a search for adventure, Wendy's brother John even warns the Lost Boys about the Indians, telling them, "remember gentlemen, the Indian is cunning, but not intelligent."³⁷ These are views that could not be expressed without backlash in modern Disney films. In *Pocahontas*, it is clear that both sides are in the wrong; the film is full of moments where Pocahontas encourages those around her to be accepting and tolerant.

Pocahontas (1995) is Disney's response to critics who claimed that previous films like *Aladdin* included racist and sexist elements.³⁸ Pocahontas is the ecological heroine of the story who ultimately teaches John Smith, the other colonists, and her own friends and family to be tolerant of each other and nature. While these are good messages to send to (especially young) audiences, scholar Esther Leslie notes that *Pocahontas* is full of "Disney-style sugary sentimentalism which leads the ideological onslaught against the messy actualities of history."³⁹ The film blends history and legend with entertainment value in order to ensure broad audience acceptance. Several critics comment on the historical inaccuracies of the film,

³⁶ It should be noted that this is based on the works of Scottish playwright J.M. Barrie, who likely had no knowledge of indigenous peoples beyond stories of Cowboys and Indians, and in fact referred to the latter as "redskins" in his original writings. However, that Disney filmmakers kept those descriptions should not be ignored. For more information about J.M. Barrie, see Andrew Birkin, *J.M. Barrie and the Lost Boys: The Real Story Behind Peter Pan*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003). For the original story, see J.M. Barrie, *Peter Pan: 100th Anniversary Edition*, (New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, LLC., 2003).

³⁷ *Peter Pan*, DVD, directed by Clyde Geronimi, Wilfred Jackson, and Hamilton Luske (1953; Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment, 2007).

³⁸ Critics point out that *Aladdin* does not depict Arab culture in a positive or factual light. The society is presented as "unjust" and Jasmine the "exotic" version of a Barbie doll. For more information, see Dorothy L. Hurley, "Seeing White: Children of Color and the Disney Fairy Tale Princess." *The Journal of Negro Education* 74, no. 3 (2005): 221-232.

³⁹ Esther Leslie, "Pocahontas," *History Workshop Journal*, no. 41 (1996): 235-239, 238.

though the creators of it hoped that the invented elements would be accepted along with the talking willow tree. Larger complaints arose about the physical appearance of Pocahontas herself, who several critics refer to as “Native American Barbie.” This moniker is not unfounded – Jeffrey Katzenberg told supervising animator Glen Keane that she should be “the finest creature the human race has to offer.”⁴⁰ The result is a heavily Anglicanized version of what Pocahontas may have looked like. The idea of tall and thin as a standard for beauty is emphasized in this film. Despite the reasonable complaints about her physique, there has also been praise for Pocahontas herself. She represents a more updated heroine than those like Snow White or Aurora. Russell Means⁴¹, who voiced Powhatan, notes that she is a strong character and that there is a positive relationship between father and daughter; they listen to each other and eventually it is Pocahontas who convinces him to end the battle and spare John Smith’s life.⁴² Those in the film who accept Pocahontas’ words of tolerance and acceptance are forgiven, and anyone else is left a villain and shunned.

Another social issue that Disney has adjusted according to changing times is the portrayal of gender issues. The characters in classic Disney films fit very specific gender roles – the men were brave and could rescue the women, and the women dreamed of marriage. Though the renaissance films still include some of these

⁴⁰ Annalee R. Ward, *Mouse Morality: The Rhetoric of Disney Animated Film*, (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002), 36.

⁴¹ Russell Means is a Sioux activist for the rights of American Indian people. He was an early leader of the American Indian Movement (AIM) and has continued to work towards eliminating racism. He has been politically involved since the 1960s, organizing a takeover at Wounded Knee and protesting anti-Indian legislation. For more information, see www.russellmeans.com.

⁴² Ward, *Mouse Morality*, 53.

ideals, the characters also have more personality and personal goals; contemporary plots do not even revolve around the love stories involved. While Snow White, Cinderella, and Aurora all require rescuing in one form or another, this lessons by the time audiences meet Belle, Nala, Pocahontas, and Mulan.⁴³ Aladdin, the Beast, Simba, and Hercules all have far more personality than the classic Disney princes.⁴⁴ This indicates that American audiences want strong characters that have goals and can overcome their own obstacles, which contemporary Disney films address.

The Princess and the Frog (2009) is regaled as the first Disney feature with an African American princess. Neal A. Lester notes that despite opening up a dialogue about race issues in the United States, the film minimizes them in order to promote

⁴³ Belle frees her father by staying with the Beast, who she then saves at the end of the film from falling of the tower Gaston stabs him. For more, see *Beauty and the Beast*, DVD, directed by Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise (1991; Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment, 2010). Nala goes hunting for her pride and forces Simba to face responsibility by returning to take his place as king. For more, see *The Lion King*, DVD, directed by Roger Allers and Rob Minkoff (1994; Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment, 2003). Pocahontas stops war between the English and her people (though historically, it is really more of a pause). For more, see *Pocahontas*, DVD, directed by Mike Gabriel and Eric Goldberg (1995; Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment, 2005). Mulan prevents China from a Hun takeover by impersonating a male soldier; even discovery and dismissal do not stop her. For more, see *Mulan*, DVD, directed by Tony Bancroft and Barry Cook (1998; Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment, 2004).

Mulan especially contains comments on gender roles. Her family expects her to be the perfect bride (calm, obedient, tiny waist, etc.) and bring honor to her family, but she reflects that she cannot envision that life for herself. As Ping, her male alter ego, she experiences boot camp and trains alongside other men. There, Captain Shang assures the troops that he will “make a man” out of them and that they must be swift, forceful, strong, and mysterious. Because Mulan acts as both a woman and a man at different points in the story, audiences see how behavioral expectations shift. For more information, see *Mulan*.

⁴⁴ Aladdin is a wisecracking thief who lies about his origins to speak with Jasmine. For more, see *Aladdin*, DVD, directed by Ron Clements and John Musker (1992; Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment, 2004). The Beast only appeals to Belle once he does not act so brutish – even when he is not quite human, she prefers his softer side to Gaston’s traditional manly-man antics. For more, see *Beauty and the Beast*. Simba returns to face his uncle and restore peace to the pridelands. For more, see *The Lion King*. Hercules only learns how to be a real hero when he truly puts the needs of others before his desire for fame and glory. For more, see *Hercules*, DVD, directed by Ron Clements and John Musker (1997; Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment, 2011).

Disney optimism. When discussing Tiana as a princess, he compares her to First Lady Michelle Obama, saying,

In this more courtly lineup, only images of Princess Diana, Princess Leia from Star Wars, and Ms. Obama match Disney's bigger-than-life idols that little girls might emulate and look up to in more substantive ways—beauty, brains, moral truth, social awareness, and lasting accomplishment. Importantly, this princess status challenges the glitz, popularity, glamor, temporality, and perceived social shallowness of beauty pageant queens. Importantly, both Michelle Obama and Tiana are princesses because they wed princes⁴⁵

The filmmakers⁴⁶ note that Tiana, as well as Prince Naveen and her other companions, is designed to be proactive in the story instead of reactive. Tiana does not wait for a prince to save her from her troubles, and views her friend Charlotte's prince-catching schemes and wishes upon stars with bemused skepticism.⁴⁷

What Tiana looks like has also been a large topic of discussion that Lester investigates. He reports,

As has been determined, this animated character is based on the actor who voices her. The January 2010 *Essence* that celebrates the movie features the actor Rose with a small drawing of the tiara wearing Tiana together; Tiana's hair and skin tone match Rose's medium skin tone and Rose's own hairstyle and chemically-relaxed hair texture. No matter how Tiana is represented, her very reality challenges representations of Disney female royalty. Rose admits a personal gratification and humility at contributing to this "groundbreaking Disney film:" [She says,] "It's wonderful to be part of this moment, the recognition of beauty outside of what has been the standard blond hair and blue eyes." Even Tiana's physical black female body both in the film and as the doll allegedly mirrors Rose, described by an

⁴⁵ Neal A. Lester, "Disney's 'The Princess and the Frog': The Pride, The Pressure, and the Politics of Being a First," *The Journal of American Culture* 33, no. 4 (2010): 294-308, 298.

⁴⁶ Ron Clements and John Muskers directed *The Princess and the Frog*. They previously directed Disney classics like *The Little Mermaid*, *Aladdin*, and *Hercules*.

⁴⁷ *The Princess and the Frog*, DVD, directed by Ron Clements and John Musker (2009; Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment, 2010).

interviewer as “the curvaceous actress”⁴⁸

Though critics applauded Tiana’s physical type for its realism (as opposed to Pocahontas⁴⁹) there were some complaints about Tiana’s hair, namely that it appeared to be only slightly wavy. A reason for this could be explained by:

the straight-hair and accepting body self-image dilemma among African-American females: Many African-American females have accepted that their bodies are different from the mainstream white, pencil-thin models and paparazzi-chased celebrities in magazines, on television, and on the big screen. [In fact], African-American girls with different body types, shapes, and sizes are typically not plagued with the same [body] image issues as females. The prevalence of African-American women as ‘bootylicious’ (Destiny’s Child) and [such] street terms for a female’s desirably full buttocks like ‘onion,’ ‘apple bottom,’ and ‘badunkadunk’ subvert the [skinny] white girl body ideal. However, African-American girls have yet to declare independence from the straight-hair ideal that bombards them at every turn, an ideal that can still fundamentally challenge their sense of self personally, physically, and socially.⁵⁰

The movie reflects society’s definitions of beauty. While racial markings are present in the film, they are minimized to support the “dreams come true when you work hard” theme of Disney optimism.⁵¹

Scholars have noted that the strength of opinions that people have about Disney has an effect on their work. In *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film,*

⁴⁸ Lester, “The Pride, The Pressure, and the Politics of Being a First,” 299.

⁴⁹ John F. Ross, *Picturing Pocahontas*, http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history-archaeology/object_jan99.html

⁵⁰ Lester, “The Pride, The Pressure, and the Politics of Being a First,” 299.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 302. After early concerns, Oprah Winfrey was brought in for race sensitivity (as well as voicing Tiana’s mother, Eudora) and Tiana’s name was changed from the less regal sounding Maddy. For more information, see Sarita McCoy Gregory, “Disney’s Second Line: New Orleans, Racial Masquerade, and the Reproduction of Whiteness in ‘The Princess and the Frog,’” *Journal of African American Studies* 14 (2010): 432-449.

Gender, and Culture, Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, and Laura Sells argue that the trademark “innocence” of Disney films makes people hesitate or refuse to take them seriously as films. They point out four reasons for this: “it’s only for children, it’s only fantasy, it’s only a cartoon, and it’s just good business.” In fact, they say that the Disney innocence “masks the personal, historical, and material relationship between Disney film and politics.”⁵²

Many write that Disney films are saccharine or only tell audiences what they want to hear. In her article “Fear of Faerie: Disney and the Elitist Critics,” Lucy Rollin argues that scholars distrust media produced for mass audiences. Rollin argues that that does not make what people want to hear wrong and questions who gets to make those judgments. She notes, “Disney was no more and no less than a product of this time, and if therein lies the weaknesses of his work, there must be its strengths as well.”⁵³ She also notes that many scholars do not like Walt Disney tweaking the fairy tales to suit his own vision, but argues that modern audiences are comforted by it – especially the changes made to *Sleeping Beauty*. Instead of a hundred year sleep, she wakes after only a short time to the prince that she met and knew before the enchantment, not a stranger.⁵⁴

Disney has a huge place in American society; while the company started out primarily to create entertainment for children, it is now a multimedia corporation

⁵² Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, and Laura Sells, *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), 4-5.

⁵³ Lucy Rollin, "Fear of Faerie: Disney and the Elitist Critics." *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 12, no. 2 (1987): 90-93, 92.

⁵⁴ *Sleeping Beauty*, DVD, directed by Clyde Geronimi (1959; Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment, 2008).

with global power and influence. In *The Mouse that Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence*, Henry A. Giroux and Grace Pollock point out the contradiction between Disney's public image and its role as an economic power. It has a huge influence on children (and has for generations), so the company has managed to deflect most criticism with the innocence that it projects in its films. There is an emphasis not only on how Disney affects American culture, but on Disney's corporate culture as well. In fact, the company defines it as,

n. 1. Of or pertaining to the Disney organization, as a: philosophy underlying all business decisions; b. the commitment of top leadership and management to that philosophy; c. the actions taken by individual cast members that reinforce that image.⁵⁵

The mission of the Disney corporation is to make as much money as possible while appealing to middle-class American values. However, despite the belief that Disney films have a conservative viewpoint, Walt Disney's films were actually full of "sociopolitical daring."⁵⁶ In *From Walt to Woodstock: How Disney Created the Counterculture*, Douglas Brode argues that it is a myth that Disney films are pro-Establishment and people are quick to point out the perceived uniqueness of a film that projects anti-Establishment.⁵⁷ For instance, in *Pocahontas*, the heroic characters are those who have lively personalities and resist authority. By the end of the film, Pocahontas, John Smith, and Thomas all have stood up to their leaders to stop the

⁵⁵ Giroux and Pollock, *The Mouse that Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence*, 49.

⁵⁶ Douglas Brode, *From Walt to Woodstock: How Disney Created the Counterculture* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2004), xi.

⁵⁷ *From Walt to Woodstock* is not limited to animated features, and includes live action films as well as television.

fighting between their people. Mulan defies social norms in order to fight as a soldier and save China.

Though the films are designed to appeal to as many people as possible, a motif that occurs in most Disney films portrays the protagonist as separate from society – either a rebellious spirit or an outcast – and somehow proves him or herself to be right in the end. Brode writes,

When all prejudice is removed from our vision, Disney movies clearly tell us that youth, not age, knows best and moreover is right in refusing to follow the dictates of those who are supposedly wiser simply because they happen to be older. Still, truly wise adults do exist and should be given full attention; children and adolescents can learn much from such mentors. The greatest problem with being young is the difficulty of discerning whom we ought to listen to and when we should reject the ‘knowledge’ of an older generation.⁵⁸

This is an essential part of the 1960s counterculture – youth across the country rebelled against a society that was run by an older generation and had to decide who to get advice from and who to reject. Brode refers to the rebels in Disney films the way that Albert Camus called them in his essay, *The Rebel*, as the “men who say ‘No!’”⁵⁹ Brode argues characters in Disney films that they grew up watching influenced those in the counterculture of the 1960s simply because they observed and absorbed those films during their formative years. The generational differences of the animators affected the stories that Disney produced over the years, so those released in the nineties reflect characters with more of a rebellious spirit (Ariel, Aladdin, Jasmine, Pocahontas, Mulan).

⁵⁸ Brode, xv.

⁵⁹ Brode, 64.

Walt Disney created a company that started off producing short animations and developed it into a corporation that has theme parks worldwide, television channels, and continues to produce successful feature-length films. Disney is a company that is recognizable to generations of people as a source of films that project the innocence and glory of youth. James B. Stewart notes in *Disney War*, “Disney is as much a mirror of American culture as it is an influence on it.”⁶⁰ The correlations and sometimes contradictions between the supposed innocence in the films and the corporate culture create an interesting dichotomy. People have very strong opinions about Disney, some rooted in sentimental memories, and some in anger at corporate greed. Neal A. Lester comments,

No matter the (dis)approval side of the fence we each sit on, we can only hope that this latest Disney installment and the critical and public attention it has garnered will continue to be valued and responded to artistically and responsibly in Disney’s ongoing efforts to further integrate its world-wide Magic Kingdom, a space literally and figuratively where dreams can really come true for every child.⁶¹

Disney films have long been a part of the American collective consciousness, but they have changed as much as the audiences have.

Different values are idealized or they are modified so that characters portray them differently. Characters in modern Disney films deal with disappointment not seen in classics like *Snow White* and *Sleeping Beauty* (i.e. dealing with banks in *Princess and the Frog* and divorce in *Enchanted*), but still include the magic and fairytaleness expected from the Disney brand. Disney films are ultimately made to

⁶⁰ James B. Stewart, *Disney War* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2005), 529.

⁶¹ Lester, “The Pride, The Pressure, and the Politics of Being a First,” 306.

entertain the masses and create a profit, so they must appeal to mainstream audiences. As mainstream values have shifted with time, so must the products if Disney still hopes to sell them. Media surrounds us everywhere, and can influence the way we view the world. It is important to be aware of what we know and how we know it.

The Walt Disney Company has released some of the most popular films of all time. They have continued to appeal to as many people as possible and so have adjusted with the changes in American culture over the past century. While we by no means live in a perfect society, these films reflect progressions and open up dialogues about social issues in the United States. If we are to believe that developments presented in the animated features reflect greater societal changes, then perhaps we are almost there.

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