DRAFT

Teaching Disney to Youth in the Age of Perpetual, Disposable Consumption
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"We have no obligation to make history. We have no obligation to make art. We have no obligation to make a statement. To make money is our only objective." (Eisner, 1981, p. 1)

Disney ended its fiscal year on Thursday with $7.5 billion in profit, a hefty 22 percent increase from 2013, as hit movies and robust theme park attendance combined to offset higher sports-rights costs at ESPN. (Barnes, 2014, p. B3)

Introduction

"Hey there, ho there, Hi there, you as welcome as can be." (Dodd, 1955)

Yes, I will admit it. I was a proud member of the Mickey Mouse Club. I had a Mickey Mouse Membership pin, Mousketeer ears and a Mousketeer Member t-shirt. I was, indeed, a card carrying member. The Mickey Mouse Club was on television weekdays from 1955-1959. I was happy to belong.

> Inside their temples the shoppers/consumers may find moreover, what they zealously, yet in vain, seek outside: the comforting feeling of belonging – the reassuring feeling of being part of a community. (Bauman, 2000, p. 99)

The show was in syndication from 1962-1968. 1977-1978 marked a revival of sorts with the New Mickey Mouse Club. It also appeared in 1989 and 1995. In the original series there were memorable members from the all-white cast. Jimmy Dodd (who wrote the theme song) was the host and head Mousketeer. He spoke words of inspiration and morality to the eager watchers. There was Big Roy, the adult Mousketeer (apparently Walt Disney picked him for the show because he was big and funny looking). Two of the young Mousketeers I remember the most were Annette Funicello (who went on to become a beach icon in films with Frankie

Avalon), Cubby O'Brien (who became a drummer for the Carpenters) and Bobbie Burgess (who later danced his way to fame on the *Lawrence Welk Show*). Interestingly enough most of the profits from the *Mickey Mouse Club* went into funding the development of Disneyland. In the 1950's there was also the television program *Disneyland* which had the divisions, *Frontier Land*, *Tomorrow Land*, *Adventure Land*, and *Fantasy Land*. Famous segments such as *Zorro* and *Davey Crockett* were part of the show. The show and spin off consumer items were profitable. Profits from the sale of the Davey Crockett coon skin caps, for example, that sold in the 1950's, reached "$300 million ($2.6 billion in 2014 dollars)" (Crokett, 2014, p.1). Yes, I had one of those too.

Although this stroll down memory lane has been fun, I place it here to remind us all, that we may shake our heads and wonder why youth are so infatuated, enamored with unwavering loyalty to Disney, but it wasn't that long ago, some of us were just as taken. It also reminds us of the allure of nostalgia. No one stands outside the enticements of the "consuming life" (Bauman, 2007) whether it is a Lexus or a coon skin cap. It is good to remember that consumer consciousness when we attempt to critically teach Disney. This exploration of Disney will consist of three parts. First, Disney is placed within the context of the politics of the culture of consumption. Second, critically teaching Disney within that context is examined to understand the current attitudes of youth toward Disney. Third, Disney loyalty is placed within perpetual, disposal consuming in the 21st century and the corporatization of everything. First, let us analyze the power of the culture of consumption.

Culture of Consumption and Disposal

> The 'society of consumers', in other words, stands for the kind of society that promotes, encourages or enforces the choice of a consumerist lifestyle and life strategy and dislikes all alternative cultural options; a society in which adapting to the precepts of consumer culture and following them strictly is, to all practical intents and purposes, the sole unquestionably approved choice; a feasible and so also plausible choice – and a condition of membership. (Bauman, 2007, p. 53)

The Walt Disney Company is a huge corporation within the "society of consumers' owning hundreds of companies in a large variety of industries. Disney owns Touchstone Pictures, Marvel Entertainment, Lucas Film, Walt Disney Pictures and The Muppets Studio. Walt Disney Company also owns radio stations across the country, publishing companies, parks and resorts around the world, ESPN, Baby Einstein, and Disney retail stores.[i] Since it is one of the major entertainment corporations its influence on popular culture is enormous. It is what Zygmunt Bauman (2011) in *Culture in a Liquid Modern World* discusses in a chapter on fashion. Fashion can be used as an example of what I want to call perpetual consumerism. In many ways what The Walt Disney Corporation knew long ago. Bauman is discussing fashion, but it is applicable to all consumer items and the type of human beings that consumer longing "produces." This schooling in consumerism is never-ending.

> Today's tokens of 'being ahead' have to be acquired quickly, while those of yesterday must be just as swiftly confined to the scrapheap. The injunction to keep an eye on 'what has already gone out of fashion' must be observed as consciously as the obligation to keep on top of what is (at this moment) new and up to date (Bauman, p.22).

Children's desires for cultural artifacts are in many ways about Disney items. Like fashion and Disney is part of fashion desires too, it is a question of what is in and what is to be discarded. That is one of the reasons for the anxious awaiting of the newest Disney film produced by Disney or one of Disney's subsidiaries. There is a feverish desire among children to follow Disney's pathway to buying. A typical pattern to this consumption is that children are taken to see a Disney film. Of course, the excitement is at a high level. Next, the kids have to be taken to Walmart, Kmart, Target or the closest Disney store to buy the hundreds of choices in toys, posters, clothes, furniture, or bedding items. Then on the way home from the store with their bags of loot the children demand to go to MacDonald's or Burger King. I suppose it might be because they want the food in the Happy Meal or the playground. But most likely it is that the Happy Meal

contains the toy that is linked to the Disney film they just saw. Disney became part of their McChildhood[ii]. It is an intense longing for these items for a limited time. There is also the desire to have the "entire collection." It is not enough to have just one toy from the group of toys. You have to have the entire collection. At this point historically it is even possible to acquire those toys via sites like EBay to perhaps, nostalgically complete a collection. As I will discuss later millennials can fulfill their nostalgic desire via online shopping. The desire to acquire these items is as intense as having just the right piece of fashion from the acceptable designer.

Then, just as in fashion, when a style goes out of style like a Nehru jacket in the 1960's or more recently baggy jeans replaced by skinny jeans the old style is tossed into the scrapheap. An interesting factor in the more recent consumer mentality is that the length of time between in style and out of style becomes ever shorter. The same is true for childhood desire for consumer items. Many Disney, Hasbro, Mattel, toys now sit in boxes in the attic or basement of childhood homes. They are relegated to obscurity for millennials. One idea about those discarded toys does cross their minds. Maybe they could sell some of the old toys as collector items and make money to buy the latest piece of technology or some other consumer items. They wish they had left those toys in their original packages because they would be worth even more. Disposability is just as important as consuming.

> Today's tokens of 'being ahead' have to be acquired quickly, while those of yesterday must be just as swiftly confined to the scrapheap. The injunction to keep an eye on 'what has already gone out of fashion' must be observed as conscientiously as the obligation to keep on top of what is (at this moment) new and up to date. (Bauman, 2011, p. 22)

Nothing lasts for long in the consumer society agenda whether it is Disney items or smart phones. Those items are as quickly disposed of as they are acquired.

Belonging is also a quest for all of us particularly millennials. In this consumer, confessional, social network society belonging is important. Just as we post our daily activities on Facebook as a replacement for confession with a priest perhaps? We count how many likes we receive. We even post our accomplishments and pets. This all is an attempt to replace real community belonging with virtual belonging. It is like our political (slacktivism) postings. These posting cement our belonging to the correct political point of view. Consuming just the right Disney items and having them displayed in a child's room is in our consumer society a sense of belonging. We all have the same hip stuff.

> The reference to '*staying* ahead' intuits a reliable precaution against the danger of overlooking the moment when the current emblems of 'belonging' go out of circulation, having been replaced by fresh ones, and when their inattentive bearers risk falling by the wayside – which, in the case of the market-mediated bid for membership, translates as the sentiment of being rejected, excluded, abandoned and lonely, and ultimately rebounds in the searing pain of personal inadequacy. (Bauman, 2007, p. 83)

Is there a way to demystify the lure of Disney and consuming Disney? That is a complex question. Critical teaching centered on Disney's role in the consumer society maybe a step in that direction. My personal attempts at critically teaching Disney within the context of a society that I have described above demonstrate that difficulty. It raises questions about the millennial's ties to Disney but also the difficulty in not completely demonizing Disney or the imposition of my positions on Disney. The question becomes how to go about teaching Disney in a critical manner.

Critically Teaching Disney

> Education is never innocent, because it always presupposes a particular view of citizenship, culture, and society. And yet it is the very appeal to innocence, bleached of any semblance of politics that has become a defining feature of Disney culture and pedagogy. (Giroux, 1999, p. 31)

> [T]he more radical the person is, the more fully he or she enters into reality so that, knowing it better, he or she can transform it. This individual is not afraid to confront, to listen, and to see the world unveiled. This person is not afraid to meet the people or to enter into a dialogue with them. This person does not consider himself or herself the proprietor of history or of all people, or the liberator of the oppressed; but he or she does commit himself or herself, within history, to fight at their side. (Freire, 2006, p. 39)

Every semester I dialogue about Disney with my pre-service teachers. I have dialoguing about Disney with pre-service teacher education students for about 8 years. I have also discussed Disney with graduate students but I want to concentrate on undergraduates in this chapter. I know it is the time of the semester when students get angry with me. One of my students in an anonymous evaluation wrote that he or she thought I was pretty cool until I started criticizing Disney then I just made this individual mad. But, there was an indication in the comment that I was making the entire class angry. We are dialoguing and deconstructing their strongly held beliefs. The Disney hegemony is extremely strong and deeply embedded. I am in the students' words pushing it too far. Initially, I was shocked by the anger and resistance to the critical discussion of Disney. I was surprised by the fierce loyalty my 20something students (millennials) demonstrated for Disney. I was treading on sacred ground. As Giroux (1999) correctly indicates, I am not trying to tell my students what Disney "means". I think that they have received enough of that in some of their other classes.

> I am suggesting a very different approach to Disney, one that highlights the pedagogical and the contextual by raising questions about Disney itself, what role it plays (1) in shaping public memory, national identity, gender roles, and childhood values; (2) in suggesting who qualifies as an American; and (3) in determining the role of consumerism in American life. (Giroux, 1999, p. 10)

These students are the "zero generation relegated to zones of social and economic abandonment and marked by zero jobs, zero future, zero hope" (Giroux, 2013 p, 1). When we begin to critically discuss Disney films, shows, theme parks, suburban communities, cruises, vacations and consumer items, we are not only questioning Disney but a heartfelt nostalgia of this generation. I have written about nostalgia (Reynolds & Webber, 2009) but this is a different look at the phenomenon. The generation might not be attached to much besides their cellphones and other technology, but they are fiercely attached to their past.[iii]

> In counterpoint to our fascination with cyberspace and the virtual global village, there is no less global epidemic of nostalgia, an affective yearning for a community with a collective memory, a longing for continuity in a fragmented world. Nostalgia inevitably reappears as defense mechanism in a time of accelerated rhythms of life and historical upheavals. (Boym, 2001. p. xiv)

Students have found it acceptable to criticize smart phones. They find it humorous when we discuss how attached they are to technology from smart phones to big screen TVs. But when the critique is centered on an iconic and beloved element of their past the tone is very different. When faced with the realistic possibility that they will encounter huge student loan debts and teaching jobs that pay very low wages and are not guaranteed for the long term, the Disney constructed past seems desirable. They also want to keep that romanticized past for their kids. A critique of Disney is viewed as an assault. It is viewed as an attack on their nostalgic sense of stability or continuity. That nostalgia is for a time of stability that never existed.

When shown videos or documentaries such as *Mickey Mouse Monopoly* (2001) students react by indicating that films made in the 1940's and 1950's are old and outdated and Disney has improved since then, particularly in the 1990's when they were enraptured with Disney. But the students have difficulty deconstructing the strong connection they have to consuming Disney products and the impact Disney has on their thinking. Most of the students can sing along to most every song from Disney films. They discuss having much of the consumer products that Disney produced and sold in Disney stores, Walmart and were prizes in MacDonald's Happy Meals. Their bedrooms were decorated with Lion King Sheets, pillow cases,

and wall posters. The women in the classes fondly recall dressing up like Disney Princesses and collecting princess memorabilia. They had Disney backpacks and fashions.

> "There's something about Disney," said Megan Eisenberg, a second-year exercise science major from Roswell. "There's something about what you saw when you were younger and are now like 'Let's watch it again, even though we're all 20 years-old and shouldn't be watching ["The Lion King,"] but it was fun when we were five, so it should be fun when we're 20." (Abercrombie, 2014, p. 1)

In a time of uncertainty for these millennials, the nostalgia of Disney allows them some comfort. Disney films and consumer items were a large part of their childhood. In an era where (for my students) both of their parents worked and felt guilty for the lack of parental attention, they bought their children stuff. This "stuff" was usually in the form of technology or DVDs. The reputation Disney had/has for innocent fun was a major consideration for purchasing certain films like the *Lion King*. The kids were already watching the Disney Channel with shows like "Boy Meets World" so the Disney brand of innocence and its consumption was already firmly in place.

> Indeed, Walt Disney quickly saw the advantages to linking childhood innocence with home entertainment, which became the pedagogical vehicle to promote a set of values and practices that associate the safeguarding of childhood with a strong investment in the nuclear family, middle class Protestant values, and the market as a sphere of consumption. (Giroux & Pollock, 2010b, p. 18)

So, when Disney is discussed in a critical pedagogical class, there should be an understanding and not an imposition of critical notions which can be just another form of oppression. The critique of consumerism is already a huge step for these millennials who often ask me –What is wrong with buying things? With Disney the comment frequently centers on the notion that critics are reading too much into this Disney analysis whether the analysis centers on race, gender, class or consumption. As the students often say, "Don't you have anything better to do? The students also reveal in the dialogue that they have never been asked their opinion before and are not comfortable disagreeing with the professor. And, though they have been told in many classes that it is acceptable to disagree with the professor, they have found out that it is not true. And, professors seldom actually listen to their opinions even if they share them. It is a major impediment that must be dealt with before the time of Disney dialogue enters the class.

The critical pedagogy they encounter is not a totalizing critique of Disney as evil. (Burdick, Sandlin & O'Malley, 2013, p.85). Discussing Henry Giroux's critique of Disney, Savage writes:

> Popular public pedagogies, therefore, are reduced to little more than mechanisms for exercising ideological domination over children. The core problem here is similar to that of political publics, insofar as these readings veer into totalizing visions of public pedagogy, which gloss over the disparate and often contradictory ways cultural texts and discourses are translated into cultural meanings. (Savage, 2013, pp. 85-86)

Critical pedagogical analysis in pre-service teacher classrooms can be an attempt to teach Disney within a framework of radical listening, open dialogue and radical love. Radical listening to student points of view and trying to establish a community of understanding with students is part of the process.

> True listening does not diminish in me the exercise of my right to disagree, to oppose, to take a position. On the contrary, it is in knowing how to listen well that I better prepare myself to speak or to situate myself vis-à-vis the ideas being discussed as a subject capable of presence, of listening "connectedly" and without prejudices to what the other is saying. (Freire, 1998, p. 107)

Dialoguing about Disney opens a pathway for other critical discussions because students can discuss popular culture and do so willingly. For me, radical love in a classroom is possible when you both care about students enough to not only share and discuss knowledge but also allow critique/critical consciousness to develop.

Dialogue cannot exist, however, in the absence of a profound love for the world and for people. The naming of the world, which is an act of creation and recreation, is not possible if it is not infused with love. Love is at the same time the foundation of dialogue and dialogue itself. (Freire, 2006, p. 89)

Critically teaching Disney is not about establishing the teacher as the knowledge or political expert establishing the ideologically correct point of view on Disney as the Darth Vader of popular culture. In this situation the teacher becomes just as reprehensible as those who enjoy banking useless information into students for test taking. But, a dialogical classroom is about mutually discussing and attempting to understand a cultural phenomenon/corporation that has influenced us all and made us good little consumers from childhood. None of us stand outside the consumer imperative. It is about developing classrooms where we as a community try to acknowledge the power of corporate capitalism to create our way of being in the world. And, try through dialogue to understand how this hegemony systemically operates. How does the critical teaching of Disney assist in the deconstruction and demystification of the present milieu? How does the placing Disney within a critical pedagogical context resist the onslaught of the corporatization of the university and public education? These are the questions we turn to next.

The Disney Millennials and the Precariat

Children are not born with consumer habits. Their identities have to be actively directed to assume the role of consumer. If Disney had its way kids' culture would become not merely a new market for accumulation of capital, but a petri dish for producing new commodified subjects. (Giroux & Pollock, 2010a, p. 11)

It is even more disturbing the Disney and a growing number of Marketers and advertisers now work with child psychologists and other experts, who study young people in order to better understand children's culture so as to develop marketing methods that are more camouflaged, seductive and successful. (Giroux and Pollock, 2010, p. 5)

Disney has always understood the connection between learning and power and their relationship to culture and politics. As one of the most powerful media conglomerates in the world, Disney promotes cultural homogeneity and political conformity, waging a battle against individuals and groups who believe that central to democratic public life is the necessity of democratizing cultural institutions, including the mass media. (Giroux, 2009, p. 250

This is the form of child consumer that our schooling and the free market ideology of neoliberalism produce. Not active citizens who engage in the process of democracy and social justice, but insatiable buyers who want the latest products. Schooling with its test-driven, factory model ideology turns our children into compliant purchasers who wait impatiently for the next new thing to buy. The free market depends on them. Disney depends on them. Apple depends on them. Vera Bradley depends on them.

Since this chapter is about Disney, we have to remember that Disney is just one Lego in the consumerist building of the tallest tower. But it is a big Lego and it has been around for a long time. Students are strongly attached to it as discussed. Their existence in the global, corporate capitalist agenda of consumerism, places them in an interesting dilemma. If they do resist this 21st century madness what are their choices? Every aspect of education and living in general is a target for privatization, corporatization and global capitalism as discussed previously as the consumer society. These are issues that create the precariat which includes global populations. This is a form of the multitude that Hardt and Negri discussed in both, *The Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (2004) and *Commonwealth* (2009)[iv].

Those in it [precariat] have lives dominated by insecurity, uncertainty, debt and humiliation. They are becoming denizens rather than citizens, losing cultural, civil, social, political and economic rights

built up over generations. The precariat is also the first class in history expected to endure labor and work at a lower level than the schooling it typically acquires. In an ever more unequal society, its relative deprivation is severe. (Standing, 2011, p. 1)

The term precariat that our Disney attached students are linked to is derived from the two words precarious and proletariat. Precarious is a term that reminds us of the dangerous, risky, and unstable. The proletariat refers to the working class who we still think of as industrial workers. My students will be hired for jobs for which they are overqualified and contain no or little job security. They are being trained to be public school teachers. Even the continuation of public schools is risky and unstable. What I prefer to call the training of teachers is now being privatized by companies like Pearson.

If you haven't heard of Pearson, perhaps you have heard of one of the publishers they own, like Adobe, Scott Foresman, Penguin, Longman, Wharton, Harcourt, Puffin, Prentice Hall, or Allyn & Bacon (among others). If you haven't heard of Pearson, perhaps you have heard of one of their tests, like the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the Stanford Achievement Test, the Millar Analogy Test, or the G.E.D. Or their data systems, like PowerSchool and SASI (Job, 2012, p. 1)[v]

It is easy to envision the actual content of teacher education courses being determined by corporations. Any opportunity for pre-service teachers to engage in critical ideas and questions fades into the merciless on slot of Mega Corporations like Pearson and others. Many of the students training to be teachers are likely to become part of this precariat. They will have the education to qualify them to become teachers but may very likely have to settle for jobs that have little or no security, no healthcare and little intellectual satisfaction. The type of education that a Pearson teacher training program would provide will be the type that will allow certification only if the potential candidate can spew forth the Pearson codes. This is not what either critical educators or teacher education students want. A Pearson infused training of teachers will certainly not have in its curriculum outlines a place for a unit on the dialogue about consumer consciousness and Disney.

Moving toward education for critical consciousness, complicated conversations and social justice is a daunting task. But there are glimmers of hope in the resistances on the part of teachers who refuse to give standardized test, students who refuse to take them and parents who support both the teachers and the students. These initial resistances to present schooling/testing are the beginning of more resistance and real change in the public schools and the neoliberal society in which they exist.[vi] Perhaps, teaching Disney in a way that raises questions about our connections to consumer life, and a nostalgic vision of the past littered with various consumer products and the role this critical education can play a part in the resistance to the ever growing importance of things. The importance and elevation of things over human beings is one of the central questions for critical pedagogues in the 21st century.

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[i] See Columbia Journalism Review (2013), Who Owns What? http://www.cjr.org/resources/?c=newscorp.

[ii] See 15 Happy Meal Toys That Made Your McChildhood. http://mashable.com/2013/11/08/mcdonalds-toys/.

[iii] See Micaela Rodriguez (2014) *The millennial generation clings to its childhood* .

[iv] Hard and Negri define the multitude as "The multitude is composed of innumerable internal differences that can never be reduced to a unity or a single identity – different cultures, races, ethnicities, genders, and sexual orientations; different forms of labor; different ways of living; different views of the world; different desires. The multitude is a multiplicity of all these singular differences." (Hardt and Negri, 2004, p. xiv)

See: The federal definition of 'rural' – times 15, The Washington Post, June 8 2013. http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/the-federal-definition-of-rural--times-15/2013/06/08/a39e46a8-cd4a-11e2-ac03-178510c9cc0a_story.html

[v] Job cites the Pearson website for the information she uses. www.pearson.com

[vi] See Reynolds, W. M. (2014).