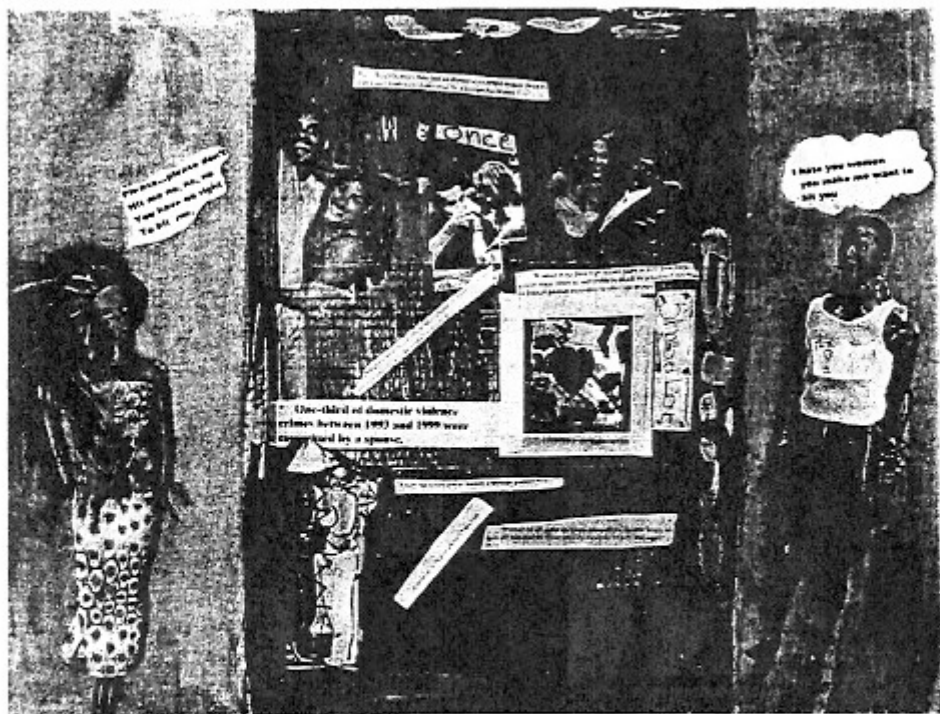


Teaching (Popular) Visual Culture: Deconstructing Disney in the Elementary Art Classroom

In the terrain of everyday life, popular culture is a significant site of learning that provides substantial experiences for children and youth. Knowledge of self and the world is often constructed, in part, through particular forms of popular visual culture, from animated films to television programs. These representations are ideological texts that provide pleasure, communicate information, influence consumption, and arbitrate power relations (Giroux, 1997; Rogoff, 1998). These texts play a significant role in the symbolic and material milieu of contemporary society by shaping, and often limiting, perceptions of reality and constructing a normative "vision" of the world.

BY KEVIN M. TAVIN AND DAVID ANDERSON



Student artwork, *Love is Blind*. Ashley Green and Tyana Dingle, age 10.

Disney appeals to many of us through a complex affective process where we negotiate our beliefs, values, desires, and expectations in the realm of pleasure and meaning.

The organizations that produce, distribute, and regulate much of the popular visual imagery in contemporary society are commercial institutions that have access to resources (money, cultural capital, and media) and operate in the interest of profit-maximization. Because individual gain is the prevailing ethos of most corporations, power is used to maintain the status quo and keep it running with as little friction as possible.¹ In our visual culture, this translates to corporations helping to construct a world-view where alternative images and ideas that critique and challenge the dominant culture are relegated to the fringes. The corporations that construct this sanitized perspective are the teachers of the new millennium. A major contributor of this corporate pedagogy is the Disney oligopoly.

Disney as a Corporate Oligopoly

For most Americans, "Disney" is synonymous with entertainment, childhood, and family values. For children and adults alike, Disney signifies a special place of celebratory play and uncomplicated amusement. In addition, Disney acts as a register for a golden age of innocence—an imaginary time in a imaginary past. When it comes to corporate power, however, most people do not think of Enron, Exxon-Mobil, or General Electric. They do not usually identify Disney as a multi-billion dollar commercial entity. But that is exactly what Disney is—a market-driven global media oligopoly "whose annual revenues exceeded 22 billion dollars as a result of its ability to manufacture, sell, and distribute culture on a global scale" (Giroux, 1999, p. 26).

While Disney signifies innocence and simplicity through the popular imagination, its corporate holdings include cable and non-cable television networks, radio stations, Hollywood cinema, sports teams, publishing companies, newspapers, music labels, real estate, theme parks, cruise lines, and retail stores. These include full or controlling interests in ABC television stations and radio networks, the Disney Channel, ESPN, ESPN2, A & E, Lifetime, the History Channel, Walt Disney Pictures, Caravan, Touchstone, Buena Vista, and Miramax film companies, the Mighty Ducks of Anaheim, the Anaheim Angels, Hyper Books, Fairchild Publications, Chilton Publications, Hollywood Records, Mammoth Records, the town of Celebration, the Amsterdam Theater in New York, theme parks and resorts in Florida, California, France, and Japan, the Disney Cruise Line, DisneyQuest, approximately 500 Disney stores (Bagdikian, 1997; McChesney, 1997; Seltzer & Picker, 2001). These holdings produce and distribute films, videos, records, tapes, CDs, computer software, Broadway plays, books, video games, stuffed animals, figurines, backpacks, lunch boxes, and a host of other gadgets and toys. Many of these items are circulated

through retail outlets such as J.C. Penney, Wal-Mart, and Toys 'R' Us. In addition, Disney has merchandising tie-ins with McDonald's, which markets and dispenses millions of Disney products through Happy Meals® and other fast-food paraphernalia and promotions (Kincheloe, 2002; Schlosser, 2002).

Disney's corporate holdings allow it to wield an enormous amount of power through the construction and regulation of the nation's media-cultural space (Shiller, 1994). Within this space, Disney promotes itself through spirals of referentiality. In this sense, Disney refers back to itself through its own media outlets and subsidiaries in an effort to advertise and advance its own cause. Michael Eisner (as cited in Giroux, 1999), chairman, CEO, and president of The Walt Disney Company explains, "The Disney stores promote the consumer products, which promote the theme parks, which promote the TV shows. The TV shows promote the company. Roger Rabbit promotes Christmas at Disneyland" (p. 1). In addition

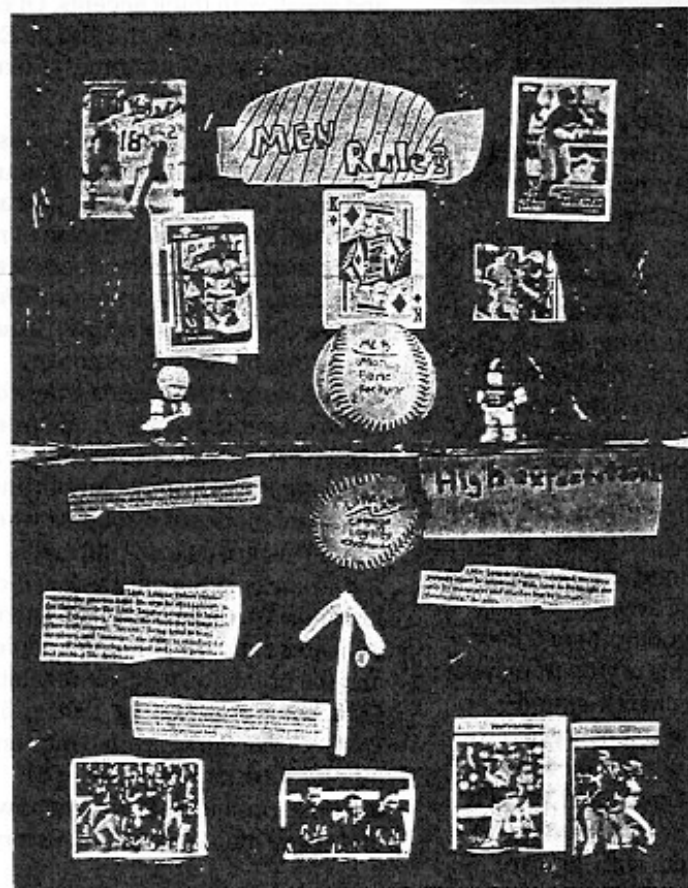
to promoting itself, these Disney venues help promote a particular vision of the world that becomes normalized through what Steinberg & Kincheloe (1997) call "cultural pedagogy." This form of pedagogy refers to the process of teaching and learning through social sites, often outside of sanctioned educational institutions. Disney provides powerful sites for cultural pedagogy where we learn about the world and our social relatedness.

Disney as Cultural Pedagogy

It may be easier to understand Disney as a source of cultural pedagogy if we consider that

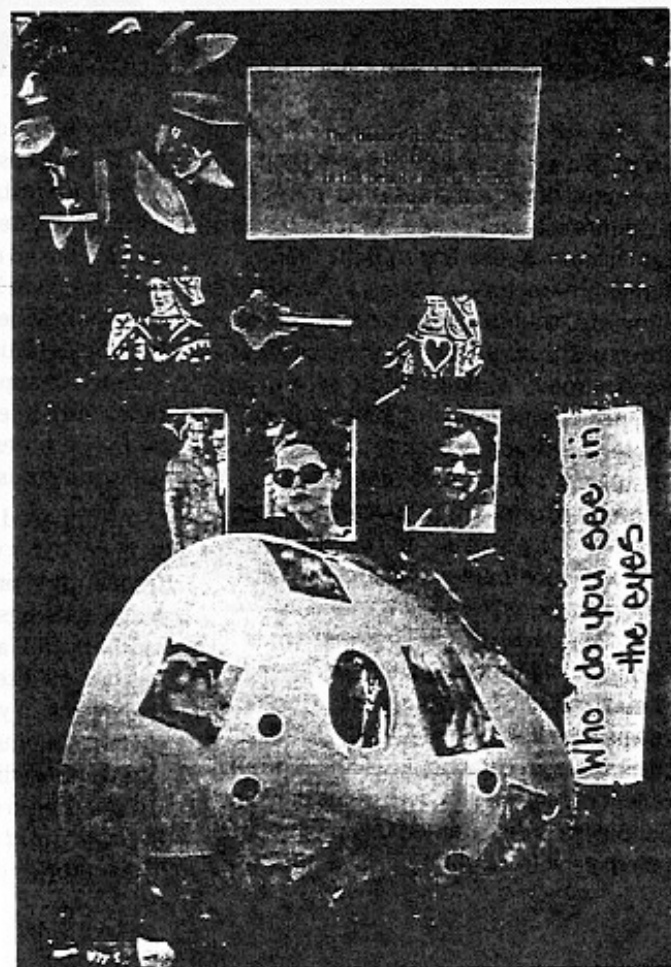
more than 200 million people a year watch a Disney film or home video, 395 million watch a Disney TV show every week; 212 million listen or dance to Disney music, records, tapes, or compact discs [and] more than 50 million people a year from all lands pass through the turnstiles of Disney theme parks. (Giroux, 1999, p. 19)

These experiences can help forge individual and collective identities. This is not to argue, however, that Disney is an evil capitalist machine that constructs identity through mass deception.² Disney appeals to many of us through a complex affective process where we negotiate our beliefs, values, desires, and expectations in the realm of pleasure and meaning. Furthermore, our identities are fluid and contingent upon elaborate conjunctures of histories, events, and relations (Orner, 1992). However, while identities are always multidimensional and dependent upon numerous idiosyncratic factors, they remain tethered to communal systems of discourse. In other words, our identities are shaped and limited, in part, by available linguistic codes, cultural signs, and representations. These codes, signs, and representations may promote or support biases, limit particular social interests, and thwart possibilities for human agency (Giroux, 1994).



Above: Student artwork, *Men Rule*. Ethan Sauers, age 10.

Right: Student artwork, *Beauty is On The Inside*. Savannah Wilson and Tijah Bennett, age 10.





Student artwork, *Communicate*. Arielle Miller, age 9.

Many of the representations emanating from Disney, especially through their animated films, are sutured to dominant discourses around gender, race, ethnicity, and history. According to Bell (1996), female characters in Disney animated films are "traditionally placed in one of three positions: that of an idealized teen-aged heroine, wicked middle-aged beauty, or nurturing post-menopausal woman" (p. 108). The young female protagonists are usually subordinate to the male heroes and often utilize over-determined behaviors of sexuality and sacrifice to gain male companionship and security. For example, Ariel, the mermaid in *The Little Mermaid*, trades her voice (read as one form of human agency) for legs so she can pursue her handsome prince and receive the kiss of "true love." Jasmine, the female protagonist in *Aladdin*, is an object of male desire, and in the end her happiness is determined through marriage with Aladdin.

Middle-aged women in Disney animated films are often portrayed as hyper-authoritarian adversaries in the form of evil step-mothers, depraved ogres, wicked queens, and sinful witches (see Ursula in *The Little Mermaid*, Cruella Deville in *101 Dalmatians*, and the Wicked Queen in *Snow White*). These characters support the dichotomy in other fairy-tales between the innocent young heroines and the impure middle-aged antagonists (Haskell, 1973).

As opposed to young or middle-aged women, older women in Disney films are frequently represented as non-sexualized magical beings such as wise grandmothers and fairy godmothers. These characters often comfort the traumatized love-stricken young heroines and sacrifice themselves to ensure heterosexual normalization (see the Fairy Godmother in *Cinderella* and Mrs. Potts in *Beauty and the Beast* for example). These stories overlap with, and are

informed by, other patriarchal narratives—about beauty, body image, competitiveness, jealousy, marriage, romance, sacrifice, and sexuality—inscribed in and through popular culture.

Other Disney films teach us about race and ethnicity through characterizations of humans and animals as well as descriptions of "faraway lands" and non-Western cultures. Repeatedly, non-White human characters appear as stereotypical representations of "the other," who are often inferior, grotesque, violent, or unscrupulous. Dark skin usually signifies "dark" intentions. For example, in *Aladdin*, the hero is light skinned with Anglo features and speaks standard American English, while other "Arabs" (evildoers?) have dark skin with exaggerated facial features and speak with thick accents. Of course, as Disney points out, the Middle East is "barbaric, but hey, its home" (Clements & Musker, 1993).

Animals and non-human representations in Disney films are not immune to this racial stereotyping. The characters often use language in the form of racially coded accents and inflections (see *The Lion King*, *The Aristocats*, and *The Lady and the Tramp*, for example). In addition, the setting of many films convey dangerous or exotic lands where other cultures seem savage and underdeveloped (see *Tarzan* and *The Jungle Book* for example). All of this falls in line with dominant modes of discourse where white Western culture represents "orderliness, rationality, and self-control [and non-Western and non-whiteness] indicates chaos, irrationality, violence and the breakdown of self-regulation" (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998, p. 5). Disney's discourse around race and ethnicity are part of a cluster of unconscious messages about power and social memories about history.

(Continued on p. 33)

Disney teaches history through revised historical narratives that erase complexity, social antagonism, and human agency. For example, in *Pocahontas* the main female character is presented as an adult who "resembles a shapely, contemporary, high fashion supermodel [that falls in love with the brave John Smith] a blond colonist who looks like he belongs in a Southern California pinup magazine of male surfers" (Giroux, 1999, p. 101). In reality, Pocahontas was a child when she first met Smith and never had a romantic connection with him. The Disney version of history also largely ignores the horrors of genocide at the hands of the colonists and the real fate of Pocahontas's people, the Powhatan Nation.

Disney provides representations (and lacks representations) that help shape and normalize our sense of gender, race, sexuality, ethnicity, and history. These corporate images resonate with other representations, texts, and discourses in the pastiche of contemporary visual culture. There is no denying that our students are learning from this cultural pedagogy. As educators interested in the well being of our students and a democratic public sphere, we have a pressing responsibility to help develop critical, reflexive, and meaningful approaches to interpreting, critiquing, and producing (alternative) images in visual culture. The following section outlines a unit of study in an elementary art classroom where students addressed issues of race and gender stereotyping, historical inaccuracies, and violence in and through Disney films.³ Students engaged in the critical interpretation of specific Disney characters and produced multi-layered artworks based on those interpretations.

Deconstructing Disney in the Elementary Art Classroom

The goals laid out above—to develop a critical thinking of popular visual culture and produce meaningful artworks based on issues in everyday life—were the fundamental goals for a unit of study for fifth graders in an elementary art classroom. In the beginning of this unit, students were asked to ponder the following question: What is an issue? Students responded by stating that issues are problems, concerns, troubles, topics, and ideas. Students then discussed issues in their everyday life including too much homework, problems with siblings, getting teased, and not getting along with others. Students were then asked to consider how people come to know one another—How do we learn about other people, and how do other people learn about us? The replies ranged from encounters on the playground to watching television. Students were asked if their knowledge about other people came from other forms of popular culture: movies, videos, advertisements, toys, etc. Most students responded in the affirmative. The conversation then turned towards stereotypes in the media. Of course, student demographics, prior experiences, and other matters were considered before engaging students in this conversation.

The first task was to define the term "stereotype." Students were asked to list possible definitions and provide examples from popular culture. The list included racial, ethnic, and gendered stereotypes. The discussion expanded to include stereotypes of Native Americans and their sources. This issue was problematized through a discussion of the complexity of Native American peoples. Throughout the next few lessons, students critically examined representations in two Disney movies, *Peter Pan* and *Pocahontas*. Students compared the Disney representations to popular Indian mascots like Chief Wahoo of the Cleveland Indians, Chief Illinwek from

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the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and other mascots from the Atlanta Braves, Washington Redskins, and Kansas City Chiefs. Students were asked to critically consider these images within the context of authentic representations of indigenous culture(s). It was explained that these images are offensive to many Native Americans (as well as non-Native Americans), as they depict Indians in a demeaning way that mocks certain ceremonial dances and sacred dress. Students then interpreted the artwork of Edgar Heap of Birds and Jaune Quick-to-See Smith to understand how artists take up some of the same issues in their work.

In subsequent lessons, students viewed clips from other Disney films such as *Aladdin*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Lady and the Tramp*, *Oliver and Co.*, and *Tarzan*. Students were asked: Who are the main characters in the movie? What do they look like, and how do they behave? Where does the action take place? Questions pertaining to specific films included the following: How is the local culture portrayed in *Aladdin*? What does Ariel do to try to win the affection of Prince Eric in *The Little Mermaid*? How did Gaston, in *Beauty and the Beast*, treat Belle? If someone screamed at you and treated you badly, like in *Beauty and the Beast*, what would you do? Do the chihuahuas in *Lady and the Tramp* and *Oliver and Co.* have a particular accent? If the movie *Tarzan* takes place in Africa, where are the African people? Why do you think there are virtually no non-White people in a movie set in Africa?

This last question usually generates a healthy discussion among the students. However, one student spoke out with sincere opposition to the question and stated that there are many non-White people in the movie, "they are Black; they are the apes." A short silence followed before other students in the classroom quickly corrected him by clearly stating that "Blacks are not animals." The student's comment confirmed that these movies and other forms of popular visual

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culture can have a tremendous impact on how children view themselves as well as others. In this case, this particular student had associated human beings with apes, in part, because of the continual representation of Black voices used for primate characters in Disney and other animated films (see *The Jungle Book*, for example).

Through the engagement with specific animated films, students generated a long list of issues relating to race, gender, history, and violence. Students were asked to consider how they would change the Disney films to address these issues in a positive light. In one version of the unit, each student chose a single issue and a particular Disney film for an art project. They created movie posters and videocassette covers that illustrated their re-visioned movie. While many of the students' illustrations were visually striking, the content and written explanations that accompanied their work proved to be even more thoughtful and insightful than imagined. In another version of this unit, students used collage and assemblage methods to create a shallow box artwork that commented on their chosen issue. These projects were equally exceptional, possessing ideational and visual complexity.

Conclusion

The Walt Disney Company and other multi-billion dollar oligopolies are the teachers of the new millennium. They substitute traditional classroom practices with animated fantasies, magic kingdoms, toys, and an array of other visual representations and objects readily consumed by children. Our students are learning from this cultural pedagogy. What are they learning, and as important, what are they *not* learning? We need to hold these corporations responsible for their images and messages. As critical art educators, we should investigate how corporations produce knowledge about the world, distribute and regulate information, help construct identity, and promote consumption in visual culture (Tavin, 2001). Of course, this is not a call to censorship. There is, in fact, too much censorship—censorship from the market—in the form of corporate policing of alternative images and ideas that challenge the status quo (Jhally, 1995). This is also not a plea for teachers to become psychic terrorists, destroying the real pleasure students receive from popular culture. Popular culture offers immense opportunities for escape, fantasy, joy, and dreaming. "But like all dreams, the dreams that Disney provides are not innocent and must be interrogated for the futures they envision, the values they promote, and the forms of identity they offer" (Giroux, 1999, p. 7).

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⁴Many students were quick to point out the connections between the Chihuahua from Taco Bell and the representations in Disney films.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Disney characters and movie titles included in this article/commentary are protected by registered U.S. copyrights and trademarks owned by The Walt Disney Corporation and its subsidiaries.

FOOTNOTES

¹See Tavin (2000) for a description of how the McDonald's Corporation asserted control over the circulation of information at a state art education convention with the threat of a conference shutdown.

²It should be noted that Disney produces some progressive texts and supports charities, educational programs, and gay and lesbian functions. The enterprising messages and benevolent activities help point to the complex and often contradictory character of Disney culture. For more information see Giroux (1999), Griffin (1999), and Klugmen, Kuenz, Waldrep, & Willis (1995).

³As it was stressed to the students, the issues that were discussed were not presumed to have originated from Disney. Visual stereotypes in contemporary imagery are, in part, consequences of previous visual representations and depictions (Duncum, 2002). In addition to Disney imagery, other forms of popular culture were included in the unit to emphasize the range in which stereotypes are perpetuated. Disney remained the focus or vehicle for its influence and popularity with youth culture.