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The Mouse that Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence
by Henry A. Giroux

Henry Giroux's *The Mouse that Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence* should be read by educators, cultural workers, and parents. Giroux writes in a relatively jargon-free manner, thus broadening the book's appeal to those who are not familiar with the forms and terms of analyses made by cultural studies scholars. The main theme of the book is that companies like Disney are increasingly commercializing and privatizing what's left of our public culture, and increasingly targeting younger children as consumers, and both trends result in dangerous consequences for childhood and for democracy. While Disney portrays itself as simply a provider of innocent entertainment products such as films, videos, and theme parks, Giroux argues that the content of these products is anything but innocent. Indeed, Giroux argues, within the package of entertainment, there are themes, narratives, and messages that not only turn children into consumers, but also threaten our principles of active citizenship, civil society, and democracy. Given that Disney is among the small number of corporate empires that mold our public culture, we must understand and resist the ways in which Disney's products nostalgically reflect, shape, and distort our democratic ideals, national memory, and gender and racial narratives.

Disney's Power

Because "Disney has always understood the connection between learning and power and their relationship to culture and politics" (p. 156-157), Giroux argues that educators, cultural workers, and concerned parents must also understand this connection. Giroux argues that as "noncommodified public culture comes under assault, we are faced with a growing commercial sphere that profoundly limits the vocabulary and imagery available for defining, defending, and reforming the state, civil society, and public culture as centers for critical learning and citizenship" (p. 12). Since Disney is such a powerful molder of this commercialized culture, Giroux's focus is "one that highlights the pedagogical and the contextual by raising questions about Disney itself, what role it plays (1) in shaping public memory, national identity, gender roles, and childhood values; (2) in suggesting who qualifies as an American; and (3) in determining the role of consumerism in American life" (p. 10).

Raising awareness of Disney's power and these connections, though, is made all the more difficult given that Disney masks its power by claiming it is simply in the business of entertainment. This is a powerful claim, since in Disney's vocabulary, "entertainment" is by definition "innocent" and apolitical. This claim shields Disney's political power as a major corporate entity as well as its cultural power to shape our cultural fantasies, fairy tales, memory, and national identity. Disney's power in large part consists of its ability to provide cultural, gendered, and political messages in its products. The burden of proof is shifted onto Disney's critics who must illustrate the overt and covert messages embedded in seemingly apolitical and mere entertainment products.

For Giroux, "innocence" operates as a multiple signifier. On one level, "innocence" describes Disney's

image as simply an entertainment company that exists in a vacuum apart from economic, political, and cultural power. Giroux illustrates that behind Disney's innocent corporate image is a political player that flexes its muscle to secure its goals. On a second level, "innocence" captures how Disney's products are simply good, clean entertainment for families and for children. While its products may indeed entertain, Giroux argues that "Disney's view of children as consumers has little to do with innocence and a great deal to do with corporate greed and the realization that behind the vocabulary of family fun and wholesome entertainment is the opportunity for teaching children that critical thinking and civic action in society are far less important to them than the role of passive consumers" (p. 158). By actively marketing to children under twelve, who market researcher James McNeal observes "shell out \$17 billion a year in gift and allowance income and influence \$172 billion more spent by their parents" (p. 158), Disney is commercializing childhood in a way that alters childhood itself, endangers our culture and democracy, but benefits Disney's bottom line. Under the cover of innocence, Disney's market research and product development is downright predatory given its goal of turning children into loyal customers. Any authentic innocence of childhood is subverted by a consumerist identity that Disney inculcates in children at appallingly young ages. This point was brought home to me last year, when on a rare trip to a mall, my three year old daughter stated, "This mall isn't very good." When my partner and I asked why, she replied, "Because there's no Disney Store." Needless to say, we haven't been back to a mall since.

Giroux thus takes us on a tour of Disney's many faces of power, and reminds readers along the way that these faces are masked by claims of innocence which disarm and blunt criticism of Disney's corporate practices and cultural products. Chapter 1 lays out the argument's core themes and highlights how Disney is responsible for replacing notions of citizenship, civil society, and the public sphere with more privatized, consumerist, apolitical, and corporate-friendly definitions of these concepts. In this chapter, Giroux also takes us inside Disney's parks to examine how the sanitized and predetermined experiences of customers reflect an essentially conservative cluster of experiences that symbolically re-define and whitewash American history by excluding references to labor conflict, racism, and nativism. Further, the combination of leisure, entertainment, and consumption within the facade of some Norman Rockwell inspired "main street America" symbolically redefines the ideal city as comfortably middle class and racially homogeneous. Giroux also unpacks Disney's innocent corporate image by examining how Disney uses hardball tactics to fight customers who have been injured on some of the rides, denies access to company records for scholars who are deemed too critical of Walt Disney, and promotes heavy-handed corporate socialization to weed out potentially nonconformist employees.

Chapter 2 investigates Disney's city "Celebration" located near its Orlando theme park. Celebration is a planned city meant to nostalgically invoke the quaint, safe, sterile, and conflict-free imagery of some Neverland turn-of-the-century America. Further, Celebration public school system boasts a Disneyfied educational curriculum. Disney's gestures toward a progressive pedagogy notwithstanding, Giroux argues that, given the corporation's selective memory exemplified by its neglect of labor strife and racial conflict in its theme park experiences and films, it is naive to trust Disney to provide a curriculum that helps students become engaged citizens.

Chapter 3 treats Disney's animated films *Mulan*, *Aladdin*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Lion King*, and *The Little Mermaid* as cultural texts that reflect and reinforce anti-democratic principles, rigid gender roles and hierarchies, and racial stereotypes. Consider *Mulan*, a movie in which a female protagonist could potentially rupture traditional gender roles or potentially lend a critical perspective on war. Despite these progressive possibilities, Giroux argues that *Mulan* ultimately reinforces traditional gender roles. For example, when *Mulan* is marching off to war singing along with her fellow soldiers about "a girl worth fighting for," *Mulan*'s attempt to interject that the ideal "girl" thinks for herself is shunned and ignored by her fellow soldiers who instead idealize beauty, cooking, and other domestic qualities. Also, *Mulan* herself becomes "one of the boys" by engaging in war and, in the end, reverts to a traditional role as she wins over the handsome son of a general (pp. 102-103). Similarly, in films such as *The Lion King* and

Aladdin, there is a symbolic equation of goodness with whiteness, Anglicized features, and Anglicized speech patterns. Simultaneously, there is a symbolic equation of evil with blackness, Otherness, ethnic features, and ethnic speech patterns. Such symbolism reflects and reinforces racial hierarchies and stereotypes in our culture and in the minds of child consumers.

Feature films for teens and adults are the subject of Chapter 4. A film like *Good Morning, Vietnam* does a grave injustice to the circumstances surrounding the Vietnam war by focusing on the eccentric radio personality played by Robin Williams. By portraying the film's protagonist as a funny, misunderstood, and well-intentioned American GI, Giroux argues that the protagonist's colonial perspective and sexual objectification of Vietnamese women are glossed over in a way that is all the more insidious because it is wrapped in the package of mere entertainment. In a similar fashion, a film like *Pretty Woman*, for Giroux, links the recovery and redemption of traditional gender roles to the "cash nexus" of capitalism.

In Chapter 5, Giroux synthesizes these themes and links them to a call for progressive pedagogy and democratic change. Pedagogically, Giroux offers some advice about raising awareness of Disney's power, counteracting it by teaching young children and students to be critical readers of these texts rather than passive consumers, and helping young students become writers and producers of their own media products. Politically, Giroux offers an admittedly general set of goals for building a progressive coalition to reinvigorate the public sphere, revitalize active citizenship, and democratize the control over culture, news, and information by promoting anti-trust legislation and alternative media outlets.

Countering Disney and Reclaiming the Democratic Public Sphere

Since Disney's power is multidimensional, Giroux argues that it must be resisted along cultural, political, economic, and pedagogical fronts. For example, when discussing the power of Disney's animated films for children, he argues that educators and parents must look at Disney's products not as mere entertainment but as pedagogical tools in themselves. Giroux states that "it is crucial that the realm of popular culture that Disney increasingly invades to teach values and to sell goods to children be taken seriously as a site of learning and contestation" (p. 108). Thus, to counteract Disney, we must be attentive to the various narratives within Disney films; we must help students and children become aware of the power of seemingly apolitical entertainment to shape culture and consciousness; and we must help children and adults develop alternative readings of these films and television shows. Disney should not be viewed as a company simply providing entertainment, but as a political, economic, and cultural force in itself, and awareness of this is the first step in countering it.

Obviously, awareness must be connected to more concrete forms of countering Disney's power. Giroux's strategy entails mobilizing a broad-based, grassroots movement of educators, activists, and citizens to democratize our public culture, support noncommercial and alternative media and news outlets, hold corporations accountable by supporting stricter anti-trust legislation, and redefine citizenship and education in more active, critical, and public-spirited ways. This multifaceted strategy is needed so that the "public" in our public culture can re-establish itself over the privatized, corporate culture now passing itself off as "public." Giroux admits his suggestions are very general, but he is indeed on the mark in suggesting that Disney's multifaceted forms of power can only be countered by a multifaceted strategy of education, awareness, and engagement directed at political and educational reforms in defense of the public interest.

For those who are cynical in this era of what Ben Bagdikian calls the "media monopoly," Giroux reminds us that in 1995 Disney's proposed Civil War theme park in Virginia was defeated by a coalition of historians, citizens, and activists who were outraged at the possibility that history be commodified, commercialized, simplified, and whitewashed any more than it already has been.

Not Just Disney

There are perhaps three areas where one might wish Giroux's analysis contained greater complexity and specificity.

First, given that Giroux's focus is on the many dimensions of Disney's power, he might have emphasized the political power of Disney more specifically. For example, he does make reference to Disney's ownership of ABC television network, numerous radio stations, and film studios. However, he could have discussed how Disney and its executives, much like other major media corporations such as Viacom (owner of CBS), GE (owner of NBC), and Rupert Murdoch's News Corp. (owner of Fox), contribute large amounts of soft money to the political parties as well as lobby Congress and the FCC to further deregulate the cable, radio, and television industries. Such an emphasis would place Disney's political influence in a broader context of a media oligopoly that is constituted by a handful of what Dean Alger calls "megamedia" corporations, all of which possess enormous political, economic, and cultural influence.

Second, there are points where Giroux might have made connections to a more pervasive corporate influence over our political vocabulary, educational curriculum, and cultural values. For example, when discussing Disney's role in creating the city of Celebration, Giroux rightly points out how the rhetoric of old-fashioned community serves as a vehicle for constructing an entirely artificial and nostalgic image of the past and present. However, it is not just Disney, but gated communities, malls, and so-called neighborhood restaurants that are actually national chains, for example, that tap into a longing for connectedness in the name of community but offer a stale, planned, and consumerist image of that desire. Public-oriented values such as community, civil society, belonging, and neighborhoods are invoked in ways that actually promote private, consumerist, and exclusive activities that in the end serve as artificial antonyms of those public-oriented values. Here Giroux's arguments echo those made by John Freie in his *Counterfeit Community*, a work which similarly picks apart how nostalgic views of the past are on the one hand selective memory and on the other hand marketed to reinforce a privatized, consumerist version of community. Further, when discussing Disney's involvement in school curriculum efforts, Giroux could connect Disney's foray into public school curriculum with the broader trend of corporate influence over public school funding. When education is cut from state and federal budgets, corporations such as Coca-Cola, Pizza Hut, Channel One, and the Edison Project have entered public schools to provide beverages, food, pre-packaged news, and even the outright privatization of public schools. The consequences of this trend might be foregrounded more by Giroux, and without analyzing them his analysis of the curriculum in Celebration's public schools comes across as underdeveloped.

Third, Giroux might also have been more specific in analyzing how public-oriented terms are harnessed for the pursuit of private gain. For example, Giroux invokes the language of "civil society" in a way that implicitly connects it to progressive social and cultural change, but does not distinguish his views on civil society from conservative scholars and politicians who also praise a more conservative version of civil society as a way of attacking "big government." Further, Giroux offers a powerful analysis of the ways in which Disney's marketing and messages replace political and civic freedom with a freedom largely equated to the right and opportunity to consume. However, this way of thinking is not specific to Disney, nor is it an entirely contemporary phenomenon; it is a feature of neoliberal political economic policies being pursued by governments around the world, and is derived from a conception of negative freedom which views government as the sole impediment to liberty. In other words, defining political freedom as consumer freedom is not a byproduct of just Disney's power, but is a reflection of the global power of free market oriented neoliberalism that reinforces negative liberty (freedom of individuals and markets from government regulation) as "the" definition of liberty. Giroux's arguments echo, but are not as detailed, as those made by others such as Benjamin Barber in his *Jihad vs. McWorld*.

Of course, Disney is a major corporation involved in shaping culture in this globalized era, but more specificity in these three areas would be helpful because it would situate Disney's power in a larger cultural, economic, and political context. Nevertheless, *The Mouse that Roared* is a book that is ideal for introducing students, parents, and the general public to the political nature of popular culture in general, and the power of Disney in particular.

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