

Style Definition: Normal:
Widow/Orphan control, Adjust space
between Latin and Asian text, Adjust
space between Asian text and
numbers

PLEASE DO NOT CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION

COPYRIGHT 2005

Born to Rule:

Social Darwinism in Disney's The Lion King

Andrew M. Gordon and Hernán Vera

*I think of a child's mind as a blank book. During the first
years of his life, much will be written on the pages. The quality
of that writing will affect his life profoundly.*

Walt Disney (Giroux 17)

Formatted: Line spacing: Double,
No widow/orphan control

Formatted: Line spacing: Double,
No widow/orphan control

Formatted: No widow/orphan
control

Children's stories, whether in illustrated books, movies, or animated cartoons, should not be taken as merely harmless entertainment, for scholars agree that they are teaching devices that can have profound and sometimes lifelong effects.¹ Walt Disney's fusion of entertainment and education dramatically transformed the culture, both in our forms of education and in our leisure-time activities, part of the process of the last half century by which filmmakers, advertising executives, and the purveyors of pop culture have become the true teachers of children around the world.

The Disney Company's animated cartoon The Lion King (1994) is one of the most profitable movies of all time, and it led to a marketing bonanza in the form of action figures, children's books, a sequel film, a TV series, and an internationally successful musical. It is also

the Disney Company's most philosophically ambitious film. In this paper we examine The Lion King as pedagogical tool. What is this movie teaching our contemporary democratic society? What does it tell us about the teaching of race and ethnicity today? We argue that the movie promotes an unabashedly Social Darwinist view of the world, a view which historically has led to sexist, racist, and anti-democratic forms of social organization. For example, the infamous eugenic laws that were to "improve the race" in the U.S. and in Nazi Germany were grounded in Social Darwinism.

The anthropomorphic animal characters in *The Lion King* are born into the predetermined natural roles of monarchs and subjects and share a single set of rituals and beliefs: lions are born rulers, whereas the others, especially the darker-skinned animals, such as hyenas, are lesser species, subject to the rule of the Lion King. Central to the plot is how the lion Scar makes the mistake of allowing hyenas, a lesser species, to participate as equals with the lions, leading to ecological catastrophe.

This movie, made by Americans for Americans and for the international market, argues for a reactionary politics. The United States began with a revolution against monarchy, yet The Lion King celebrates monarchical rule and royal birth rights. The idea of a social order derived from inequalities which are supposedly part of the natural world contradicts the American proposition that all men are created equal. The ideas driving The Lion King take us into the ideological territory of the KKK and other Neo-Nazi and white supremacist organizations and into a philosophy fallen into disrepute for over half a century. How a corporate media giant could propose such a discredited ideology as an innocent view of the world is our central question.

The Innocence of Disney

Formatted: Font: Arial

Formatted: Font: Arial, 14 pt, Bold, Italic

The historical association of Disney's products with the world of childhood between the ages of three and eight grants the company an aura of innocence and cleanses it of the taint of corporate power and politics. Ariel Dorfman, a critic of the world of Disney, writes that "the child in every adult, which Americans seem to hunger for, the constant innocentization of all aspects of life, has found. . . a perfect embodiment in Disney. . . . this infantilization of the adult, the child who is supposedly inside us all, has come to dominate the culture which the United States exports to each and every corner of the globe" (Dorfman, Empire 55-56). Innocence, according to Henry Giroux, becomes "the ideological and educational vehicle through which Disney promotes conservative ideas and values" as taken for granted premises of the existing social order (Giroux 34-35).

This "innocence" is achieved through the corporate reach and political power the Disney Company has over many levels of American culture. Like Betty Crocker is for food stuff, the Disney brand name is a seal of approval that assures parents of a movie's quality, innocence, and wholesomeness. In our classes, students identified Disney movies as contributing some of their first and most lasting memories of childhood stories. Furthermore, most of the 300 undergraduate and graduate students to whom we showed the movie had already seen The Lion

King, and about 200 acknowledged that they had been deeply moved by the film. Among the students, six mothers who had taken their children to The Lion King strongly protested against any intellectual critique of the movie. One of them said, "I feel safer taking my child to a Disney movie than taking him to Sunday school." In a very real sense, Disney movies have become sacrosanct, and therefore, in the public view, above criticism.

Formatted: Font: WP
TypographicSymbols

Formatted: Font: WP
TypographicSymbols

Disney's and other children's movies differ from other pedagogical devices. Comic books are read by children in isolation. In contrast, children's books are often read to children by their parents in the privacy of the family home. New movies are attended by parents and children in theaters, joined by other viewers in their community. VHS and DVD bring movies back home, where children can watch them repeatedly, either alone or with siblings and parents. The grandchildren of one of the co-authors watched The Lion King several times a week for a month after the movie was re-released on DVD. The participation of parents in the viewing of children's movies adds to the legitimacy and assumed goodness and innocence of the films.

The clearest sign of the social recognition of the pedagogical value of films and the importance of the parents' role in the education of their children provided by motion pictures is to be found in the numerous rating systems and guides to aid parents in deciding what their children may and may not watch. In addition to the Motion Picture Association of America, ratings are provided by various churches and denominations, and dozens of secular organizations such as the Parents Television Council. The Lion King was rated as suitable for general audiences by all these organizations.

By telling the story with animated animal characters, The Lion King draws on both the age-old wisdom of the animal fable and the contemporary, "innocent" appeal of the funny animal

cartoon. Going back to Aesop and continuing into the 21st century, illustrated story book, comic book, and animated cartoon characters such as Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, Goofy, Porky Pig, Petunia Pig, Brer Rabbit, Brer Fox, Daffy Duck, and Bugs Bunny communicate moral and philosophical ideas, sometimes in the form of an animal fable or allegory. In Disney films, the moral lessons are always spelled out but not the ideological implications. Only in satires, such as Orwell's Animal Farm, does the creator of an animal fable deliberately foreground his political bias.

In Disney animations, because of the expressive faces, gestures, and speech of the leading animal characters, we read them as human. The Lion King creates a moral allegory, with animal characters clearly labeled as good or evil. The hypocrisy of evil characters such as the lion Scar and the hyenas in The Lion King, is portrayed through letting the audience realize that their facial expressions and reassuring words are in fact lies. For example, when Mufasa rescues his little son Simba from the hyenas, these animals claim they were unaware that the young lion was the king's son, which we know to be a lie. The same is true with Scar, whose protestations of affection and care for his young nephew are also shown to be lies which disguise his evil intentions.

The Opening Scene

The Lion King transforms the contingencies of a monarchical gender and racial hierarchy into a natural arrangement, so that the biases of the film-makers remain invisible. In the film the three monarchs are all male lions, reinforcing the idea that power and legitimacy are tied to patriarchal entitlement. The film opens and closes with a ceremony in which the male heir, a lion cub, is publicly presented to the assembled animals as the heir to the throne while the background music reaches its highest volume. The lionesses, who are portrayed as happy mothers under the good king Mufasa, remain subordinate when the evil Scar takes over the kingdom, continuing to hunt and to perform their maternal roles.

The movie opens with a black screen as sounds of African wildlife increase in volume until a lion's roar calls the animals to gather for a ceremony. Thus, before a single image has appeared onscreen, the audience has been cued by the sound track that the plot will take place in the realm of nature, innocent nature. The first images are gorgeous: a majestic sunrise on the African savanna and a host of moving animals-- flying birds, trekking elephants, and leaping gazelles--like an animated cartoon version of a nature documentary. As the entire animal population converges on the plain, an African chant changes to a song in English about the importance of the "circle of life," which will be the film's theme song. There is harmony among the animals in the kingdom, as we see in a shot of an elephant fording a river with many different species of bird perched on his tusks.

Then there is a soaring aerial shot as a bird glides toward a promontory, the Pride Rock, which overlooks the Pride Land, the kingdom of the Lion King. The lions, appropriate to their elevated station, live on the heights, while the subservient masses live below. The bird, which we later learn is Zazu, the King's majordomo, lands on the Pride Rock and bows to the noble

Formatted: Font: WP
TypographicSymbols

Formatted: Font: WP
TypographicSymbols

Lion King Mufasa. There is high angle on the bird, from Mufasa’s point of view, and a corresponding low angle on Mufasa as he looks down and graciously nods at his servant. Next, Rafiki, the monkey who functions as high priest, ascends the rock, bows to Mufasa, and the two embrace. Aside from the lions, only these two loyal servants are allowed access to the King. Rafiki is the only bipedal mammal in the opening sequence and the only animal in the film who uses tools: he carries a staff and makes drawings using natural pigments. His wisdom is also suggested by his copious white beard, and his high status is shown by his hugging the King. The royal family includes the Lion Queen Sarabi and her newborn cub, Simba, Mufasa’s son and heir to the throne. The sequence ends with Rafiki anointing Simba as future king and holding him up to display him to the mass of waiting animals below, who stamp their approval with their hoofs and then bow down in submission to the cub.

This opening song about the “circle of life,” combined with the natural imagery of beauty, harmony, order, calm, and majesty, serve to naturalize the social and political hierarchy and to endorse the rightness of the ceremony. This opening sequence rationalizes monarchical succession via primogeniture as a *natural* political arrangement. Inequality is depoliticized and justified because all is well balanced in the “circle of life.” Moreover, the opening imagery evokes religious meanings by suggesting birth and a new beginning—the sunrise and the newborn cub—as well as a nativity scene, with Rafiki as a wise man bearing gifts to a child savior. The opening sequence, and in fact the entire film, illustrates Roland Barthes’ argument in Mythologies: what we accept as “natural” is in fact an illusory reality constructed in order to mask the real structures of power in society. Presenting a political regime as dictated by nature and sanctified by religion transforms the social and political realms into an immutable order

Formatted: Top: 1.5", Do not suppress endnotes, Different first page

Formatted: Font: WP
TypographicSymbols

Formatted: Font: WP
TypographicSymbols

Formatted: Font: WP
TypographicSymbols

Formatted: Font: WP
TypographicSymbols

Formatted: Font: WP
TypographicSymbols

Formatted: Font: WP
TypographicSymbols

beyond human reach. The claim to the sanctity of immutable, unchanging nature is one of the most powerful pedagogical devices there is.

As Roger Ebert remarks, the film “fudges on the uncomfortable fact that many of these animals survive by eating one another. And all through The Lion King the filmmakers perform a balancing act between the fantasy of their story and the reality of the jungle” (Ebert). And, as another reviewer notes, “Unlike the real African savanna, which is a violent place. . . Disney’s African savanna is a tropical paradise where all the animals seem to exist in idyllic tranquility. So when a new lion cub is born, the zebras, monkeys, and elephants all bow down in humble deference to the future king, in stead of saying things like. . . ‘RUN!’ or whatever real monkeys say to one another” (Slater). This innocent, well-ordered utopia masks the cruelty of nature proposed by Social Darwinism.

Social Darwinism

Social Darwinism was a powerful belief system, extremely popular in the second half of the nineteenth-century and the first half of the twentieth, that implied that the social order is the same as the natural order and is biologically predetermined. Social Darwinism, promoted through the theories of nineteenth-century sociologist Herbert Spencer, applied a badly misunderstood version of Charles Darwin’s theory of biological evolution to the social realm. According to this theory, there is a social “survival of the fittest”: in the struggle to survive and improve “the race,” the rich and those who rule are the fittest, who have been chosen to dominate over the unfit, meaning the poor and racial and ethnic “inferiors.” In the United States, Social

Darwinism was tremendously influential, used in the late nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century to restrict immigration from certain countries whose nationals were considered inferior, to justify rule by white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant industrialists, and to argue against government programs to alleviate or eliminate poverty.² Don Martindale summarizes this ideology as having an “external program,” which was imperialism, and an “internal program,” which was an active eugenics policy aimed at race improvement, mass sterilization, and the rooting out of socialism “as if it were a genetic defect.” (Martindale 174). Far from being an “innocent” view of the world, this pseudo-science informed the international eugenics movement, which spread through Europe, Asia, the United States, and Latin America in the twentieth century. Unfortunately, Social Darwinism persists even today in certain extreme strains of the American right wing. The KKK and other white supremacist organizations still openly promote a crude, biologically based Social Darwinism.

In particular, in Nazi Germany eugenics aimed at the creation of a superior, pure “Nordic race” through mass sterilization of “inferiors” and, eventually, through genocide. Throughout Mein Kampf, Adolph Hitler “recited social Darwinian imperatives, condemned the concept of charity, and praised the policies of the United States and its quest for Nordic purity” (Black 275). Hitler’s ideology is based on the idea of “rigid basic law” and supposedly “universally valid” laws of nature. His formulation of the false doctrine of Social Darwinism and the survival of the fittest is straightforward: “In the struggle for daily bread all those who are weak and sickly or less determined succumb, while the struggle of the males for the female grants the right or opportunity to propagate only the healthiest” (285). As he invokes the laws of nature, Hitler uses analogies to the animal kingdom:

“The consequence of this racial purity, universally valid in nature, is not only the sharp outward delimitation of the various races, but the uniform character in themselves. The fox is always a fox, the goose a goose, the tiger a tiger, etc. . . . But you will never find a fox who in his inner attitude might, for example, show humanitarian tendencies toward geese, as similarly there is no cat with a friendly inclination toward mice.” (285)

For those who think that they can overcome Nature, Hitler warns that “Distress, misfortune, and diseases are her answer”(289). This is the message that *The Lion King* delivers to its viewers as nature’s answer to Scar’s experiment of allowing the participation of the hyenas, who are born ugly, lazy, and stupid, albeit Scar is presented as manipulating them like a totalitarian leader reminiscent of Hitler.

Consistent with the Social Darwinist view of social relations, *The Lion King* teaches that human desires are achievable through violence, as when Scar kills Mufasa or when Simba defeats the hyenas and Scar. The hand-to-hand combat of action movies is adopted in *The Lion King* as a way to solve problems. As Hitler wrote, “Those who want to live, let them fight, and those who do not want to fight in this world of eternal struggle do not deserve to live.” (289)

In The Lion King, the harsher aspects of Social Darwinism are sweetened by reference to more acceptable contemporary popular notion of ecology. The unfair social hierarchy is made to seem just and natural, as King Mufasa explains to his son Simba,

Mufasa: Everything you see exists together, in a delicate balance. As king, you need to understand that balance, and respect all the creatures-- from the crawling ant to the leaping antelope.

Simba: But, Dad, don't we eat the antelope?

Mufasa: Yes, Simba, but let me explain. When we die, our bodies become the grass. And the antelope eat the grass. And so we are all connected in the great Circle of Life.

This is pure sophistry, rationalizing the predominance of the lion predators, who, to use another metaphor from the film, are not simply part of the great "circle of life" but at the top of "the food chain." Notes a reviewer, "There's a problem here" that the screenwriters have not resolved. "And maybe it can't be solved if your bigger characters eat your smaller ones" (Hinson). The contrary message-- the truth that the "circle of life" is not utopian or equal, but that "life is unfair" and that in the natural world powerful animals survive by killing and eating weaker ones--is discredited by being put in the mouth of the villain Scar, the usurper who murders his brother Mufasa to take over the throne.

As mentioned, the film's plot is constructed on a hierarchy of the animal kingdom, with lions as natural-born rulers and the rest as natural-born followers. We tend to project human qualities onto animals, and lions, as "the king of beasts," are frequently featured on royal coats of arms. Lions have been associated with authority since biblical times; for example, in the New Testament, Jesus is both the sacrificial lamb and "the lion of Judah." In art, architecture, sports, and even advertising, lions symbolize courage, strength, and nobility (Stoffel). This symbolism

- Formatted: No widow/orphan control
- Formatted: Font: WP TypographicSymbols
- Formatted: Font: WP TypographicSymbols
- Formatted: Font: WP TypographicSymbols
- Formatted: Font: WP TypographicSymbols
- Formatted: Font: WP TypographicSymbols
- Formatted: Font: WP TypographicSymbols
- Formatted: Font: WP TypographicSymbols
- Formatted: Indent: First line: 0", Tabs: Not at 0" + 0.5" + 1" + 1.5" + 2" + 2.5" + 3" + 3.5" + 4" + 4.5" + 5" + 5.5"
- Formatted: Font: WP TypographicSymbols
- Formatted: Font: WP TypographicSymbols
- Formatted: Font: WP TypographicSymbols
- Formatted: Font: WP TypographicSymbols

has little to do with actual animal behavior since lions, like hyenas, are predators and scavengers. What is being taught through these anthropomorphized animals is the innate supremacy of one species over others. “The lion’s dominance over other animals supports class hierarchies and nepotism” (Woodruff).

Formatted: Font: WP
TypographicSymbols

The Social Darwinist confusion of the social with the ecological order in the film is reinforced by the implication that it has as well a divine sanction, as in the opening “nativity” ceremony. At many turning points in the film, the heavens cooperate to underscore the rightness of the rule of the Lion King. For example, in the opening sequence, when Rafiki anoints Simba and holds him up to the crowd of animals to view, the clouds part and a sunbeam highlights Rafiki and Simba. As Mufasa and Simba, father and son, stand together atop a crag, they are touched by the first light from the rising sun. In another climactic moment, when the exiled Simba has lost his sense of self, the image of his father Mufasa forms in the stars and speaks to him, reminding Simba of his true identity as the Lion King. Next, as Simba returns home to the Pride Lands to take his rightful place as King, shooting stars streak across the sky. When Simba confronts Scar in a titanic duel to the death, lightning strikes, igniting a fire. After Scar falls and is taken down by the pack of hyenas, a healing rain opens up, douses the fire, and nourishes the parched lands. Simba ascends to his place atop Pride Rock in the rain, and, through a hole in the clouds is visible a patch of stars. Simba roars, and there is a time lapse dissolve from the wasteland to the Pride Lands restored in the closing scene to the sunshine and fertility of the opening. As if it is insufficient to justify the political predominance of the Lion King as integral to the “circle of life,” it is also given a heavenly blessing, as if it were religiously ordained like the divine right of kings.

Formatted: Font: WP
TypographicSymbols

Formatted: Font: WP
TypographicSymbols

All Animals Are Not Created Equal

In the film, animals fall into categories according to their relationship to the ruling lions: First are faithful helpers or comic sidekicks of the Lion King, such as Zazu the hornbill bird, who is majordomo, a sort of loyal butler to the royal family; Rafiki, the mandrill shaman who conducts the opening ceremony; and the meerkat Timon and the warthog Pumbaa, who rescue and befriend the exiled Simba. Second are submissive peasants, such as the non-talking animals who bow before the King and his heir, and the mindless herd, such as the stampeding wildebeest. Third, there are traitors, such as Scar and his hyena helpers. In other words, if the Lion King Mufasa and his wife and son are the equivalent of the white heroes, then the other animals are the minorities, functioning only in the stereotyped roles traditionally offered ethnic minorities in the American movies: comic helpers, obedient masses, or villains, various ways to diminish or discredit them.

One other ethnic stereotype is represented by Rafiki, who, despite being voiced by a black actor, performs a role identical to that of Mr. Miyagi, the Japanese karate master in The Karate Kid (1984): a small but powerful man who serves as surrogate father to the hero and transmits to him the mystic wisdom of Asia. Rafiki has not only the insight of a Zen master but also magical powers: by particles blown in the wind, he can sense from many miles away the presence of Simba. In one scene, Rafiki overpowers with a few swift karate moves the hyenas who threaten Simba, just as Mr. Miyagi uses karate against the thugs who gang up on the young hero Daniel. In many recent American movies, such as The Green Mile (2000), The Family

Man (2000), and The Legend of Bagger Vance (2001), “magical Negroes” serve the white heroes (Lee). In The Lion King, the magical African shaman Rafiki is crossed with the “magical Asian.”

The duplicitous villain Scar is made to look deliberately ugly and hypocritical, in contrast to his handsome, majestic older brother Mufasa.. Scar has a scrawny body, black mane, white goatee, sharp fangs, pointed claws, unpleasant facial expressions, and sickly green eyes. Even though he is voiced by the English actor Jeremy Irons, with the disfiguring scar above and below one eye, Scar conjures up various ethnic villains in American film: the evil Indian chief Scar in The Searchers (1956), who kills white settlers and kidnap and rapes their daughters, or the vicious gangster protagonists of the two versions of Scarface--an Italian-American in the 1932 film and a Cuban-American in the 1983 update.

More than that, Scar is equated with the ultimate twentieth-century villain, Hitler. The sequence in the cave of the hyenas when Scar announces that he will eliminate Mufasa and become the next King grotesquely parodies the opening ceremony of monarchical succession, restaging it as a Nazi rally, replacing sunlight, beauty, harmony, and natural order with underground darkness, ugliness, discordant music, and totalitarian order. The style in this cave sequence is German Expressionist, emphasizing strong diagonals and striking shadows. Scar lords it over his troop of hyenas, who, in a heavy-handed homage to Leni Riefenstahl’s Triumph of the Will (Triumph des Willens) (1934), suddenly begin goose-stepping in perfect formation. Echoing the nighttime Nuremburg rally in Triumph of the Will, in which Hitler stands on a high platform beneath a giant Nazi eagle, Scar perches on a high rock as, on the wall behind him, his shadow is cast in the shape of an enormous eagle. The sequence ends with Scar perched on high,

beneath a crescent moon, the shapes here subliminally evoking a hammer and sickle. Although children will miss the allusions to the Nazi and Soviet regimes, any viewer, young or old, will read these images as sinister. Making Scar into Hitler distracts the audience from noticing that The Lion King, as much as Triumph of the Will, constitutes cinematic propaganda, or from recognizing that the Social Darwinism underpinning the entire movie has fascist implications.

After Scar, with the help of the hyenas, kills Mufasa and drives Simba into exile, he announces "The dawning of a new era, in which lion and hyena come together in a great and glorious future." In an unholy alliance, he lets the hyenas take over the Pride Land, and they rapidly turn it into a waste land resembling the elephant graveyard. The Social Darwinist message is clear: by perverting not only family bonds but also the "natural" social hierarchy, Scar destroys the delicate balance of the great circle of life, leading inevitably to ecological catastrophe. As Nala explains, "Everything's destroyed. There's no food, no water. Simba, if you don't do something soon, everyone will starve."

Formatted: Font: WP
TypographicSymbols

Formatted: Font: WP
TypographicSymbols

Formatted: Font: WP
TypographicSymbols

Formatted: Font: WP
TypographicSymbols

In a film about the eaters and the eaten, where characters often talk about food and are usually hungry or starving, it is surprising that we never see anyone kill or eat a fellow animal-- except for Scar and the hyenas. Possibly this is done to retain a "G" rating, yet otherwise the film has a lot of violence. It is more likely that the strategy is used to induce sympathy for the heroic royal lion family and to alienate us from the villains, even though both are predators.

Formatted: Font: WP
TypographicSymbols

Formatted: Font: WP
TypographicSymbols

Paradoxically, Mufasa and Simba are lions, yet they are never seen as killers. Mufasa trains Simba in techniques of hunting and pouncing, but they only do so in play. When he is in exile in the jungle, Simba subsists on grubs and insects. Nala chases Pumbaa the warthog but does not eat him when she learns he is Simba's friend. However, in his first scene, Scar pounces on a

cute, helpless, tiny mouse and is about to eat him when Zasu, the wise court-jester bird, interrupts, so he instead pops the bird in his mouth and would swallow him if not for Mufasa’s intervention. In the end, when Simba fights Scar, he does not kill him. Instead, the pack of hyenas, those untrustworthy, darker animals, turn against their former leader Scar and devour him (a brief scene only suggested in silhouette).

One persistent stereotype held by whites about racial and ethnic minorities is that they lack proper manners and etiquette. In particular, they have peculiar or repulsive culinary habits.

These racial and ethnic “others” eat funny foods that look or smell odd, and are either cooked with too many spices or else consumed raw. Their table habits are also strange: instead of knives and forks, some eat with chopsticks or with their fingers. Thus not showing the Lion

King and his family killing and eating raw, bloody animals maintains them as “normal,” as similar to the white American audience. When Simba eats bugs, it is acceptable because he is a child and the scene is amusing. But the carnivorous habits of Scar and the hyenas are intended to shock and disgust us. The hyenas are portrayed as filthy eaters; Zasu calls them “slobbering,

mangy, stupid poachers.” After Scar flings the hyenas the haunch of a zebra, they devour it ravenously, talking loudly with their mouths full and cheeks stuffed. Their lack of table manners is yet another of many signs that they are unacceptable. Hyenas are unclean beasts, outlaws and outcasts who live in dark caves. Their lair, the elephant graveyard, is a taboo realm proscribed by the Lion King, an inferno filled with darkness, fire, bones, and the drooling jaws and snapping teeth of the hyenas. Hyenas function in this film as the unassimilable outsiders, the untouchables, the bottom of the food chain on which the lions are top. With their hunting in packs and ganging up on victims, hyenas resemble vultures, scavengers who prey on the weak

Formatted: Font: WP
TypographicSymbols

Formatted: Font: WP
TypographicSymbols

Deleted:

Formatted: Font: WP
TypographicSymbols

Formatted: Font: WP
TypographicSymbols

Formatted: Font: WP
TypographicSymbols

Formatted: Font: WP
TypographicSymbols

and the small--which of course ignores the fact that lions and hyenas, in real life, compete for the same prey. In our classes we were surprised to encounter numerous students who refused to believe that lions were not at the top of a real chain of command in the jungle.

Besides being coded as ethnic inferiors by their eating habits, the hyenas are not a family but a group of unrelated characters who behave like thugs or gang members. In contrast, the family of the Lion King cares for each other (with the exception of Scar, who kills his brother and plots his nephew's death; but Scar is set apart from the other lions by his darker skin, British accent, and scarred face). On the one hand, Mufasa, Sarabi, and little Simba are a royal family who possess great power; on the other hand, we can relate to them as an ordinary family because of the touches of situation comedy, as when Simba wakes up his Dad too early in the morning, saying, "You promised!" The sly, lying, hypocritical, and self-serving Scar and the hyenas serve as foils for the honesty, nobility, and "family values" epitomized by the family of the Lion King.

The three main hyenas, the only ones with names and speaking roles, are played as comic and sinister, and voiced as a black woman, a chicano, and a drooling idiot—as if the three social situations were equivalent. It seems deliberate that the two principal hyenas, Shenzi and Banzai, are voiced by the black actress Whoopi Goldberg and the chicano Cheech Marin. In fact, as one reviewer comments, "the banishment of the ethnic-voiced hyenas to the elephant graveyard supports racial segregation" (Woodruff). And another writes, "The most controversial aspect of the film are the hyenas, who spout hip ghetto street talk and when they take over the lion kingdom, give unmistakable overtones of a white neighborhood having been turned into a ghetto" (Scheib).

Formatted: Font: WP
TypographicSymbols

Formatted: Font: WP
TypographicSymbols

Formatted: Font: WP
TypographicSymbols

Formatted: Font: WP
TypographicSymbols

Formatted: Font: WP
TypographicSymbols

Formatted: Font: WP
TypographicSymbols

Formatted: Font: WP
TypographicSymbols

Significantly, although The Lion King is set in Africa, “the cast of characters gets less black as time goes on.” In the opening, Mufasa, Sarabi, young Nala, and Rafiki are voiced by black actors, although young Simba, Zazu, and Scar are voiced by whites. “Simba -- our main character -- could be the ethnic equivalent of Beaver Cleaver.” As the film goes on, Mufasa dies, and Simba’s new companions Timon and Pumbaa are voiced by whites. In particular, the adult Simba and Nala, now a romantic couple, both have white accented voices, as if “to prevent the suggestion of an interracial pairing” (Sherman).

Formatted: Font: WP
TypographicSymbols

Formatted: Font: WP
TypographicSymbols

Formatted: Font: WP
TypographicSymbols

Formatted: Font: WP
TypographicSymbols

Formatted: Font: WP
TypographicSymbols

Formatted: Font: WP
TypographicSymbols

Deleted:

How Audiences View The Lion King

Formatted: Font: Arial

It is possible to argue that we and the critics we cite are simply projecting arbitrarily onto The Lion King when we see it as an allegory about white supremacy. Nevertheless, Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis, in their groundbreaking study, Enlightened Racism, demonstrated that audiences had trouble distinguishing between the fantasy black family of the Huxtables on the hit 1980s television series The Cosby Show and the reality of American race relations. People talked about the Huxtables as if they were neighbors and claimed to have learned many truths from this television family. “The line between the TV world and the world beyond the screen has, for most people, become exceedingly hazy” (Jhally and Lewis 133).

One of our students at the University of Florida, Rey Diaz, wrote an undergraduate honors thesis in which he conducted focus groups of teenage boys after showing them The Lion King. In discussion, the all-white group identified strongly with the lions, seeing them as

powerful, aristocrats who “talked very proper English with correct grammar” (Diaz 19). To the white group, the lions were high class, clearly the good guys, and the hyenas were low class and evil. One white student said, “The whole coloring, the whole scene of the movie, the fire, the skeletons, all that kind of stuff, it gave the image of being evil. Something dark is used. The whole image of color and sound. . .the voice” (Diaz 21). In contrast, the group of black and Latino teenagers did not hold the lions in high esteem but saw them as ugly and scary, whereas they viewed the hyenas as happy animals who were always laughing. “No one [in this all-minority group] said that the hyenas were bad or evil and no one said that the lions were good” (Diaz 30). Clearly the white teenagers quickly realized who represented white power in The Lion King and who were the despised minority. Similarly, the blacks and Latino boys immediately recognized that they were supposed to be represented by the hyenas, and so they chose to value the hyenas over the lions, despite the many ways in which the movie positively codes the lions and negatively codes the hyenas.

Formatted: Font: WP
TypographicSymbols

Formatted: Font: WP
TypographicSymbols

Formatted: Font: WP
TypographicSymbols

Formatted: Font: WP
TypographicSymbols

Formatted: Font: WP
TypographicSymbols

It can be argued that groups of different ages in different geographical locations might see the movie and its characters in different ways. For example, the reviewers of the Catholic Church’s film rating system summarize the movie in the following way:

***Lion King, The** -- Animated tale of an African lion cub (voice of Jonathan Taylor Thomas) who, led to believe he caused the death of his father the king (voice of James Earl Jones), runs away in shame, enabling his evil uncle (voice of Jeremy Irons) to assume the throne until he returns a full-grown lion (voice of Matthew Broderick) to discover the truth and reclaim the*

kingdom. Directors Roger Allers and Rob Minkoff combine stunning animation with deft comic touches and stirring musical numbers for an evocative allegorical story of a young lion coming of age and learning to assume responsibility as an adult leader. Some intense moments. (A-I) (G) (1994)

These reviewers do not mention the elements we emphasize; clearly, they watched a different pedagogical text. One could argue that the leaders of the Catholic Church who reviewed the film are not democratically elected but appointed by the hierarchy of their organization, and therefore might look kindly upon or take for granted the goodness of monarchical rule. There is no question that what we learn from movies and other texts is always mediated by our experience and our identity. This makes the study of pedagogical devices in movies all the more important.

Conclusion

Formatted: Font: Arial

The Lion King is intelligible only as a colonial narrative. This is not really an African story, for "Disney plunders all folklore, fairy tales, and nineteenth and twentieth-century children's literature, reshaping it in his average North American image" (Dorfman, Empire 24).

Its African setting continues a long tradition of perceiving that continent, or, for that matter, most of the "Third World," as the home of animals and savages. It is a profoundly Western plot that adapts "non-mainstream cultures and beliefs only in terms of how they can provide garnish for

Formatted: Font: WP
TypographicSymbols

Formatted: Font: WP
TypographicSymbols

Formatted: Font: WP
TypographicSymbols

the white man's story" (Sherman). As a Eurocentric story, The Lion King trades in ethnic stereotypes and justifies social inequality through Social Darwinism, which deliberately confuses the natural with the social and political realm. It sweetens this harsh notion through an appeal to the vaguely ecological sounding ideal of "the circle of life." But the underlying message is that characters are born into their place in society; some, the fittest, are born rulers, and the rest are born followers, and when they stray from their assigned place, they break the circle, with disastrous consequences for both the social and the natural realms. This is a comforting message only to those at the top of the food chain, who are supposedly born to rule.

The cumulative effect of films such as *The Lion King* is to suppress the desire for democratic change. Since the rule of the Lion King Mufasa is seen from the opening sequence as entirely benevolent, then any rebellion is either childish foolishness, like Simba's venture into the forbidden elephant graveyard, or adult treason, like the plot of Scar and his hyena thugs. All attempts to change the system endanger the continuity of the utopian rule of monarchical primogeniture and constitute a grave social and political danger. Even more, rebellion is sacrilege, for it disrupts the natural order, the harmony of "the circle of life." Thus the effect of children's films such as *The Lion King* is to insure conformity to authority. Through such stories, proposes Ariel Dorfman, the child "participates in his own self-domination, thereby circumscribing his freedom not only to become another person but also to invent another kind of world. In this way his natural rebellious energies--which should normally be used to question the established order and risk imagining one that is different--are neutralized" (Empire 59). This neutralization of desires for change and rebellious energy is no small matter in a contemporary America where--despite the checks and balances of democracy--social, political, and economic

Formatted: Font: WP
TypographicSymbols

Formatted: Font: WP
TypographicSymbols

Formatted: Font: WP
TypographicSymbols

power can still become the hereditary entitlement of a cadre of ruling white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants such as, among others, the Bush dynasty.

Why a democratic society like the United States should promote the teaching of such reactionary, discredited ideas as Social Darwinism is an important question on which considerably more research is warranted. Certainly, it is urgent that our teachers, from K-12 to higher education, be trained in how to study the versions of history and the ideologies promoted by the mass media, especially in movies.

Formatted: No widow/orphan control

Works Cited

Barthes, Roland. Mythologies. Trans. Annette Lavers. London: J. Cape, 1972.

Bettelheim, Bruno. The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales.
NY: Knopf, 1976.

Black, Edwin. War Against the Weak: Eugenics and America's Campaign to Create a Master Race. New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2003.

Diaz, Rey. "Cinema and Values." Undergraduate Honors Thesis, Department of Sociology,
University of Florida, 2001.

Formatted: Font: WP
TypographicSymbols

Formatted: Font: WP
TypographicSymbols

Dorfman, Ariel and Armand Mattelart. Para Leer al Pato Donald. Buenos Aires: Siglo
Veintiuno, 1972.

Dorfman, Ariel. The Empire's Old Clothes: What the Lone Ranger, Babar, and other innocent heroes do to our minds. Trans. Clark Hansen. NY: Pantheon, 1983.

Ebert, Roger. Review of The Lion King. Chicago Sun-Times, June 24, 1994.

<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19940624/REVIEWS/406240301/1023>

Deleted: '

Giroux, Henry A. The Mouse that Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence. New York:
Rowman and Littlefield, 1999.

Hinson, Hal. Review of The Lion King. The Washington Post, June 24, 1994.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/review96/lionkinghin.htm>

Deleted: -

Hitler, Adolf. Mein Kampf. Trans. Ralph Manheim. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1971.

Jhally, Sut and Justin Lewis. Enlightened Racism: The Cosby Show, Audiences, and the Myth of the American Dream. San Francisco: Westview Press, 1992.

Lee, Spike. Quoted in Kevin McDonough. "The Mortar of Predictability." Newsday, September 20, 2001, B31.

Deleted: Section Break (Continuous)

Lion King, The (1994). The Disney Company. Directors: Roger Allers and Rob Minkoff.

Screenplay: Irene Mecchi, Jonathan Roberts, Linda Woolverton, and others. Producers: Alice Dewey, Don Hahn, Sarah McArthur, Thomas Schumacher. Editors: John Carnochan, Tom Finan. Music: Elton John, Lebo M., Joseph Williams, Hans Zimmer. Starring: Rowan Atkinson as Zazu (voice), Matthew Broderick as Adult Simba (voice), Niketa Calame as Young Nala (voice), Jim Cummings as Ed/Gopher (voice), Whoopi Goldberg as Shenzi (voice), Robert Guillaume as Rafiki (voice), Jeremy Irons as Scar (voice), James Earl Jones as Mufasa (voice), Moira Kelly as Adult Nala (voice), Nathan Lane as Timon (voice), Cheech Marin as Banzai (voice), Ernie Sabella as Pumbaa (voice), Madge Sinclair as Sarabi (voice), Jonathan Taylor Thomas as Young Simba (voice).

Martindale, Don. The Nature and Types of Sociological Theory. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960.

Scheib, Richard. Review of The Lion King. The Science Fiction, Horror and Fantasy Film Review 1994. <http://www.moria.co.nz/fantasy/lionking.htm>

Sherman, J. Review of The Lion King. Shermomma, 1994. http://www.awa.com/w2/shermomma/s_1.10.html

Deleted: -

Slater, Jeremy. Review of The Lion King DVD. Chud.com, October 7, 2003. <http://www.chud.com/chudvd/reviews/lion.php3>

Formatted: Indent: First line: 0"

Stoffel, Tim. "The Lion of Judah and the King of Pride Rock: An Overview of Christian Principles in Disney's The Lion King." <http://www.lionlmb.org/lion/KOKlk.txt>

Formatted: Font: WP
TypographicSymbols

Formatted: Font: WP
TypographicSymbols

Wertham, Frederic. Seduction of the Innocents. NY: Rinehart, 1954.

Deleted: Section Break (Continuous)

Woodruff, Zachary. Review of The Lion King. Tucson Weekly, January 5, 1995.
<http://www.filmvault.com/filmvault/tw/1/lionkingthe.html>

Formatted: Indent: First line: 0"

Endnotes

Deleted: ¶

Formatted: Font color: Auto

1. A strong uneasiness about the role children's stories play in the socialization of children can be traced back to Frederic Wertham in 1954. Bruno Bettelheim made a compelling case for the importance of fairy tales in childhood development. Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelarts showed the racism and colonial ideology in Disney comic books.

2. Nazi eugenics went farther and was far more brutal than the American policies after which it was modelled. For a detailed discussion, see Edwin Black.

The world of Disney's latest animated feature Zootopia represents this view in the most literal way possible. As the name suggests, the city of Zootopia is a utopia. Predation doesn't exist and animals of all species have evolved to live peacefully side by side. In the first minutes of the movie, we are introduced to the history of this world: before the advent of civilization, mammals lived in a state of perpetual conflict and struggle between predator and prey. Now that the predatory instinct has been eliminated, the species live harmoniously together. The lion lies down with the lamb. But the random collection of Lion King/Simba's Pride headcanons: Nuka is the only child Zira and Scar had together, and Scar's only son. Scar mated with many different lionesses in desperate attempts to produce an heir, but most of Scar's offspring were girls, and thus unable to be king, and Scar also considered Nuka too weak and sickly to ever be king so kept on trying. Vitani is the daughter of Scar and Sarafina, and as such is Nala's little sister.