

# **The Mouse that Roared**

**Disney and the  
End of Innocence**

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*Updated and Expanded Edition*

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**Introduction*****Disney's Troubled Utopia***

The organization and regulation of culture by large corporations such as Disney profoundly influence children's culture and their everyday life. The concentration of control over the means of producing, circulating, and exchanging information has been matched by the emergence of new technologies that have transformed culture, especially popular culture, which is the primary way in which youth learn about themselves, their relationship to others, and the larger world. The Hollywood film industry, television, satellite broadcasting technologies, the Internet, magazines, billboards, newspapers, videos, video games, and other media forms and technologies have transformed culture into a pivotal force, "shaping human meaning and behavior and regulating our social practices at every turn."<sup>1</sup> No longer simply a means of communication or entertainment, they are in the current historical moment the primary sites at which education takes place for the vast majority of young people and adults; they are what we call new forms of public pedagogy.

Although the endlessly proliferating media sites seem to promise unlimited access to vast stores of information, such sites are increasingly controlled by a handful of multinational corporations. Consider the Disney corporation's share of the communication industry. Disney owns or holds a controlling share in the following media outlets: six motion picture studios, including three animation studios (Walt Disney, Pixar, and DisneyToon), Hollywood Pictures, Touchstone Pictures, and Miramax Films, which produce films for the theater; Walt Disney Studios Home

Entertainment, which distributes films for release on video; the ABC television network, with its 226 affiliated stations; two television production studios; cable television networks, including the Disney Channel, ESPN, and interest in at least six other channels; 227 radio stations; four music companies, including Buena Vista Music Group and Hollywood Records; five theme park resorts, located in California, Florida, Tokyo, Paris, and Hong Kong; three cruise lines and several smaller resorts; two theatrical production companies that produce Broadway and touring ice shows; several book publishing imprints within Disney Publishing Worldwide, including Hyperion Books for Children; fifteen magazine titles; five video game development studios; the ubiquitous Disney Stores; and the Walt Disney Internet Group, which claims "to provide a safe, secure environment for consumers to experience the Disney brand anytime and anywhere."<sup>2</sup> Besides Mickey Mouse, the current franchises include Baby Einstein, Winnie the Pooh, Disney Princesses, Disney Fairies, Cars, Toy Story, Pirates of the Caribbean, High School Musical, and Hannah Montana.<sup>3</sup> Disney's partnerships with Apple, Inc., and the Sony Corporation have also put Disney at the forefront of media companies expanding into digital technology and the Internet. For instance, in 2006, Disney became the first company to sell its films and television shows online for download from the Apple iTunes store to computers and portable media devices.<sup>4</sup>

As an integral part of a multinational apparatus that transmits dominant forms of public pedagogy, mass-produced images fill our daily lives and condition our most intimate perceptions and desires. At issue for parents, educators, and others is how culture, especially media culture, has become the primary educational force in regulating the meanings, values, and tastes that legitimate particular subject positions—what it means to claim an identity such as male, female, white, black, gay, straight, citizen, or noncitizen. Media culture defines childhood, national identity, history, beauty, truth, and individual agency.<sup>5</sup> The impact of new electronic technologies as teaching machines can be seen in some rather astounding statistics: It is estimated that the average American spends more than six hours a day watching video-based entertainment, and by 2013 the number of daily hours spent watching television and videos will match the number of hours spent sleeping.<sup>6</sup> The American Medical Association reports that the "number of hours spent in front of a television or video screen is the single biggest chunk of time

in the waking life of an American child."<sup>7</sup> Such statistics warrant grave concern, given that the messages provided through such programming are shaped largely by a \$263-billion-a-year U.S. advertising industry,<sup>8</sup> which sells not only its products but also values, images, and identities that are largely aimed at teaching young people to be consumers.

Corporations such as Disney recognize the potential for lucrative profits to be made off the commodification of children's culture, and they stop at nothing to discover the buying habits of kids and ways through which kids can influence parental spending. For example, a 2009 front-page article in the *New York Times* reported that Disney is at the forefront of the corporate quest to capitalize on the \$50 billion spent worldwide by boys ages six to fourteen.<sup>9</sup> One way in which Disney discovers "emotional hooks" that lure boys into the "wonderful world of Disney" is to hire child psychologists, anthropologists, and other researchers, such as Kelly Peña, also known as the "Kid Whisperer." Peña's research includes looking in kids' closets, going shopping with boys, and paying them \$75 for an interview (without identifying Disney as the entity collecting the data).<sup>10</sup> One result of hiring armies of marketers and consultants to probe the minds of male youth is the Disney XD cable channel and website ([www.disney.go.com/disneyxd](http://www.disney.go.com/disneyxd)), which features a lot of sports content and video games. Disney's strategy to tap into the male youth market is even more evident in its \$4 billion purchase of Marvel Entertainment Inc.—which holds the license for superhero characters such as Spider-Man, Iron Man, and the Hulk—in 2009.<sup>11</sup> If Disney has its way, kids' culture will become not merely a new market for the accumulation of capital but a petri dish for producing new commodified subjects. Young people searching for purpose and hoping to establish independent identities are a particularly vulnerable group when faced with corporate giants such as Disney, which makes every effort to understand youth so as to develop marketing methods that are more camouflaged, seductive, and successful. A number of psychologists, especially Allen D. Kanner, have publicly criticized child psychologists who hire out their professional skills to corporations.<sup>12</sup> And one does have to wonder how such individuals can reconcile working for companies only interested in exploiting children for profit with their ethical responsibility to promote the physical and mental health of their clients. The fact that Disney's use of neuropsychological and field researchers to mine the inner lives and experiences

of children gets covered without so much as a critical comment in the *New York Times* is notable not for pointing out that Disney is less relevant because it is "so proud of its new 'headquarters for boys'" than for indicating the reality of a widespread numbness, if not acceptance, regarding the commercialization of childhood among the broader public. If the turning of children into consumer research subjects does not cause alarm, then how will people react when Disney's recently established secret research facility in Austin, Texas, begins testing kids' biometric responses to Internet ads, as it does now with adults?<sup>13</sup> One would hope, if we are not yet living in Aldous Huxley's dystopian world of conscripted consumption, that such news would generate more than a sigh or a whisper:

As our lives become defined by deeper immersion in a new "marketing ecosystem" made possible by a deluge of digital technologies and viral marketing techniques,<sup>14</sup> we are losing the ability to recognize, let alone resist, the corporate control of time, space, bodies, and minds. Pixie-dust magic may appeal to the world of fantasy, but it offers no language for defining vital social institutions as a public good, even as it links all dreams to the logic of the market and harnesses the imagination to forces of unfettered consumerism. Of course, it would be reductionist not to recognize that there is also some excellent programming designed to encourage public participation and critical thought, but by and large much of what is produced on television and commercial websites and in the big Hollywood studios panders to the lowest common denominator, defining freedom exclusively as consumer choice and either debasing public discourse by reducing it to a spectacle or eliminating it altogether.<sup>15</sup> Whether we are talking about the United States or other parts of the globe, it is fair to argue that for the first time in human history, centralized, commercially driven conglomerates hold sway over the stories and narratives that shape children's lives.

Consider the enormous control that a handful of transnational corporations have over the diverse properties that shape popular and media culture. Not only are "51 of the largest 100 economies in the world . . . corporations,"<sup>16</sup> but the U.S. media is dominated by fewer than ten conglomerates, whose annual sales range from \$10 to \$170 billion. General Electric, AOL Time Warner, Disney, Viacom, News Corp., and Bertelsmann AG together control approximately 90 percent of the media holdings in the United States.<sup>17</sup> These major firms produce much

of the content for the entertainment, news, and other sources of information that permeate our daily lives, and they also control the way it is consumed by developing "media software and [owning] distribution networks like television networks, cable channels and retail stores."<sup>18</sup> According to Mark Crispin Miller, "Just a few giant players [are] now co-directing all the nation's media," and this means that even professional journalism intended to inform the public becomes "yet another version of the entertainment that the cartel vends nonstop."<sup>19</sup> It has become increasingly clear that we need a new language to define the meaning and purpose of public culture, one that makes democracy a defining principle of both learning and everyday practices. This challenge requires alternative democratic conceptions of the meaning and purpose of education, organizations capable of mobilizing civic dialogue, and political movements that can influence legislation to challenge corporate power's ascendancy over the institutions and mechanisms of civil society.

This book focuses on the role that the Disney corporation in particular plays as an influential force in shaping American and global popular culture. It also makes clear on a general level that the cultural production of meaning, social practices, and desires is increasingly dominated by a consumer society. Yet, the relationships among consumption, individual agency, and social belonging are far more complex than can be accounted for by a simplistic theory of indoctrination. We believe these relationships require an understanding of the expanding and inter-related forces that contribute to the production, distribution, regulation, consumption, and globalization of corporate media culture. These crucially important relationships become more intelligible through models of learning: how learning occurs by providing the ideas and narratives that shape how people see the world and themselves; the impact of learning on people's lives and their ability to continue to learn; and the best strategies to turn learning into opportunities to resist authoritative narratives that constrict independent, critical thought or, for that matter, to create the conditions that enable people to connect learning to social change. Learning is constantly taking place, especially when educational sites are available through the mass media to large numbers of people at once. Young people more than adults are constantly engaged in learning, and, as suggested above, they are one of the primary targets of the corporate-mediated teaching apparatus that engages in public

pedagogy, or what might be called the articulation of knowledge to the shaping of values and experience. Consequently, Disney's influence as a major participant in youth culture must be addressed both as an educational issue and as a matter of politics and institutional power. Although we focus on Disney's cultural politics and its attempt to mystify its corporate agenda with appeals to fun, innocence, and pure entertainment, the seriousness of the political and economic threat that Disney and other corporations present to democracy cannot be underestimated. As Crispin Miller makes clear, a "global superindustry" has emerged with the result that "the gigantic scale and thoroughness of the corporate concentration has made a world of difference, and has made this world a very different place."<sup>20</sup> We need to understand the full scope of the corporate monopoly of information and private industry's regulation of public culture if we want to loosen—let alone free ourselves from—the stranglehold such megacorporations have upon democratic forms of governance and social agency in the twenty-first century.

We are not suggesting that Disney is engaged in a conspiracy to undermine American youth or democracy around the world. Nor should Disney be characterized as an evil empire incapable of providing joy and pleasure to the millions of kids and adults who visit its theme parks, watch its videos and movies, or buy its products from stores or the Internet. For parents and educators who are helping youth to navigate a perilous cultural landscape, it is indeed tempting to fall back on the adage that Disney products are of "good quality," harmless to kids, and at least a better option than most other items on the market. But recognition of the pleasures that Disney provides should not blind us to the reality that Disney is about more than entertainment. Media conglomerates such as Disney are not merely producing harmless entertainment, disinterested news stories, or unlimited access to the information age. Indeed, it is impossible to imagine what might be meant by "pure" (apolitical) entertainment, given that we inhabit a society in which "the media becomes a critical site for the articulation of a major intellectual shift in the ground of public discourse . . . in which pricing systems are now brought to bear on any problem, anytime, anywhere."<sup>21</sup> Corporations like Disney are fully implicated in the realm of power, politics, and ideology as they engage in processes of commodification and exploitation that recognize profit as the sole determining factor in all their corporate decision making. And even if

we choose not to consume Disney products ourselves, Disney should still concern us, as its represents both a major cultural influence and an exemplary case that can help us understand how corporate media conglomerates operate on a wider social scale, regardless of their impact on discrete individuals.

At the same time, it is equally important to acknowledge that the effects of Disney films, games, websites, theme parks, television shows, and other products are not the same for all who are exposed to them. Disney culture is not a self-contained system of unchanging formal conventions. Like all cultural formations, Disney is riddled with contradictions; rather than being a static and monolithic entity, Disney culture offers potentially subversive moments and pleasures within a range of contradictory and complex experiences. In fact, any approach to studying Disney must address the issue of why so many kids and adults love Disney and experience its resorts, websites, films, and consumer products as opportunities to venture beyond mundane, everyday experience while laying claim to unrealized dreams and hopes. We aim not to categorically reject Disney products but instead to appreciate and understand the cultural mechanisms that give a corporation like Disney enormous sway over the norms and values associated with U.S. and global popular culture.

For children, Disney is a wish landscape that combines fantasy, fun, and the opportunity to enter into a more vibrant and imaginary world. Its animated films usher children into exotic and provocative terrains—filled with fantasies of escape, adventure, and powerful emotional themes about survival, separation, courage, love, and loss—and provide sites of identification and the capacity to mediate and experience in the form of fantasy realities that children have not yet encountered. Disney's theme parks invoke a kind of education that escapes the discipline and regulation of school, while providing spectacular encounters with fascinating and grotesquely shaped Disney characters, the adventure of assuming multiple identities, and the visceral thrill of park rides. Disney offers children the opportunity to dream, vindicating the desire for fantasies that contain utopian traces and offering an antidote to the boredom, brutality, and emptiness of everyday life. But the dreams generated by Disney are not innocent and must be interrogated for the futures they envision, the values they promote, and the forms of identifications they offer, particularly with respect to children.

For adults, Disney's theme parks offer an invitation to adventure, a respite from the drudgery of work, and an opportunity to escape from the alienation and boredom of daily life. As Susan Willis points out, Disney invites adults to construct a new sense of agency founded on joy and happiness and to do so by actively pursuing their own pleasure, whether it be a Fairy Tale Wedding ceremony, a cruise ship adventure, or a weekend at the Disney Institute. Disney's appeal to the so-called child in all of us is also rooted in a history that encompasses the lives of many baby boomers. These adults have grown up with *The Wonderful World of Disney* and often "discover some nostalgic connection to [their] childhood" when they enter into the Disney cultural apparatus. In this sense, Disney theme parks can be thought of as an "immense nostalgia machine whose staging and specific attractions are generationally coded to strike a chord with the various age categories of [their] guests."<sup>22</sup> Disney's invitation to a world where "the fun always shines" does more than invoke utopian longing and the promise of the sun-drenched vacation. It also offers an acute sense of the extraordinary in the ordinary, which, under the right conditions, can become a powerful antidote to even the most radical forms of pessimism. That Disney parks evoke just such a sense can be seen in a recent travel article published in a Canadian newspaper. The journalist begins,

I love the Mouse. . . . Walt Disney World makes me happy. It makes my children happy. It makes me want to pay nine bucks for a pair of Mickey Mouse ears for a young relative; makes me want to order Mickey waffles for breakfast, although I'm trying to avoid carbs and don't actually like waffles. . . . If you don't think you have it in you to love the Mouse, to believe in Tinker Bell and Peter Pan . . . to see grown-ups waddling by in duck costumes without wanting to shake them by the beak and demand to know where their dignity is, don't bother getting on a plane. Just don't come crying to me when you have lost your sense of wonder, your ability to scream in terror and to gasp in surprise, when you realize you haven't laughed until you were in tears in a very long time. Because that's what the Mouse gives you. That's the magic of Walt Disney.<sup>23</sup>

As this passage suggests, Disney's power lies, in part, in its ability to tap into the lost hopes, abortive dreams, and utopian potential of popular culture. A closer look at the journalist's impressions, however, reveals a clearly disturbing, and perhaps inadvertent, indicator of Disney's capacity to destroy individuality and to compel, even *control*, the will of

individuals toward consumption ("I'm trying to avoid carbs and don't actually like waffles"). And the very fact that the article is positioned as a rebuttal to what are assumed to be prevailing negative attitudes among adults toward Disney speaks to the contemporary challenges faced by a corporation claiming to "make dreams come true." All this suggests that Disney's appeal to fantasy and dreams—occasioning a kind of psychological disavowal on the part of fans, as suggested by the journalist's admission to *knowing* about the darker implications of corporate Disney but still not *caring* to change her behavior—becomes paradoxically both more powerful and more dubious against a broader American landscape in which cynicism has become a permanent fixture.

But if the Disney invocation of nostalgia is losing some of its persuasability and cultural authority among adults, then Disney's popularity also appears in some contexts and with certain audiences to be on the ascendant. For non-Western cultures and for children today, Disney cannot embody nostalgia in the same way it does for Westerners and for baby boomers; instead, Disney offers access to a postmodern world of free-floating identity signifiers, as it unmoors a concept of selfhood from the stable social institutions and codes of an earlier generation (for instance, family, nation, and church) and replaces it with a performance-driven notion of the self as a brand that has the power to generate its own *global* social networks. In this context, self-actualization and empowerment—rather than a nostalgic sense of loss—come packaged as various self-enhancing commodities made available to those who have money to spend and the optimism to believe in them. Yet, both traditional and contemporary versions of the Disney utopia point beyond the given while remaining firmly within it. As philosopher Ernst Bloch points out, genuine wishes are felt at the start, but these are often siphoned off within constructions of consumer agency, careless fun, and childhood innocence that undercut the utopian dream of "something else"—that which extends beyond what the market and a commodity-crazed society can offer.<sup>24</sup>

As suggested above, the feeling of happy plenitude derived from Disney "magic" is more often than not revealed to be a mere "swindle of fulfillment"<sup>25</sup> through the varied and complex contradictions that emerge from the way adults and young people experience a Disney culture that simultaneously elicits both pleasure and irritation, subordination and resistance, passive identification and genuine affective involvement. For example, Disney's invitation to adult couples to

experience an erotic fling—an escape into a hoped-for rekindling of sensual desire and pleasure by taking a vacation at one of Disney's theme parks—is undermined by an environment that is generally antiseptic, overly homogeneous, regulated, and controlled. Yet, this exoticizing of the Disney landscape does contain a utopian element that exceeds the reality of the Disney-produced commercialized spaces in which such desires find their origins as well as their finale in the fraudulent promise of satisfaction.

Of course, there are no passive dupes in this script. Disney's texts are neither static nor universal, and some even present opportunities for oppositional readings. For some cultural theorists, the strength of Disney's texts lies in their potential to tap into viewers' desires and in the multiple readings they provide for diverse audiences, although most researchers find it necessary, as we do, to carefully balance the discussion of the affirmative elements in Disney culture with acknowledgment of its problems.<sup>26</sup> Granted that the importance of recognizing that the mode of reception is constitutive of meaning and that the differential meanings of a particular text are in part determined by how the audience confers meaning, this insight does not eliminate the need to take into account larger cultural, political, and economic contexts and, in this case, the inordinate power of megacorporations such as Disney to control the range of meanings that circulate within society. It would be a political and pedagogical mistake to affirm only the "active and critical element in popular cultural usages, [white] overlooking the overwhelming historical realities of inequality and subordination that condition [such responses]."<sup>27</sup> In other words, the potential for subversive readings, the complex interplay of agency and subordination, and the mixture of alienation and pleasure promoted by the culture industry do not cancel out the power of a corporation like Disney to monopolize the media and saturate everyday life with its own ideologies. Although it is true that people mediate what they see, buy, wear, and consume and bring different meanings to the texts and products that companies like Disney produce, it is crucial that any attempt to deal with the relationship between culture and politics not stop with such a recognition but investigate both its limits and its strengths.<sup>28</sup> Although media and popular culture are contested terrains, always subject to disruptive translations and negotiations, the playing field is nowhere close to being level. As Janet Wasko's work makes clear, most people share "similar

understandings of Disney," which unfortunately suggests that "there is little room for active or alternative readings of texts, like Disney's, which are carefully coded and controlled, and not polysemic and open."<sup>29</sup> Consequently, this book initiates a discussion about the ideas and values that people derive from their encounters with Disney culture by paying extensive attention to the commonsense narratives often encoded by Disney as an important step in the process of interrogating the historical, institutional, and political conditions that shape, limit, and condition the way people decode such narratives in an increasingly globalized, militarized, and market-oriented world.

This book aims to take seriously the cultural and political effects of the Walt Disney Company, to shatter commonplace assumptions that equate Disney with fun and games and childhood innocence, and to offer readers a set of tools that will enable them to inquire into what Disney represents, in a way that they might not have previously considered. In short, this book represents a critique of Disney that goes beyond studies that limit themselves to either close readings or populist interpretations of Disney texts or that fail to consider the diverse contexts that inform Disney culture.<sup>30</sup> At the same time, this book poses a challenge to anti-intellectual arguments that scholars who take a critical perspective of Disney have nothing better to offer than "self-righteous tirades against an endless litany of 'isms.'"<sup>31</sup> The issue at stake in Disney studies should not be the rhetoric employed by cultural critics or their neglect of the immense popularity of Disney's texts, but rather the problem of how to address and challenge the authority of an entity like the Walt Disney Company as it interacts with a whole assemblage of other cultural texts, ideologies, and practices. Within this perspective, accounting for why millions of people say they love Disney is not nearly as significant as posing the larger questions of how some ideas, meanings, and messages under certain political conditions become more credible as representations of reality than others and how these representations assume the force of ideology by making an appeal to common sense while at the same time shaping political policies and programs that serve very specific interests, such as the Telecommunications Act of 1996, the forging of school-business partnerships, and the U.S. invasion of Iraq as a post-9/11 response to terrorism.

Reading methods that remind us of the complex and indeterminate relationships between texts and their reception—but stop short of

considering the effects of power on such relationships—may have “fallen into the trap of believing that method is sovereign and can be systematic without also acknowledging that method is always part of some larger ensemble of relationships headed and moved by authority and power.”<sup>32</sup> For the late Edward Said, the forces of cultural production and reception were not equal, which suggests that we should always deal with the relationship among politics, power, and pedagogy when analyzing cultural phenomena. Focusing on how subjects interpret, mediate, or resist different messages, products, and social practices does not cancel out the concentrated assemblage of power that produces them; nor does it address the broader historical, cultural, and institutional affiliations that often privilege texts with specific intentions and meanings. Nor does such a limited approach to Disney enable the working out of a political project that takes a stand against particular forms of domination while struggling to expand democratic relations. There is no virtue, ideologically or politically, in either remaining on the level of theoretical abstraction or simply pronouncing what Disney means to various individuals and groups if such an approach also ignores the impact of corporate power and media monopolies on the larger culture and the ways in which resistance to their domination has resulted in revalorized and pluralized democratic public spheres.

This book approaches Disney by highlighting the pedagogical and the contextual and by raising questions about Disney, such as what role it plays in (1) shaping public memory, national identity, gender roles, and childhood values; (2) suggesting who and what qualifies as an agent; and (3) determining the role of consumerism in American culture and around the globe. These questions expand the scope of inquiry. Disney must be engaged as a public discourse, and doing so means offering an analysis that forces civic discourse and popular culture to be accountable to each other. Such an engagement represents both a pedagogical intervention on the terrain of cultural politics and a way of recognizing the multiple, shifting contexts in which any cultural phenomenon must be understood and engaged.

Each of the following chapters provides a different lens through which to examine Disney’s influence as a cultural and corporate entity. Chapter 1 looks at the crisis that has emerged around the concept of childhood and the expanding role corporate culture plays in constructing new forms of childhood innocence. It explores the pedagogical

practices that Disney employs in the attempt to substitute consumerism for democratic citizenship, first, in its tightly controlled themed spaces, which advance the ongoing privatization of public space, and, second, in its corporate work culture based on hierarchical rule and rituals. Chapter 2 discusses the expanding role that Disney plays in shaping education by producing learning materials for the very young that it claims are “educational” and by influencing older kids’ attitudes toward schooling in its more recent television shows and films. Disney’s partnership with the public education system in Celebration, Florida, is explored in detail since it represents a public relations venture that not only tried to affirm Disney’s public image as a benevolent corporation invested in children’s education but also exposed ways in which Disney is ultimately driven by market considerations rather than public interests. Chapter 3 provides contexts and readings for many of Disney’s animated films, particularly ones made in the 1990s that served as the foundation for the radical expansion of Disney’s corporate and cultural power during that decade. It proceeds to discuss how the Pixar Animation Studio’s computer-generated imagery, or CGI, animated films have become the true heirs to both Walt Disney’s artistic and creative legacy and the company’s great nostalgia machine. Disney’s authority in popular culture is so secure that it can withstand the self-critical and parodic elements of its more recent films—elements that expose the darker side of unchecked corporate power, for example, the commercialization of the children’s toy industry (the *Toy Story* films) or the environmental impacts of hyperconsumption (*Wall-E*). Turning to politics, Chapter 4 explores the activities of the Disney corporation alongside the ominous expansion of neoliberal policies and ideologies in the United States and the implementation of a national security agenda after September 11, 2001. Two films, the ABC production *The Path to 9/11* and Disney/Pixar’s *The Incredibles*, endorse a severely curtailed political agency that suggests a rapidly developing crisis in broader public discourse. Chapter 5 considers global contexts for approaching Disney: first, the market fundamentalism that underpins a vision of global expansion put forward by CEOs Michael Eisner (1984–2005) and Robert Iger (2005–present); second, the development of Disney theme parks in France, Japan, and China and the ways in which American models were adapted to local cultures; and third, the growing resistance among various groups around the globe to Disney’s corporate policies and cultural influence,



most especially to its use of sweatshops and other reprehensible labor practices. These various aspects of global Disney make clear that as the corporation grasps for more power—perhaps by eliminating healthy democratic public spheres or by increasing its control over the field of social meanings in more and more countries around the world—it will face a number of challenges arising from organized, informed protesters who refuse to be the passive consumers Disney needs to populate its global empire.

Questioning what and how Disney teaches through its corporate actions and its public pedagogy is part of a much broader inquiry regarding what parents, children, educators, and others need to know in order to critique and challenge, when necessary, antidemocratic institutional and cultural forces that have a direct impact on public life. Such inquiry is most important at a time when corporations hold an excessive amount of power in shaping children's culture as a largely commercial endeavor, using their various media technologies as teaching machines to commodify and homogenize all aspects of everyday life—in this sense posing a real threat to the freedoms associated with a substantive democracy. But questioning what megacorporations like Disney teach also means appropriating the most resistant and potentially subversive ideas, practices, and images at work in their various cultural productions and turning them into further opportunities to voice dissent.

This book does not purport to be *the* definitive study of Disney; rather, it aims to provide a framework for generating more dialogue, while also encouraging the use of public time and space to enter discussions about Disney both within and outside academic fields of study. It takes as its main tenet that what Disney teaches cannot be abstracted from a number of important larger issues: What does it mean to make corporations accountable to the public? How do we link public pedagogy to a critical democratic view of citizenship? How do we develop forms of critical education that enable young people and adults to become aware of and interrogate the media as a major political, pedagogical, and social force? How do we make education and culture central to any viable understanding of politics? How might we convince young people that while pleasure is central to any definition of popular culture, there is also another kind of pleasure, the pleasure of learning? At the very least, such a project suggests developing educational programs in both informal and formal schooling environments that offer students

the opportunity to learn how to use and critically read the new media technologies and their cultural productions. Organizing to democratize the media and make it accountable to a participating citizenry also demands engaging in the hard political and pedagogical task of opening up corporations such as Disney to public interrogation and critical dialogue.<sup>33</sup>

Disney's overwhelming presence in the United States and abroad reminds us that the battle over culture is central to the struggle over meaning and institutional power. For learning to become meaningful, critical, and emancipatory, it must not be surrendered to the dictates of consumer choice or to a prohibition on critical engagements of how ideologies work within various cultural discourses. On the contrary, critical learning must be linked to the empowering demands of social responsibility, public accountability, and democratic citizenship. How we educate our children and youth is intimately connected to our collective future. We need to sustain the narratives that empower young people in the spheres of our public culture. As noncommodified public culture comes under assault, we are faced with a growing commercial sphere that profoundly limits the vocabulary and imagery available to youth and others for defining, defending, and reforming the self, the state, and various public spheres as centers for critical learning and citizenship. None of us is unaffected by the cultures of pleasure and entertainment that now hold sway over much of the Western world and are rapidly extending their influence to other countries, particularly Japan, India, and China. The test of these spreading culture industries cannot be based solely on whether they are capable of producing joy and merit but must instead assess their capacity to offer narratives of pleasure without simultaneously undermining democratic movements and institutions. What we do not need is a global culture industry in which Disney imaginers and executives turn children's desires and dreams into fodder for advertisers and corporate-controlled media.