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Brenda Ayres (Ed.): The Emperor's Old Groove: Decolonizing Disney's Magic Kingdom

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Brenda Ayres (Ed.): The Emperor's Old Groove: Decolonizing Disney's Magic Kingdom

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Like many readers of *The Emperor's Old Groove: Decolonizing Disney's Magic Kingdom*, Brenda Ayres (the editor) was raised on Disney products and entertainment. Despite a childhood enjoyment that has accompanied her into adult years, however, Ayres – and her contributors – find Disney to be “insidious”, (p.ix) a corporate propagator of a “noxious ethos” (p.11) of Western superiority that undermines efforts at international and intercultural tolerance and understanding. Often after a relationship sours, one tends to exaggerate the shortcomings of the ex-lover, to see the most malevolent schemes behind the slightest faults. This may help to explain rather than to excuse the slipshod critical thinking to be found in this volume. A few examples should suffice to illustrate.

In “Disneyfication,” the first of six rubrics containing this baker's dozen of essays, Ayres examines some of the less savory particulars in Walt Disney's life – the notorious racism of his hometown (Kansas City), his father's emotional and physical abuse, his lifelong concern about being an illegitimate son, his “radical right-wing fundamentalism” (p.22) – and attempts to identify their dark shadows in several of the corporate founder's more well-known animated features. In “Disney Family,” Mark Axelrod notes the enduring success of the “motherless” formula as unveiled in *Snow White* (1937), seeking an explanation thereof in Walt Disney's troubled relationship with his own mother. In “Disney Women,” Christiane Staninger criticizes *Aladdin* (1992) for passing up an opportunity to “help destroy the West's stereotypical view of the East as a country of violence and oppression of women's rights”. (p.65) She cites exceptions that other critics have taken to Disney's Middle Eastern representations in *Aladdin* before marshalling further scholarly opinion and historical evidence to conclude that Jasmine's characterization may not be far from the truth after all, if only by “accident”. (p.76) In “Disney Culture,” Christopher Wise takes issue with *Aladdin*'s “thoroughly and dangerously racist ... depictions of Arabs”, (p.104) excoriating the film and media in general for continuous reference to reputed Arab brutality and the perpetuation of an ignorant, Orientalist view of a complex, sophisticated culture. In “Disney Literature,” Sheng-mei Ma analyzes the Orientalist representations of *Mulan* (1998), criticizing Disney for its use of what the author sees as hackneyed iconography (dragons, chopsticks). In “Disney History,” Dianne Sachko Macleod

resorts again to personality politics in proposing that Disney CEO Michael Eisner's "global ambitions, unanticipated economic needs, fear of failure, and reliance on special effects to bolster the illusion of success are not only responsible for *Aladdin*, but also parallel the causes and unfolding of the Gulf War". (p.179) Though the author admits that "there was no evidence of collaboration between Eisner and the Pentagon," she juxtaposes the two without trepidation, arguing that "both *Aladdin* and Operation Desert Storm contrived to achieve their goals semiotically, ... ideologically, ... stylistically, ... and technologically ...". (p.180)

Many of the contributors to *The Emperor's Old Groove* read the Disney corpus as selectively as Disney stands accused of reading culture and history. Though a comprehensive treatment of every Disney animated feature from 1937 onwards would have been beyond the scope of this slim volume, not one paper examines *The Emperor's New Groove* (2000). The film features a complete, traditional family of father, mother, and two children. The mother, Chi Cha, demonstrates a range of domestic skills but is also represented as the equal of her husband, independent of thought and resourceful in times of danger. She saves both her family and the Emperor of Peru with mastery and calm efficiency, even while in an advanced stage of pregnancy. This representation alone confounds the implications of the title of the collection as well as complicates Mark Axelrod's sweeping contention that Disney's animated features are, "if not misogynistic, works that have devalued motherhood and the role of the mother within the nuclear family". (p.30) And however dubious Disney's historic depictions of racial Others, an analysis of *Lilo and Stitch* (2002) character Cobra Bubbles, an African American social worker and ex-CIA agent (voiced by Ving Rhames) who once saved the world from an alien invasion, would have been profitable. Uncle Remus he is not. Instead, one reads Christopher Wise's claim that the "cavalier insensitivity of films like *Aladdin* has directly contributed to the culture of misunderstanding that now prevails in the United States, and has prevailed in the years that led 'us' to the controversies in which 'we' and 'our' children are now embroiled". (p.112) Perhaps, but could one not reasonably argue that recent images of journalist Daniel Pearl with throat slit, of the incinerated body parts of American contractors hanging from a bridge in Fallujah, of the beheadings of civilian workers Nicholas Berg and Paul Johnson (web-posted by the murderers themselves, rather than by a multinational corporation with an Orientalist *Weltanschauung*), as well as the plea for mercy of South Korean decapitation-victim Kim Sun-il (to speak nothing of the images from 9/11) do at least as much as any Disney song lyrics or cartoons to perpetuate stereotypes of Arab and Islamic cruelty? Richard Finkelstein opens his discussion of *The Little Mermaid* by lamenting Disney's market proliferation, arguing that "[p]eople who buy Disney things ... themselves become standardized according to its product model". (p.131) But how can the same products both standardize their consumers and alienate them one from another? Christiane Staninger objects that nowhere does *Aladdin* address Jasmine's Islamic faith. True,

but to be fair, Disney features *never* explicitly refer to *any* particular faith. And Mark Axelrod's assessment of *Snow White* as an "animated version...of child abuse and attempted murder" (p.36) strikes one as reductionist and hyperbolic. Finally, even the editing (p.24 - a footnote cut-and-pasted into two separate notes: p.49 - "embowers"; p.70 - "in movie"; p.163 - "varius"; p.172 - "through the unfolding of romantic adventure tale") betrays the quality of thought that went into much of *The Emperor's Old Groove*. In an epilogue, Ayres states that "Disney's is a magic kingdom that cannot fix our problems with just the sweep of a magical wand". (p.195) Nor should Disney be blamed for so many of those problems, either.

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