



DECONSTRUCTING DISNEY

Eleanor Byrne & Martin McQuillan



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Contents

Acknowledgements

| | |
|---|-----|
| Introduction. Duckology: Political Narrative in the Age of Deconstruction | 1 |
| 1. A Spectre is Haunting Europe: Disney Rides Again | 19 |
| Intermission | 37 |
| 2. <i>Socialisme ou barbarie</i> : Welcoming Disney | 42 |
| 3. Domesticated Animus: Engendering Disney | 57 |
| 4. Spectrographies: Conjuring Disney | 73 |
| 5. You Can't Lionise the Lion: Racing Disney | 94 |
| 6. It's the Economy, Stupid: Bill 'n' Disney | 111 |
| 7. King of the Swingers: Queering Disney | 133 |
| 8. Democracy Limited: Impeaching Disney | 151 |
| Epilogue: Disney Work | 168 |
| Filmography | 177 |
| Index | 206 |

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This book is respectfully dedicated to Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart who first taught us how to read Donald Duck.

Introduction

Duckology: Political Narrative in the Age of Deconstruction

Reading Disney is like having one's own exploited condition rammed with honey down one's throat.

Dorfman and Mattelart

Reading for Socialism

At this late stage in the process of 'Advanced' Capitalism, the conditions of 'postmodernity', the construction of the Disney *oeuvre*, and the practice of 'poststructuralist' inquiry, what is there left to say about the feature-length animations of the Disney corporation? As early as 1971 Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart concluded in their seminal study *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic*, that 'attacking Disney is no novelty'.¹ Dorfman and Mattelart aside, works such as the biographies by Richard Schickel and Marc Eliot (published 25 years apart) or critical editions like Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas and Laura Sells's *From Mouse to Mermaid* have consistently recorded, analysed and critiqued the right-wing agenda more or less implicit in Disney films.² The most frequent criticisms include sexism, racism, conservatism, heterosexism, andro-centricism, imperialism (cultural), imperialism (economic), literary vandalism, jingoism, aberrant sexuality, censorship, propaganda, paranoia, homophobia, exploitation, ecological devastation, anti-union repression, FBI collaboration, corporate raiding, and stereotyping. It would seem only a matter of time before conclusive proof is discovered linking Walt Disney to the assassination of J. F. Kennedy and the production of anti-personnel landmines. Even if such a baroque critical strategy as this were to be pursued it would have long since lost any power to surprise let alone illuminate. Disney has become synonymous with a certain conservative, patriarchal,

2 *Deconstructing Disney*

heterosexual ideology which is loosely associated with American cultural imperialism. As such Disney films (never mind the merchandise, theme parks, and media conglomerate) might be thought of as not in need of 'deconstruction' because they are self-evidently reactionary parables of the American Right.

Disney (man, films, or corporation) is therefore beyond the political pale, having been exposed by a series of devastating ideological incursions which have demolished Disney's claims to political neutrality and to be a purveyor of mere innocent entertainment. At this late stage there ought to be nothing left to say. Disney has been well and truly 'deconstructed', there must be more urgent topics to address. And yet there is still much to say about Disney and the terms of such a criticism are as valid as ever even if they are now open to negotiation. Disney's powerful hegemonic hold over children's literature, family entertainment, mainstream taste, and Western popular culture remains intact and indeed continues to grow. Alongside Disneyland, Walt Disney World and the EPCOT centre (these sites are linked by Disney Cruises) it is now possible to visit Disney Safari World, Disneyland (Paris) and soon Disneyland (Tokyo) and Disneyland (Beijing). Not only can we watch Walt Disney Pictures (with six feature-length animations due to be released in the two years between 1999 and 2000) but we can also enjoy Touchstone, Hollywood, Caravan, Miramax, Henson, and Merchant Ivory Productions, as well as Buena Vista Television and the Disney Channel. This adds up to a production facility and media and entertainment group with a truly global reach and an estimated worth of \$4.7 billion.³ Despite consistent and clear denunciations of the ideological inscriptions of Disney the evil empire continues to grow and one must assume (the popularity of semiotics aside) continues to work its reactionary magic across the globe.

In the face of Disney's wilful refusal to lie down and allow itself to be analysed out of existence perhaps the self-knowing yawn of 'postmodern' criticism, bored with yet another 'deconstruction' of Disney, is an inappropriate response. Equally, another impassioned condemnation of Disney's hetero-andro-conservatism might not cut the mustard either. Such criticism valuable as it may be merely occupies and

unquestioningly reproduces a position allotted to it by the Disney text as a condition of that text's existence. A Disney text (film, video, comic book, shop, theme park, cruise ship) only functions ideologically within the wider contextual frame of the entire Disney corporation, which in turn is representative of a set of overdetermined cultural values, as a result, in part, of the existence of critics prepared to question those values. In other words, if denunciations of Disney did not exist, Disney would have to invent them. They are precisely what keeps Disney going. Attacks on the religio-politico-socio-economic values of Disney have from the very beginning (whenever we might like to date this) enabled the corporation to construct and defend its ideological machinery. The fact that a Disney text is so open to the charge of ideological conservatism (as any child can see) allows it to exercise those very conservative values in the face of an imagined external 'leftist' critical agenda. The blatantness of Disney is what makes it so resistant to the challenge of ideological exposure.

This is not to imply that a critical response to the determinate political effects of the Disney Corporation is a necessarily closed interpretation. Instead it is to point out that the so-called conservative and therefore *ipso facto* reactionary ideology of Disney (based as it seems to be around questions of nation, capital and race) is predicated on an opposition to a pre-existing and fixed set of 'leftist' values which it opposes. Disney is able to do what it does ideologically because it is a 'justifiable' bulwark against a caricatured (one might say ideologically determined) set of identifiably left-wing and therefore *ipso facto* subversive values. Disney's critics pre-exist Disney (or at least occupy a necessary position for the continued successful functioning of Disney as an ideological event) and so legitimise its actions in the field of ideology. What is at stake in this configuration is the very serious question of whether we know what we mean when we attempt to criticise Disney from a left-wing point of view.

As an *a priori* of post-structuralist criticism (this term will need to be unpacked later) we accept that texts are radically indeterminate with respect to their meaning, therefore any reading of a text must be determined by factors not prescribed

4 *Deconstructing Disney*

by the text itself. These factors are, so the logic runs, political and it is therefore an obligation of those of us on the Left 'to read for socialism'.⁴ This implies, contrary to our initial suggestion, that the readings such a criticism produces are determinate with respect to their meaning: we know what it means to be on the Left, we know what we want and we know what socialism is. However, it is not disrespectful to either party to suggest that the historically rooted concerns of Dorfman and Mattelart (writing in 1971 as part of an educational programme sponsored by Allende's Popular Unity government) and the anxieties of the liberal-left American academics of 1995 contributing to *From Mouse to Mermaid* are not one and the same. The Chilean revolutionary process is not reducible to the North American academic apparatus.

The identification of this contradiction must open a way for a consideration of the terms of criticism as a prior responsibility to any analysis of the Disney text. This engagement with a 'self-evidently' reactionary text poses certain difficulties in relation to our understanding of the reading process and our appreciation of the political space. This is not to repeat a tired rhetoric about the current redundancy of terms such as Right and Left (which is itself a depoliticising gesture invoked in the name of various political interests) but rather to ask whether these terms have not in fact always been importantly undecidable sites of ideological contest, and what have been the political effects of their supposed stability? The ultimate stake in such an analysis might be a questioning of the ways in which terms such as 'the Left' or 'socialism' have been determined by the metaphysical sedimentation of historically constituted political discourses. To continue to say that we know what we want and that we want socialism will necessarily involve a displacement of the terms 'socialism' and 'Left' from the metaphysical discourse of politics. In other words these terms will have to resist the temptation to reassert themselves in a transcendental position in a reading strategy which denies the possibility of transcendentalism altogether.

As a first principle of this inquiry then, it will be necessary to assume that we might not be certain of what we mean by 'Left' or 'Right' or indeed that the meaning of the space denoted by the term 'the political' is fixed. The contextual

operation of these terms is what is at stake in, and what will emerge as a result of, the encounter with the Disney text. Our analysis of Disney will only be able to make an effective intervention in the field of political oppositions it criticises by offering the double gesture of overturning the classical oppositions which surround Disney and displacing the conceptual order which predicates these oppositions. This conceptual order ('Left', 'Right', 'socialist', 'imperialist' etc.) is articulated through a non-conceptual order of non-discursive forces. This order must also be overturned and displaced and that finally is what has always been at stake in the deconstruction of Disney.

It is equally important to start from a position of openness to the question of what we mean when we use the term 'Disney' itself. Walt Disney is a man who died in 1967. This man was a film-maker, FBI informant, strike breaker, propagandist, television presenter, before his death about to be proposed as a recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, and according to urban myth, is cryogenically frozen in a vault under Sleeping Beauty's castle in Disneyland. Disney is a studio system and a classically Fordian chain of filmic production. Disney is an entertainment and leisure complex with global interests from brand endorsement to satellite television. Disney is an *oeuvre* of audio-visual publications (including feature-length animation, short animation, pedagogical material, nature films, and live action films, not to mention home videos, CD-ROMs and computer games). Furthermore, the name 'Disney' is a signifier which has come to represent a set of contradictory and unstable ideological codes. This entire signifying complex (which incorporates all the anxieties and conflicts of national and international cultural development in the twentieth century) is inscribed in the signature 'Walt Disney' which accompanies every Disney product. This recognisable signature simultaneously implies the bodily non-presence of Walt Disney and establishes him as the origin of the text by suggesting he was present in some moment in the past. This moment of past-presence becomes a moment of future-presence when the signature is repeated after Disney's death (as it was during his life) as a copyrighted trade-mark. Walt is always with us; he

is the origin of all that the corporation produces. However, as we have suggested above, the signature gathers a multiplicity of meanings around it and inscribes them in the pure singularity of Disney's autograph. It is the very reproducibility of the pure event of Disney's signature which means that it can be detached from 'the singular intention of its production'.⁵ This citational structure means that on every occasion the Disney signature does not necessarily signify the same thing. The possibility of its legibility as a marker of a certain right-wing ideology depends upon the impossibility of the 'rigorous purity' of such an ideological mark. Alterity takes place and reading is possible.

In other words the ideological event of Disney is never saturated. Accordingly, it is not enough to rehearse the same textual exegesis which explained *Snow White* in 1937 (or the Duckburg comics in early 1970s Chile) when confronted by each new Disney text. This is not to say that *How to Read Donald Duck* is 'out of date' but rather to suggest that the form and space in which it was written are no longer the same conditions under which we write today. So much has changed: the space of public discussion, the means of communication and the channels of information, the relation these have to the question of authority, the place of the intellectual, the form of critique, the ideological meanings currently in circulation and so forth. *How to Read Donald Duck* should never be forgotten but it cannot be exactly repeated.⁶ Just as these changes affect the terms of involvement open to the critic they also affect the production of the Disney text.

For example, how can we explain an event like Gayday at Walt Disney World in Orlando? Every year since 1991 on the first Saturday in June a lesbian and gay fun day has been held in the park and celebrated as a stand against intolerance. The day is not organised or sponsored by Disney but they profit greatly by it and Disney Chairman Michael Eisner has given it his official blessing on national television.⁷ While the Disney camp has been keen to benefit from the strength of the pink dollar at home,⁸ it has simultaneously made inroads into exploiting 'red' China as a new foreign market (with two prospective theme parks and a collection of factories). The National Association for the Advancement of Coloured

People objected to the representation of happy plantation workers in *Song of the South* when the film was released in 1946 (and on each of its re-releases in 1956, 1972, 1980 and 1986).⁹ However, the space and scope of Disney's filmic racism has since widened to include a letter of reprimand from the General Secretariat of the Arab League, suggesting a proposed Arab boycott of Disney products in response to persistent 'negative portrayals of Arabs' in Disney films.¹⁰ How can we reconcile exactly the Walt Disney who was a social correspondent for the FBI with the 'Team Disney' executive of Michael Eisner, Jeffrey Katzenberg and Frank Wells who offered open support to the democratic presidency of Bill Clinton? Quasimodo is not Pinocchio and Pocahontas is not Snow White.

If the Disney text has changed then so too must the terms of critical engagement. This book must not only ask questions about Disney but it must also ask questions about the questions we have been taught to ask about Disney. It is necessary to question the form of the critique as a precondition of making an intervention into the conceptual and non-conceptual order which predicates the Disney empire. On its own such a gesture would not constitute 'reading for socialism' but it cannot impede commitment. Quite the reverse.

Keeping Up With the Paula Joneses

'It depends what the meaning of "is" is.'

Bill Clinton

The 1996 film *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* gives an indication of the ways in which the Disney text might be said to have changed in the mediatic space of the 1990s (the feature-length animations produced since 1989 are this book's object of study). Disney's films have always (with varying degrees of success) incorporated songs as a formal component of the text. Much of the cultural capital of Disney has been based upon the mnemonic quality of this music: 'Whistle While You Work', 'One Day My Prince Will Come', 'When

8 *Deconstructing Disney*

You Wish Upon A Star', 'Bare Necessities', 'The Circle of Life' and so forth. Far from being mere adjuncts to the animated narrative, musical interludes between anthropomorphic action, these songs represent some of the decisive indices in which the Disney ideology is most securely embedded. They structure the films and carry the weight of the Disney signature. The above list reads like New Labour's pre-election pledges. Disney songs have produced a lucrative sideline in the merchandise catalogue of sing-along videos, soundtracks and songbooks. In the 1996 film two songs stand out as the same but different from their predecessors in the Disney canon. The first is 'A Gypsy's Prayer', sung by Esmerelda, the second is 'Beata Maria', sung by Minister Frolo. Curiously both are addressed to *notre dame*.

Esmerelda has become trapped in the cathedral after falling foul of the city guard when rescuing Quasimodo from ridicule at the 'Festival [*sic*] of Fools'. In a perfect Californian accent she asks the Archdeacon of Notre-Dame, 'What have they got against people who are different anyway?' The Archdeacon ponderously tells her, 'You can't right all the wrongs of this world by yourself', and with evangelical opportunism suggests, 'Perhaps there is someone in here who can [help].' Esmerelda turns into a side chapel, evidently amazed to see figures kneeling in prayer. She looks up to a curiously un-Catholic Madonna (if there were to be a puritan statue of the Virgin Mary this would be it) and sings, 'I don't know if you can hear me, or if you're even there.' There is a last doubtful equivocation when she sings, 'I don't know if you would listen to a gypsy's prayer.' What is remarkable here for Disney is not the postmodern scepticism but the very evidence of religion at all. With the exception of weddings and christenings to open or end a narrative there are no other explicitly religious representations in any of the feature-length animations (spanning a period of 60 years), perhaps unusual for a production company whose ideological values are so closely associated, as a critical commonplace, with the American Right. Esmerelda's opening lines might be not so much a songwriter's embarrassment in a secular age but rather a sop to and apology for that secularism. One might argue

that it is now only possible for Disney to make religion visible because it is only now necessary for Disney to make it visible.

The camera pans out into a sumptuous tracking shot of Esmerelda walking through the swirling tendrils of light in the cathedral, illuminated by a forest of candles. With admirable invocation of the politically correct she sings, 'God help the outcast hungry from birth. / Show them the mercy they don't find on earth.' The lyrical content of the song is at a considerable remove from the comic gusto of previous Disney offerings. However, the tune bears a striking family resemblance to the homogenous Disney lover's ballad of its later films. As the audience is offered a head-and-shoulder shot of Esmerelda walking through the candles we are reminded of the numerous pop videos for sound-alike ballads which invoke the same waxy conceit. Esmerelda is recognisable as Janet Jackson and/or Celine Dion (a neat trick, given the racial implications of such ambiguity). The set-piece operates through the conventions of pop video (in which a young contemporary audience would be highly literate) rather than the choreographed routines of previous Disney vaudeville. The song is tearing in two directions then: firstly, as an introduction of one of the few quasi-religious sentiments in the entire film (and Disney canon); secondly, offering a consumerist conceptual frame to secularise unfamiliarly and unhealthily Catholic material. Esmerelda walks in the opposite direction to a processing chorus of the Parisian Catholic bourgeoisie, their passing shadows cast across Esmerelda's face as they sing contrapuntally, 'I ask for wealth, I ask for fame' etc. The bourgeois Catholics kneel at the feet of a giant stained-glass window of the stigmatic Christ (again specifically puritan in outline) while Esmerelda turns away from such patriarchal idolatry to sing to Our Lady of Self-Reliance, 'I ask for nothing, I can get by. I know so many less lucky than I.' Along with the frontiers of the state it would seem that Disney would like to roll back the interventionist powers of the Almighty as well.

Esmerelda walks into a circle of light cast by a high stained-glass window dedicated to the Virgin; as the camera pans away and a solo piano reaches its diminuendo, she concludes, 'Please help my people poor and downtrod. / I

thought we all were children of God.' Previously Disney have approached the name of God with an almost Hebraic zeal (that it should never be stated) yet here it is invoked in a manner both pious and puritan in a suggestively Christian (almost 'socialist') sentiment which concludes another production-line pop song. The play of secular and religious frames and discourses is particularly striking. What is important here is not the ethics of political correctness (only a very superficial analysis of the text would stop here) but the peculiar ways in which religious discourse permeates the politico-ideological conceptual frame of what remains a deeply conservative film. This configuration is important because it demonstrates all the contradictions which constitute contemporary American political discourse here and now in the second term of the Clinton presidency. There will be much to say about this situation later as there will be about this particular text as well. However, we offer it now in this introduction as an example of the historical specificity of these later Disney films.

The second song, 'Beata Maria', sung by Minister Frolo, is also problematic in terms of a conventional critical vocabulary about Disney. Esmerelda's song is immediately preceded by a singular scene in which Frolo surprises her from behind, twists her arm, sniffs her hair and runs his hand over her face. Little is left to our childish imaginations. Frolo tells her, 'I was just imagining a noose around this pretty neck.' She retorts, 'I know what you were imagining' – just in case anyone has missed the point. 'How typical of your kind to twist the truth to cloud the mind with unholy thoughts', replies Frolo, with a studied air of prurience as he makes the only reference to the 'holy' in the film. This religious discourse ('un/holy', which opens the text onto theological and philosophical considerations as well) is linked to sexuality. Specifically it is linked to an expression of desire inappropriate for a public official, tempted by poor gypsy trash. This is the only physical proximity between Frolo and Esmerelda (until he stands before her to burn her at the stake during the film's denouement) and yet unexpectedly it produces the uncontrollable lust which gives rise to Frolo's

Deconstructing Disney is a new podcast that takes a whole new spin on Disney Films. The breakdown happens as Freeze and Mandy go through every Disney movie; one per episode; and deconstruct the movie. Then they will discuss facts, symbolism, and other things you may not have known, or thought about. This show is intended to be though provoking, and instructional. With titles like Deconstructing Disney or From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender and Culture, these books are filled with numbingly predictable criticisms. Taking their cue, the professorial minorities have made their own contributions with articles like "Deconstructing Disney: Chicano/a Children and Critical Race Theory" appearing in journals such as Aztlan.