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VIEWING DISNEY VIDEOS WITHOUT ROSE-COLORED GLASSES

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Chyng Sun was a 19-year-old undergraduate in Taiwan when she saw her first animated Disney feature film, "Cinderella." Enchanted, she quickly devoured "Snow White" and "Fantasia."

When "Little Mermaid" was released, though, she decided not to see it.

"It was my favorite fairy tale," she says. "I could see a tendency to distort women and I didn't want the story destroyed for me."

When she finally saw "Mermaid," along with "The Lion King," "Beauty and the Beast," and "Aladdin," she was on her way to what would eventually lead to her own video, "Mickey Mouse Monopoly: Disney, Childhood and Corporate Power." It will be screened tonight at Wheelock College and on May 5 at noon at the Museum of Fine Arts. The MFA showing is open to the public.

Taking on such a formidable opponent is not something one does lightly. For Sun, as well as for the researchers she interviews on the video, the stakes are worth it: "Parents have a right to know" the effect Disney has, she says.

The thesis of the video is that Disney's feature-length, animated films are inappropriate and potentially harmful for children under 5. The problem isn't just the content, which she says is often racist, sexist, and violent, but also Disney's ability to reach even into the crib to sell spinoff products.

Disney is not the only company doing this, of course, but Sun argues that Disney holds a position unique in the world. As the biggest player in children's entertainment (it owns the Disney Channel, ABC-TV and radio, ESPN, Miramax, Touchstone, and Disney Pictures), it sets the agenda for everyone else. With 660 stores worldwide, Disney's reach is international and its products typically generate four times more revenue than the box office, says sociologist Gail Dines, an associate professor at Wheelock College. "Lion King" alone had 186 items, she says.

Beyond all that is something no one can measure: "Disney enjoys an aura. Parents think it is safe," says Sun, a children's book author and a doctoral candidate at the University of Massachusetts.

Harvard University psychiatrist Alvin Poussaint hopes the video will dispel that complacency.

"Disney imparts values, and children are more impressionable than parents realize," he says.

Consider Disney's portrayal of women. "They all have big eyes and tiny waists, they're beautiful and seductive and they all look Caucasian even when they aren't supposed to," says Poussaint, director of the Media Center at Judge Baker Children's Center.

For preschoolers trying to understand what it means to be a girl or boy, the message they get is appalling, he says: "Girls, you have to be beautiful and sexy to be loved and, by the way, you need a boy to rescue you, no matter how capable you are. Boys, only a girl like this is worth loving and, by the way, she needs you to protect and rescue her."

Preschoolers are also trying to understand differences, and this is another place where Disney's values potentially exert a negative influence.

"When a 4- or 5-year-old notices differences, she doesn't necessarily ascribe goodness or badness to them," says early-childhood educator Diane Levin of Wheelock College. "She is trying to learn, `If some people don't look like me and don't act like me, can I still like them?'"

The example she offers is from "Hercules." On a give-away plastic cup offered by McDonald's, there's a scene of scantily clad women with tiny waists, big breasts, and a sexy come-on look. There's one exception: An ugly, fat woman who is drooling.

"By making fatness a source of disgust and comic relief, the message is obvious," she says: "Fat is bad."

Can young children really read so much from so little?

"They don't yet have the cognitive capacity to look beyond appearance," says Levin. "All they focus on is what they see, what's concrete. They can't compute how or why a person got to be that way, but they form ideas about it anyway."

The ideas get incorporated into their view of the world.

"Preschoolers are figuring out how the world works," says Dines. "Disney gives superiority to those in power, who are always literally or symbolically white." (Consider the hyenas in "Lion King," who are stand-ins for ghetto blacks; Disney portrays them as being incapable of keeping the power they gain because they are morally and intellectually inferior, she says.)

Levin says that what children take from this theme, which varies only slightly from film to film, depends on who they are.

"If you're a mainstream, white kid, you learn that stereotypes and put-downs of `other' is OK," she says. "If you're one of the other cultural or ethnic groups Disney represents, you see yourself portrayed in ways that are often degrading and negative, worthy of scorn and ridicule." Levin is author of "Remote Control Childhood?" (NAEYC Press).

That children tend to see a Disney video over and over makes the message more and more familiar, until it becomes ingrained and normalized. That's one reason Disney's influence is more troublesome for parents today than it was several decades ago.

"We went to the theater and saw it once. Then we embellished our memory or read the story and imagined what we didn't remember," says media literacy consultant Cheryl Hirshman, former director of the New England Children's Film Festival.

The other reason the influence is greater today involves marketing. Here's what some say spin-off toys and products do:

Diminish play. Children who play with figures or toys from a video tend to act out the movie instead of their own lives. "That robs them of what's meaningful about play," says Dines.

Push children to be consumers. Because marketing is so pervasive (think bed sheets, lunch boxes, Happy Meals), children begin to think they need the objects to be happy, and because a lot of the merchandise isn't fun once they own it, the meaning comes from the buying, says Levin. Plus, when the item is given by an adult who is meaningful in a child's life, it comes with a stamp of approval: "Not just the toy," says Hirshman, "but the message behind it too."

Take over their thoughts. When the images are on everything from cereal boxes to T-shirts to tubes of toothpaste, "Children can't screen it out," says Levin. "They think it's important so they spend lots of time trying to figure out what it means instead of putting energy into other, more important things."

What's worse, the message they are working on is often beyond their ability, says psychologist Joanne Cantor, a professor at the University of Wisconsin at Madison.

"Bambi," for instance, is frightening because it hasn't dawned on a 4-year-old that her parent could die. A scary scene in "Beauty and the Beast" that's fun for an 8-year-old gives a 5-year-old nightmares because he can't grasp the difference between real and pretend.

"Preschoolers are frightened by what looks threatening or ugly," says Cantor. "A grotesque animated villain is far more scary than a live-action character who is evil but doesn't appear to be." Cantor is author of "Mommy, I'm Scared" (Harvest).

The advice from these professionals is that children younger than 6 not see Disney animated feature films. Short of that, Cantor recommends prescreening, with your child's sensibilities and your family's values in mind. If your child does watch them, it should be an occasional event ("Not enough for the characters to become your child's best friend," says Levin), where you watch with her, so you can turn it off if necessary, an advantage over seeing the film in the theater.

Making children literate viewers is something we can begin to do even with 3-year-olds by asking questions. After "Lion King," for instance, ask, "What could be another ending? Could everyone vote on who should be leader?" For "Little Mermaid:" "How would you feel if you had to give up your voice?"

Wanda Whitmore, an independent filmmaker and mother of four, is careful about the videos her children watch.

She nixed "Cinderella" and "Aladdin" ("over-the-edge stereotypical") but allows some Disney videos in spite of their values because she sees an entre for teaching. After watching "Pocahontas," there was a family conversation about what white settlers were really like. After "Bambi," they talked about hunting and guns.

"A lot of Disney can seem so innocent," says Whitmore. "You can have a catchy song stuck in your head that you're humming and then suddenly you pay attention to the lyrics and it stops you in your tracks."

For example, she was sensitive to mock Native American language in a song from "Peter Pan." Her oldest daughters rewrote the lyrics, putting in real words instead of stereotypical grunts and groans.

For information about "Mickey Mouse Monopoly," contact the Media Education Foundation, 800-897-0089 or www.mediaed.org.

Contact Barbara F. Meltz at meltz@globe.com.

SIDEBAR

DISCUSS THE MOVIE'S MESSAGES WITH YOUNGSTERS

1 DON'T ASSUME THE SCARINESS OF A VIDEO IS AKIN TO THE SCARINESS OF A CLASSIC FAIRY TALE. BEING PRESENTED WITH A VISUAL IMAGE IS SCARIER THAN HEARING A STORY AND IMAGINING AN IMAGE.

2 UNLESS A CHILD IS VISIBLY FRIGHTENED (IN WHICH CASE YOU SHOULD TURN IT OFF), TALK ABOUT THE VIDEO'S MESSAGES AFTER YOU'VE WATCHED, NOT DURING THE SCREENING.YOU'LL MAKE HER CRAZY, AND SHE WON'T WANT TO WATCH WITH YOU. LET HER DECIDE WHEN TO HAVE A DISCUSSION, BUT AGREE TO THE TIME BEFORE YOU WATCH.

3 WHEN WATCHING VIDEOS WITH CHILDREN OF VARIOUS AGES, MAKE THE SELECTION FOR THE YOUNGEST CHILD. TELL AN UNHAPPY OLDER SIBLING: "WHEN YOU WERE THIS AGE, WE PROTECTED YOU, TOO."

4 IF YOU WANT TO CUT BACK ON YOUR CHILDREN'S VIEWING, DO IT GRADUALLY, NOT ALL AT ONCE, AND TALK ABOUT YOUR REASONS.

5 RECOMMENDED SOURCES OF VIDEOS FOR YOUNG CHILDREN: WESTON WOODS BY SCHOLASTIC (800-243-9194; WWW.SCHOLASTIC.COM), E! SPECIALLY "SYLVESTER AND THE MAGIC PEBBLE," "CORDUROY," AND "HERE COMES THE CAT"; CHURCHILL MEDIA (800-829-1900; WWW.SVEMEDIA.COM), ESPECIALLY "MORRIS GOES TO SCHOOL," "CHILDREN OF WAX," AND "AMAZING GRACE"; BULLFROG FILMS (800-543-3764; WWW.BULLFROG@IGC.APC.ORG), ESPECIALLY "BETWEEN THE WALLS," "THE DINGLES," AND THE "LOIS AND BRAMS" SERIES.

6 WORK WITH OTHER PARENTS IN YOUR COMMUNITY SO THAT AS MANY CHILDREN AS POSSIBLE LEARN SIMILAR VIEWING HABITS.

7 AVOID BUYING LOGO PRODUCTS AS WELL AS TOYS SPUN OFF FROM A VIDEO.

Caption:
GLOBE STAFF PHOTO/DAVID KAMERMAN\ Director Miguel Picker and producer Chyng Sun work on Sun's video, `Mickey Mouse Monopoly.'PHOTO

Memo:
CHILD CARING / BARBARA F. MELTZ

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