

Disney in the Crosshairs

by Glynn Custred

Among the subjects studied and taught at universities are the fields which comprise the humanities: art history and art appreciation, music, literature, folklore and history, as well as the social science approach to the study of culture which involves all of those activities. Also of academic interest is the campaign now rapidly spreading through our institutions to transform American culture along the lines of neo-Marxism. Among the organizations that have joined this campaign is the Disney corporation, a company which for nearly a century has provided family entertainment, and which has been a prominent part of American popular culture, but which now propagates the neo-Marxist based Critical Race Theory and gender radicalism.

For example, in January 2023 Disney's Magic Kingdom theme park discontinued its popular ride Splash Mountain, an attraction which had been running for the previous thirty years. The reason given for closing the attraction was that it showed several characters from the 1946 film *The Song of the South*, a story which takes place on a Southern plantation before the Civil War. In a petition asking to keep the ride open, its defenders wrote

that Splash Mountain never included "depictions of slaves or racist elements and is based on historical African American folktales that all ethnicities have been enjoying for nearly a century." But the attraction was discontinued. This was the latest, and the final, action taken by the company to remove the film and its spin-offs from public view, part of a series of ongoing policies critics call "woke revisionism."

Beginning in 1923 and for its first fifty years Disney took well-known themes from Western Civilization for its often innovative films. In 1937 the fairy tale *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* was adapted for Disney's first feature length animated film. Other themes from traditional folklore were used for later films. In 1942 the company released a parody of Jack and the Beanstalk where Mickey Mouse plays the role of Jack in the second half of the feature length film *Fun and Fancy Free*. And in 1950 another fairy tale became the subject of a feature length animated movie, *Cinderella*. Classical mythology was also used in the 1940 production *Fantasia*, an animated film in which music inspired the images instead of the usual use of a musical score to fit a story. The seg-

ment titled “Pastoral Symphony,” based on Beethoven’s Symphony No. 6, takes the audience back to ancient times to an imagined festival held at the foot of Mt. Olympus for Bacchus the god of wine. Disney also took themes from children’s and fantasy literature: *Pinocchio* (1940), *Dumbo* (1941), *Bambi* (1941), *The Adventures of Ichabod and Mr. Toad* (1949), *Alice in Wonderland* (1951), *Peter Pan* (1953), *The Jungle Book* 1967, *Robin Hood* (1973), and in 1950 Disney’s first live action film based on Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island*.

American history, folklore, and popular culture have also provided sources for those earlier productions. In 1946 Disney released the animated musical *Make Mine Music*, an anthology composed of unrelated segments which used music and songs sung by popular singers of the time to tell the stories. One of the segments was “Casey at the Bat,” the recitation of a poem about disappointed baseball fans at a time when baseball was the national sport. Another segment was “The Martins and the Coys,” the story of the Hatfield-McCoy feud in the Appalachian Mountains which was presented as a song sung by the popular singers The King’s Men. In 1948 *Melody Time* was released, also a full-length feature film composed of different segments, but this time with a combination of live action and animation. One of the segments was “The Legend of Johnny Appleseed,” the story of a man who traveled through the wilderness of the Middle West in advance of the pioneers, planting apple trees and spreading

Christianity. The story is told in song by the popular singer Dennis Day. Another segment is “Pecos Bill,” which relates the tall tales of a fictitious hero of the Old West where the story of the hero’s fantastic exploits is told in animation, and the live action parts feature the famous cowboy singer and actor Roy Rodgers.

In the 1950s, events from American history were adapted for live action films: *Westward Ho the Wagons*, the story of the trek across the prairies in covered wagons, and *The Great Locomotive Chase* which reenacts an episode from the Civil War. The most popular in this series dealt with Davy Crockett, a real-life figure who obtained legendary status. The film, which tells of his life and exploits, was first shown as a live action series on television titled *Davy Crockett: King of the Wild Frontier* featuring Fess Parker and Buddy Ebsen. The series was Disney’s most successful television effort. The television film begins with settlers in the wilderness of the Tennessee frontier during the time of the Creek Indian War (1813-14). It then moves to Davy’s exploits and his time in Congress, and ends with the Battle of the Alamo. It was later shown in theaters, and was followed by a sequel titled *Davy Crockett and the River Pirates*. The theme song, “The Ballad of Davy Crockett” was heard nationwide, and the coon skin cap, which was a prominent part of the frontiersmen’s dress as depicted in the film, was sold in stores.

Make Mine Music and *The Song of the South* were the two earliest films to deal with American history and folklore,

both of which were shown in 1946 in theaters across the country. The inspiration for *The Song of the South* was the work of Joel Chandler Harris (1848-1908) a copywriter for the *Atlanta Constitution* who wrote a column in which he invented the character of Uncle Remus, an old man who would stop by the newspaper to talk about the affairs of the city. In 1877 Harris read an article by William Owen in *Lippincott's* magazine titled "Folklore and the Southern Negro." The stories that were told in that article reminded Harris of the time during the Civil War when he had worked as a printer's apprentice for a newspaper, *The Countryman*, which was published on Turnwold Plantation in Middle Georgia. It was there that he heard such tales from the lips of slaves, among them Uncle George Terrell, Uncle Bob Capers, Old Harbert, and Aunt Crissy. Harris retold those stories and others in his column, using his Uncle Remus character as the fictional storyteller. The tales were so popular that other publications picked up the column and reprinted it. Within months the Uncle Remus stories and the black storytelling tradition became popular across the country.

One reason for this popularity is that, despite the discriminatory attitudes of the time, in both the North and the South, the African American and the Euro-American traditions were closely intertwined, and were part of the then nationwide romantic vision of the antebellum South. Historian Eugene Genovese in *Roll, Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (1962) wrote:

An ironic thing about those two great hyphenated minorities, Southern-Americans and Afro-Americans, confronting each other on their native soil for three and a half centuries, is the degree to which they have shaped each other's destiny, determined each other's isolation, shared and molded a common culture. It is, in fact, impossible to imagine the one without the other and quite futile to try.

This interrelationship is also seen nation-wide in the field of music, especially in the uniquely American genre of jazz, which has its roots in both African American and European American traditions.

Harris was an authentic raconteur, telling traditional stories in the traditional way, not in the oral but written form, and employing the devices of literature to do so more effectively. Besides his wide popular appeal Harris also attracted the attention and the admiration of such writers as Mark Twain and Rudyard Kipling, both of whom used folk speech in their writing. He also influenced later writers such as William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, Ralph Ellison, and others. Above all, he greatly influenced the genre of children's literature.

The fables he tells have been traced back to Africa with such figures as the trickster, depicted in African stories as the Hare, sometimes a spider, and in the African American tradition as Brer Rabbit. Another feature of African American folklore is a safe haven, a place to go from one's worries, called the "laughing place."

The stories are one thing. Another is what they do for those who tell and listen

to them, in other words their social and psychological functions. One function, of course, is entertainment. Another is education, which is achieved by inculcating general attitudes and principles such as honesty, diligence, and perseverance as illustrated by the actions of the characters. Such tales also act to validate cultural norms and to maintain conformity, yet they can have the reverse effect namely, to protest those norms that are considered onerous or oppressive. Sometimes such protest is obvious, in other cases implicit, for by simply telling the story and enjoying it, listeners feel good and their will to endure or resist is strengthened.

Bruce Botkin was a folklorist who headed the Writer's Project in 1938, a part of the Works Progress Administration during the Depression. His goal was to preserve the oral history of former slaves by recording and publishing their recollections. His work is regarded as the first legitimate historic source from the experience of those who had once been enslaved. In his section on the trickster in African American folklore, Botkin says that for the slave storytellers and their listeners those tales of the cunning and deceitful trickster were "in line with the universal tendency on the part of oppressed people to identify with the weaker and triumphant animal" by "pitting brains against brute force and superior strength."

Among the most notable achievements of Harris's stories, writes Bruce Bickley in a biography of the author, is his use of dialect, a distinctive form of speech that reveals the poetic nature of black language and narrative, with its "quaint and rugged

humor" and with the sensitivity of black Southerners. Specialists in the study of the English language noted the accuracy of Harris's use of dialect and the way he employed it as a narrative device which has been described as harnessing the "power of the vernacular," a manner of speaking which he expressed effortlessly and instinctively, thus providing an important voice in the tradition of American storytelling. This device did not originate with Harris. It was known as local color fiction, which became popular from the Civil War to the end of the nineteenth century and is still used in fiction today. George Washington Cable, Mark Twain, Harper Lee, Thomas Nelson Page, James Whitcomb Riley, along with black writers like Charles Waddell Chesnutt, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Zora Neale Hurston, and Toni Morrison all employed local vernacular to achieve authenticity.

Harris's tales are told in a plantation setting as he had originally heard them, thereby preserving their proper context. What was an innovation for the time was the convergence of the old Southern realities of caste and class, in this case with the depiction of a situation in human terms where children of both races and different classes are brought together through the care and kindness of an old black man, an innovation appreciated even by many who objected to the old romantic vision of plantation life and its racial stereotypes. Yet Harris was not a nostalgic apologist for the ante-bellum South. He was instead a proponent of the New South, and for his time and place his views were progressive, for he supported black voting rights

and education for black children. He also advocated racial justice, and at the height of his career he condemned anti-black mob violence in a series of newspaper editorials. This was the context in which Disney turned to Joel Chandler Harris's stories for the film version of the stories told by Uncle Remus.

Disney chose Harris's *Uncle Remus and His Friends* (1892) and *Told by Uncle Remus: New Stories of the Old Plantation* (1905) as the sources for his cinematographic telling of the familiar fables. Walt Disney expressed his feelings about the Uncle Remus stories in a publicity statement issued in 1946 at the film's release. He wrote that he had been "familiar with the Uncle Remus tales since boyhood" and that from the time when he first began his work in films, he had had them in his production plans. He said the cinematographic medium had until then "not been ready to give them [the stories] an adequate film equivalent in scope and fidelity," for Disney wanted to depict Uncle Remus as a real person on the screen in live action segments and the animals in the tales in animation.

Told by Uncle Remus is the story, as Disney retells it, of a somewhat frail and slightly repressed little boy whose mother brings him from the city to the plantation where his grandmother lives. Uncle Remus befriends the child, whom he affectionately calls "Honey," and helps him learn to cope with life and to become a stronger individual. He responds to the child's problems not with advice, but simply by telling a moral tale about the animals that inhabit the world of fable. The story line of

the film is summarized by Disney archivist David Smith, author of *Disney A to Z: The Updated Official Encyclopedia* (Disney Editions, 2006) in the following way.

The story is about a boy learning about life through the stories of Uncle Remus, which are shown in animated segments. Little Johnny is taken to his grandmother's plantation where he meets Uncle Remus and is guided by his stories . . . about Brer Rabbit, Brer Fox, and Brer Bear. Johnny finds friendship with a local girl, Ginny Favors, but is bullied by her cruel brothers. When he is accidentally gored by a bull, it takes more than Uncle Remus to save him. His parents must reunite, creating a happy family once more.

Jim Korkis, a Disney historian and author of numerous articles and presentations on Disney's work, tells the story of the film in his 2012 book *Who's Afraid of the Song of the South: and Other Forbidden Disney Stories*. The film was produced as Disney had planned, with the mixing of live action with animated segments and combining the two in certain scenes, as when Uncle Remus sings the most famous song of the film, "Zip-a-Dee- Doo-Dah," and in the final scene where Uncle Remus and the children mingle with the animals of the stories he has told. The actor who played Uncle Remus, James Baskett, was awarded an Oscar for his performance, and "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah" won an Oscar for the best song.

In this way Harris presented a benign view of Southern plantation culture which Disney transferred to the screen. But many objected to the film. Among them was the NAACP which in its battle for equality of opportunity, said that the story perpetuated an image of the

caste system which they were striving to abolish. A member of the Disney staff, Norma Jensen, said that the film did indeed contain some cliches, yet it is “so critically beautiful that it is difficult to be provoked by the cliches,” and that the relationship between a rich white boy, a black boy, and the daughter of a white tenant farmer is very touching. In this way the story transcends race and class in the traditional South.

The film was not a box office success with its first release, but subsequent re-releases were profitable. The first re-release was in 1956 and another in 1972 when it was the highest grossing rerelease up to that time. There were two more, 1980 and 1986. After that, the Disney executives surrendered to negative criticism, and withdrew the film from public view. This move, according to Floyd Norman, was a misstep. Norman, who wrote the foreword to *Who's Afraid of the Song of the South*, was the first black animator with Disney Studios and was subsequently inducted as a Disney Legend. He writes that he saw *Song of the South* as a child and found it “delightful.” As a Disney employee he was allowed to check out a sixteen-millimeter version which he showed in the 1950s at a special screening in a Los Angeles church to an entirely black audience. They “absolutely loved the movie and even requested a second screening of the Disney classic.” The film, he says, “remains a sweet and gentle tale of a kindly old gentleman helping a child triumph through a troubled time.” It presents a naïve view of the South, but one that

was “never malicious or offensive.” The film is “flavored with some of the most inspired cartoon animation ever put on the screen,” and he says that “if you are a fan of classic Disney storytelling, I guarantee you’ll not find a better film.”

Yet its final release was in 1986 (the full movie and segments, as this goes to print, can still be viewed on Youtube). Norman says that he had assumed that we were living in a more enlightened society decades after the film’s first release, yet censorship remains. “Why,” he asks, “bury the wonderful performances of James Baskett [the second Black actor to win an Academy Award], Hattie McDaniel [the first Black recipient of an Academy Award] and Ruth Warrick [who played the mother in the film]?” and “why deny animation fans some of the finest animation ever to come out of the Disney studio?” America, says Norman, “has come a long way since a little black kid sat in a movie theater in Santa Barbara and dreamed of a Disney career” which he eventually achieved, and for which he was later honored.

Disney executives have also come a long way since their predecessors used early themes with racial figures, for it is not only *The Song of the South* which they now reject, but other parts of films where blacks appear in what they now consider a demeaning way. For example, they apologized for a chorus sung by a flock of jolly, joking crows in the film *Dumbo*, one of which was named Jim Crow, in which the crows speak and sing in the black English vernacular, which the company now regards as a “demean-

ing” stereotypical African American accent. In the 1960s the company removed from reruns of *Fantasia* the character Sunflower, a centaurette (female centaur) with obvious black features who was the servant of an attractive white centaurette, an act of retroactive editing which has become routine since then.

Along with the emphasis on race, with its roots more recently in Critical Race Theory, the Disney company now also promotes gender ideology, both of which are parts of the broader movement to transform American culture from within. In this vein the Disney company, in 2019, added a mea culpa on its streaming platform in the form of a disclaimer warning viewers of the “regretful racial stereotypes” and “outdated cultural depictions” seen in the classic Disney films. In its disclaimer the company says that they have sought the advice of third parties including the African American Film Critics Association and the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation in what the company calls its “efforts to increase our cultural competence by providing ongoing guidance and thought leadership in critical issues and shifting perspectives.”

The effect of the race-gender emphasis throughout the institutions is seen not only in popular entertainment, but also in lessons taught in public schools to children as young as five years old, topics which Disney advances in its theme parks and films as well as in television productions for children. For example, Latoya Raveneau, executive producer of Disney Television Animation,

the producer of the musical series “Rise Up, Sing Out,” and of the series “The Proud Family, Louder and Prouder,” tells of how easy it has been to add “queerness” to shows whenever possible. And Karey Burke, President of Disney General Entertainment, says that she intends to see that half of all characters will represent LGBTQ+ or racial minorities. As the public becomes aware of those changes, their attitude is beginning to change about Disney and its current productions. One parent told the *Epoch Times* (March 1-7, 2023) that she had always felt that Disney provided “wholesome entertainment for the entire family,” but that “something happened. We became aware,” she says, “that Disney’s content was changing” in ways to which she objected, and that like other parents she did not like what Disney was teaching her children, an opinion shared by many others.

Such objections were also raised in Florida in the way that public schools were purveying the new line on gender to young children without notifying the parents of what they were doing. This led to the passage in 2022 of the Parental Rights in Education Act which protects the parents’ right to be informed about their child’s educational program, and which prohibits classroom instruction about sexual orientation or gender identity from kindergarten through the third grade. Beyond the third grade the new law requires that such instruction must be age appropriate, although those standards have yet to be formulated.

At first the Disney executives steered a middle course between the advocacy of LGBTQ+ activists and employees who urged the company to stay out of politics. But the activists won and the company came out against the legislation. The CEO at that time, Bob Chapek, said at the annual meeting of the company shareholders that the management had opposed the legislation “from the outset,” but thought that it would have been more effective by working against it “behind the scenes.” He also pledged \$5 million to LGBTQ+ organizations, and Peter Rice, chairman of Disney Entertainment Content (of which Disney television is a part), said that the Florida law is “a new and painful iteration of a history of discrimination against an already vulnerable group” and a “violation of fundamental human right.”

This change on the part of the Disney corporation, from a family-friendly source of entertainment to a purveyor of a radically different way of a dealing with children, is a change of direction to which many object, and has resulted in a sharp decrease in the company’s public approval as seen in various polls. For example, a Trafalgar poll in April 2022, designed to determine the popularity of Disney’s policy of “focusing on creating content to expose young children to sexual ideas” showed that 68 percent were less likely to do business with Disney because of that turn in policy, and 69 percent support family-friendly alternatives. For a company which has been known for a family-friendly form of entertainment, this is a warning sign that

their policy shift might eventually affect what really counts, namely its profit margin.

This in turn has caught the attention of large shareholders some of whom are dissatisfied with the financial repercussions of this sharp leftward turn. Kenneth Simeone, who owns a large share in the company, brought suit against the management whose actions, he says, have had “financial repercussions” resulting in “harm to the company.” In April 2022 Reed Rubenstein, former U.S. Deputy Associate Attorney General and currently the senior counsel for America First Legal, wrote a letter to the board on behalf of dissatisfied shareholders demanding that the board investigate the “wasting of corporate assets” including damage to Disney’s trusted reputation for creating G-rated children’s entertainment. He also asked the board “why the company supports lessons on sexual orientation for five-year-olds, while simultaneously opposing parental notification.”

A further sign that the Disney executives are on the wrong track is the tremendous financial loss from two of its latest films, *Strange World* and *Lightyear*, the later a part of the *Toy Story* franchise, which together lost a quarter of a billion dollars. Both films have homosexual plots which are not directed toward tolerance or acceptance, but rather are based on what has been described as the sexualization of children, which some even call “grooming.”

The vast Disney conglomerate has also had trouble at the top with major

management shake-ups, partly due to the decision to support the LGBTQ+ agenda in the face of the Florida legislation. The company never had to join this politically motivated dispute, but if the Trafalgar poll and other indications show a trend in public opinion, then it is clear that Disney has picked a losing issue, for the company had nothing to gain from joining this movement, or from sexualizing the content of productions of children's entertainment. Despite changes of CEOs the management continues to be influenced by a small group of assertive activists within the company as well as top executives who seem willing to follow the current trend. This may change in time if the profit margin indicates that it is advantageous to do so. The trend so far indicates that profits will be affected presumably due to the introduction of gender ideology in films made for children. For example, subscriptions to Disney's streaming service showed a drop during the first three months of 2023, with the whole service losing four million customers worldwide. Overall, the company has, in total, lost more than one billion dollars in the last quarter of 2022 and close to that amount in the first quarter of 2023, for which content is no doubt a factor.

The reason seems to be the company's stubborn commitment to identity politics especially in its emphasis on transgenderism with its displays of drag queens and other kinds of "gender fluidity." One example Disney subsidiary Marvel Entertainment's *Loki* series which showed a "gender fluid" character.

Another is the Disney+ animated series *Baymax* which features a "transgender man" who menstruates, and who advises on which type of menstruation pad one should buy.

Perhaps it is time to hope, with Floyd Norman, that "the Disney company might one day get over its self-imposed fears and finally find its own laughing place."

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