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Cultural Gatekeepers: How Disney, Pixar, and DreamWorks Shape Young Minds

During my childhood, I was a devoted fan of *Disney*, *Pixar*, and *DreamWorks* films. As an adult, I often reflect on how these movies have influenced me. Since becoming a mother in 2017, I have become more attuned to the messages and themes portrayed in popular children's films. These messages can be direct or subtle, but children absorb them all, inevitably shaping who they become. The movies we expose our children to, such as the ones my children enjoy, tackle important social issues like sexuality, race, and identity. It is crucial to be mindful of how these films impact our children's socialization and everyday lives. Movies remain vital to our entertainment and culture, from mid-20th-century classics to modern-day hits like *Zootopia*.

From the late 20th century to today, *Disney*, *Pixar*, and *DreamWorks* have served as cultural gatekeepers and regulators by playing a pivotal role in shaping societal perceptions of self, race, racialization, and sexuality, especially among children. Through their influential media productions, these filmmakers construct narratives and characters that reflect and influence sociocultural attitudes.

The *Disney Corporation* is most well-known for its children's films containing the iconic *Disney* princesses, old-fashioned stereotyping, and gender roles. After a study that found that the *Disney* brand played a role in body image concerns in young girls, the brand began to create new character attributes. This resulted in *Disney's* commitment to inner characteristics instead of the outdated emphasis on outer beauty (Elman, 2020). This was when a shift began to occur within the industry of children's films. *Disney* and *Pixar* took the lead by creating movies with empowering female leading characters, such as *The Incredibles* (2004), *Brave* (2012), and

Frozen (2013). Despite the power of the new progressive messages, there are still some concerns regarding their effectiveness. *Disney* released its Oscar-winning animation film *Zootopia* in 2016, and while it tackles issues on race, gender, and inclusivity, several issues were identified after analyzing how it portrays feminism (Elman, 2020).

Julie Elman examines *Zootopia* and argues in her article, "Slothful Movements: Disability, Acceleration, and Capacity Feminism in *Disney's Zootopia*," that a major problem lies within the unique illustration of feminist empowerment in the film. *Zootopia* (2016) is about the main character, Judy, a rabbit from the countryside, who joins the police force while fighting for acceptance against the force's prejudice toward small mammals. Elman's main goal within this publication is to articulate how Judy's femininity appears as "smallness" while masculinity is innately strong. Because of this depiction, the film subtly defines feminism as a weakness, giving it the characteristics of a disability (Elman, 2020). All the females in this film are described as small, weak, quiet, and shy, while the men are strong, loud, in charge, and more competent. This is teaching our youth audience that females have a disability by nature because of their sex and must work harder to be taken seriously.

There seems to be a shift from one extreme to another, causing filmmakers to miss their target. While characters of the past were stereotyped and assigned gender roles, these newer characterizations are forming new stereotypes from the old ones. The film's lead female character, Judy, is portrayed as a determined and capable individual who strives to prove her worth in a male-dominated environment. However, despite her strength and perseverance, the film still reinforces negative stereotypes about women by depicting them as having to struggle

against the system. This sends a message to young people that being female is a predetermined

disadvantage and perpetuates gender inequality.

In the last decade, successful animated children's films by *Disney, Pixar, and*

DreamWorks have grown considerably. The characters within these films, like Judy in *Zootopia,*

exhibit multifaceted emotions and deliver messages to children (and adults) about gender roles,

overcoming fears, and self-acceptance while portraying class and race differences (Lugo, 2009).

In their article "Look Out New World, Here We Come," authors Freeman and Giroux explain

how these movies act as "portable professors." Because of the themes and lessons these films

express, they inherently help reinforce and shape cultural norms and values for viewers. Giroux

explains how media culture educates youth about their identities, relationships, and the world

outside their bubble. Therefore, the entertainment industry has gained an educational role in

society and has become an underlying cultural authority.

Disney's Zootopia is a great example of a modern film encouraging young viewers to

work hard and strive for success, regardless of their background. This message is all too familiar

and reminiscent of the lessons I learned in my childhood from films that were not as progressive

as the children's movies today. Freeman and Giroux quote American Anthropologist Helaine

Silverman, "As a quintessential form of American public culture, animated movies may be

examined as a site where collective social understandings are created…" So, while the depth of

the message may have changed, modern children's films still promote extreme narratives, which

continue to affect young audiences today. These audiences consist primarily of children who do

not have a fully developed brain or sense of self. Therefore, understanding that production

companies serve as cultural gatekeepers and regulators is vital to understanding that modern

children's films affect how children view themselves, the world, and the people around them.

The thesis presented in this paper is an important one to grasp fully. These films are

among the first tools children receive to not only teach about race and sexuality but also to

maintain existing conditions that came before them (Lugo, 2009). *Disney* has remained one of

the largest and most influential media conglomerates in the world for over 60 years, and thanks

to streaming services, children have access to an abundance of media texts that inherently

influence many aspects of their lives (Towbin et al., 2008). According to the Kaiser Family

Foundation Report of 1999, children watch television for an average of 2.5 to 3 hours daily. That

is nearly 20 hours per week. That is more time than my 4-year-old son spends in part-time

preschool weekly.

The influence of media cannot be exaggerated because media exposure contributes

directly to shaping a child's values, beliefs, dreams, and expectations. Scholars have discovered

that children learn better through visual aids, such as movies, while adults learn better through

verbal and written communication. It is even said that children as young as one can imitate the

emotions of the people surrounding them by watching them (Towbin et al., 2008). By the time a

child reaches 18 years of age, they have viewed 200,000 acts of violence and 40,000 murders on

TV, and there is evidence of a mild link between viewing violence in media texts and showing

aggressive behavior (Towbin et al., 2008). If children can mimic mannerisms after observation, it

stands to reason that these movies can shape their behavior and thinking. The role of media

production companies in influencing youth is significant. Therefore, it is critical that their

messages are crafted with care.

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In a study of 16 *Disney* animated films, scholars found that gender portrayals have not

kept pace with societal changes but have become less noticeable. Gender representation in

contemporary animated films remains similar to that of the first *Disney* film in 1937, *Snow White*

and the Seven Dwarfs (Towbin et al., 2008). It might seem trivial, but studies show that children

as young as five can grasp the concepts of prejudice. According to Allison Briscoe-Smith and her

article in *Greater Good Magazine*, most kids will understand the unfairness in movies like

Zootopia. When parents discuss children's films with their kids, it fosters empathy and

inclusivity instead of perpetuating prejudice (Smith, 2016). While movies play a crucial role in

educating children on serious topics, they also provide an opportunity for parents to discuss the

issues with their kids.

It is essential to understand that young children lack the cognitive abilities to distinguish

between reality and fantasy. As a result, they may need help to process the messages they are

exposed to through the media. These messages have a significant impact on their beliefs and

values, which are still in the process of being shaped. Therefore, it is essential to understand the

role and responsibility media production companies like *Disney*, *Pixar*, and *DreamWorks* assume

as cultural gatekeepers and regulators. From the traditional portrayals of gender roles and

stereotypes to the more recent attempts at progressive messaging, these films influence the way

young minds understand self, race, racialization, and sexuality. It is crucial to develop a critical

lens for ourselves and our children as we create and consume new children's films in the future.

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