

**The Globalization of U.S. Culture**  
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**Learning consumer values through the Disney?**

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# 1. Introduction

The Walt Disney has served as an interesting object of research throughout the twentieth century up to these days. Even though its stories might be understood by the audience as a pure entertainment, it might include other meanings. The one promoted by Walt Disney himself was its educative element, as he considered himself to be a moral educator contributing in the preservation of American culture. Many scholars suggested something quite different: that the values “concealed” behind the innocent facade of the Disney pictures actually have an imperialist nature.<sup>1</sup> They also observed those cases in which Disney movies were evidently used as a tool of spreading cultural influence. To mention some radical examples, the Disney has once been used as a tool to displace the Nazi of the control of the Latin American communications systems in order to place the „Good Neighbor policy”.<sup>2</sup> The propagandistic cartoons during the Second World War might present the most extreme form of Disney’s “educational” activities. Disney plays a dominant role in the entertainment market for children and thanks to the globalized world economy they are enabled to spread its influence out of the United States. Therefore it definitely has a significant effect on the Czech society as well, but there has not been much research focused on this field. And so it seemed to me extremely interesting so ask: which messages can the Disney movies be delivering today?

After studying various detailed analysis of the marketing strategy of the company and about the possible meanings of the Disney movies, I came to a quite evident observation: Disney seems to be promoting the consumer lifestyle. And spreading such life values starts with the

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<sup>1</sup> John Tomlinson, *Cultural Imperialism: A Critical Introduction* (London: Pinter, 1991)., 41.

<sup>2</sup> Lisa Cartwright and Brian Goldfarb, “Cultural Contagion: On Disney’s Health Education Films for Latin America,” 173.

movies and is indirectly present in all its other products. For instance, Tomlison suggests that imported cultural goods including the Disney movies somehow contain the values of American consumer capitalism and that being a good way of life.<sup>3</sup> It does not necessarily have to be the purpose of the company to promote America as such, but its interest in spreading consumerism might just be a regular attitude of a business company: they want to increase their profit. And if they are able to contribute to building consumer society, the people will want to buy their products and that way bring them profit.

### **Focus of the research and methodology**

I observed two different ways in which the Disney company can be achieving this objective. Firstly, it is engaging people to buy other products after purchasing one. That does not mean only the movies, but also all sorts of goods with the movie characters or even spending money on visiting the Disneyland. Even though this is an indirect effect of the Disney movies, it is quite evident. The second one regards the content of the Disney movies themselves, since many scholars have been discussing the consumer values hidden in them. I have to admit that each of those topics would be an interesting object of research in a more complex paper. I further present the most important theoretical observations about these interlinked topics and after each one of them I include my own observations. Those come out of a qualitative research I did with 40 different respondents – 20 children in the age between 4 and 8 who like watching Disney movies and 20 parents of those children. I tried to focus in the interviews on whether the children or even their parents can be adopting a consumer life attitude by watching the movies and being encouraged to purchase Disney products.

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<sup>3</sup> John Tomlinson, *Cultural Imperialism: A Critical Introduction* (London: Pinter, 1991), 44.

## 2. Disney teaches us to buy

The role of producer of the benign children entertainment places Disney out of suspicion of involvement in any process of forming the public life attitude.<sup>4</sup> However, any product of American capitalism has to persuade the people it dominates that the American way of life and values is what they want.<sup>5</sup> That is the case of the Disney company which logically wants to keep its high popularity and that way gain stable profits. Contemporary life has become dominated by such global corporations that influence our choices about spending our leisure time as well as change the role consumption takes in life of the individual. That has lead to consumption becoming increasingly important in leisure. Children are taught by the marketers behind the films to behave as merely passive consumers since the movies do not allow any participation. Public culture seems to be replaced by purely commercial culture and democracy becomes a democracy of consumers.

This happens also due to the fact that the Disney movies are smartly linked with all the other Disney products. The company works with the synergistic marketing strategy, which means that purchasing one piece will advertise another and motivate you to buy more from the same brand. As Roe states, "*the power of Disney lies in its ability to make itself an object of desire, the pleasure of which is to be found only in the construction of the desire, not in its possession.*"<sup>6</sup> The goal of the company, according to Roy Disney, is that the movie and television production needs to be strong to be able to sell other products of the company, such

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<sup>4</sup> Lisa Cartwright and Brian Goldfarb, "Cultural Contagion: On Disney's Health Education Films for Latin America," 174.

<sup>5</sup> John Tomlinson, *Cultural Imperialism: A Critical Introduction* (London: Pinter, 1991), 41.

<sup>6</sup> Eleanor Byrne, Martin McQuillan: *Deconstructing Disney* (London: Pluto Press, 1999), 174.

as merchandise or an entrance ticket to the Disney amusement park.<sup>7</sup> In fact, the Disney World is basically another sophisticated product that focuses on American heritage and creates an illusion of perfect world, including happy looking staff members that have to follow series of very strict rules.<sup>8</sup> The park, similarly to the movies, has been criticized for transforming children into consumers.<sup>9</sup> If we look at the whole circle that links the movies and the products, we come to the realization that the movies automatically put pressure on children to want to buy the other products or visit the theme park and that reminds them to watch the films again and so on. That way watching the movies encourages them to buy stuff and simply “consume”.

### **Qualitative research: absorbed by Disney products?**

The part of the research which focused on this topic of spreading consumer lifestyle brought some valuable results. I found it extremely interesting to observe whether the parents of young Disney fans resist to buy their children the merchandise that is linked to the movies and automatically seems very attractive. Such pressure on the parents is part of the globalized world in which we have to constantly resist global forces in our choices of how we live and what we buy.<sup>10</sup> According to Friedman’s definition of the phenomenon of globalization, is that it enables corporations to reach around the world farther, faster, deeper and cheaper than ever before.<sup>11</sup> That way most of the movie that arrive from the United States to Europe bring with them new goods and other possibilities for profit-making. All of the families which I

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<sup>7</sup> *EuroDisneyland*. Case study by the Thunderbird American Graduate School of International Management, (Glendale, Arizona, 1999), 3.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, 7.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, 10.

<sup>10</sup> June Johnson, ed., *Global Issues – Local Arguments: Readings for Writing* ( Pearson Education, Inc., 2007), 12.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, 8.

interviewed in my research possessed some toys from the Disney corporation. The number varied in relationship with three factors: the will of the parents to buy them, the popularity of Disney movies in the families and the monthly income of the parents. The will and the income were not necessarily in a tight relationship, some parents from upper-income families, such as respondents 2 and 7 stated that they rather buy their children some sophisticated toy or board game than toys with cartoon characters. A lack of toys and absence of clothing with the movie characters was present in the households where the children did not watch the movies frequently. Those formed about 10 percent of the families, but the number is not applicable to the entire population since this was a qualitative research and focused on the middle and upper class families. The rest of the parents admitted that in fact about 60 – 80 % of the time when the children play on their own they are somehow surrounded by Disney products. It was interlinked with the parents preference of the Disney movies when choosing a fairytale – they like its story and appreciated the visual quality themselves, or they simple considered the movies “the easiest choice”, while the children enjoy watching most of them. Respondents 3 and 16 also considered the lack of good Czech movies for children the reason for the American dominance on the market of children movies. Thus the Disney merchandise become “the clearest choice in the toy store”, as respondent 19 stated, because the children are used to the characters from the movies and will enjoy the gift. And the presence of Disney products seemed to encourage children to prefer Disney when choosing a movie. I asked the child respondent 23 what he likes to watch and he surely answered: Mickey Mouse Club. Child respondent 32, who had with his brother several toys and pieces of clothing with The Cars motive, mentioned that his favorite movie is The Cars. Some parents, such as respondents 16 and 18, had the attitude of allowing some Disney movies, but not being in favor of buying other Disney products. The opinion of the respondent 16, however, changed after their children linked Disney with a specific piece of its marketing system – the Disneyland: “We

never allowed a high quantity of the Disney goods in the household until the moment when we visited Disneyland and we saw what a happy places it is. We ourselves fell in love with it and we like to buy our daughters some of its products from time to time.”

### 3. Modern consumer attitude hidden between the lines

The second possible way how Disney spreads the consumer lifestyle might be the movie themselves. This has been a significant topic of critique and many authors blame Disney for defending the capitalistic system within the movies. It starts with showing the capitalist class relations as something natural, unchangeable, and morally justified.<sup>12</sup> Disney culture that way presents the particular and historical form of white society which has power in the world. The Western world, in particular America, is depicted as the holder of social and ideological values and it teaches the children not to have doubt about that. And this society which is shown is nothing else than our modern economic society with its consumer values.<sup>13</sup> With the strong impact of Disney on the public this can be understood as construction of children future identities within the ideology of consumerism.<sup>14</sup> I will limit myself to explaining such points on only one interpretation of one of the Disney fairytales: the Little Mermaid.

This fairytale, according to Byrne, can be understood as a symbol of the East – West conflict. The sea world – the Eastern society – is to be understood as the less effective one in the use of capital through the state, which should show the limitation of communists system. Ariel is a member of that society, but is different from the rest in her will to become a part of the upper world where she could enjoy all its pleasures. She suffers in the merworld from not being able

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<sup>12</sup> John Tomlinson, *Cultural Imperialism: A Critical Introduction* (London: Pinter, 1991), 42.

<sup>13</sup> Eleanor Byrne, Martin McQuillan: *Deconstructing Disney* (London: Pluto Press, 1999), 23.

<sup>14</sup> Henry A. Giroux: *The Mouse that Roared* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlewood, 1994), 156.

have the consumer freedom and be able to consume commodities. “Without commodities we have no friend, no lovers”,<sup>15</sup> seems to be her motto. Therefore she collects human objects, even though she is never satisfied enough and wants more commodities. The value of the objects of pleasure is not important, it is just their quantity and prestige that matters. However, the position of the things is not as important as the consumer behavior itself.<sup>16</sup> And to achieve that, Ariel has to come up to the human world. So she even makes an unfair treatment with the witch in order to just become part of the other world. She eventually gets there and, unlike in the original version of the story, she happily stays there. This ending is supposed to prove that the human capitalist world is the right choice.

### **Qualitative research: ability to detect hidden meanings?**

It appeared much harder to prove the scholarly points in practice of my research with family who watch Disney movies. To show the procedure of my research, I have to firstly say that my original intention was to let the children watch the Little Mermaid movie and afterwards let them tell me what it was about. The objective was to see how they retell the story and what they take out of it. However, this methodology did not prove to be successful, because the children would merely try to repeat in detail the storyline and did not put any judgments in it. That is because the capacity to condense a story and depict its most important points is not developed in their age. Therefore I modified the method keeping the objective of seeing the ability of people to transmit the idea from the story into their real lives. I started to interview only the parents and see if they can identify some points that they find interesting about the

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<sup>15</sup> Stephen M. Fjellman, *Vinyl Leaves: Walt Disney World and America* (Oxford: Westview Press, 1992), 304.

<sup>16</sup> Eleanor Byrne, Martin McQuillan: *Deconstructing Disney* (London: Pluto Press, 1999), 174.

movies. However, the most common answer was a comment about the visual quality, nice tale and good entertainment for their children. It could be said about their responses, that they considered the system of the two worlds in the movie totally normal and did not have serious problems with it. Nevertheless, that does not mean that they would thus accept the capitalist system or see consumer attitude in the Ariel seeking for more human objects. When they were told to retell the story, they would follow the most important points of the storyline and see it merely as a pleasant fairytale. In the moment when they realized that I am trying to observe their understanding of the movie, some of them would react as the respondent 7: "It is just a movie for children. There is no need to find meanings in it, cause there aren't any." Since the parents would not take the movie seriously, I could not observe that they could be anyhow affected by that nor that they would be critically thinking about the possible content of it. Even when I told them to do so, they could not figure out any complex theories about what the transition from the sea to the human world means. "Ariel wants to change her life, maybe it could be showing that it is nice to travel," suggested respondent 20. That certainly means that the general public cannot easily recognize such topics hidden between the lines and thus their life choices are not affected by that. Different layers are apparently understandable mainly for the academic community. However, I can declare that some hidden ideas in the movies could not be encouraging people to behave in a certain way - that would be a topic for a long-term observation of people's behavior after watching Disney movies.

## 4. Conclusion

In this essay I examined the point on which many scholars agree: that Disney encourages people to adopt a consumer lifestyle. The two mechanisms of transmitting consumer values that I found most significant were the synergistic marketing strategy which encourages us to

purchase one product after the other and also the hidden meaning of the movies. While the latter was hard to prove to have a real effect on forming attitude of people and in my opinion remains in the academic field, the synergy of products was well observable and I could obtain clear evidences of how children learn that consumer attitude of purchasing more and more merchandise is normal and their parents accept it as morally correct. I used theoretical as well as empirical data, which allowed me to make a research with relevant scholarly background that observes the impact of Disney in Czech environment. Such expansion of the influence of the Disney concern is closely linked with the general topic of globalization of the US culture and the consumer lifestyle is definitely part of the world general process of economic globalization.

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