The Happiest Films on Earth: A Textual and Contextual Analysis of Walt Disney's *Cinderella* and *The Little Mermaid*

Pamela Colby O'Brien

This essay argues that when textual analyses of Disney films are performed in conjunction with analyses of the films' production and reception contexts, added insights into the films as social and cultural forces emerge. This study uses combined contextual and textual analysis to examine female character representations in Disney's *Cinderella* and *The Little Mermaid*, and concludes that such representations reflect conscious corporate decisions influenced by the social context within which these films were produced and received.

"The happiest place on earth!" This greeting welcomes millions of visitors each year who enter the gates of Disneyland in Anaheim, California. Not only does this sentiment apply to the friendly domains of the Walt Disney Company theme parks throughout the world, but it also aptly characterizes Disney's animated movies. Through careful control of textual and contextual information, Disney has created a mythic image of all Disney productions as wholesome, family entertainment for "children of all ages." Although there have been chinks in this image (e.g., Walt Disney's involvement in encouraging the House Un-American Activities Committee to investigate communism in Hollywood, Disney initiated lawsuits against daycare centers for unlicensed showing of Disney videos and use of Disney characters, and controversy over new theme park locations), over the last six decades the success of Disney ventures from films and television series to theme parks and hockey teams confirm the rhetorical force of Disney's mythic image (Canemaker, 1980; Kogan, 1987; Slater, 1950; Thomas, 1994).

Feminist critics, however, have raised serious questions about the "wholesomeness" of Disney's patriarchal depictions of females. As Bell, Haas, and Sells (1995) note, "If the Disney corpus can be seen as peddling a pedagogy of innocence, perhaps one of the most telling

Pamela Colby O'Brien (ABD, Indiana University, 1996) is Assistant Professor of Radio-TV at George Washington University. This essay is based on her dissertation, directed by Rod Rightmire. An earlier version of this essay was presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association, Albuquerque, NM, 1995.

lessons it sells us is that of gender—of bodies, sexuality and desire" (p. 10). This paper argues that the gender ideology in Disney films has changed very little over the company's history; new films merely have updated presentations to make traditional values seem more relevant to new generations. To illustrate the consistent patriarchal gender ideology in Disney's animated films, this paper examines the texts and contexts of two films from two distinct time periods in the company's history, using a contextual and textual approach.

As Bennett (1982) argues, because a text cannot speak for itself, textual interpretations should be situated within specific social, political, economic, material, institutional, and cultural contexts within which a text is created and received. From such a material historiographic perspective, Staiger (1992) observes, textual meaning is located not only in the text, but also in audiences' encounters with a text. Such an analysis assumes that textual meanings may differ over time as contextual factors change. Thus, a researcher must study not only the text, but also external discourse about the text's production and reception—what has been written about it, what is said about it, and what has been attached to it (Bennett, 1982).

A contextual analysis argues that meanings occur in the interactions among context, text, and individual viewers. Contextual analyses, then, are materialistic historiographies which seek to explain how texts and the discourses operating in everyday life work together to reproduce or change existing social structures. This approach sees films as cultural documents that both reflect and react to the times in which they are made in terms of social, political, and economic conditions, including constructed identities of race, nationality, and gender. In other words, a materialistic historiography asks what contextual factors may account for particular textual interpretations (Staiger, 1992).

A materialistic historiography of Disney films as representations of patriarchy and traditional gender roles, then, must take into account the corporate, economic, and social factors that surround the films. Contextual analysis reveals how the images of women in Disney films provide carefully crafted support of the company's and Walt Disney's personal gender ideology and dominant American patriarchal gender ideology. By comparing the texts and the production and reception contexts of *Cinderella*, made during Walt's management, and *The Little Mermaid*, made under Michael Eisner's tenure, this paper argues that the gender images and marketing concepts created under Walt

have faithfully been perpetuated by the company's new leaders. Thus, this analysis demonstrates that while *Mermaid* illustrates Disney's corporate response to some changes in the social and cultural context in which it was produced and initially received, this representative Disney film still affirms traditional, conservative gender identities found in such early Disney films as *Cinderella.*

I argue that notions of femininity are constructed by and through cultural industries (Spigel, 1992), and specifically that the Walt Disney Company, through its animated films and their promotional campaigns, has continually reinforced traditional gender roles. Representations of women in these two films is due partly to the fact that Walt's personal feelings about family life shaped the Disney Company and all of its products, and partly to the fact that Walt's attitudes mirrored the patriarchal cultural beliefs of the 1940s about what roles women should play in society. To illustrate this thesis, the remainder of the essay examines the texts and contexts of *Cinderella* (1950) and *The Little Mermaid* (1989).

In viewing the videotapes of these two films, it was apparent that the stories presented by Disney differed, at times significantly, from the classic versions of the fairy tales. This led me to question why the Walt Disney Company, or specific people within the company, had made these changes. Were the changes made for production or merchandising reasons, for the perpetuation of certain ideologies, or a combination of both? To gain insight into these questions, I begin by surveying materials written about Walt, his company, and its animated films. These sources included biographies and videographies (Schickel, 1968; Mosley, 1990; Thomas, 1991; Thomas, 1994); interviews with Walt and his staff in the popular press (Brown, 1950; Slater, 1950; Walley, 1986; Marion, 1991); press releases and annual reports of the Walt Disney Company; and scholarly analyses of Disney (Trites, 1991; Smoodin, 1993). Cultural histories and popular press articles written in or about the 1940s and 1980s provided details on the social, economic, and political contexts in which the films were produced (Leach, 1984; Conger, 1988; May, 1988; Spigel, 1992). Finally, I gathered film reviews and advertisements for both films, focusing on newspapers in New York, Washington D.C., Chicago, and Los Angeles to secure reactions from potentially different sociocultural contexts across the country. For the analysis of *Cinderella*, newspapers from Boston, the film's premiere city, would have been beneficial, but they were not

readily available. Popular periodicals such as *Newsweek*, *Time*, *Life*, and *Entertainment Weekly*, and industry publications such as *Advertising Age* and *Variety* also were searched for reviews and commentary, particularly at the time of *Cinderella*'s re-release in theatres and on videotapes. Advertisements for the films were reviewed in the newspapers for the week preceding the release of each film through the first month of the film's distribution to determine how and when different ads were used.

Cinderella

Walt Disney began the Walt Disney Company on the strength of one character, Mickey Mouse. The dozens of animated Mickey Mouse shorts each year generated enough profit to keep the company going (Cornwell, 1981). However, Walt knew that in order to earn the capital he needed for his other ideas, such as theme parks, and to remain financially solvent, he would have to create full-length animated feature films (Slater, 1950). The first of these, 1937's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, was a technological, critical, and box office success (Cornwell, 1981).

However, problems began with subsequent films, especially during World War II. Walt was never known for his economic skill; in fact, after Walt's death, one top Disney official joked that if Walt were still alive they'd be bankrupt (Walley, 1986). Walt's limited financial knowledge and his dedication to delivering family entertainment hindered the production of films that audiences were flocking to in the 1940s: crime, action, and drama (Koppes & Black, 1987; May, 1988; Schatz, 1988). These two factors led to a string of financial and critical failures with *Fantasia* (1940), *Bambi* (1942), *Saludos Amigos* (1943), *Three Caballeros* (1945), and *Song of the South* (1946). There were no Disney theme parks at this time, which meant that the company's only dependable revenue source was its short features, but they were becoming increasingly costly to produce and exhibit (Slater, 1950).

By 1950, Disney was on the verge of bankruptcy. Sources reported that Walt owed at least $600,000 to the Bank of America (Slater, 1950). Yet, in spite of the high cost of feature-length animation (Kinney, 1988), Disney risked the company on one more fairy tale adaptation: *Cinderella*. Walt knew that to stay financially alive he needed a story with wide appeal and marketability, especially since movie studios were experiencing a universal downturn (Powdermaker, 1950). Anything

too controversial or discouraging would be rejected by the audience and also the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association (MPPDA) (Canemaker, 1980). Because of these economic and social constraints, Walt created his own version of the Cinderella story.

Disney, Cinderella, and the 1940s

In the aftermath of World War II, American families torn apart by the war wanted to return to traditional family ideals and domestic values (May, 1988; Spigel, 1992). The challenges of the Cold War furthered the need for a family-centered culture. As the ideology of the Cold War and the post-WWII "domestic revival" indicate, Americans desired liberation from their economically depressed and war-filled past, and security in their future. As May (1988) argues, "The family seemed to offer a psychological fortress that would protect them [American families] against themselves" (p. 11). Children were being born at a rapid rate, people had more money to spend on luxury goods, leisure time increased, and the population began shifting from the city to the suburbs. As veterans returned home and began looking for jobs, the consumer industry portrayed women as middle-class homemakers and purchasers (Haralovich, 1989). Rosie the Riveter was replaced by Harriet Nelson. The dominant sociopolitical ideology affirming traditional nuclear families and sex roles, Puritanism, conservatism, individual aggressiveness, and capitalism (Rollins, 1987) was reflected by the Motion Picture Production Code and would-be censors such as the Catholic Legion of Decency (Powdermaker, 1950).

The Production Code was commissioned in 1930 by William Hays, the MPPDA's first president, and written by a Jesuit priest and a Catholic publisher as a doctrine of ethics and self-censorship within the film industry. The Production Code was designed to remove excessive sex and violence from movies and, through narratives featuring moral retribution, to ensure that the audience did not sympathize with criminal or immoral behavior (Schatz, 1988, p. 167). Influential in the creation and enforcement of the Production Code was the Catholic Legion of Decency, which the MPPDA depended upon as it tried to anticipate how audiences and other agencies might react to films (Jacobs, 1991). The Catholic Legion of Decency threatened boycotts of films by faithful believers and placed a "condemned" rating on any film it deemed a violation of conservative, Catholic morality (Koppes & Black, 1987).

Walt Disney was aware of these trends and he capitalized on them by providing the public with filmic fantasies through which it could fulfill its fantasies about a peaceful and virtuous society (Powdermaker, 1950). The dominant themes of this period in America were summarized by Proger Butterfield: "the desire to see all *men* free and equal, and the desire to be richer and stronger than anyone else [emphasis added]" (qtd. in Powdermaker, 1950, p. 10).

Such themes pervade Disney's *Cinderella.* It is one of the most well known stories of all time, existing in hundreds of different versions around the world (Dundes, 1988). The exact origins of the story are not known, but *Cinderella* is most often linked to either the Brothers Grimm or Charles Perrault (*Cinderella and Other Tales from Perrault*, 1989). The 1950 Disney film is based on Perrault's 1697 version of the story ("The new pictures," 1950, p. 91).

Perrault was a member of the French Court of Versailles, and it was his job to write stories and poems to entertain and please the Court. Since Perrault was anxious to maintain his position and popularity within the Court, he chose to remove the more disagreeable and disturbing elements of *Cinderella*'s previous incarnations. For many of Perrault's same reasons, Disney further sanitized the story to create a filmic fantasy which mirrored the concerns in the 1940s for the restoration of the male-dominated family and a return to traditional gender roles (Berland, 1982).

Not only did Walt Disney incorporate these ideological tenets in his films, he embraced them in his personal life. Walt viewed America as a man's country with women as the second and inferior sex; they were adorable but fallible and unreliable (Mosley, 1990). Walt believed in patriarchy and structured his family life accordingly. Walt demanded the same attention and dedication from his wife and two daughters as he did from his employees, and he expected *his* family to uphold *his* moral beliefs and respect *his* wishes, such as his desire to tear out his wife's garden to put in a model train (Thomas, 1994). In spite of his intimidating temper, Walt was a loving father. However, he did feel girls should be treated differently than boys. Thus, he created for his daughters a fairy tale childhood that resembled the worlds in his animated films. He shielded them from publicity, bribed merry-go-round operators to let them repeatedly catch the brass ring, and kept the Santa Claus myth alive by having his employees build his eight-year-old daughter, Diane, a fairy castle in the backyard complete with electricity and running water for her to see on Christmas morning (Thomas, 1994).

Walt's attitudes about women's capabilities also were reflected in the constitution of his animation department. There were no female animators in the early years, although women dominated the inking department. This was because Walt felt that women did not have the requisite artistic flair for creativity. Walt himself best described his prejudice against women and other groups in the 1940s when he said, "Roosevelt called this the Century of the Common Man. Balls! It is the century of the Communist cutthroat, the fag, and the whore!" (Mosley, 1990, p. 221).

The 1940s' film audience enjoyed a variety of film genres. For example, *Come Back, Little Sheba*, *The Third Man*, and *Guilty of Treason* were in the theaters at the same time as *Cinderella*. Disney's films, however, allowed parents to bring their young children along, secure in the knowledge that they would not be exposed to the violence of war or titillating sexual taboos. This child audience became increasingly important to Disney's success. Realizing this, Disney made certain that negative or evil elements were ultimately punished in *Cinderella*. For example, the evil cat Lucifer plunges to his death from the castle tower after attempting to keep Cinderella from trying on the glass slipper. In Perrault's version, the stepmother is not the ultimate villainess, for while she is mean to Cinderella, she does not try to stop her from achieving happiness by marrying the Prince. In contrast, Disney's stepmother carefully orchestrates her daughters' hatred of Cinderella and perpetuates Cinderella's unhappiness by trying to prevent her from going to the ball and trying on the glass slipper. Disney's distinctions between good and evil, and proper and improper behavior, were always clear, making it easy for children to leave the film with "appropriate" social messages (Berland, 1982).

Disney's simplified representations of gender roles also made patriarchal values more accessible to younger audiences. Although it is not possible to determine from the available historical sources who made specific story changes, the plot change in Disney's film regarding Cinderella's stepsisters reflects this simplification of gender roles. While both Perrault and Disney portrayed the stepsisters' cruelty to Cinderella, Perrault's tale ended with Cinderella finding her stepsisters members of the Court to wed after she marries the Prince. Disney's version, however, highlights the differences between Cinderella and her stepsisters, in terms of grace, beauty, charm, cooking, and cleaning, to demonstrate to audiences the qualities that a woman needs

if she wants to get married, and therefore be happy and fulfilled. In Disney's fairy tales, women who do not possess these traits (i.e., who do not embrace patriarchal values) never find "happiness." Thus, Disney's Cinderella marries the prince, but she does not find husbands for her stepsisters because they do not possess the "proper" qualities to be good wives. Perrault's Cinderella also possessed greater personality and humanity than Disney's heroine, and the change in the film's ending reflects this: Perrault's tale implies that in the end all is forgiven and step-family members might come to alter their narrow-minded attitudes; Disney's film does not.

Disney's alterations of Perrault's fairy tale are significant in terms of their effects on the story's outcome and the reification of patriarchal values. In Disney's version Cinderella's father dies. This allows the "evil stepmother" alone to begin her wicked treatment of Cinderella. By contrast, in Perrault's version, the father also contributes to Cinderella's victimization through his distracted neglect of her. Thus, Perrault's version states that Cinderella never troubled her father with her stepmother's cruel treatment because her father had problems of his own. The Walt Disney Company's decision to alter the story by killing Cinderella's father at the beginning of the film reflects the film's affirmation of patriarchy. The portrayal in Perrault's story of the father's inability to protect his daughter could be interpreted by the audience as an example of a bad or weak father, one so dominated by his wife that he does nothing to protect his only child. Disney recuperates patriarchy and fatherhood by making it impossible for the father to fail to do anything because of his "untimely death." This enables viewers to assume that her father acted on Cinderella's behalf before he died. By having the stepmother replace the father entirely, the Disney film fosters the patriarchal view that strong women are evil and are detrimental to the proper upbringing of children.

Patriarchy also is recuperated through the characters of the male mice, Jacques and Gus-Gus, who continually rescue Cinderella. In addition, Perrault's version of the story references a Queen, a figure absent in Disney's *Cinderella*, and the acknowledgment that the Prince requests the ball. In Disney's version the Prince is forced into throwing the ball and marrying by a father who wants his son to take on the role of husband and father and to embrace traditional family values. In Disney's *Cinderella*, the King forces his son to embrace the patriarchal ethic which holds that men are expected to grow up, get married,

and support their wives and children (Ehrenreich, 1983). Indeed, Disney's Prince successfully transitions from bachelor to breadwinner at the "happy" end of the film.

Another significant difference between the Perrault and Disney versions is the relationship between Cinderella and the Prince. Perrault allows their relationship to develop over the course of two nights. Further, he portrays the Prince as initially enchanted by Cinderella's beauty and further won over by her conversation and charm. The Prince himself searches for the *one* specific woman who fits the glass slipper because the Prince clearly will recognize the woman with whom he fell in love. He is not merely looking for *any* woman who happens to have a small enough foot to fit the glass slipper as he is in Disney's version.

The Production of Cinderella

Both the production and the marketing of Disney's films center around their simultaneous appeal to children and adults, which necessitates a delicate balance of characterization and plot. Many story changes from Perrault's original tale reflect efforts to maintain this balance while still presenting images that support traditional values and gender roles.

Creating hand-drawn animated features in the 1940s required hundreds of animators and years of work (Slater, 1950). The Walt Disney Company's financial difficulties affected the number of animators working on *Cinderella* (Kinney, 1988). A 1946 memo from Walt to the company's directors detailed the company's financial constraints, which led to payroll deductions and changes in the scheduled release of films in 1949 and 1950 (Kinney, 1988).

In order to cut costs and channel money to the best animators, Walt designated a creative team referred to as the "nine old men" in the late 1940s. The nine old men oversaw most of the animation produced by the Disney studios over the next four decades and became Walt's board of advisors. This designation led to resentment and low morale among the remaining animators, "but this was Walt's way of keeping everyone off balance and stirred up" (Kinney, 1988, p. 146).

Walt preferred animals to people and this is one reason animals became central to his animated films; however, their presence also was based on the constraints of animation (Mosley, 1990). One of the most difficult things to animate realistically is the human form. Not

only do humans require intricate drawings for even the slightest moves, but the audience also has preconceived notions of how a human being should look and act. These expectations often are difficult to meet for animators struggling to make two-dimensional drawings possess the same characteristics as three-dimensional humans.

Furthermore, human characters were not "fun" to draw, and most Disney animators preferred to work on animal characters. Since animals do not move or talk in the ways Disney uses them, animators had much greater freedom to explore and experiment with the characterizations. Next to drawing animals, animators preferred working on villains because these caricatures permitted them more freedom and personality ("The new pictures," 1950, p. 92). The result was that two animators tended to be singled out to draw the human characters: Marc Davis drew the women and Milt Kahl was "stuck" with the princes (Walley, 1986). Davis' and Kahl's resentment at their inability to explore other characters is reflected in the flat, impersonal feeling of Disney's human protagonists (Walley, 1986). In spite of the animators' resentment at drawing male characters, Disney's princes are the focus of most of the stories: he is the prize that the princess desires and he is the one who saves the princess from villains.

Another reason for the high profile of animals in *Cinderella* was Walt's belief that children were unable to identify with adult characters, and thus unable to understand the messages or morals of classic fairy tales. He believed, however, that children could relate to animals who were like children but could act as guides and advice-givers to the heroines. As Berland (1982) explains, "The spectator lives through all his own fears and feelings of smallness and at the end gets the comforting feeling that, in spite of all he will be saved and will conquer the strong" (p. 96).

The addition of animal sidekicks was the most significant change in Disney's version of *Cinderella.* Cinderella's goodness and kindness is signified by the fact that she is loved by all, including animals. These animals, usually males, rescue Cinderella from her locked room in time for her to try on the glass slipper and win her prince. Indeed, the animals almost become the center of the story, and they certainly allowed the Disney animators to utilize slapstick humor to lighten a story that otherwise might be too serious or unpleasant for the child audience (Schickel, 1968). Animals, however, also function to recuperate patriarchy. For example, the song *We Can Do It,* sung by the mice when they are making Cinderella a dress for the ball, rein-

forces the film's message that women should be responsible for domestic chores. The female mice sing to the male mice, "Leave the sewing to the women, you go get some trimming." Throughout *Cinderella*, female animals are shown performing only domestic chores such as sewing, bathing Cinderella, and cleaning Cinderella's clothes and room. In contrast, male animals perform heroic and intellectual roles: they outwit Lucifer, save Cinderella, become Cinderella's horses and footman for the ball, and follow Cinderella on her honeymoon.

The Marketing of Cinderella

The Disney Company has always excelled in the marketing and merchandising of its products, and *Cinderella*'s carefully designed marketing campaign was no exception. The Walt Disney Company's large debt and string of critical and box office failures placed an even greater burden on the marketing of the film. The Disney Company decided to capitalize on *Cinderella*'s traditionally romantic theme by premiering the film in Boston on Valentine's Day. To highlight the film's themes of romance and beauty, Disney also held "Cinderella-for-a-day" contests across the country. However, these contests, held before showings of the film, were not designed for young girls, but rather for adults. Thus, they served to generate adult interest in a film that initially was perceived as targeted only for children, and to involve women in the film's consumer culture (Slater, 1950; Thomas, 1991).

The Disney Company also contracted with over 150 stores to permit the use of Cinderella's face and signature for their exclusive product tie-ins, thus increasing the pervasiveness of the film, its images, and its gender role messages. These tie-ins included dolls, balloons, bath salts, shoes, jewelry, dresses, ice cream desserts, and pencil sharpeners (Slater, 1950), all of the materials that a girl or a woman might need to "become" Cinderella. The tie-ins and contests encouraged women (and men) to accept Disney's conception of female roles and identity. Together, the marketing campaign and the film's message affirmed that ordinary girls can become "happy" princesses by being kind, gentle, long-suffering, and submissive, and by marrying a strong, capable male who will rescue them from their dreary existence. Like the film, the material goods associated with *Cinderella* carried with them a "promise of personal transformation" (Leach, 1984, p. 328).

Prior to the film's release, the Walt Disney Company used *Cin-*

derella's music to promote the film by having numerous recording artists—Perry Como (Victor), Sy Oliver (Decca), Lawrence Welk (Mercury), Dinah Shore (Columbia), Bing Crosby (Decca), and Jimmy Durante (MGM)—perform versions of the songs "Bibbidi-Bobbidi-Boo" and "A Dream is a Wish Your Heart Makes." *Variety* (1950, February 15, p. 26) reported that just one day after the film's Boston premiere, Shore's and Como's recordings of "Bibbidi-Bobbidi-Boo" were the fifteenth most played song on juke boxes and most purchased in record stores. That the movie's soundtrack, referred to as a children's album, reached number one on *Billboard*'s pop album chart, selling over 750,000 copies in one year (*The Music of Disney*, 1992), also increased exposure to the film's gender ideology.

The Walt Disney Company also marketed *Cinderella* by utilizing the star discourse of Walt Disney. Unlike other film studios that relied on their stars to provide added exposure and attraction, animated characters really could not do this. Furthermore, Walt kept his vocal artists and production crew relatively anonymous. Instead he relied on his own persona to sell the films (Cornwell, 1981). This encouraged audiences to link Walt Disney's name with traditional family values. Walt was very careful about what was said about him and his company—including the fact that Walt had adopted his second daughter Sharon—and this close control resulted in the creation of the friendly and caring "Uncle Walt" image (Mosley, 1990).

Cinderella's Advertisements

The Walt Disney Company created a number of different advertisements for *Cinderella.*[1] However, one of the most interesting promotions was not a paid advertisement but the appearance of Cinderella on the cover of *Newsweek*. The cover story, which appeared during Valentine's week, highlighted the film's messages about romance and love. The cover showed Cinderella and her prince in a loving embrace and protected by a banner held by kindly birds. The mouse Gus-Gus holds a heart while Jacques plays "he loves me, he loves me not" with a flower. Cinderella's glass slipper prominently reinforces the "feminine" trait of diminutiveness as indicated by a dainty foot. Prominent in the background, the castle

serves as a reminder of the outcome of the story: the elevation of status through marriage and blissful domesticity.

Other interesting elements on the cover are the positioning and illustration of the animals. As pictured, Cinderella and the Prince are not representative of their appearance in the film; furthermore, they are relegated to the background, suggesting that their roles are secondary to those of the animals.

Another indication of who the audience is invited to identify with is the article's title, "Disney's 'Cinderella': Of Mice and Girls." Of course, Cinderella is anything but a girl: her well-developed figure and facial features indicate a woman past puberty. Disney's representation of females in fairy tales often has been criticized, for one of the characteristics of a fairy tale is the youthful heroine's growth into adulthood after overcoming adversity. By portraying Cinderella as a physically well-developed woman, Disney's version ties the character's development to her actual aging rather than to her struggle for self-empowerment (Trites, 1991).

Advertisements which ran in *The New York Times* and *The Chicago Tribune* on 22 February 1950, the premiere date of the film nationwide (and which were the most frequently used over the course of the film's run), again featured only the mice drawn as they appear in the film. Cinderella, the Prince, and the coach are drawn in a minimalist style, which again moves attention from them to the mice and the clock in the background. The ad also emphasizes a connection between *Cinderella* and Disney's only other true animation success, *Snow White*, with the words, "Greatest since 'Snow White.'" By prominently featuring Walt Disney's name, the ad attempted to generate interest in the film based on the shared reputation of the man and the company: "the world's best loved story . . . told with all of Walt Disney's wizardry." This and other advertisements directly tied the film to the Disney myth and the values that Walt represented. Further, in the bottom left of some ads (e.g., *The Chicago Tribune*) is notification of "the Cinderella for a day" contest and the appearance of the voices of Cinderella and Donald Duck.

Advertisements framing the *Cinderella* ads provide further evidence of the sociocultural context in which the film was released. To the left of the 22 February 1950 *Chicago Tribune* ad was one for the movie *Guilty of Treason*. It portrayed this film as a "Searing drama of sadistic brutality and the humiliation of men and women.

. . . An innocent young girl submitted to unspeakable indignities, . . . whipped . . . tortured!" The ad for *Stromboli*, below the *Cinderella* advertisement, foregrounds the film's "raging island . . . raging passions!" The page in the 22 February 1950 *New York Times* on which the Cinderella ad appears illustrates the contrast in the ads: the innocent Cinderella, in layers of flounce versus the femme-fatale Valentina Cortesa in *Malaya*, dressed in a strapless low-cut gown. These advertisements indicate that the Disney Company used ads to cement its image as a family studio representing traditional gender roles and values.

Cinderella was the success Disney needed; it earned tremendous box office and tie-in merchandise dollars. The film broke house records at the Memorial Theater in Boston and earned a domestic gross of over $5.5 million, which was $1 million more than *Snow White* ("Bonanza," 1950, p. 5). In addition, *Cinderella* earned Academy Award nominations for Best Sound, Best Musical Score, and Best Song—"Bibbidi-Bobbidi-Boo." *Cinderella* boosted the sagging audience for animation and turned Disney into one of the biggest independent producers of the time (Slater, 1950). Despite some contemporary criticisms of the Walt Disney Company's portrayal of the heroine and prince as two-dimensional and lacking in human emotions, the company's version of Perrault's fairy tale resonated with post-WWII Americans. The audience's favorable response to this filmic reaffirmation of patriarchal ideals helped keep the Walt Disney Studios financially solvent and furthered the Disney myth (Mosley, 1990).

The Little Mermaid

After Walt's death in 1966, the Walt Disney Company was run by family members who remained committed to the Disney ideology of family entertainment, but who lacked the knowledge to operate in a rapidly changing entertainment industry. Under the leadership of Walt's son-in-law and Disney Company President Ron Miller, critical and financial disasters such as *Something Wicked This Way Comes* left many wondering if the Disney Company would survive. Even Disneyland and later Disney World lost money. In the early 1980s the company's earnings continued to decline—from $135 million in 1980 to $93 million in 1983 (MacKay, 1985). Children, too, seemed to be turning away from wholesome Mickey to Luke Skywalker and Indiana Jones. The company was ripe for a

hostile takeover bid which was led in the spring of 1984 by financiers Saul Steinberg and Irwin Jacobs. Miller's poor handling of this event led to his resignation in September of that year. At this time, Disney stockholders reorganized the "old-fashioned" (MacKay, 1985) management style by bringing in Michael Eisner from Paramount as chairman of the board, Jeffrey Katzenberg (also from Paramount) as chairman of motion pictures, and Frank Wells from Warner Brothers as president of the company. Roy Disney, Walt's nephew, remained as head of the animation division and vice-chairman of the board. The new team quickly restored internal corporate and public confidence in the company. Eisner and Katzenberg brought Disney up to date in terms of production scale and innovation. As Disney vice-president of communications Erwin Okun said, "With these guys [Eisner and Wells] everything has to be done yesterday" (qtd. in MacKay, 1985, p. 12). Production, especially animation, was pushed at a quick pace, and Walt's original goal of one animated feature a year was once again adopted (Magiera, 1989). Under Eisner this goal was reached by returning to Disney's successful adaptations of fairy tales and "classic" stories (Galbraith, 1987), and to the traditional values that pervaded the animated features produced under Walt's direct supervision. As mentioned earlier, changes in the *Cinderella* fairy tale appear to have been made by Walt Disney, the person who oversaw all aspects of the films produced by his company (Mosley, 1990; Thomas, 1994). As will be shown, similar but more extensive plot changes in *The Little Mermaid* were made by Disney's new corporate team.

In addition to increasing the pace of feature-length animation production, Eisner and Katzenberg pushed Touchstone, the new production division created in 1983, to develop movies designed for an adult audience. This clear division of audience groups reflected Eisner's desire to segment the audience to increase profits (MacKay, 1985). Both Walt and Eisner believed that while their animated films' primary audience was children, the movies also needed adult appeal in order to encourage parents to bring their children back for repeated viewings. Both also recognized that children are a recidivistic audience. If kids fall in love with a film, they will want to see it again and again, buy all the merchandise related to the film, and eventually buy the video. This makes animation more than just "kid stuff" (Maslin, 1989). Nowhere was this dual audience plan more apparent than in the making of *The Little Mermaid*.

The Little Mermaid's Gender Values

As with *Cinderella*, the Walt Disney Company needed *The Little Mermaid* to be a financial and critical success in order to restore Disney's image and profitability (Magiera, 1989). To insure this, Disney adapted Hans Christian Andersen's classic to appeal to 1980s' children and teenagers while still maintaining the overarching patriarchal family values on which Disney's reputation was based. The need to return America's youth to such values dominated politics and the press in the 1980s (see Gardner, 1985; Conger, 1988). According to Michael Wilmington (1989), the film appealed to the 1980s' generation because, "coming after four decades of limited animation and MTV, it looks more hyper-active than *Snow White* or *Pinocchio*. There's a heightened element of sexual sophistication in the story—partial nudity and double entendres, despite a G rating" (p. 1).

The Reagan administration's push toward conservatism and materialism in the 1980s was not a far cry from the social and economic climate of the late 1940s. However, the 1980s' shopping mall generation (Wilmington, 1989) extended from parents to young children apparently more concerned with material success than "developing a meaningful philosophy of life" (Conger, 1988, p. 294). Total spending by the adolescent population had risen from $32.2 billion in 1978 to some $55 billion in 1988, a figure equal to the GNP of Turkey (Sellers, 1989). Disney's goal was to create new consumption communities around its products to capture this adolescent market (Tebner; 1988; Walley, 1988; Maslin, 1989).

Disney's depiction of Ariel corresponded to this philosophy. Ariel's portrayal reflects how some women, especially younger women, viewed their roles in the increasingly conservative society of the 1980s. In this wave of postfeminist thinking, young women were moving away from feminist ideas that challenged traditional gender roles and embracing more traditional views of women's roles even while retaining some economic equality/career goals for women (Press, 1991, p. 4). This growing confusion about women's roles and gender ideology is played out in *The Little Mermaid.* Ariel begins the film aspiring to be more, intellectually, than is possible in the role assigned to her by her father, King Triton. She learns all she can about the forbidden human world, and she rebels against the constraints of the patriarchal system until she falls in love with Prince Eric.

Once in love she returns to a more traditional female role. She tries to convince the prince to marry her by using her feminine charms—her "body language" as Ursula, the evil sea witch, calls them. Where once she wanted to become human to explore her intellectual curiosity, she now wants to become human to be with her love. Only after she embraces patriarchy does she secure Eric's love, persuade her father to make her permanently human, and restore peace so that everyone can live happily ever after.

In contrast to Disney's version, Andersen's 1837 version told the story of a beautiful mermaid princess who longs to know the human world because humans have immortal souls and can express their emotions through tears, while mermaids cannot. The young princess and her older sisters are allowed to go to the surface after they reach their sixteenth birthday. The mermaids' education about the surface world is augmented by their regal grandmother, a character completely absent in Disney's version. Also, in contrast to Andersen's tale in which the father is largely absent, the father is a dominant presence in the Disney version.

In Andersen's tale, when she is old enough to go to the surface, the Little Mermaid falls in love with a prince she rescues from the sea. Her love leads her to visit a sea witch who helps the Little Mermaid, but not for the witch's own gain. Additionally, the heroine's desire to be human and her love for the prince are challenged when she must endure the loss of her voice, tremendous pain when walking, and fear of her own death if the prince does not love her. Although the Little Mermaid gains the prince's love, it is a brotherly love that he feels and, when he marries another woman, the mermaid knows she will now die and turn into sea foam. Her sisters, however, have sacrificed their hair to the sea witch in return for a knife, because if the Little Mermaid kills the prince and his bride on their wedding night she will once again become a mermaid. She is unable to do so, however, and jumps into the sea where she is transformed into an angel. In return for her self-sacrifice, she gains the reward she sought from the beginning: an immortal soul.

Instead of Andersen's mermaid in search of an immortal soul, Disney's Ariel is a rebellious, witty, savvy teenager searching for independence from her overbearing yet loving father. Ariel is the youngest and most beautiful of the daughters, and the King's favorite. As daddy's little girl she can get away with more than her placid sisters. She

tosses her long red hair in defiant moves associated with Scarlett O'Hara and, more recently, Southern California's valley girls (Wilmington, 1989). Andersen's religious notions of the poor gaining entry to heaven through love and suffering are entirely absent from the Disney version, replaced by discourse about contemporary parent-child relationships and the potential dangers of rebelling against a patriarchal system (Wilmington, 1989). In addition, although payment for Ariel's desire to become human is the loss of her voice to Ursula, unlike Andersen's mermaid, it is not accompanied by the agony of walking.

In addition to increased materialism, the 1980s marked a movement away from religion. Fewer college graduates and people under the age of 30 (32%) described themselves as holding strong religious beliefs, compared to their older female (47%) and African-American (61%) counterparts (Ornstein, Kohut, & McCarthey, 1988, p. 110). This shift among younger adults away from religion, and religious conceptions of family values, suggests that audiences would have difficulty identifying with the Andersen tale's appeal to Puritan religious ideals. Therefore, Disney replaced those ideals with motivations salient to contemporary, young adults: the need for individuality and the desire for independence from the constraints of society. While this "concession to modern sensibilities" helped to ensure profitability, it stripped the fairy tale of its original purpose: to impart a moral as well as gender socializing lesson (Kantrowitz, 1988).

In Disney's version the human world is evil and off limits. At the beginning of the film, Ariel's curiosity is intellectual, and she collects artifacts from sunken ships to further her education, although this marks the beginnings of her materialism. Her intellectual interests quickly turn to emotional dependency once she sees Eric. Changing the reason for the mermaid's initial curiosity reflects Disney's attempt to make the character's motivation understandable to modern children and teenagers, and does not reflect any new-found Disney feminist ideology.

Furthermore, as was the case in *Cinderella*, *The Little Mermaid*'s cast of male animal friends do most of the work; they beat the evil sea witch and gain the prince for Ariel. The guidance and support provided by Andersen's grandmother and loving sisters also were replaced with Ariel's helpful animal friends—Flounder, a small, childish fish; Scuttle, a not-so-bright seagull; and Sebastian, a soft-hearted crab. The addition of these male characters and the loss of strong female charac-

ters removes even the limited female community support that the Little Mermaid received in the original story. In Disney's version, Andersen's limited feminism is replaced by patriarchal images of a helpless Ariel who must turn to her male animal friends for both intellectual and physical support in times of difficulty. In fact, Ariel's sisters question her desire for independence and intellectual curiosity and, thus, work as agents of patriarchy. Disney's changes eschew any feminist message in Ariel's struggle for independence. Indeed, by the end of the film, Ariel's rebellion against her father's control is forgotten, and patriarchy's hold is both figuratively and physically illustrated when she thanks her father for making her human and permitting her to leave home.

In addition, during the final battle, it is Eric—not her sisters—who rescues Ariel from Ursula. Further, King Triton, not Ariel, trades his life to the sea witch to save his daughter. Once again Disney's heroine survives to find happiness thanks solely to the heroism and sacrifice of male characters, and without experiencing personal growth or self-empowerment.

As in *Cinderella*, Disney's animators had difficulty making the human characters seem human. Eric is portrayed as a physically well-developed man who falls in love with a woman based solely on her voice. Ariel, too, is drawn as a fully developed woman, not Andersen's adolescent. Visually, Ariel resembles an animated Barbie Doll with thin waist and prominent bust. This stereotypical image of women is one that the Walt Disney Company apparently is comfortable with, though Disney executives did insist that animators draw Ariel with a shell bra for fear that partial nudity would undermine Disney's association with family values (Walley, 1986).

Advertising and Marketing The Little Mermaid

The Disney films released prior to *The Little Mermaid—The Great Mouse Detective* and especially *Oliver and Company*—had story lines and characters that appealed principally to young children. While these films were fairly successful, they were not successful enough to guarantee distributors' full support for *The Little Mermaid.* Distributors feared that the film, labeled as a "family" movie, would bring in children and their parents but not other adults, and they warned Disney of the possibility that they would show the film only during the daytime

when children make up the majority of the audience (Magiera, 1989). Such scheduling would have resulted in less revenues, because not only would it mean fewer chances for audiences to see the film, but it would have further discouraged adults—who in the 1980s tended not to respect animation (Magiera, 1989)—from attending the film without children.

In addition, *The Little Mermaid*'s scheduled premiere the week of Thanksgiving meant head-to-head competition with another full-length animated film from former Disney animator Don Blueth, *All Dogs Go to Heaven*. Furthermore, both animated films were competing against another children's film, the live-action movie *Prancer*, thus increasing the financial risk of splitting the child audience. These risks provided further justification for the Disney executives' decision to stick to the animated fairy tale formula created by Walt. When past Disney animated films had deviated from this formula of cute animal characters and traditional values, the films were not received favorably by critics or audiences (Smoodin, 1993).

Distributors' concerns and increased competition prompted Disney to commit a $7 million media budget to develop a two-pronged marketing attack: highlight *The Little Mermaid*'s animation and characters to appeal to children, and foreground the plot, romance, songs, studio heritage, magic, and nostalgia to appeal to the adult segment (Magiera, 1989). The first ad for *The Little Mermaid* was run nationally on 12 November 1989, but only appeared until the Sunday before the film's premiere on 17 November. This advertisement was designed to generate interest among children (Magiera, 1989). All of the film's major characters are present, but the focus is on Ariel as the object of the gaze, a continuation of the early ideas of film spectatorship which describe women as being objectified in films.

Also interesting is the placement of King Triton and Ursula. Their position above Ariel and Eric indicates superiority and control over them; furthermore, their gazes at the younger couple are hostile. Although this contradicts Triton's view of Ariel in the film, since she is his favorite, she does rebel against him; and Eric, whom Triton sees as threatening to take away his daughter, challenges Triton's patriarchal control. Triton's hand stretches toward Ariel as if he is reaching to remove her from Eric's adult love, though it is clear from her figure that she is not a *little* mermaid. Ariel's smiling gaze is directed not at Eric, but at the audience, inviting them to become "part of her world."

The ad's copy references quotes from five different film reviewers telling parents and children old enough to read that "you don't have to be little to love 'the Little Mermaid.'" Also, the copy used the terms "exciting," "heartwarming," and "lovely," mentioning the "wonderful music," and calling the film "genuine fun."

The *New York Times* ad (24 November 1989) represents a different advertisement theme that began the week of 13 November. Most often associated with the movie, this ad is prominently featured on many of the movie's tie-in products. This advertisement, designed with the adult audience in mind (Magiera, 1989), is less cluttered. However, it features only Ariel. The way in which the ad is drawn makes it difficult to tell if Ariel is a mermaid or a human, for she is shown sitting on a rock gazing off into an unknown world. Her stunning silhouette provides a sharp contrast to the ad for *All Dogs Go to Heaven* (see *The New York Times*, 24 November 1989). This ad features animals and a female child in contrast to the distinct outline which highlights Ariel's adult female body.

The Little Mermaid won two Academy Awards for Best Song and Best Original Score, the first animated feature to win an Oscar since *Dumbo* in 1942 (Solomon, 1991). Reviews like David Denby's (1989) characterization of it as the best animated film since *Yellow Submarine* probably helped attract adult audiences. The result of all of these factors was that *The Little Mermaid* became the most successful Disney film to that time; its $84.4 million in box office receipts (Lowry, 1991) earned it Disney "classic" status. The profitability of *The Little Mermaid* brought new life to animation and added momentum to the Disney animated features under production. However, like *Cinderella*, the film delivered its children audience less than revolutionary images of women.

One difference between the advertisements for *The Little Mermaid* and *Cinderella* is the former's focus on the female character. Cinderella was a peripheral figure in both the film and its marketing in 1950. Pervasive merchandising now is essential to create a new "classic" Disney film, and the characters in *The Little Mermaid* appeared everywhere. As Katzenberg explained, "That's how we institutionalize it. We weave the movies into the fabric of the whole company as best we can, as quickly as we can" (qtd. in Daly, 1991, p. 43). In addition to Disney's own catalog and retail stores across the country, Disney licensed McDonalds and Sears to carry *Mermaid* tie-in merchandise. At Sears,

buyers could find all forms of children's clothing, dolls, school supplies, bedding, bath accessories, books, shoes, and costumes bearing pictures of various *Mermaid* characters. McDonalds supplied a character a week for seven weeks in its Happy Meals and a Flounder Christmas ornament with the purchase of gift certificates (Hirsch, 1990).

Major tie-ins also occurred at Disney theme parks. *The Little Mermaid* became the focus of the daily parades in all Disney parks, and roving costumed *Mermaid* characters frequently appeared for photo opportunities. At the Disney-MGM theme park in Florida, *The Little Mermaid* was turned into an attraction that combined live-action, animation, and audience involvement. In addition, Disney kept press attention focused on the film through press releases announcing future plans for *The Little Mermaid* television series (Lowry, 1991) and Sebastian/Samual Wright music specials on the Disney cable channel (Marion, 1991).

The Critical Context of Disney Films

Film critics have become an important element in a film's popularity if for no other reason than the free publicity they provide. Popular press reviews of both *Cinderella* and *The Little Mermaid* reflected critics' admiration for Walt Disney and Disney animated films. For example, Kogan (1987) applauded the re-release of *Cinderella*, saying, "Such are its charms and wonders that spending so many years before I met 'Cinderella' almost feels like a crime" (p. E7). Although there are many reasons why reviewers like Disney, one explanation may surround reviewers' nostalgia about Disney films and their own childhoods.

Many reviewers who were exposed to Disney films as children may have developed a positive, personal relationship with Disney products. Like other Baby Boomers, they may link the films with their romanticized memories of childhood (see Kogan, 1987; Trojan, 1988). This affects the contemporary child audience because these Baby Boomer parents want to share their fond childhood experiences of Disney with their own children (Zoglin, 1990). In her review of *Mermaid*, *New York Post* reviewer Jami Bernard (1989) proclaimed: "It's funny, romantic, and—OK—scary, just as it should be. This kind of terror is enthralling, stimulating. Just as yesterday's kids cowered at *Bambi* and *Pinocchio*, films they remember now with great affection, let today's kids see how powerful animation can be" (p. 27).

In addition, Disney is one of only a few companies that produces movies for children on a regular basis. This gives Disney an edge since the search for parent-approved entertainment is ongoing (see Siskel, 1987; *Variety*, 1949). Critics have helped Disney pull viewers of all ages into the theater by bestowing on *The Little Mermaid* praises such as Maslin's (1989): "Teenagers will appreciate the story's rebellious heroine; adults will be charmed by the pretty look and robust score, and small children will be enchanted by the sunniness and perfect simplicity" (p. H17). Due to Disney's long history and Uncle Walt's wholesome image, Disney's films typically are reviewed favorably for their content and reputation.

Disney's favorable reviews in the popular press tend to overlook the gender roles represented in the company's animated films. Maslin (1989) says of *The Little Mermaid*, "It affirms both the daughter's need for independence and the importance of the father's being able to relinquish his parental control. . . . *The Little Mermaid* works simultaneously as a fable, as sheer happy escapism and as a cogent glimpse of parent-child relationships" (p. 17). However, not all popular press reviewers have forgiven Disney's portrayal of women. As early as 1950, Brown observed: "Plainly she [Cinderella] eats well, is delighted with her looks, and from the outset is bound to win the Prince. She is, in short, a smug little number with a mind as empty as a diary received on Christmas morning" (p. 30). But such negative reviews clearly are outweighed by the number of film reviewers who support the Disney myth.

Constructing the Child Audience

Fowler and McCormick (1986) argue that the introduction to fairy tales at an age when the distinction between fantasy and reality is blurry leads readers to accept the stereotypical conventions of fairy tales: stepmothers are wicked, princesses are mistreated, and everyone lives "happily ever after." In addition, elements of realism that otherwise would be questioned remain unchallenged because the audience believes that fairy tales should be "accepted, not analyzed" (p. 46). They conclude that genre expectations rather than the texts themselves guide readers' responses. Disney has capitalized on this, especially with the children's audience who is even more susceptible to the blurred distinction between reality and fantasy, and who likely readily accepts the images presented by Disney.

As mentioned earlier, Walt Disney and Michael Eisner both believed that children are more capable of understanding or identifying with a film if the messages are clearly articulated, uncomplicated, and presented by humorous animal characters. While maintaining this view may be beneficial for the creation of Disney films, it does not reflect research on how children actually interact with media and characters (Palmer, 1986). Studying the interaction of *The Little Mermaid*'s themes and children's subsequent play with the movie's dolls, researchers found that young girls incorporate Ariel, not the film's plot, into their play as a means of contrasting themselves with boys and other babyish toys. Furthermore, as Seiter (1993) points out, Ariel is a small step toward a role model that young girls can use to question all of the positive images presented in the media. While Ariel does not move completely away from victimization to self-realization, she does possess a few resourceful and assertive traits (Stone, 1988) that girls utilize in making her the heroine of their adventures (Seiter, 1993). Not much exists in Disney's film for little girls to work with since Disney has carefully integrated textual and contextual factors that work against Ariel's independence and self-actualization; but even some polysemy is a start in the right direction.

One of the more important elements in Disney's construction of the child audience is its use of villains. These anxiety-producing characters and situations have been questioned by parents and sociologists, but at the Walt Disney Studios the villain drives their best films (Collins, 1987). Without a "good" villain or with a villain that is too vulgar, a Disney film will not succeed: witness the failure of *The Black Cauldron* and *Pinocchio*. According to Bettelheim (1976), the portrayal of villains as external aspects of the subconscious mind relieves anxiety in children.

Disney relies on women to create conflict in its versions of fairy tales and this results in a number of stereotypes. First, Disney associates evil with dark and good with fair. Recently, in conjunction with America's fascination with thinness, Disney began to associate weight with evil (Trites, 1991). Thus, while the stepmother in *Cinderella* is thin and drawn, Ursula is a mass of slithering flesh. In contrast, Ursula's prisoners look emaciated. Ursula (actress Pat Carroll's voice) is "a fat, raucous vamp with a teasing basso voice" (Denby, 1989, p. 143) and perhaps was inspired by Divine (Fetherston, 1989). Ursula's grabbing tentacles and manipulative personality, like the stepmother's

evil gaze and her equally reprehensible cat in *Cinderella*, reflect Disney films' characterizations of older women as predatory villains (Trites, 1991). Indeed, in one scene, Ursula's large bosom occupies the entire screen, a portrayal of the female body as menacing (Trites, 1991). The use of such imagery is another way for the films to differentiate good versus evil for the child audience.

Disney's shapely and fair Ariel is presented as the epitome of goodness, a dangerous stereotype in a society where many of its teenage girls suffer from multiple eating disorders (Trites, 1991). The conflict, then, involves the usurpation of good by evil, of fat and menacing by thin and beautiful. However, in the end it is not Ariel who triumphs, but Eric who kills Ursula. Thus, male power is portrayed as positive, but female power, that of evil Ursula's and good Ariel's, is negative (Trites, 1991).

This prompts Trites (1991) to sum up the moral in all of Disney's films as this: "nice girls aren't supposed to have that much power" (p. 150). In this way Disney's animated films work to teach young children that women are either evil or self-effacing, and that they get power either by depending on men or stealing power from them (Trites, 1991).

Conclusion

Cinderella and *The Little Mermaid* represent a continuation of the practice in animated feature films of creating characters that enact female oppression and embrace patriarchal values. Until recently, however, few have questioned Disney's continued depiction of women in traditional gender roles because Disney is hailed as a purveyor of society's dominant "family" values. In fact, the Disney myth is so strong that the story in each of the company's instantly "classic" feature-length animated films tends to be perceived as the original version of the fairy tale.

A materialistic historiography provides support for textual interpretations of Disney's portrayals of female characters within specific historical contexts. This essay illustrates the usefulness of this approach by contrasting two Disney films with their original fairy tales. The analysis indicates that Disney character representations are based on conscious decisions made by management and creative forces, and influenced by social and financial contexts, contexts that dynamically

interact with a text's readings. As Maslin (1989) argues, "Part of the art of making children's films is knowing what to put into them. Part is knowing what to leave out" (p. H18).

Considering what was put in and what was left out of Disney's *Cinderella* and *The Little Mermaid*, it becomes clear that the films react to and reflect the social, political, and economic conditions in which they were made. Walt Disney embraced the conservative, traditional gender ideology of the 1940s in his personal and professional life. Consequently, this must be seen as an important contextual factor in the textual interpretations of his films because the pervasive use of the Uncle Walt image ties the films and their advertising and merchandise into the beliefs he represents. The formula he developed for his animated films, which still is being used by his successors today, incorporates patriarchy into classic fairy tales by eliminating or downplaying female characters' self-empowerment while foregrounding male power.

Press (1991) argues that even when commercialized mass media allow feminist ideas into the finished text, they often are placed within a stronger discourse of traditional femininity (p. 39). This clearly is evident in Disney's recent films. For example, in both *The Little Mermaid* and *Pocahontas*, women who begin the film as strongly independent and self-empowered are brought back into the patriarchal fold when they fall in love. Disney films' affirmation of patriarchal values also is strongly evident in the persistent absence of matriarchal support in animated fairy tales. Disney's princesses and princes do not have mothers or grandmothers and the princesses do not have sympathetic sisters. Thus, the only system in which Disney characters can potentially find happiness is a patriarchal one because that is the only option.

This analysis of *The Little Mermaid* suggests that while Disney's animated films have adapted to cultural changes, their continued representation of traditional gender roles indicates that the films do more to reproduce than change existing social structures. This can be seen by placing *Cinderella* within the context of the 1980s and having the images and messages of the film still resonate with audiences. In spite of the progress women have made in society, the Walt Disney Company continues to create characters that perpetuate patriarchal values. Moreover, the enormous success of the company's films indicates that audiences and reviewers are willing to accept these portrayals. Dis-

ney's sanitization of the original fairy tales occurred not only for production reasons, but also to increase the popularity of the films and their merchandise by aligning the morals of the stories with society's dominant ideology. As long as audiences approve of Disney's films and characters, the company has little incentive to reevaluate Walt's formula.

Films are cultural texts produced within historically specific economic and social conditions to communicate some meaning to audiences (Anderson, 1994). Disney has adapted fairy tales to appeal to the society within which its films are made. In doing so, however, Disney has only minimally addressed women's evolving cultural roles. Despite this, *Cinderella* and *The Little Mermaid* have been eagerly embraced by children, parents, and many critics, thus affirming the ideological power of the Disney myth. This myth works to maintain the popularity of Disney's films in spite of their stereotypical images and patriarchal ideology; but what else can we expect from films made by the people who design the happiest places on earth?

Notes

[1]Unfortunately, I was unable to obtain permission to reproduce these advertisements.

References

Anderson, C. (1994). *Hollywood tv: The studio system in the fifties*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Bell, E., Haas, L., & Sells, L. (Eds.). (1995). *From mouse to mermaid: The politics of film, gender and culture*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Bennett, T. (1982, Winter/Spring). Text and social process: The case of James Bond. *Screen Education, 41*, 3-14.

Berland, D. (1982). Disney and Freud: Walt meets the id. *Journal of Popular Culture, 15*, 93-104.

Bernard, J. (1989, November 15). *The Little Mermaid*. [review]. *New York Post*, p. 27.

Bettelheim, B. (1976). *The uses of enchantment: The meaning and importance of fairy tales*. New York: Vintage Books.

Bonanza. (1950, April 2). *New York Times*, section 2, p. 5.

Brown, C. (1991, May 3). Messin' with the mouse. *Entertainment Weekly*, 16-17.

Brown, J. M. (1950, June 3). Recessional. *The Saturday Review*, 28-30.

Canemaker, J. (1980, March). Animation renaissance. *Horizon*, pp. 45-53.

Cinderella. (1949, December 14). *Variety*, p. 26.

Cinderella and other tales from Perrault. (1989). New York: Henry Holt and Company.

Collins, G. (1987, August 6). Is *Snow White* too scary? Ask a 4 year-old. *New York Times*, pp. C1, C12.

Conger, J. (1988, April). Hostages to fortune: Youth, values, and the public interest. *American Psychologist, 43*, 291-300.

Cornwell, R. (1981, December). Emperor of animation. *Art in America*, 113-120.

Daly, S. (1991, December 13). Creating a monster. *Entertainment Weekly*, 36-45.

Denby, D. (1989, December 4). *The Little Mermaid.* [review]. *New York*, p. 143.

Disney, W. (Producer). (1988). *Cinderella* [videotape]. Burbank, CA: Buena Vista Home Video.

Dundes, A. (1988). Introduction. In A. Dundes (Ed.), *Cinderella: A casebook* (pp. vii-xi). Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press.

Ehrenreich, B. (1983). *The hearts of men: American dreams and the flight from commitment*. New York: Anchor Books.

Fetherston, D. (1989, November 15). *The Little Mermaid.* [review]. *Newsday*, p. 7.

Fowler, L. J., & McCormick, K. (1986, October). The expectant reader in theory and practice. *English Journal, 75*, 45-47.

Galbraith, J. (1987, December 2). Roy Disney keeps fingers in inkwell and ups cel slate. *Variety*, pp. 3, 23.

Gardner, E. (1985, September). Do schools contribute to decline in moral standards? *USA Today*, pp. 55-56.

Haralovich, M. B. (1989). Sitcoms and suburbs: Positioning the 1950s homemaker. *Quarterly Review of Film and Video, 11*, 61-83.

Hirsch, J. S. (1990, January 19). Fast-food vendors get serious with kids. *The Wall Street Journal*, pp. B1, B4.

Jacobs, L. (1991). *The wages of sin: Censorship and the fallen woman film, 1928-1942*. Madison, WI: The University ofWisconsin Press.

Kantrowitz, B. (1988, July 18). Fractured fairy tales: Will the real Cinderella please stand up? *Newsweek*, p. 64.

Kinney, J. (1988). *Walt Disney and assorted other characters: An unauthorized account of the early years at Disney*. New York: Harmony Books.

Kogan, R. (1987, November 20). Disney's classic Cinderella engenders love at first sight. *Chicago Tribune*, section 7, p. 1.

Koppes, C. R., & Black, G. D. (1987). *Hollywood goes to war: How politics, profits & propaganda shaped world war II movies*. London: I.B. Tauris & C. Ltd.

Leach, W. (1984). Transformations in a culture of consumption: Women and the department stores, 1890-1925. *Journal of American History, 71*, 319-342.

The Little Mermaid: The original story by Hans Christian Andersen. (1993). New York: Jelly Bean Press.

Lowry, B. (1991, February 11). Disney floating new Sat. "Mermaid" skein. *Variety*, p. 38.

MacKay, G. (1985, March 25). Restoring Disney's realm. *Maclean's*, p. 12.

Magiera, M. (1989, October 16). *Mermaid* aims to reel in adults. *Advertising Age*, p. 24.

Marion, J. (1991, April 6). Coming out of Sebastian's shell, the voice of cartoon crab clicks as a recording star. *TV Guide*, p. 19.

Maslin, J. (1989, November 19). Out of the sandbox, right to the box office. *New York Times*, p. H17.

May, E. (1988). *Homeward bound: American families in the cold war era*. New York: Basic Books.

Mosley, L. (1990). *Disney's world*. Maryland: Scarborough House.

The music of Disney: A legacy in song, the companion book. (1992). U.S.A: Walt Disney Records.

Musker, J. (Producer, Director, Writer), & Ashman, H. (Producer). (1990). *The Little Mermaid*. [videotape]. Burbank, CA: Buena Vista Home Video.
The new pictures: *Cinderella*. (1950, February 20). *Time*, pp. 91-93.
Orchestras-music: Listings for the week. (1950, February 15). *Variety*, pp. 42-44.
Ornstein, N., Kohut, A., & McCarthey, L. (1988). *The people, the press, & politics: The Times Mirror study of the American electorate*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
Palmer, P. (1986). *The lively audience: A study of children around the tv set*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
Powdermaker, H. (1950, October 14). Celluloid civilization. *Saturday Review of Literature*, pp. 9-10, 43-45.
Press, A. (1991). *Women watching television: Gender, class, and generation in the American television experience*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
Rollins, L. (1987). Fear of faerie: Disney and the elitist critics. *Children's Literature Association Quarterly, 12*, 90-93.
Schatz, T. (1988). *The genius of the system: Hollywood filmmaking in the studio era*. New York: Pantheon Books.
Schickel, R. (1968). *The Disney version: The life, times, art and commerce of Walt Disney*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
Sellers, P. (1989, May 8). The ABC's of marketing to kids. *Fortune*, pp. 114-120.
Siskel, G. (1987, November 20). Siskel's flicks-picks. *Chicago Tribune*, section 7, p. 1.
Slater, L. (1950, February 13). Disney's "Cinderella": Of mice and girls. *Newsweek*, pp. 86-88.
Smoodin, E. (1993). *Animating culture: Hollywood cartoons from the sound era*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.
Solomon, C. (1991, May/June). The saga of a calypso crab. *The Disney Channel Magazine*, pp. 22-23.
Spigel, L. (1992). *Make room for tv: Television and the family ideal in postwar America*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
Staiger, J. (1992). *Interpreting films: Studies in the historical reception of American cinema*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
Stone, K. (1988). Book review: Don't bet on the prince: contemporary feminist fairy tales in North America and England. *Journal of American Folklore, 101*, 110-111.

Tebner, R. (1988, May 2). Dickering done, tie-ins prove worth. *Advertising Age*, S4-5.
Thomas, B. (1991). *Disney's art of animation: From Mickey Mouse to Beauty and the Beast*. New York: Hyperion.
Thomas, B. (1994). *Walt Disney: An American original*. New York: Hyperion.
Trites, R. (1991). Disney's sub/version of Andersen's "The Little Mermaid." *Journal of Popular Film and Television, 18*, 145-152.
Trojan, J. (1988, December). Front row center. *Wilson Library Bulletin*, p. 100.
Walley, W. (1986, February 20). The man who created Disney's girls. *Advertising Age*, 32.
Walley, W. (1988, August 1). Disney builds on its direct link with fans. *Advertising Age*, S11-12.
Wilmington, M. (1989, November 15). *The Little Mermaid*. [review]. *Los Angeles Times*, p. 1.
Zoglin, R. (1990, August 6). What's up, Doc? Animation! *Time*, pp. 66-67.