Disney and its Critics I

Mickey Mouse Monopoly
Need for Media literacy

• “Given the influence that the Disney ideology has on children, it is imperative for parents, teachers, and other adults to understand how such 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 citadel of fun and good cheer. On the contrary, as one of the primary institutions constructing childhood culture in the United States, Disney warrants healthy suspicion and critical debate.” Giroux p. 90.
  – This claim lies at the root of Giroux’s analysis, and is (imo!) 100% true.

• “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 context in which they are situated and because they resonate so powerfully with dominant perceptions and meanings. Giroux, p. 97.
  – But does Disney really promote “conservative values” (read as sexist, racist, and capitalistic), as Giroux asserts?

• Lets look more closely at the claims of Mickey Mouse Monopoly…
Mickey Mouse Monopoly
Henry Giroux implies that Disney’s aggressive copyright protection policy (and unwillingness of publishers to violate it) equates to living in “a police state.” Is Disney’s defense of copyright law at the root of Giroux’s contention that Disney “erodes civil society.”?

Having watched this documentary, would you agree that Disney is too controlling when it comes to “policing” its name/characters/images?

How do you think the producers of Mickey Mouse Monopoly got the rights to use Disney clips? Do you think Disney challenged the rights of the Media Education Foundation to use these clips under fair use?
• Mickey Mouse Monopoly suggests that the Little Mermaid teaches girls to give up their voices and use their bodies to catch a man. Is that the message of The Little Mermaid?
• What aspect of Ariel does Eric first fall in love with? How does Ursula trick him into marrying her? At what point does Eric realize it is Ariel he loves?
• A more nuanced criticism of Disney’s Little Mermaid comes when Giroux writes, “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.” Giroux p. 99. Is this a legitimate criticism? What are boys strongly positioned to believe at the end of the film?
How to be a boy?

- The documentary uses a scene of Gaston from Beauty and the Beast to support the claim that children will model how they want to look based on Disney Characters. Do you think Disney intends Gaston as a role model?
- Do you think children might wish to be like him, based on Disney’s portrayal?
“And this is a movie that is saying to our children, ‘overlook the abuse, overlook the violence, there is a tender prince lurking within, and its your job to kiss that prince and bring it out, or to kiss that beast and bring the prince out.’ That’s a dangerous message.” (Carolyn Newberger, Mickey Mouse Monopoly). Is this the message of Beauty and the Beast?

Does Belle overlook the Beast’s abusive behavior? At what point does Belle have a change of heart towards the Beast? Does Belle kiss the beast to change his behavior? Based on the above scene, who would you say is trying to “bring the prince out.”?

Could an alternate reading of Beauty and the Beast be that Disney is suggesting men must change their essential natures in order to attract women? Should we be critical of Disney for that?
Racial stereotyping

• In Oliver and company, a Latino character is portrayed as a chihuahua, and Mickey Mouse Monopoly suggests this is a racist portrayal. Is it racist to portray a Latino character as a dog and a thief?

• What is the British character portrayed as? What is the French character portrayed as? What are the “mongrel-american” and “afro-american” characters portrayed as? Does this make the Latino portrayal any less or more racist than implied? Brode writes, “As an aesthetic, caricature is benign, so long as it is not misused for negative purposes… When democratically applied, in a work that does not reserve caricature for any one ethnic group, there is nothing invalid about it – at least, not to any mind that remains open during the observation process…” (Brode, p. 2-3)
Racial stereotyping

• In The Jungle Book, King Louis sings that he “Wants to be a man like You.” Mickey Mouse Monopoly suggests this is a racist portrayal – that Africans, or African Americans, are being presented as “sub-human” and yearning to be “fully human” – i.e., white. Do you agree?

• Does the song change its meaning at all when you consider that the voice actor for King Louis is a Sicilian-American actor and trumpet player from New Orleans named Louis Prima (hence, “King Louis”, whose distinctive style of music and acting were recognizable to the audience when the film was released? Or that in the song, each character (Mowgli the human, Baloo the bear, etc.) sings “I want to be like you, and you can be like me…?”

• What color skin/what race is Mowgli? If this is a commentary on race, what race does King Louis want to be? Would you say it is Disney, or Disney’s critics, that have racial stereotyping issues when it comes to this song?
Race and Disney

- Mickey Mouse Monopoly stresses the huge, diverse media holdings of Disney - including ABC television.
- It also implies that Disney has no positive black or latino characters, that such characters are always represented as “ghetto.”
- If we are being asked to recognize Disney’s diverse media holdings, can we ignore Disney’s television and music dimensions, as well as more recent Disney films?
“The urns with Hercules symbols, and mugs, and sneakers and it’s a total anachronism in that it doesn’t relate to the times of Hercules at all but its showing children shopping and getting all the products and all the excitement of getting the products so it kind of makes this kind of seamless marketing between the show and the ad, totally indistinguishable for children.” (Diane Levin, Mickey Mouse Monopoly)

What would you say the “message” is in the second Hercules clip? How reasonable or unreasonable is it to think that children would “get” this message?
“Play is natural for children, comes natural. And through play, children get to know themselves, get to know the world around them, its their chance to explore, to create their own means of exploring the world. They develop imagination, language, skills, social skills. If you tell a child how to play, you are depriving the child of what’s maybe necessary for that child’s development.” (Marisa Peralta, Mickey Mouse Mouse Monopoly)

Do you think merchandising limits childhood play? Do children only or mostly re-enact film scripts when playing with movie tie-in toys?