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Disneytown

The Walt Disney Company, or as it is commonly known, Disney, is a multi-billion dollar company. The company owns a multitude of channels such as ABC and ESPN, myriad cruises and theme parks, and a large number of toys and other products. Disney is one of the most powerful media companies in the world. As with many companies, Disney has achieved its status as a powerful company by subordinating those who are not rich, white, or heterosexual. In a word, the Walt Disney Company is hegemonic.

Hegemony is “the power or dominance that one social group holds over others” (Lull, 1997, p. 61). The word “hegemony” is credited to the Italian intellectual Antonio Gramsci. His views, derived from the ideas of Karl Marx, led to the theory that “mass media are tools that ruling elites use to ‘perpetuate their power, wealth, and status [by popularizing] their own philosophy, culture and morality’” (Lull, 1997, p. 61). In addition, “the mass media uniquely introduce elements into individual consciousness that would not otherwise appear there, but will not be rejected by consciousness because they are so commonly shared in the cultural community” (Lull, 1997, p. 62). In such a way the Walt Disney Company uses its power as part of the media elite to put its views into its movies. Disney movies usually cater to children and who better to express one’s viewpoint to than children? In fact, children’s prejudiced views about others who are not the same as them in terms of religion, race, or economic status can be traced back to Disney.

In her article, “Defining Racism: ‘Can We Talk’?” Beverly Daniel Tatum explains how, as a society, we are all exposed to misconceptions about people who are not like us, starting as young as preschool (Tatum, 1997, p. 123). Tatum uses the example of a study that was done by one of her students that examined the conceptions of Native Americans by preschoolers. The children, between the ages of three and four, were asked to draw a picture of a Native American. They did not know what a Native American was and did not know what to draw, yet when asked to draw a picture of an Indian, the children knew drew away. Almost every picture had feathers, some had weapons, and the Indians were depicted as violent. Most of these children were white, the dominant group in society. The children did not live near a huge Native
American population and probably had never encountered Native Americans, but internally, the children had ideas about what Indians looked like. When asked where they received this information from, the children named the movie Peter Pan, a Disney movie (Tatum, 1997, p. 124). Certainly, this follows the thoughts of British social theorist Philip Elliot who suggested that “the most powerful effect of mass media is how they subtly influence their audiences to perceive social roles and routine personal activities” (Lull, 1997, “Hegemony”, p. 62). The Walt Disney Company being part of the media elite means that it is “[a] controlling economic [force] in society that [uses] the mass media to provide a ‘rhetoric [through] which these [concepts] are labeled, evaluated, and explained” (Lull, 1997, “Hegemony”, p. 62).

Hegemony’s effectiveness “depends on subordinated peoples accepting the dominant ideology as ‘normal reality or common sense…in active forms of experience and consciousness’” (Lull, 1997, “Hegemony”, p. 63). The subordinated – women, people of color, LGBTs, disabled, poor, and non-Christians – are found in Disney movies, yet they are not depicted accurately. In the 1989 film, The Little Mermaid, the white males ultimately reign, which is not surprising, given that they are the dominant group in society. While at first glance the film might seem innocent, sexism quite evident in it.

The Little Mermaid is filled with fantastic animation and music, but its sexist overtones, particularly with Ariel had how she is dressed, cannot be overlooked. When sixteen-year-old Ariel is singing “Part of Your World,” she is rolling around the floor of her grotto, clad in a scanty bikini, almost orgasmic, showing the stereotype of women being little more than sexual creatures. Meanwhile, on the ship for Prince Eric’s birthday celebration, Eric is given a statue of himself. His companion, Grimsby, tells Eric, “It would have been a nice wedding present.” This shows the larger picture of people “having” to be married. After Ariel saves Eric, she is singing the reprise of the song and here we can tell how she wants to be with him so badly- “What would I give to live where you are? What would I pay to stay here beside you? What would I do to see you smiling at me?” This is a foreshadowing of what Ariel is going to do – give up her body, voice and identity to marry the man she loves.
Marriage is not so easily attained by Ariel, however. She finds that she needs the help of a witch, Ursula, to gain access to her prince on land. Ursula is fat, bitter, and powerful; she lives alone and seeks revenge on others, implying that powerful women cannot have men and are witches. The most sexist scene in the movie is in the cavern when Ursula is singing “Poor Unfortunate Souls,” the song during which she promises that she will give Ariel legs for three days and that she can remain a human forever if she is given the “kiss of true love” by the third day at sunset from Prince Eric. Ursula claims she is a good person:

And I fortunately know a little magic;  
It's a talent that I always have possessed.  
And here lately, please don't laugh,  
I use it on behalf of the miserable, lonely and depressed.  
Pathetic.

Ursula is saying that Ariel is depressed because she does not have Eric, implying that women need men to be fulfilled. Ursula shows off her transformation of the polyps, hollow shells of former merpeople, in her cavern-

Poor unfortunate souls  
in pain, in need.  
This one longing to be thinner,  
That one wants to get the girl,  
And do I help them? Yes, indeed.

The one “longing to be thinner” is a girl, showing society’s pressure on women to be thin. After Ursula explains the rules of the kiss, Ariel goes on to say, “If I become human, I'll never be with my father or sisters again!” Ursula says, “That's right. But you'll have your man. Life's full of tough choices, isn't it?” Ursula explains to Ariel that she has to give up her voice. Ariel questions this, “But without my voice how can I...?” Ursula comes back with, “You'll have your looks, your pretty face. And don't underestimate the importance of body language.”

The men up there don't like a lot of blabber;  
They think a girl who gossips is a bore.  
Yes, on land it's much preferred,  
for ladies not to say a word.  
And after all, dear, what is idle prattle for?
Come on, they're not all that impressed with conversation;  
True gentlemen avoid it when they can.  
But they dote and swoon and fawn,  
on a lady who's withdrawn.  
It's she who holds her tongue, who gets her man.

This entire song implies that women need only their bodies to get men and women who speak, namely smart women, will bore men and drive them away. Ariel still signs the contract and her voice is taken out. She is brought up to the surface by the witch’s minions, and when she pops out of the water, she is framed in what is essentially a porn shot; the viewer can even make out her nipple.

Once on land, Eric finds Ariel but deduces that she can not be the girl who saved him because she has no voice. He pities her and brings her back to his palace. The maids are all women and say that Ariel cannot be a princess because she is dressed in rags. These images and conversations show women as servants, housecleaners, and imply that women cannot be princesses unless they are beautiful, furthering the film’s underlying assertion that women are comprised of little more than their bodies.

Eric ultimately saves the day by protecting Ariel and killing Ursula; this is not only extremely violent, but the classic “prince saves the day” ending. Ariel’s father gives her the gift of legs, and she and Eric kiss and then get married. Ariel gains the body she desires, but she gives up her home, what made her who she is, to be with the man she loves. The Little Mermaid presents a sexist view of women’s bodies and desires as well as the message that marriage is the only appropriate end for a good woman and that they need men to work out their problems. Another Disney film, the 1994 The Lion King, continues to model the degradation of women and adds an additional set of underlying racist messages.

The Lion King takes place in the Pride Lands of Africa and follows the transition of a young lion cub named Simba on his journey through adulthood, trying to find his place in the “Circle of Life.” Simba must face many challenges along the way in order to become the next king. While an interesting film that has both wonderful music and fantastic animation, the sexist and racist overtones cannot be overlooked. Sexism is not as prevalent as racism in this particular Disney
The first instance of sexism is when Simba wakes his sleeping parents, Mufasa and Sarabi. Mufasa turns to Sarabi and says, “Before sunrise, he’s your son,” thus implying that the females have to deal with the children in the mornings. In another scene, Simba and Nala, childhood friends, are getting groomed by their mothers, not their fathers. In the scene where Mufasa is yelling at Simba for going into the forbidden zone, or elephant graveyard, Mufasa says Simba is wrong but proceeds with, “And what’s worse, you put Nala in danger.” This implies that females are weak. Certainly one of the more sexual/sexist scenes is after Simba and Nala have been reunited as adults. They are rolling down a hill and when they reach the bottom, not only do they appear to be having sex (in the missionary position no less), but it is Nala who licks Simba’s face and looks at him seductively. Simba is not looking at her like that. The missionary position would imply that Simba is the powerful male with the weakened female Nala below him. Nala licking Simba’s face could show she is a caring, stereotypical female. The seductive eyes are also stereotypically female, implying that women are sex objects who use their bodies to get attention (much like Ariel did). In another scene, Sarabi criticizes her brother-in-law Scar for how terribly the Pride Lands are being run. Scar slaps her, showing sexism by implying that if a woman dares question a man, she is “asking” to be slapped.

The sexism in The Lion King is appalling but the racism in it only makes things worse. The first glimpse into racism is the view of the elephant graveyard, shown as dark, obsolete, and covered with bones and litter. The elephant graveyard is depicted as the “projects,” housing that is stereotypically associated with blacks. This complex is separate from the lush and lavish Pride Lands, where the lions (or whites) live. Mufasa tells Simba not to go to the elephant graveyard because it is “dangerous” although he does not say what is dangerous about it. This would imply that Mufasa is trying to instill fear in Simba of the “other,” the blacks.

Scar is attempting to steal the throne from Mufasa and Simba and he enlists the help of the graveyard’s residents, the hyenas, who are associated throughout the film with African Americans. The hyenas Shenzi, Banzai and Ed demonstrate the film’s racism by not only being voiced by black and Hispanic actors (Whoopi Goldberg, Cheech Marin, and Jim Cummings) but
also by speaking “inner-city” slang, having a “black” laugh and having expressions, big tongues and evil faces, that have been used for centuries to belittle black people and force them into the position of the “other.”

Before Scar attempts to kill Simba and Mufasa in order to take the throne, he tells the hyenas that they will “never go hungry again” if Simba and Mufasa are killed. Scar sings the song “Be Prepared” and he insults the hyenas with the line, “It’s clear from your vacant expressions, the lights are not all on upstairs.” This implies that blacks are stupid. When Scar is trying to kill Mufasa and Simba, the hyenas are in on this, thus drawing on the stereotype that blacks are in a gang and must follow a leader. This also implies that blacks are murderers. Also, when the hyenas kill Scar for betraying them, this also implies blacks are vengeful and not trustworthy.

The Lion King tries to disguise itself as a family movie with its songs and animation, but the messages it sends are appalling for children and adults alike. It should also be noted that not only is the film both sexist and racist, but it is extremely violent. It is sad that the movie’s tagline is, “Life's greatest adventure is finding your place in the Circle of Life,” but as evidenced in this film, blacks and women do not have a good place in this “Circle of Life.”

The evidence of racism and sexism in Disney films is quite damning, yet one must wonder why these films are not the target of bigger criticism. We can deduce that it is because “information and entertainment technology is so thoroughly integrated into the everyday realities of modern societies, mass media’s social influence is not always recognized, discussed, or criticized, particularly in societies where the overall standard of living is relatively high. Hegemony, therefore, can easily go undetected”(Lull, 1997, “Hegemony”, p. 63). Disney markets its ideologies through its films and products by disguising them with clever songs and cutesy characters. While the vast majority of children are probably intelligent enough to realize that killing to go higher up on the ladder of success is wrong or that a magic potion will transform your life, with the world being more dog-eat-dog/cat-eat-cat and young girls flocking to plastic surgery in hopes of alluring men and changing their lives, we have to wonder where these ideas come from, and, as evidenced by the above mentioned Disney products, they can,
quite frankly, come from movies. Children have such porous minds that it is important to educate them about the real world and to help them separate fantasy from reality. Boycotting Disney could help. While it might not cause a reaction immediately, it would be a great symbolic gesture. To quote Margaret Mead, we must “never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” It is time to leave Disneytown behind.

References:

The Lion King. DVD. Walt Disney Home Video, 1994.


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