Songs of the South and the East: Disney and (Consumer) Culture
(or, "Everybody Has a Laughing Place [and wherever it is, Disney owns it]")

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In his essay “Criteria of Negro Art,” the famous African-American author and critic WEB Du Bois wrote “I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda. But I do care when propaganda is confined to one side while the other is stripped and silent” (986). His statement reflected his belief that all art—whether it claimed exemption or not—was some form of propaganda. Though the “unmarked” text could pass as universal, it only did so through fitting the specific cultural norms of a certain class of a certain society at a certain time in history. “White” and “male” were default settings against which WEB Du Bois and his contemporaries had to fight in order to let their voices be heard.

Today when we read the poems or books or view the movies of Du Bois’s time, we are quick to judge them racist. Obviously, the “second-class citizen” characterization of African-Americans by Hollywood, resulting in gross stereotypes and further inculcation of prejudice, seems wrong to us. We object to “Step-and-Fetch,” the African-American man who, despite his formal training and success as an actor, took demeaning roles as the comic relief in movie after movie. We cringe when we think about the magazine story referenced by Du Bois, in which “the most beautiful colored woman [in Central America] falls in love with [a white man]. She crawls across the whole isthmus to get to him. The white man says nobly, ‘No.’ He goes back to his white sweetheart in New York ” (986). We feel enraged when we hear reports about racial
profiling or other forms of bigotry. Perhaps we swear that we will never allow our children, or our sisters and brothers, to grow up in a society in which these things happen.

In order for us to be as good as our word, and for society to be truly improved, however, we need to connect Du Bois’s statement about propaganda with the literature and film to which we expose children. If, in fact, all texts are conduits for some kind of propaganda—or are themselves nothing but propaganda—then this includes what we may think of as children’s texts.

An exploration of the Disney corporation and its films, then, must begin with an eye on the function of propaganda and an awareness of the tendency to assign children’s literature a place as “innocent fun” or “beyond reproach,” especially because this particular company has, as Henry Giroux states in his book *The Mouse That Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence*, “become synonymous with the notion of childhood innocence” (17). Despite this reputation, we cannot ignore the political, ideological, and pedagogical implications of a corporation becoming the main source of stories for children.

In the past, fables and folk stories have been widely used to shape a child’s worldview, support the status quo, and teach a moral lesson. We can look, for instance, at an example of the patently propagandistic children’s literature created in Hitler’s Germany before World War II. Christa Kamenetsky, author of *Children’s Literature in Hitler’s Germany*, remarks that pacifistic works like Remarque’s *All’s Quiet on the Western Front* had made it to the incinerator and to Goebbels’ “black lists” by 1933, since they were deemed to be contrary to the “fighting spirit” of the National Socialist attitude. Still, there were a number of books on children’s book shelves even after the purge [of literature of which the Third Reich did not approve], that, for the Nazis’ taste, dwelt too much upon the absurdities of war, including the idea of senselessness of human suffering. The authorities insisted that
such portrayals were to be avoided under all circumstances. New war books should vigorously emphasize the Nordic Germanic heroic virtues with reference to the present and future German folk community. In this connection, symbols should be effectively used to enhance the meaning of the National Socialist “reality.” (127)

Children’s literature, as evidenced by Kamenetsky, can be and has been used as a powerful tool in enculturating children. Giroux states that we must “[raise] 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” (10). With the propagandizing of the Third Reich in mind, Giroux’s statement becomes increasingly relevant. Before we allow children to be taught the values of the Disney corporation, we must examine what those values are and how they relate to American culture (and, as a community of faith, to our Christianity). As Giroux reminds us, “the dreams that Disney provides for children are not innocent and must be interrogated for the futures they envision, the values they promote, and the forms of identifications they offer” (7).

And people do identify with the lifestyles, values and dreams that Disney promotes. Disney has truly become the storyteller for today’s generation. The art of the animated feature films put out by the company every year since 1989 has become the standard for all animated films; Disney characters have become household names. The success of the films means that Disney has successfully tapped into the desires, fears, and fantasies of the American people in a way that few companies have. It also means that more children today are watching the same programming—essentially, being taught the same thing—than ever before. The power and influence of the Disney Corporation are practically unprecedented.
What, then, is the Disney Corporation teaching children? Though William Wimsatt Jr. and Monroe Beardsley claim in their essay “The Intentional Fallacy” that authorial intention is not a valid primary consideration in reading a text, examining the Disney Company’s intentions, past and present, may enlighten our discussion of how Disney has operated in the past and to what effect it currently steers the production of its animated films. Though the reader’s knowledge of an individual’s intentions in the writing of a novel or poem can be nebulous at best, companies often state intentions in the form of mission statements or well-defined corporate philosophies. According to Mark S. Fulton in his “Business Sense” article “Mission: Invaluable,” Disney’s corporate mission statement is “To make people happy.” Fulton claims that “the central theme of ‘happiness’ influences every aspect of Disney’s theme parks, from entertaining attractions to friendly and helpful workers to a clean and safe environment. A Disney employee is encouraged to always think, ‘How can I make this guest happy?’” The Reverend Robert L. Schwarz gives the alternate phrasing of Disney’s mission statement: “to provide people with happiness” (1). In this case, the product intended for consumption by Disney customers is happiness itself. Clearly, a connection exists between the intentions of the company and the expected actions of its employees and the aims of its products. Due to time constraints, we will only discuss a select few animated/partly animated feature films produced by Disney. An extended discussion of Song of the South, released by Disney to theaters following WWII and based on Joel Chandler Harris’s collection of folktales published in book form in 1880, and Mulan, a more recent Disney film based on an ancient Chinese legend, will illustrate how changes in the focus and intentions of the Disney Corporation have altered (or failed to alter) its storytelling.
The historical context in which Disney produced Song of the South proves particularly intriguing when considering the content of the film. The Disney Corporation began releasing animated films in 1937, with the widely acclaimed Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, followed in the next several years by Pinocchio, Bambi, and Dumbo. The Disney Corporation now considers these films a part of their “Gold Collection,” and has re-released each of them on video within the last twenty years. However, films that were also created during the World War II era but never released on video include the Donald Duck short entitled “Der Fuehrer’s Face”; Victory through Air Power, an hour-long film based on the book of the same name by Major Alexander de Seversky; and the part-animated, part live-action Song of the South. Disney’s foray into the world of explicit propaganda with “Der Fuehrer’s Face” and Victory through Air Power seems to be rarely discussed in academic articles, journals, or books, though both were popular at the time they were produced. A brief examination of “Der Fuehrer’s Face” and Victory Through Air Power, then, may be informative, followed by a more extended treatment of Song of the South, which has been the only feature-length film produced by Disney that has not been released onto video in the United States.

The eight-minute cartoon “Der Fuehrer’s Face,” starring Donald Duck, portrays Donald as a good American who wakes up in enemy territory. Forced to build bombs for the “Nutzis” and “Heil...Right in Der Fuehrer’s Face” all day, Donald is exhausted by the ridiculous amount of work he is given, which is emphasized by the demand for “48 hours of work a day” by his “Nazi” superior. Almost all of the scenery in the cartoon is shaped like a swastika, and the title song pokes constant fun at the “super-duper supermen.” When Donald wakes up in his safe American bed, Donald is thrilled—and so is the audience. The short won an Oscar in 1943 when it was released, and the title song was a hit outside of the short itself. But despite its success with
the WWII-audience, Disney has not re-released the short, probably because the propaganda of “Der Fuehrer’s Face” was so explicitly related to the war effort of the time (“Der Fuehrer’s Face”).

The follow-up to the Donald Duck short was a different sort of endeavor. *Victory through Air Power*, based on the book of strategy of the same title by Major Alexander de Seversky of the U.S. Air Force, was a much longer and even more blatant attempt at wartime propaganda. Taken almost directly from the book, the sixty-minute part animated/part live-action film was intended to disperse the proposal de Seversky—that the war could only be won by air—to the widest audience possible. Although the School of Advanced Airpower Studies claims in “The Paths of Heaven: The Evolution of Airpower Theory” that the book had already reached a circulation of five million due to its status as a Book of the Month (257), Walt Disney thought that de Seversky’s plan was on target, and though Disney “believed he would probably lose money on the movie” (257), he claimed that it was “no time to think of personal profits” (qtd. on 257). According to “The Path of Heaven,” “the film so impressed Winston Churchill that he insisted that President Roosevelt watch it with him during their summit meeting in Quebec in August 1943” (258). The content of the film portrays Germany as a wheel, on the rim of which are Nazi military outposts and ammunition factories; Japan is a giant octopus holding the other Pacific islands in its tentacles. Neither enemy could be defeated, the film shows, until air reinforcements—drawn as a “fierce and powerful eagle”—come to the aid of the Navy and Army (258-9). *Victory through Air Power* was also nominated for an Academy Award for Music Score of a Dramatic or Comedy Picture, but lost to *Song of Bernadette*. Ultimately, though it could not be called a “box office hit,” *Victory through Air Power* the animated feature had made $799,000
at a profit of $11,000 ("Cubbi's Disney page"), and Gallup polls indicated that de Severesky's ideas had reached twenty million people (Meilinger 257).

When the war ended, Disney quickly shifted from the overt propaganda of "Der Fuehrer's Face" and *Victory through Air Power* to the fantasy of tolerance depicted in *Song of the South*. Released to theaters in 1946, *Song of the South* is set in the time immediately following the American Civil War. Despite its setting, the film depicts African-Americans and whites as living peacefully on a Georgian plantation with no overt signs of racial strain, the emotional turmoil of post-war stress, or even evidence of the burning of nearby Atlanta by General Sherman during the Civil War. Thus, the film is given a post-war setting without any of the accoutrements of war—exactly what post-WWII America would have wanted to see. Compared to Oscar Micheaux's "race films," which were especially popular in the 1920s and 30s, from the perspective of most white people, *Song of the South* was tame and comforting. The film may have acted as a reminder to post-war white Americans that the African-Americans in their midst were really passive storytellers like Uncle Remus (and unlike Micheaux and his contemporaries), subordinate servants like Tempy, singing cotton-pickers like the rest of the cast of African-Americans in *Song of the South*, or even harmless tricksters like Bre'r Rabbit himself, who has a distinctly African-American accent⁴.

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⁴ After the summer following WWI—known as the Red Summer of 1919, during which black soldiers returning from the war were welcomed home with lynchings and hate crimes rather than gratitude—this reminder would have been especially relevant, to both whites and blacks. No one wanted to see more fighting.

Even without these specific memories with which to contend, American moviegoers would have been suffering under post-war stress, a sociological phenomenon closely linked to the post-traumatic stress syndrome with which we are familiar today. As [DETAILS—name of author] discusses admirably in her book *Urban Fiction in Post-WWII America?* [DETAILS], the post-war stress experienced by all Americans caused society to deny the evils of—even the existence of—the war that they had just won. The main drive of the society was, as Ex-President Warren G. Harding had said after the First World War, to "return to normalcy."
Though *Song of the South* may have been concerned originally with soothing its audience by attempting to re-establish a "pre-war" status quo (one that in reality had never existed at all), today's audience would likely find the viewing experience an unpleasant reminder of institutionalized and widespread racism rather than a comfort. This appears to be the only possible reason for Disney's reluctance to release the feature onto video in America. The film was most recently released on video in the United Kingdom in 2001, but despite numerous theater releases, it has never been released on video in the U.S. The most recent opportunity for Americans to view the film without undergoing a costly conversion procedure from the UK's PAL video system to the American NTSC VHS was in 1986, when the film was brought out of its vault and into the theater in celebration of its fortieth birthday. Strangely, though Disney has merchandised all of its past films through personal home video, even creating second-rate sequels to the "Gold Collection" classics in recent years, the company did not take the opportunity of the theater release or the subsequent fiftieth anniversary of *Song of the South* to release the film on VHS. For a company that last year celebrated what would have been Walt Disney's 100th birthday if he had not died in 1966 (Watts 446), the neglect of this anniversary is uncharacteristic, especially since a relatively small but determined contingent of fans (30,000 of them, according to one online count) have been petitioning Disney for the American release of *Song of the South* for years. In addition, while struggling to obtain the video in a U.S.-compatible format, the Messiah College Library Acquisitions Department learned that Disney had added a safety feature to the PAL version of the film that causes the screen in the converted version of the tape to grow alternately darker and lighter at certain intervals, degrading the color quality of the film, although it is still viewable. This measure seems unnecessary, since at a one-to-one ratio of conversion, those who purchase the video are not necessarily breaking any laws, and
Disney still receives a profit from the original sale. This kind of purposeful secrecy must be questioned—what is it that Disney wants to hide from Americans?

Some sources cite pressure from the NAACP as the main reason for Disney’s refusal to release *Song of the South* this side of the Atlantic. However, though the NAACP protested the film at its original release, no evidence exists for the claim that the organization has attempted to obstruct the release of the film onto video. More likely accurate is the idea that executives at the Disney Corporation have decided independently to keep the film from being released. In the interests of preserving the image of Disney as a company concerned more with imagination and innocence than politics or power, Disney has not responded to the determined fans bent on obtaining the film for American viewers. In a post-Civil Rights Movement America, the racial discrimination and stereotyping flaunted by the film would shock the average middle-class American, possibly ruining the illusion of the “Company that is not a Company.”

The basic plot line of *Song of the South* is actually somewhat complex, and thus bears summarization: a young white boy named Johnny and his parents go to his grandmother’s plantation because his parents are considering a divorce and need some time to be apart. While at the plantation, Johnny meets several friends, the most significant of whom is Uncle Remus, an elderly African-American storyteller who tells Johnny several tales about Bre’r Rabbit and the animated rabbit’s enemies, Bre’r Fox and Bre’r Bear. Johnny is upset over his father’s return to Atlanta (without wife or child) and attempts to run away; Johnny is given a dog, but has to give it up; he has a birthday party, but never arrives due to an incident with the neighborhood children. At each upset, Uncle Remus tells Johnny a story that applies to the situation, and Johnny is able to use the underlying messages to learn more about the world, to defeat the machinations of the neighborhood boys and to trick his way out of trouble. Concerned about Johnny’s behavior,
Johnny’s mother, Miss Sally, insists that Uncle Remus stop telling Johnny stories. Uncle Remus decides to leave the plantation; seeing Uncle Remus drive away, Johnny runs across a field and is knocked unconscious by a charging bull. Uncle Remus and Johnny’s father return to the plantation, where Johnny is calling Uncle Remus’s name despite a high fever. Miss Sally allows Mr. John (Johnny’s father) and Uncle Remus to see Johnny, and a new story told by Uncle Remus releases the little boy from his fever. Husband and wife decide not to divorce, Miss Sally and Uncle Remus reconcile, and the final scenes of the movie portray Johnny, his two friends, his ill-gotten dog, Bre’r Rabbit and Uncle Remus whistling “Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah” and disappearing over the Technicolor horizon. Imagination and story are able to conquer the irrational fear and doubt of Johnny’s mother, as well as Johnny’s illness, the marital troubles of the parents, and, to an extent, racial barriers and prejudice.

The story sounds like an innocent ode to the power of imagination when summarized; however, the subordination of African-American characters in Song of the South is chronic and obvious to the vigilant viewer. Racism shows up nowhere in the movie so profoundly as in the characterization of the African-Americans who do not play a central role in the narrative. Apparently content to spend their time hauling cotton in from the field while singing folk songs, the workers at the plantation (apparently former slaves content to remain with their former masters) relate to one another and to main characters in a unified voice, portraying the “capital-V” Voice of the African-American as carefree, naively joyful, and almost animalistic in its simplicity. The group appears four significant times in the film: once, while singing a song about “How the Leopard Got His Spots” and Uncle Remus’s stories; twice in the middle of the film, while returning from their labors in the field, singing and smiling; and finally, singing mournfully in a gathering outside the plantation house while Johnny remains ill.
Because their actions are collective, the supporting African-Americans cease to be individuals in the eyes of the viewer, becoming instead an example of mob mentality, almost herd-like. They are designed to express their reactions as reflections of our already-realized feelings. In this way, we may compare their function to that of the Chorus in a Greek drama, which, in the earlier stages of drama, became “a participating actor [that] tied the histrionic interludes together [and in the later stages] commented on the action and divided it, creating acts” (“Greek Chorus”). But unlike the Greek Chorus, none of the participants in these gatherings has any dialogue or other effect on the story as it unfolds. Depriving them of language makes their reactions seem purely emotional rather than reasonable, and they appear to be relying on instinct rather than intellect.

A few African-American individuals are featured in Song of the South, beginning with Johnny’s friend Toby. As Johnny and his parents arrive at the Georgian plantation quite a ways from their Atlantan home, a young African-American boy named Toby, about the same age as Johnny, jumps onto the back of their carriage. Almost immediately, Toby is charged with the care of Johnny while the family is visiting. Although in this case, the African-American child has evidently been given responsibility for the white one, Toby has not been given authority over Johnny, and thus cannot enforce any advice or “care-taking” that he may give. Later in the film, Johnny goes missing and hides behind a tree as Toby’s mother and the white family’s servant, Tempy, reprimand Toby for not watching Johnny more closely. Johnny does not come to the aid of his new friend, but also never suffers the consequences for his actions; Toby is left to bear the weight of Johnny’s truancy, functioning as Johnny’s “whipping boy.” At Johnny’s birthday party, also, folklorist Patricia A. Turner notes that “Toby is curiously absent,” despite the fact that he has been Johnny’s best friend in the movie up to that point. Instead, Toby is replaced by
Ginny, a little white girl—albeit a poor one—from down the road. There appears to be no structural or narrative benefit from this switch, but after the party, Toby does not play a large part in the rest of the film.

Uncle Remus, on the other hand, does remain a constant influence in Johnny's life throughout the film. However, Uncle Remus is also arguably the most subordinated of the African-Americans in the film. He lives on the outskirts of what appears to be an African-American encampment on the property of the plantation, in a shack barely furnished and certainly not home-like. When Johnny hides from Toby's mother and Tempy, Uncle Remus covers for Johnny, despite the fact that Johnny has shown no indication of coming out from behind the tree and given no explanation as to why he is hiding. After taking responsibility for the boy, Uncle Remus follows Johnny through the woods and uses reverse psychology to convince Johnny that his plan to walk back to Atlanta is not a good idea. Uncle Remus does not offer contrary advice at any point, but instead allows Johnny to go as far along with his plan as he is willing to go, knowing that Johnny will be persuaded better by a story of Bre'r Rabbit than by logic or force. We may applaud Uncle Remus for using non-coercive tactics in teaching Johnny not to run away from his problems, and indeed, we should; however, this obscures the fact that Uncle Remus cannot legitimately choose to exert authority over Johnny within the movie.

Though Uncle Remus comes highly recommended by the other African-Americans and by Johnny's father and grandmother, Uncle Remus has no authority over Johnny or any other white character. The only way for the kindly old storyteller to influence Johnny or Miss Sally is to manipulate them into agreeing with him. When Johnny deliberately lies to Uncle Remus and Miss Sally about returning a puppy that he was told he could not keep, Uncle Remus takes him at
his word and allows the puppy to stay in his home, though the implication within the scene is that the dog cannot go into the main house, but may live in the inferior shack-like living space of Uncle Remus: “Not in the house, maybe...but I bet [he could stay here with you]!” Johnny says. When the neighbor boys who own the dog come to collect it, Uncle Remus does not send them away based on his own authority as an elder or on the fact that they are on (what we suppose is) his property, but instead threatens to tell Miss Sally if they come back again, relying entirely on the white woman’s authority. The boys leave him alone out of fear of Miss Sally. Later, Uncle Remus learns the truth—that Johnny was supposed to return the dog—but still tries to send the neighbor boys away from the main house before they can speak with Miss Sally. The boys refuse to go, and when Miss Sally arrives, she cuts off any explanation that may have been offered by Uncle Remus, not allowing him to tell her about Johnny’s lie. Uncle Remus remains silent in the face of Johnny’s mother’s reprimands, and Miss Sally instructs him to stop telling Johnny stories.

Johnny, not knowing what has happened, brings a toy for his dog to Uncle Remus’s house in the next scene. Uncle Remus sadly informs him that the dog has been returned—but his sadness seems to be not for the dog or for Johnny’s loss, but for himself in having been lied to and reprimanded. Despite the anger he must be feeling towards Johnny, Uncle Remus’s disapproval shows up only in veiled references to the lie and a moody demeanor; Uncle Remus never directly confronts or reprimands the young boy. Because of this, Uncle Remus seems preoccupied with himself and sulky in the way we might expect a small child to be. As we see from later interaction between the white mother and Uncle Remus, he does not act this way because of some inherent character flaw or immaturity, but because it is the only acceptable expression of his anger.
Like Toby, Uncle Remus is given charge over Johnny, but not given the authority necessary to carry out his responsibilities. We probably would not take issue with the idea that Johnny’s mother should have the final word in how to raise her son, but in each case in which Miss Sally and Uncle Remus come to a point of disagreement, there is the sense that she is not only instructing Uncle Remus on how he should treat Johnny, but also on how he should live his own life. She does not even allow Uncle Remus to say anything in his own defense. In the case of the puppy-situation, Miss Sally interrupts Uncle Remus’s explanations with a moral direction: “I am trying to raise Johnny to be obedient and truthful, and you and your stories are making that very difficult.” This statement, couched in broad moral terminology, implies that her judgments carry weight for Uncle Remus’s lifestyle as well as her son’s—how can Uncle Remus claim to value obedience and truthfulness if he continues to engage in storytelling? When Uncle Remus tells a final story to cheer up Johnny and Ginny after an incident with the neighbor boys, Miss Sally confronts Uncle Remus again, responding to his apology with “No, it’s my fault. I should’ve known you couldn’t stop telling your stories...I’m afraid I’ll have to ask you to stay away from Johnny. Completely away.” This is extremely pejorative language to direct at a sensitive elderly man and implies that Uncle Remus has a complete lack of self-control combined with terrible judgment. Still, although Miss Sally’s unwillingness to listen to or respect Uncle Remus is viewed as a negative characteristic, since the audience knows that Uncle Remus’s stories have had a positive effect on Johnny, the manner in which she speaks to Uncle Remus is not necessarily viewed as immoral or ethically wrong, simply misinformed. Her prerogative as a parent—especially as a white parent—remains more important than Uncle Remus’s right to express his views and hold independent opinions.
Uncle Remus reacts to Miss Sally’s injunction with the same long-facedness that he had exhibited when he learned that Johnny had lied to him. He packs up his few belongings and forlornly leaves his shack behind. This departure can be seen in a few different ways: we may feel that Uncle Remus has been asked to leave, though the camera does not record such a request; Uncle Remus may feel that he has to leave due to his powerlessness on the plantation during Miss Sally’s stay; Uncle Remus may have found that he could not control himself enough to guarantee that he would not tell any more stories, and so removes himself from the plantation; or perhaps Uncle Remus has been so offended by Miss Sally’s attitude towards him and his stories that he chooses to leave in a passive-aggressive attempt to gain leverage or attention. Each of these options implies that Uncle Remus is a reactive agent who has little to no control over his surroundings, perhaps even over his own impulses. Indeed, Uncle Remus does not come back until Johnny—after being struck by a bull while running after Uncle Remus’s carriage—requests Uncle Remus’s presence at the sickbed. Uncle Remus’s retreat, if it had ever been a free choice, is interrupted by the white child’s illness, and though we are not told how Uncle Remus knew to return, Uncle Remus is again placed in the role of reactor.

When Uncle Remus goes up to the room where little Johnny lays moaning his name, the storyteller goes up at the request of Mrs. Doshy, Johnny’s grandmother. At this point, we may realize that, except for the back kitchen, Uncle Remus has not been in the house during the entire movie. He acts accordingly, seeking permission to enter the room, and finds that Miss Sally now anxiously welcomes him. The return of Uncle Remus and his stories seems to work magic on the boy, who, after all, just needed the restoration of imagination to his life in order to be healed.

We should not diminish Johnny’s feelings for Uncle Remus and his stories, but the overwhelming presence of racism in *Song of the South* seems certainly to overshadow this love.
The portrayal of Uncle Remus is generally positive within its context, but the context itself is so limited as to be oppressive. Although he has the power of imagination, which heals Johnny, Uncle Remus has derived this power from his conformity to the stereotypes that define African-Americans as passive, singing storytellers, content in whatever circumstances they are handed, bending willingly under even the slightest pressure from a white person. To say that this portrayal is positive or that Uncle Remus truly has power or freedom as an African-American in *Song of the South* is the equivalent of saying that women may be powerful and free as long as they stay in the kitchen barefoot, pregnant, and uncomplaining. It is *granted* power, freedom on loan, and may be taken away at any point for any reason.

Perhaps less blatant than the racist elements of *Song of the South*, but equally insidious, is the characterization of the few women present in the story. The women in *Song of the South*, to sum up, appear to be heavily dependent on men, or at least openly advocate this dependency. The worst case of this is Miss Sally's almost-paranoia in the absence of her husband, Mr. John. Her fractured mental state during his absence is most evident at the *return* of Johnny's father, which, besides allowing Uncle Remus access to Johnny, seems to signal a pivotal change in Miss Sally's attitude towards Uncle Remus. She is much more hospitable and understanding than she had been, grateful for Uncle Remus's presence and desire to help Johnny. Though this shift does not appear to be directly related to Mr. John's return, the chronological proximity of Johnny's father's return and what appears to be Miss Sally's conversion to the Uncle Remus "fan club," forces us to wonder if the conversion was actually dependent on the father's return.

Of course, with her son in such a terrible condition, we may credit Miss Sally's concern for Johnny with her attitude shift. The fact that she has to be faced with a life-and-death situation before she will respect Uncle Remus may be offensive, but it is not uncommon for people to
recognize their errors through this kind of event, and we may see it as redemptive rather than racist if, in fact, she has truly been changed by the experience. But we may also attribute the switch to the return of Johnny’s father and the subsequent restoration of balance to the family. Again, we may expect an imbalance in the family when any member is away, or when a husband or wife threatens divorce—but in this case, the presence of the father at the end of the movie signifies not just restoration of family, but the restoration of his wife to sanity.

Miss Sally’s major problem throughout the movie is her unwillingness to admit that she needs her husband; all of her problems appear to be created by an unhealthy lack of common sense that stem from the absence of Mr. John. As Johnny’s birthday approaches, Miss Sally tells her mother that Johnny “has his mother and his grandmother” to befriend him, the implication being that Johnny should not need anyone else. The grandmother replies that Johnny needs other friends as well, children his age: “that’s just common sense.” Earlier in the movie, the grandmother agrees with Uncle Remus’s observation that “what dat chile needs is his paw,” and adds “and that’s what his mother needs—but I’m afraid it’s going to take a little while for her to find that out.” The restoration of the husband/wife relationship thus becomes the central conflict in Miss Sally’s life for the course of the movie (though not necessarily in the film as a whole), and the implication is that this conflict has infected Miss Sally’s relationship with Uncle Remus, Johnny, and her own mother, as well as her husband. Miss Sally makes one bad decision after another, supposedly due to her lack of a husband. In turn, the breakdown of her relationship with Uncle Remus leads to Uncle Remus’s leaving, which leads to Johnny’s illness at the end of the movie. When the father returns, Uncle Remus is allowed to return, Johnny’s fever breaks, and all is right with the world. If we state the progression in this way, it seems quite plausible that Johnny’s—and Miss Sally’s, and possibly even Uncle Remus’s—true savior is Mr. John. This
interpretation has an impact on both our view of Uncle Remus as the lynchpin for Johnny’s recovery, and our view of Miss Sally’s sudden attitude conversion. The father, despite his absence through most of the movie, becomes a figure of central importance at the expense of his wife.

The other women in the movie—the family’s servant Tempy and the grandmother Mrs. Doshy—combat Miss Sally’s characterization as an overprotective and ill-equipped mother to some degree. The servant, though limited by her status and race, does her work with competent efficiency. When Uncle Remus tries to get some pie through flattery, Tempy reprimands him, laughs, and then gives it to him; we get the impression that she has chosen to be kind rather than that she has been manipulated or dominated. She can understand Uncle Remus, and relates to his demands on a level of independence that we do not find in Miss Sally, who seeks to dominate Uncle Remus out of fear that he will corrupt Johnny. But we also associate Tempy with the mass of African-Americans presented singing and wailing, and ultimately her race prevents her from contradicting the characterization of Miss Sally and women in general within the movie. Her accent is so thick that viewers are constantly reminded of her race, and at some points may fail to understand what she is saying at all; thus, she can be as inarticulate as many of her peers, despite her ability to work well and relate to Uncle Remus and Johnny. And like other African-Americans, she has no real ability to effect change within the narrative. Left only with the ability to react in the presence of white employers, Tempy becomes as powerless in the action of the story as Miss Sally is to harness her madness prior to her husband’s return.

The grandmother is the only other adult woman to begin to combat the negative portrayal of independent women. She has a good, almost equal relationship with Uncle Remus, and she speaks her mind to both her daughter (Miss Sally) and Mr. John. She appears to run the
plantation without assistance, though we never see her handling the details of the work. Her statement that Miss Sally needs Mr. John, then, is especially ironic considering her own success at independence. But her competence is also what gives her the right to make such a statement about her daughter; the only sane and powerful woman in the movie also becomes the one advocating dependence on a man, and since we trust her advice more than Miss Sally’s impulses, we must identify with her stance, agreeing that at least in this case, what Miss Sally needs more than anything is to get her husband back. The issue at hand is not whether divorce is morally permissible or not—instead, it is a question of whether Miss Sally should desire independence for herself at all, or whether she should remain content to be the sane and submissive wife and mother that she had been up to that point. When Miss Sally exerts her independence in disciplining Johnny and Uncle Remus, Johnny is injured and the grandmother’s advice is apparently proven correct. Shaken by the disaster, Miss Sally acquiesces to her maternal instincts and takes her husband back, despite the violence of his good-bye kiss as he left the plantation at the beginning of the movie and the minimal contact they have had in the intervening period. As for the grandmother, we know that independence has been thrust upon her rather than sought after; when Mr. John arrives initially, Mrs. Doshy comments that “It’s good to have a man in the house again.”

After the Civil Right Movement and the Feminist Movement of the mid-to-late twentieth century had exposed and rightly vilified the evils of racism and sexism, middle-class America was forced to wake up to the realities of prejudice. Today, though activists for racial and gender equality are still often misunderstood and viewed as troublemakers, issues of discrimination are seen as important when determining public policy. Some formerly pervasive stereotypes in movies and television shows have also been widely recognized and denounced. It is because of
this level of awareness that Disney has not released *Song of the South* to the public; it simply would not be profitable.

Michael Eisner, current CEO of the Disney Corporation, wrote an internal memo stating that “We [at the Disney Company] have no obligation to make history. We have no obligation to make art. We have no obligation to make a statement. To make money is our only objective” (*Mickey Mouse Monopoly*). At first, this goal seems at odds with the previously discussed mission statement, “to make people happy,” and in some ways, it is. However, the “invention of the consumer” as discussed by Stephen Fjellman in his book *Vinyl Leaves: Walt Disney World and America*, sheds light on the contemporary intersection between these goals in a capitalist society.

According to Fjellman, the beginnings of a society in which people were primarily defined by businesses as “consumers” began in the first half of the twentieth century. He notes:

*Karl Marx had predicted that industrial capitalism would be beset with the problem of overproduction. As the recessions at the end of the nineteenth century showed, this was the case in the United States. The industrial machine was too powerful. There was a persistent crisis of demand. The response to this structural problem was a process—sometimes coordinated, sometimes disorganized—that continued into the late 1920s by which priorities in the economy were shifted from production to consumption.* (39)

This shift from producing to consuming had a direct impact on the way in which successful businesses marketed products: Fjellman states that “their logic…was based on the distribution of goods over the widest possible market. Costs of new items…were held down. Style differences were kept to a minimum. Most important, credit was extended as widely as possible on the most liberal terms” (39). Thus, mass marketing was created. Products became separated from their
producers, since they were meant to be cookie-cutter replicas of a proven design rather than expressions of the artist’s or creator’s individuality. In the same vein, the concept of “consumer” became quickly separated from that of “human,” as businesses began to “invent a new ontological category of human being. Their interest was partly economic, but it was also philanthropic. As did many others, they believed this new kind of person—the consumer—would be capable of living a rich human life far beyond the capabilities of his or her forebears” (39). In order to give them this life, however, the consumer was “being metaphorically linked to a mouth and a stomach” (39). This alteration in identity had begun by the 1920s, but was not fully realized until after WWII, when consumption—and focus on consumption—in the domestic sphere increased dramatically.

The shift in focus for businesses in the twentieth century has had an influence that can hardly be overstated. If the primary “ontological category” into which we may insert our neighbors, friends, and family—and perhaps most importantly, ourselves—has become “consumer,” then we may expect that our entire way of life has shifted as well, as anticipated by businessmen of the 1920s. Our myths—the stories that tell us about ourselves, our history, and our future—must also have changed. The fact that a corporation has such control over the stories accepted and commonly recognized by children is in itself a testament to the fact that the business world and consumerism have spilled over into the realm of literature and myth-making.

This change in priorities for the public and the Disney Company is most noticeable in the area of merchandising. Part of every Disney film experience now includes the merchandising of the film, as well as the viewing of the animated feature itself: as part of the film experience, we are encouraged to pick up the miniature character figurines from McDonald’s, which we can only get with the purchase of a Happy Meal (a product name that perversely echoes Disney’s
mission statement: “to make people [buy] happy [meals]”); we can eat off of Disney plates with Disney spoons, and perhaps find a Disney toy in our cereal; we can go to any number of department stores—or, better yet, the Disney Store, in malls or online—to purchase further film-related products; we may listen to Radio Disney every day of the week; if we watch ABC, we see advertisements for Disney films every day, and on Saturday mornings, we can watch Disney cartoon series, some of which are spin-offs from the movies (on Saturday morning cartoons, according to my count, the concentration of Disney film commercials or products is no fewer than ten per half hour); on Sunday evenings, we can re-view past feature favorites shown on ABC; if we have cable, we can tune in to the Disney Channel or ABC Family Channel at any time of day; when not watching television, children can re-enact the movies with an endless supply of movie-based action figures, board games, video games, or watch the movie again through the magic of VHS or DVD; for vacation, we can go to Disney Land, Disney World, Euro Disney or Disney Tokyo; when we return home, we may even come back to the first ever Disney-run suburban town of Celebration, Florida. Through pervasive and all-encompassing merchandising, Disney is able to make each animated film it produces less of an hour-and-a-half experience, and more of a lifestyle. As Giroux states in Mickey Mouse Monopoly, “If Disney produces a bad film, it doesn’t have to worry…eventually it will seem as if [the movie] really is such a wonderful product…[Disney] has the power to turn every element of communication and information into an advertisement.”

In 1999, Disney took the synthesis of film content and merchandising to a whole new level by including a line of Hercules sportswear and merchandise in the movie itself. Besides being completely anachronistic, this inclusion serves as a product-placement for actual items for sale in the world outside the movie. In the movie, even the “bad-guy sidekicks” Pain and Panic
are caught wearing *Hercules* sandals and drinking from *Hercules* cups following a musical montage of the types of *Hercules* products supposedly on sale in ancient Greece. The presence of merchandising within the movie ironizes the reality of Disney's actual marketing strategies, making the viewer feel that the company has a sense of humor about its own business practices; however, the irony of self-referentialism in this case is lost if Disney decides to market the products exactly as shown within the movie, which is precisely what the corporation did.

Rather than propaganda in support of a war or political position, or even for or against racism or sexism, then, Disney feature films have become propaganda for *consumption*. Though Walt Disney himself desired to form a company that would perform well economically on the national level, the founder of the company supported a controversial and relatively unprofitable venture with the release of *Victory through Air Power*, allowing his personal convictions to affect his business practices. Compared to the response of the current-day Disney corporation to the Persian Gulf War—silence in the political arena, followed quickly by the release of the allegedly racist *Aladdin*, which is set in an “imaginary” location in the Middle East—or the recent war in Iraq—again, silence—Walt Disney’s personal and professional involvement in his WWII-era films seems dramatic. The impersonality of the current Disney Corporation relates directly to the “invention of the consumer” and the public shift from concern with politics to concern with purchases.

The complicity of Disney in consumerism has led to a fundamental alteration in not only the company’s business practices, but also to a disconnect between the supposed or expressed values of our culture—the values of racial or gender equality, for instance—and the values that are actually expressed in the movies themselves. Instead of informing (as Walt Disney desired *Victory through Air Power* to do) or teaching (as Aesop’s fables, or Grimm fairy tales are
expected to do) or exhorting one to better oneself (as Jesus’s parables do), these films conform to the standards and stereotypes of the culture of consumerism, using elements that are most convenient instead of most accurate or virtuous or fair-minded. They reflect neither reality nor ideals. The end result is that Disney films seem harmless because they only portray forms of racism or sexism that the average white middle class American will not automatically recognize.

The Disney animated films of the past decade have been much debated among scholars in the fields of gender or race-oriented film studies. However, these experts have rarely made a stir in the general population. Though Casey Casem’s highly publicized objections to the racist lyrics of Aladdin’s opening song “Arabian Nights” caused Disney to eventually change the lines describing the Middle East as a place “where they’ll cut off your ear if they don’t like your face” on the video release of Aladdin (though not the soundtrack), few mass movements have formed surrounding Disney’s articulation of the place of women and men of minority status.

In recent years, Disney has ostensibly made an attempt to remand its portrayal of women and minorities, in two fell swoops: Pocahontas, and Mulan. Both women who in America today would be considered minorities, Pocahontas and Mulan are obviously meant to be strong, independent women in charge of their own destinies. Neither woman is married or engaged by the end of her respective movie; both defy family and the larger society in order to do what they think is right, and both have accomplished the cessation of war by the end of their films. On the surface, these women seem like prototypical feminists; however, when we examine the storylines and characterizations more closely, we quickly realize that in some ways, Pocahontas and Mulan are no less racist than Song of the South. (Due to time constraints, we will only be dealing with Mulan here.)

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² Mulan is also one of the only Disney movies set in a non-Western country. Others produced since 1950 include The Jungle Book, The Lion King, Tarzan, Aladdin, and The Emperor’s New Groove.
The Legend of Hua Mu-lan is taken from ancient Chinese folklore. In the Disney version of this tale, Mulan fails to please her matchmaker. Instead of getting married, she leaves her home to join the Chinese Army in place of her elderly father, who has been conscripted. She conceals her identity as a woman and eventually fights bravely alongside her fellow soldiers, single-handedly defeating the invading Hun Army. Her commanding officer discovers that she is a woman, but he spares her life despite a law requiring her execution. Mulan discovers that the Huns are not dead and goes to the Forbidden City to warn her Army, but she is rejected. Procuring the help of some of her Army friends, she finds a way (with her commanding officer) to defeat the leader of the Huns a second time, and the emperor commends her for her bravery. She returns home with honor, where her father praises her. Mulan’s commanding officer follows her home, presumably because he feels a romantic attachment to Mulan.

Considering the location and subject matter of this film, and the fact that every human character in Mulan is clearly intended to resemble the Han Chinese, it is ironic that the first and most often commented-on racial stereotype in Mulan is that of the “jive-talking” Mushu, Mulan’s miniature dragon-companion. Voiced by Eddie Murphy, this character sounds startlingly like Song of the South’s Bre’r Fox. No explanation is given within the movie as to why a small dragon summoned by a Chinese woman’s ancestral spirits would have the accent of a comedic African-American, and for most of the audience, it seems that no explanation is needed. It would be difficult to impossible to prove that Eddie Murphy’s voice is funny because of its African-American-ness, but if we consider an alternative—a French accent perhaps, or a Russian accent, or even a Chinese accent—we can clearly see that the stereotype of the African-American voice is different from the stereotypes of these others. Since there appears to be no other reason for the inclusion of an African-American character in a film that is set entirely in
China, we are left to conclude that the reason for the casting of Eddie Murphy is related almost entirely to our stereotypes of African-Americans\(^3\). For some reason, Disney appears to claim, like the white audiences of 1936, we find an accent associated with African-American-ness hilarious.

Contrary to what we may claim regarding African-American stereotyping in *Mulan*—perhaps that the film is racist—some could argue that in the case of *Mulan*, a non-stereotypical voice has been given to the Chinese, who would otherwise have had none; we may feel that *Mulan prevents* “propaganda [from being] confined to one side while the other is stripped and silent” (DuBois 986). Americans in general seem to have little knowledge of ancient Chinese legends, let alone ones in which women are portrayed as strong and independent. At its best, Disney’s concentration on the Legend of Hua Mu-lan can fill in some of these knowledge gaps. Unfortunately, this lack of knowledge has its pitfalls. As with African-American artists of the Harlem Renaissance, who were expected by some to speak with the “capital-V” Voice of “their people,” a single or simple example of a foreign culture or society can be more harmful than helpful. A student in my Anthropology class last semester, for instance, announced that she considered *Mulan* a good example of an accurate depiction of Asian society, and went on to cite the ancestor worship and misogynistic tendencies of Chinese society as proof of her statement, despite the fact that the movie itself was the only evidence she had for these assertions. “We all know how they are,” seemed to be her attitude, one which was offensive to me and some of my fellow students. The attempt to destroy stereotypes may lead to the establishment of new ones if

\(^3\) Disney includes similar stereotype-related voice choices throughout its “Gold Collection”: in Dumbo (the Crows, intended to be an allusion to the Jim Crow laws); Lady and the Tramp (the Siamese cats); The Jungle Book (King Louie); The Little Mermaid (Sebastian, as well as the French cook); Aladdin (the bad guards); The Lion King (the hyenas); and Mulan (Mushu) (*Mickey Mouse Monopoly*). With few exceptions, the characters given African-American or otherwise “ethnic” voices are portrayed as enemies or unhelpful fools. Surely this disparity would cause WEB Du Bois to protest that “propaganda [has been] confined to one side while the other is stripped and silent” (986).
audiences consider one example emblematic for an entire culture, despite any good intentions on the part of the storyteller; this tendency to universalize becomes even more problematic with Disney, since the destruction of stereotypes is not the main concern of the Disney Corporation. As such, Disney’s *Mulan*, like *Song of the South* and many feature films in between, is riddled with cultural, racial and gender stereotypes.

The complexities of the stereotypes in *Mulan* are difficult to unpack, but may best be described as racism in the form of gender bias. Chinese culture in *Mulan* is relegated to a set of ideas about the place of women in society and a brief explication of Chinese religion in the form of comical ancestors that may be summoned in time of need. Mulan is told repeatedly to “know her place” and become the woman that society expects her to be. After failing in her duty to become a good wife by horribly offending the matchmaker, Mulan secretly takes on the identity and thus the social position of a male. Though she does not gain instant respect, the accolades for her later performance are obviously dependent on her status as a male, since when she returns to the Forbidden City to tell her fellow soldiers that the Huns are about to attack, she is silenced by men in the crowd and ignored by her commanding officer. Mushu reminds her that she’s “a girl again, remember?” The implication in this statement, as in many others, is that Chinese people do not respect women.

Though Disney must have intended the statement of the movie—that women can do whatever men can do—to speak against any society’s oppression of women, the movie is set specifically in China, which to an American is the world of the Other. The portrayal of China as an openly misogynistic culture, rather than defying stereotypes, only confirms American’s previous stereotypes about the Chinese. Furthermore, some of the societal constructs through which Disney shows the powerlessness and degradation of women—most significantly, the idea
of a matchmaker testing women on their domestic skills in order to arrange their marriages—have never actually existed in Chinese society, according to Chyng Feng Sun, producer and writer of the film *Mickey Mouse Monopoly: Disney, Childhood and Corporate Power.*

This stereotyping of Chinese society is highlighted by Mulan’s Western sensibilities. Though *Mulan* places some emphasis on family honor and virtue, Mulan herself sends her dog (which she calls “Little Brother,” possibly as a reference to the “one child” policy of contemporary China) to do her chores, and her innovation desecrates the shrine to her ancestors. She crams for her exam with the matchmaker after waking up late. She seems to have no sense of duty, formality, or respect. While her defection to the Chinese Army was partly a result of her love for her father, it is also an escape, an adventure, and an opportunity to find her individual identity, as expressed in the song “Reflections”:

> Who is this girl I see staring straight back at me
> Why is my reflection someone I don’t know
> Somehow I cannot hide who I am,
> Though I’ve tried,
> Why won’t my reflection show who I am inside? (*Mulan* Soundtrack, “Reflections”)

Mulan’s individualistic concept of identity is primarily, if not exclusively, Western—this may be why she does not recognize the Chinese girl in the mirror.

To be fair, the collective identity of the Chinese is not referenced in the film in general: even the injunction of the Emperor, that “a single grain of rice can tip the scale” places emphasis on the individual rather than the family, team, or society. The strongest link between the Chinese people in *Mulan* actually seems to be their collective, negative attitude towards women. The reprimand against stereotyping women, then, may be appropriated by Americans instead of
internalized: Chinese people oppress women, Chinese people devalue women’s potential, Chinese people should be corrected. It is a part of their culture, possibly the primary aspect. Mulan is set apart from the stereotypical Chinese woman by her lack of identification with the Chinese culture, but also by her positive identification with tenets of American culture and Western ideas of identity and personal freedom. In sum, in order to explore issues of gender stereotyping, Disney sets Mulan in a cultures to which Americans may not easily relate, thus sparing us from uncomfortable self-examination. Mulan’s presence as a Westernized woman advocating a Western brand of gender equality is similarly comforting.

Ultimately, however, the “Western brand” of “gender equality” fails to truly confront major gender-role issues in American society. Because of this, we are left with only the idea that American gender inequality is superior to Chinese gender inequality, rather than the notion that we should pursue true gender equality in any culture. Gender roles in Mulan are actually played out, as Mulan appropriates the position of a man in order to be empowered to help her country. The alternative, according to the song “Honor to Us All,” is for Mulan to bear sons to help with the war effort indirectly. The traditional woman’s role is rejected by Mulan because of her search for an identity and the drive to be a true hero: the implication is that women are relegated to the status of home-maker, rather than that they may freely choose it. The position is viewed as demeaning and secondary to the contribution of men. Disney could just as easily have portrayed a woman—any woman, Chinese or not—who chooses a traditional role and finds her position rewarding and heroic, but chose instead to portray a woman who can only find happiness and honor by acting like a man.

Of course, issues of gender roles are complex: we would like women to feel empowered in any position they choose, and we may be quick to criticize those who advocate the
empowerment of traditional roles for women as well as those who advocate the appropriation of traditionally male roles. The hallmark of a truly empowered woman appears to be the ability to choose her own life without suffering the repercussions of prejudice. However, in this movie, Mulan cannot legitimately choose to exercise authority as a woman in any role. Before her escape to the Army, Mulan is reprimanded for speaking in the presence of the Emperor’s official, for questioning her father, and for not being feminine enough to impress the matchmaker. After she is revealed to be a woman by her commanding officer, Shang, and despite the fact that she has saved China, she is similarly ignored and scolded by the people around her. A law requiring her execution makes this prejudice official, though this prejudice is intended to be resisted by the audience. With the traditional role of women de-legitimated by the attitudes of those around her and indeed by Mulan herself, Mulan appears to be left with no arena in which to feel empowered.

Disney does offer one type of empowerment for Mulan and women in general, however. In a parallel of Mulan’s cross-dressing, three of Mulan’s Army compatriots disguise themselves as women in order to gain access to the Emperor’s palace, which had been taken over by the Huns. Women’s clothing thus becomes empowering, as the soldiers defeat the Hun guards and gain access to the Emperor. The power they have harnessed, however, is that of the femme fatale: the men, who appear to be women to the guards, attempt to seduce the Huns and subsequently knock them out with fruit. The message for women is that a woman’s true power comes from the ability to seduce men, and for men, that women are not what they seem. They are ultimately manipulative and possibly deadly, wolves in sheep’s clothing. Thus, in the classic dichotomy of the virgin and the whore, we learn that the whore is more powerful, but not to be trusted.
The type of power provided by the clothing worn by Mulan and her fellow soldiers is also portrayed as merely an intermediate step between powerlessness and the appropriation of male power rather than a true example of specifically female empowerment. The soldiers are able to climb the wall with the women’s scarves they are dressed in, an activity that has nothing to do with the original, “womanly” function of the scarf. Mulan also flips the sword away from the leader of the Huns by using her paper fan, which we remember from her scene with the matchmaker. But though it is used as a weapon, the purpose of its use is for Mulan to obtain the truly powerful tool—the sword. The superiority of the male role is emphasized by the fact that Shang—the soldier with whom we are most familiar and sympathetic, due to the death of his father and his honor in battle and his sparing of Mulan’s life—does not dress in women’s clothing, but chooses to sneak in behind the Hun guards instead. Shang is the one who first confronts the Hun leader Shan-Yu and attempts to save the Emperor; the efforts of the men dressed as women are intended to indirectly effect this outcome, while Shang is able to have direct access to the Emperor and the battle with Shan-Yu.

Though Mulan ultimately defeats the Huns twice, she must be pardoned for her usurpation of the male role by her peers from the Army, Shang, the Emperor of China, and her father. No reconciliation with her mother is needed, nor with her grandmother, who are the only two other recurring women in the movie. This is not surprising in the case of her mother, who hardly speaks at all throughout the movie⁴.

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⁴ Mulan’s mother’s minimal contributions to the plot, however, are an improvement from the vast majority of Disney animated features which include no mother-figure at all. Films released between 1989 and 2000 which contain one-line references to a deceased mother-figure or no mention at all of the presence of a mother include The Little Mermaid (Eric has no parents; Ariel has a father), Beauty and the Beast (Beast has no parents; Belle has a father), Aladdin (Aladdin has no parents; Jasmine has a father), Pocahontas (John Smith has no parents; Pocahontas has a father), Hunchback of Notre Dame (neither Phoebus nor Esmerelda have parents, Quasimodo has a mother who dies), Hercules (Hercules has two sets of parents, but only interacts with his fathers; Megara has no parents), Mulan (Shang has no mother), Tarzan (Jane has no mother, though Tarzan’s gorilla mother is important). This chronic neglect of the mother-figure in recent Disney movies
The grandmother in *Mulan* does have a voice; however, she functions in the same way as the grandmother in *Song of the South*. At each appearance, she makes remarks that undermine Mulan’s attempts at independence and empowerment, though unlike Mrs. Doshy, Mulan’s grandmother serves as comic relief. When Mulan returns from the war with the crest of the Emperor and the sword of the leader of the Huns, her grandmother says “If you ask me, she should have brought home a man.” Mulan’s accomplishments cannot be recognized, since they do not correlate to her appearance or gender at this point. When Shang follows Mulan into the family garden, the grandmother amends her previous statement, crying “Sign me up for the next war!” The grandmother’s comments show that, for women, the greatest accomplishment is still just to get married. And yet, her statements are viewed as amusing rather than discriminatory. The attitude behind the grandmother’s statement matters less than our pleasure at hearing them.

We should expect this, since Disney’s purpose, as we recall, is to provide us with happiness. The question before us now is “what are we willing to take pleasure in?” Henry Giroux remarks that

As distorted as Disney’s dreamscape might be, it contains a utopian element in that it offers an antidote to the boredom, brutality, and estrangement that appear to be such a pervasive part of daily life. To condemn Disney while simultaneously affirming the unhappy consciousness of powerlessness and despair is to reaffirm the very conditions that make Disney so appealing to those who want to escape from a culture in which cynicism has become a permanent fixture. (148-9)

Though it seems unnecessary, illogical, and offensive to some, we must begin to cultivate an awareness of and even pleasure in discovering and re-thinking the propaganda underlying Disney compounds the devaluing of motherhood and home-making as legitimate choices for women and would make a valuable future study.
films and every area of consumer culture. But we must go beyond this, also seeking to create positive alternatives to the myths and propaganda that we find offensive. Only through this sort of pro-active examination and re-creation can we defeat both stereotypes and cynicism.
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