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English 102 -- 3rd Hour

11 April 2017

“Part of Your World”...On Second Thought, We’ll Take All of It

For most American children, our childhoods were littered with the strange, colorful sensations of Walt Disney Animation. On screen everywhere, we watched in amazement as meerkats hula-danced, mermaids sang, household objects spoke, and genies referenced obscure 80’s pop culture icons. As a nation, we sang along with Pinocchio, laughed aloud with Baloo, and experienced first-hand the traumatic loss of a father figure that would render us to tears whenever we heard the word “stampede.” The Walt Disney Company, in terms of films, merchandise, and theme parks, wormed its way into our homes as well as our hearts. But what began as a hunky-dory (who would be found in a later film) American staple evolved over time into an all-consuming global superpower. Like the same stampede that killed Mufasa, Disney embarked on an epic crusade to bring their theme parks, toys, and animated films to all corners of the world, and in a further analogy, forever disseminated and Americanized worldwide cultures. As their movies as well as business conglomerate diversify, the company itself has had to adjust its innermost workings to appeal to a larger, ethnically varying audience. One thing is for certain -- the Walt Disney Company has had to execute a sensitive juggling act, Americanizing the diverse world whilst diversifying America.

In the 1980’s and 90’s, following Michael Eisner’s bold acquisition of Tokyo Disney and “Euro-Disney,” the Disney theme-park property later to take on the more politically correct name, “Disneyland Paris,” the company slowly began expanding their worldwide connections

(Tang par. 2,13). Since then, the company has expanded their global theme-park standings, including Hong Kong Disneyland in 2005 and Shanghai Disneyland in 2011 (Tang par. 6, 16). However, these strongholds of all that is pure and imaginary were far from exact replicas of their American counterparts. Chinese, French, and Japanese traditions and customs had to be taken into account, often times affecting the entire layout of the park. For example, in Hong Kong Disney, the entryways to the park have been adorned with boulders and an excess of fountains and streams throughout, in order to represent wealth and preserve positive *chi* inside the park. There are also no clocks in the gift shops because “giving a clock” in Mandarin sounds like, “going to a funeral.” Green hats are also absent, as they used to be worn by prostitutes. Hotels have no floor number four, as “four” sounds similar to “death” and is essentially our version of the number thirteen (Tang par. 7-10). These changes continue in Paris, where Tom Sawyer has little to no name recognition, and so his playground island that is the centerpiece of Frontierland here in the U.S. has been transformed to Discoveryland, an attraction dedicated to world inventors (Tang par. 14). Disney was very obviously making long strides to culturally appropriate their attractions, and by doing so, they found a much easier method of introduction of the Disney brand to foreign nations. These small but significant changes continue in the films as well as the parks.

Disney’s newfound global awareness -- along with advancements in technology that make these changes significantly easier -- has also seeped through the cracks in their animated films. Pixar Animation, Disney’s sister-studio, has particularly made strides to adjusting their animated features in order to better coincide with various cultures. The examples are numerous, and a significant number of them are due to translation issues. In their Academy award-winning feature, *Up*, our protagonists Carl and Ellie continually put money into a jar to save up for a trip

to “Paradise Falls.” However, translations could not be provided in every language, so the words as you would see in the American version are replaced by a simple illustration. In fact, *Monsters University* had so many spelling-based gags that, not one, but two major symbols and jokes had to be adjusted for the non-English version of the film. Randall’s cupcakes spelling out “Be My Pal” and subsequent rearranging to “LAME” are replaced with frosting smiley faces, and the imposing red-lettering announcing the movie’s infamous “SCARE GAMES” is instead shown via Greek symbols (Gillis 2-7). However, some of the most intriguing modifications comes from their film *Inside Out*. In one of the opening scenes, we see a toddler version of our main character being force-fed broccoli -- a universally despised vegetable by anyone with sanity -- and her subsequent struggles to avoid it. Your disgust and surprise might even match my own when I tell you that broccoli is actually well-liked in many nations, even by toddlers. So in multiple versions of the film, the vegetable is changed, notably becoming a green bell pepper in the Japanese version (Boboltz par. 1,2). The director of the film, Pete Doctor, was quoted by *Huffington Post*, explaining, ““We learned that some of our content wouldn’t make sense in other countries....Technology has allowed translation of signage and other elements to be pretty easy”” (Pete Doctor as qtd. in Boboltz par. 3). The film had another two sequences that required re-animation, including hockey game being transformed into the more universally recognized sport of soccer as well as the language and direction of which a character read a sign, totalling up to twenty-eight graphic changes over forty-five individual shots in the final product (Boboltz par. 4-5, 7-8). These changes, however, as well as cultural references in general, have not gone without their fair share of controversy.

The America the Walt Disney Company was born into starkly contrasts the one we live in today. Now more than ever, political correctness is esteemed and racial and ethnic controversies

are to be avoided at all costs. Since its birth in the 1930's, Walt's beloved and "wholesome" animation company has gone through periods of scrutiny, often under fire for blurring the lines between comedic and offensive. These controversies may have began in an innocent place but were misconstrued as the crow flies...literally. *Dumbo* is considered classic Disney gold, and the little elephant's tale of flight and adventure delighted us as children, though one element more than likely went over our heads. On his way to find himself, the elephant comes across a group of crows, who are smoking, laughing, and speaking purely in slang. We are then introduced to their leader -- Jim, the *crow*. (Does the name ring-a-bell?) This was not the only time Disney walked the offensive line in their earlier films, however, stereotyping ethnic groups within the United States ("The 10 Biggest Disney Controversies" par. 4). In their film *Peter Pan*, we meet a tribe of Indians, who subsequently sing, "What Makes the Red Man Red?" and stop, dance, and wildly clap their hands over their mouths....not exactly in line with that "political correctness" discussed earlier ("The 10 Biggest Disney Controversies" par. 6). Taking on more global undertones with their 1955 film, *Lady and the Tramp*, Disney features two Siamese cats as its villains. With tan skin, slanted eyes, and artful manipulation, one cannot but help to see the connections to the World War that took place just ten years before and our opposing side ("The 10 Biggest Disney Controversies" par. 7). Even years later, as the Disney Renaissance was taking place, it seemed the Company could not feature ethnic diversity in its films without offense. The beloved *Aladdin* ran into some trouble with Arab-American groups due to its portrayal of barbaric brutality in the films' Arab setting. Though Disney was patting itself on the back for featuring an ethnic hero and heroine, the critics won, causing Disney to change a few lyrics when it was released to video (James par. 1). However, controversy cannot be discussed without mentioning the incident that was *Song of the South*. No longer permitted to be released

in the U.S., this 1946 film won an Academy award as well as its own attraction in the Disney theme parks. However, the story, which features a happy and content ex-slave who tells folksy stories to the white children, was called out for racial stereotyping and glossing over a time of extreme sorrow and pain (Suddath par. 1). Aside from a soaking drop on Splash Mountain, most U.S. citizens have never associated with it, and the film is now out of sight and out of mind. This history of controversy stems from the very beginning, but this is not to say the modern era Disney films have been granted immunity.

Disney recently took another shot at culturally foreign films in 2016's *Moana*, which takes place in the Pacific Islands. With its beautiful imagery and intense study of Polynesian culture, the film's creators were well-prepared and received two Oscar nominations. However, it was their portrayal of the legendary demigod Maui that angered those of Polynesian heritage. With his burly, larger-than-life appearance, viewers saw him as a direct stereotype, as nine out of ten of the world's most obese nations come from the Pacific Islands (Roy par. 1-4). All of these controversies, as numerous as they are, still deserve to be discussed rather than forgotten about. As stated in an article on *TheRichest.com*, "Controversy in Disney is particularly interesting because it reflects the historical progression of society – what would have been acceptable 60 years ago now makes viewers roll their eyes or squirm in their seats. More importantly, however, it raises concerns for children and what effect these outdated messages could have on them" ("The 10 Biggest Disney Controversies" par. 3). Past mistakes are lessons to be learned from, and it is for certain that Disney has learned theirs.

The 90's to early 2000's was a time of exponential growth for the Disney Company, conquering such names as ABC Family, The Muppets, and most notably, Pixar Animation. The more worldwide brands they flip, flopped, and injected in a bit of that Disney magic, the more

worldwide the Company became as a whole. The global corporation consists of five major branches -- parks and resorts, Walt Disney Studios, their two music record labels, Disney Interactive, and the ultimate merchandising, world-dominating Disney Consumer Products (Robbins 8-9). With so many acting components, Disney's superpower can, surprisingly, be surmised in one -- the *brand*. Years of tireless work has engrained a certain image of the Company as whole in the minds of the consumers, one of innocence and wholesomeness, thought not without adventure (Robbins 10, 12). Michaela Robbins of the University of Tennessee offers an interesting perspective, recounting, "Some suggest that Disney's success exists in its ability to speak to both children and adults. The Disney Company speaks to children by constructing and reliving elements of lived experiences, while providing adults with nostalgic fantasies about the past" (Carson as cited in Robbins 12-13). A brand is a difficult thing to cultivate, especially with their level of success, and it is this automatic, psychological connection with the emotion behind it that is the cause of Disney's widespread notoriety (Robbins 13). Robbins nicknames this contagious love of the Company as "Disneyization"; it knows no boundaries and has infected every corner of the world. There is something irresistible about consistent theming, mass merchandising, and the forever cheerful, company-mandated demeanor, which gives the lovely impression to all that their work....doesn't feel like working (the reality of this effect, I'm sure, differs from employee to employee) (Robbins 15-16). This globalization was not without fail, however.

For consumers around the world and the company itself, Mickey Mouse stepping foot in another continent was akin to Armstrong landing on the moon. The establishment of Euro-Disney, now Disneyland Paris, was Disney's first firm establishment in the worldwide stage, and quite frankly, it was disastrous. The French press cruelly critiqued the company throughout its

creation, because unlike most companies, Disney changed little to nothing when entering the international realm. Robbins recounts, “The French place great value on their language and culture, and due to this the press made the Disney venture out to be one of American cultural imperialism. The French feared that Disney characters would soon overtake the French literary masterpiece characters in the mind of French citizens” (Robbins 18). Time would prove this forcible Americanization to be quite profitable. Disneyland Paris, even with the dramatizations of the press, has over one million visitors a month, and France as a whole has become Disney’s largest European consumer (Robbins 20). Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, Director of the East Asian Studies Center and Professor of History at Indiana University, observed a similarly successful not-so-hostile takeover upon Disney’s arrival in China. He describes:

While living in Shanghai in the mid-1980s, two things I remember seeing are sweatshirts for sale on the streets emblazoned with the face of Disney's most famous creation, and a wall poster showing a stake being driven through Mickey's heart. Were these signs that a big American corporation was extracting profits from a new market and that local people were angered by cultural imperialism? Hardly. (Wasserstrom par. 3)

The poster, as it turns out, was a part of the Communist Party health campaign and not an act of aggression against Disney or America, but was instead encouraging Chinese citizens to rid of rats...and it just so happened that Mickey was the nation’s staple rodent (Wasserstrom par. 3). It seems as though, regardless of Americanization and the hostilities that come with it, Disney remains profitable and widely accepted (or in China’s case, well utilized) in many cultures.

While, yes, Disney has had its hands tied ushering into foreign nations, it has been quite busy diversifying America as well. Among all the cultures it integrates into its works, Disney has cultivated a culture (wordplay!) all its own. In essence, they have found the perfect recipe for

taking a culture and making money through it by use of escapism. Lee Artz of Purdue University simplifies its appropriation of cultures as such: “Disney animation entertains and instructs because it offers a cinematic escape from reality by presenting recognizable narrative and imagistic fictions as if they were or could be reality. In part, the fantasies and their narratives are shielded from external critiques because they are based on widely-accepted cultural myths and morals” (Artz 3). On the one hand, Disney has the ability to take worldwide cultures and present them in a way that is understandable to children. Legends and fables, and most importantly, their lessons, that would have gone untaught are now instilled in American youth. In this way, the use of foreign cultures within films encourages the escapism that marks Disney’s inner culture. But on the other, the way in which Disney goes about any specific culture’s appropriation forever walks the line of offense. For example, in *The Lion King*, while illustrating the natural beauty of the African plains and wildlife, the film received minor clapback for portraying the protagonists as English nobility and (subtly) the evil hyenas as lower-class American youth (Artz 3). However, even with all of society’s critiques, Disney has not gone without a pat on the back. Their recent efforts in terms of diversity, with characters like the hard-working, African American Tiana and independent, Arabic tradition-breaking Jasmine, have gained them much praise, even placing the company thirty-ninth in the top fifty companies engaged in diverse employment benefits (Alvarez par. 3-4). There is certainly work to be done, but there always will be. Maybe it’s time to honor how far the company has come instead of how much farther it has yet to go.

Always attractive, smiling, and glistening, the Walt Disney Company has brought joys and thrills to households all across America and, especially in the past thirty years, the world. They are one of the most influential organizations in the world, not only due to their widespread

business, but also because of their audience -- children. Foreign myths, lessons, and stories are made available to them that would have otherwise gone unnoticed. And if we truly “*are the world and are the children*”, it is important that we keep these theoretical culture doors open so as to better expose youth in America and around the world to the diverse planet they were born into. Disney has certainly struggled with achieving this appropriately -- adjusting their theme parks to match the host nation and their films to match their setting and characters. By doing so, Disney merchandising has been put on trial as a serial culture-killer. Is this Americanization a monster that must be stopped or simply a side-effect of diversity? I believe it to be a little bit of both. And with time, trial, and error, Disney will continually perfect the global appropriation formula in a way that exposes but doesn't offend and shares but doesn't plagiarize. It truly is “A Whole New World”....and the magic carpet just might be capitalism.

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