

## **Educating Through Animation: Disney as Cultural Pedagogy**

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“I think of a child’s mind as a blank book. During the first years of his life, much will be written on the pages. The quality of that writing will affect his life profoundly.”

*Walt Disney*

The proverbially wonderful world of Disney evokes more than childhood memories; Disney does not speak exclusively to children but rather to the child in each of us. However, the animated feature films of the Walt Disney Company instill more than this sense of innocence and pure delight. The Disney canon serves an ideological, or socializing, function as a critical form of cultural pedagogy. What then does the ‘franchise’ of the Disney animated films inculcate? How does our ‘literacy’ in reading the Disney narrative affect our perceptions of social mobility, normative sexuality, and material culture? And how do social constructions formed by the broader culture shape and inform our impressions of these movies, even as the ‘Disney world’ proves elemental to that encompassing cultural sphere? This student seminar will explore how Disney’s retellings claim ownership of original stories while inflecting complex issues suffusing the contemporary American cultural Imaginary.

In order to approach the vast amount of material on Disney and their wide selection of animated films, this seminar will focus more specifically on gender, race, and narrative revision during the Michael Eisner era, although we will still speak to Disney’s previous animated films and corporate legacy (the “era of Walt”) to frame our discussion. Many of the great Disney animated films of the post-Walt era were released when this generation of students was growing up, and so these films, more than the studio’s early classics, may have formed its social impressions and perceptions more decisively than, say, “Snow White” or “Sleeping Beauty.” The seminars will be structured around a set of topics designed to allow close scrutiny of the great Disney films of our childhood—e.g., “The Lion King”; “Little Mermaid”; “Mulan”; “Beauty and the Beast”; et al.—in tandem with theoretical, historical, and sociological analysis of the corporate and cultural contexts within which such films were made and received. We begin with a session aimed at constructing a general overview to help establish the “Disney” context and ways to approach an appropriate range of strategies for cultural criticism. The following three seminars will be each focused on a key thematic or formal issue—sex and gender; retellings; and race and multiculturalism—with the seminar culminating in a reflective return to questions raised throughout the semester.

This interdisciplinary seminar offers much to a wide range of majors. As a Religion major and Philosophy minor, I am eager to test the idea of Disney as a kind of secular religion, complete with its own traditions, costumes, rituals, and pilgrimages (the continuing proliferation of Disney-emblemized events, edifices, and sites—such as Disney Fairy-Tale Weddings and the Disneyland Magic Kingdom [which Umberto Eco terms “America’s Sistine Chapel”]—attest to this cultural brand’s fusion of capital and ritual investment). Students with different intellectual backgrounds and interests will certainly add particular insights to the conversation: anthropology majors can help us shape a nuanced understanding of cultural context, sociology majors can help us probe the dynamics of gender politics, history majors can help explain the traditional practice

of, say, minstrel shows, and economics majors can articulate the functions and operations of corporations, to name just a few pertinent disciplinary perspectives. Moreover, this seminar should appeal to majors from Psychology to French, Chinese to Comparative Literature, and of course, to everyone who has encountered “the wonderful world of Disney.”

### Possible Syllabus Materials

#### **Theoretical Approaches: A Critique of Material Culture**

Naomi Klein, *No Logo*

Terry Eagleton, “Culture in Crisis,” in *The Idea of Culture*

John Storey, “What is Popular Culture?,” in *An Introductory Guide in Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*

Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*

Mark Lewis Taylor, *The Executed God: The Way of the Cross in Lockdown America*

Ted Lardner & Todd Lundberg, *Exchanges: Reading and Writing about Consumer Culture*

#### **Branding Tomorrowland: Disney as Corporation**

Eric Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation*

Carl Hiaasen, *Team Rodent*

Michael Sorkin, “See you in Disneyland,” in *Variations on a Theme Park*

Scott Bukatman, “There’s Always Tomorrowland: Disney and the Hypercinematic Experience,” in *October*

The Disney Project, *Inside the Mouse*

Peter Schweizer, *Disney: The Mouse Betrayed*

Louis Marin, *Disneyland: A Degenerate Utopia*

Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*

Eric Smoodin, *Disney Discourse*

#### **Mixed Moral Messages: Disney as Cultural Pedagogy**

Miguel Picker, *Mickey Mouse Monopoly* (documentary)

Henry A. Giroux, *The Mouse that Roared*

Annalee R. Ward, *Mouse Morality*

Lynda Haas, Elizabeth Bell, and Laura Sells, *From Mouse to Mermaid*

#### **The Roles of Sex and Gender**

Watch Disney’s *Mulan* and *Beauty and the Beast*

Amy M. Davis, *Good Girls & Wicked Witches*

Sean Griffin, *Tinker Belles and Evil Queens*

Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde*

The Bible (NRSV), Judges 11

Sigmund Freud, “Female Sexuality,” in *The Future of an Illusion, Civilization and Its Discontents and Other Works*

Sigmund Freud, “Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes,” in *The Ego and the Id and Other Works*

#### **Retellings: Revising History and Happily Ever After**

Watch Disney's *The Little Mermaid*, *Pocahontas*, and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*  
Terrence Malick, *The New World* (film)  
Victor Hugo, *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*  
Hans Christian Anderson, *The Little Mermaid*  
Students research an historical account of Pocahontas

**Adjusting Approaches to Race and Multiculturalism**

Watch Disney's *The Lion King* and *Aladdin*  
"What Made the Red Man Red," *Peter Pan*  
"When I See an Elephant Fly," *Dumbo*  
Douglas Brode, *Multiculturalism and the Mouse*  
Mimi Nguyen, "Who's Your Heroine? Negotiating Asian-American Superpower in *Mulan*"