

TINKER BELLES AND EVIL QUEENS

THE WALT DISNEY COMPANY
FROM THE INSIDE OUT

SEAN GRIFFIN

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Introduction

Whose Prince Is It, Anyway?

In the summer of 1988, I was hired by New Wave Productions as a courier, production assistant and general all-around “go-fer.” New Wave Productions functioned in the film industry as a “trailer house”—a company producing theatrical trailers and TV and radio spots for feature films. New Wave worked exclusively on projects for the Walt Disney Company, making ads for all of its feature films, both under the Disney label and under its newer logos Touchstone Pictures and (beginning in 1990) Hollywood Pictures. Although New Wave wasn’t the only trailer house working exclusively for Disney, and New Wave was not a subsidiary of the company, for all intents and purposes, I was working for Disney.

Disney had become a major force in the film industry by the summer of 1988. Over the preceding Christmas season, the studio, under the new management of Michael Eisner, Frank Wells and Jeffrey Katzenberg, had released its first film to bring in over \$100 million domestically at the box office—*Three Men and a Baby*. Only a few weeks later, *Good Morning, Vietnam* was released, which also made over \$100 million. That summer, Disney would surpass all of the other Hollywood studios in box-office share, with the Tom Cruise star-vehicle *Cocktail*, the re-release of *Bambi* (1942) and the top summer hit *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* It was stunning to begin work for a studio that was riding on a crest of energy, ambition and measurable success.

As I continued my career at New Wave, I was gradually promoted up the ladder—first as an all-around assistant to a producer of spots, then, more specifically as the assistant producer overseeing the sound mix of the TV spots, and finally as a producer myself. The success of 1988’s summer releases were followed by the next summer’s *Dead Poets’ Society* and *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids*, then the Christmas 1989 release of

The Little Mermaid and the early spring 1990 release of *Pretty Woman*. It was hard not to “catch” some of the giddy adrenaline that results from such steady success. Even in a lesser capacity, working on spots for the films instead of the films themselves, I could feel some sort of contribution to the success and notoriety of the studio. I could see my work readily on TV, and some of the ads themselves became the topic of journalistic reports. One TV spot for *Dick Tracy* (1990), cut to (and intercut with the video of) Madonna’s song, “Vogue,” even got mentioned in *TV Guide*.¹

Yet, the economic success of the Disney studio (and my own) during my employment at New Wave wasn’t the only reason for the elation I felt. As with most American men and women my age, Disney had been around me for most of my life. As a child, I had been surrounded by Disney in the form of films, TV shows, children’s books, comic books, coloring books, games, toys, puzzles, records, ice shows and theme park visits. The earliest memory I have is that of holding my father’s hand as we walked down the street to a movie theatre that was playing *The Jungle Book* (1967). My unbridled anticipation of the movie has helped to keep this memory alive in my consciousness. Working for a company that evoked such deep emotional memories helped carry me through the often late nights and weekend hours of work.

The other factors that helped me through the stress of deadlines and expectations of hyperperfectionism imposed by the studio were the immediate people that worked with me on the projects. A tight group that varied over time from between five to eight people, my co-workers often felt like a second family to me. I developed a father-son relationship with the producer I assisted that extended beyond the workplace. Many of us included each other in our social lives and helped each other through a number of personal crises. Amongst these crises was my gradual “coming out” process. Although I had already come to terms with my sexuality within myself, it took a long while for me to tell others. A number of events amongst my co-workers made me feel safe enough to make them the first group of people to talk to about my homosexuality. In late 1990, the producer that I assisted died of an AIDS-related disease. Although he welcomed me into his family, which included his male partner, and probably suspected that I was gay, I was never able to bring myself to tell him, and this weighed heavily on me after his death. That next spring, a female co-worker went through a traumatic breakup, ending a six-year relationship. Her admission to me

of her pain, and that the other party was a woman, allowed me to admit my own orientation.

Looking back, I could see how Disney's films had at times created a space for me during adolescence to (secretly) express my budding sexual orientation. I remember quite clearly the first twinges of desire in the mid-1970s as I watched Kurt Russell as *The Strongest Man in the World* (1975) and Jan-Michael Vincent as *The World's Greatest Athlete* (1975). But it wasn't until late 1992, as I sat in a Hollywood picture palace to watch Disney's latest animated feature *Aladdin*, that I suddenly realized that the ties between Disney and homosexuality extended much farther than my own individual history. The film was preceded by a live stage show—a medley of various Disney songs, sung by men and women dressed up as the live-action versions of the studio's famous animated characters—Snow White and Cinderella (with their princes), Ariel the mermaid, and Beauty and her Beast. The huge audience roared with approval and laughter—an audience made up largely of adult males who seemed to enjoy the campy nature of the performances. At another screening in the same theatre, Joseph Boone remarked that the mostly gay male audience during the pre-show “shared recognition of the likely *non*-heterosexuality of several of the men performing as straight Prince Charmings on stage (some of whom were singled out by friends' exclamations—‘look, it's XXX!!’—from the audience).”² The “queer appreciation” of the pre-show continued through both my and Boone's screening of the film, in which every “gay” joke uttered by Robin Williams as the Genie was loudly applauded by the respective audiences.

It became apparent to me during this screening just how important Disney figures in the lives of a number of lesbians and gay men (including myself). Beyond my co-workers at New Wave, I had met a number of men in gay bars and found out through conversation that they too worked for Disney—either at the studio or for the parks. When I later joined the Gay Men's Chorus of Los Angeles, a disproportionate number of members were presently or had been Disney employees. Furthermore, many of these people shared the same fascination with Disney that I did. The producer I assisted was a huge fan of *Peter Pan* (1953). Many gay men I knew owned shelves of Disney merchandise. Others seemed positively obsessed with Disneyland and went to the theme park in Anaheim repeatedly. In the 1990s, Disneyland and Disney World have held “Gay Nights” (and even “Gay Weekends”). Gay

camp has appropriated many of the cartoon villains in Disney films. The AIDS quilt is covered with Disney imagery. Gus van Sant described his fantasy of

a full-budget Disney animated feature with gay leads—for example, *The Prince and the Stable Boy* or *Peter Pan: Love in Never-Never Land* or *The Little Mermaid 2: Ariel and Samantha*. With love songs between the two and full promotions. Y’know, McDonald’s Happy Meals with the characters. It would be great.³

If Disney figured so strongly in the gay community, then it might be possible to see how Disney was helping individuals to define their identity as part of the gay community and how various Disney texts worked as a factor in the understanding of their sexuality. Similar to my adolescent preoccupation with Kurt Russell, others have told me about the formative influence of the television serial “The Adventures of Spin and Marty” shown on the original *Mickey Mouse Club* (1955–59; rerun in syndication, 1977–78). Wayne Koestenbaum, in *The Queen’s Throat: Opera, Homosexuality and the Mystery of Desire*, describes how his fascination with Adriana Casselotti’s contralto as the voice of Snow White helped build the foundation of his identity as an “opera queen.”⁴

The idea that lesbians and gay men could be watching Disney and using the texts (films, TV shows, theme parks, records, etc.) to further a definition of their sexuality is initially stunning and provocative. Of all the major Hollywood studios, only Disney has maintained a public awareness of a “house style” up to the present day. Whereas moviegoers in the 1930s might have been able to distinguish the look and feel of a Warner Bros. film from an MGM film or a Paramount film, today there is no brand differentiation amongst studios—except for Disney. The Walt Disney Company has established for itself since the 1930s an image of conservative American family values—values which uphold the heterosexual patriarchal family unit in a nostalgic remembrance of some bygone era of small-town Midwestern Protestant ideals. Obviously, this image is usually considered antithetical to conceptions of homosexuality—and even, to an extent, sexuality in general. Since the films, TV shows and theme parks are geared mainly towards children, or adults with children, there is often an elision of anything that could be construed as referring to sexuality, whether heterosexual or homosexual. In the cartoon shorts, for example, no one is ever the offspring

of another character: Donald has an Uncle Scrooge, but no father—and three nephews, but no sons. In the early 1930s, the studio removed the udder from Clarabelle Cow because it was too suggestive of sexual organs. Only the constant replication of a middle-class heterosexual family indicates that “something” is going on off screen.

One of the main purposes of this work, then, is to explore what particularly there might be within the Disney image and its various manifestations that attracts lesbians and gay men. By viewing Disney’s animation, live-action films, television series, theme parks and various other products created by the company through a “queer sensibility,” one can come to understand the variety of motifs and characteristics of Disneyana that lend themselves readily to such a reading. Since the company has stood for so long as an upholder of heterosexual normativity, it is vital to recognize and discuss the long-standing (though basically hidden, denied and underexplored) relationship that has existed between the Walt Disney Company and the communities and cultures of homosexual men and women that emerged during the twentieth century. By acknowledging the presence of lesbians and gay men both within the studio and within the viewing audience, this work also attempts to bring greater awareness of the importance that Disney has had in twentieth-century homosexual culture.

Realizing the links between Disney and lesbian/gay culture was a bit of a surprise to me back in 1992 during the screening of *Aladdin*. Six years later, though, a number of individuals and organizations have recognized the relationship. In 1994, some fundamentalist Christians in Florida noticed that a “Lesbian/Gay Weekend” was being held at Walt Disney World and protested Disney’s allowing it to take place (even though Disney itself was not involved in the organization of the event). Soon, others were jumping on the bandwagon of outrage at Disney. One anonymous writer on the Internet ominously asked,

What should you think of the modern Disney? Are your children safe with the Disney mindset? Consider the people involved in making the recent Disney feature-length cartoons. Who are they? Renown [*sic*] singer, self-professed homosexual, and AIDS activist Elton John is in the employ of Disney. A not-so-well-known Disney employee died of AIDS shortly after completing a Disney cartoon. Look at the other credits in such films as “Beauty And The Beast” and “The Lion King” and “Pocahantos” [*sic*]. Are there more not-so-well-known sex

perverts and anti-family feminists in other decision-making positions at Disney—altering the direction of the plots, injecting “alternate lifestyles tolerance” themes into the stories, and denigrating traditional family roles?⁵

A letter to the editors of the Lancaster, Pennsylvania, *Sunday News* complained that “According to Coral Ridge Ministries, Disney executives work with a homosexual advocacy group that strives to promote a homosexual agenda in the workplace, along with advertising in the homosexual magazine *Out*.”⁶ By 1997, Southern Baptists (the largest Protestant denomination in the country) decided to “refrain from patronizing the Disney Co. and any of its related entities” in reaction to Disney’s growing tolerance for homosexual employees and customers.⁷

Since the 1980s, a number of other entertainment-oriented companies have either equaled or surpassed Disney’s acceptance of homosexual employees and customers. These include companies with divisions aimed directly at children and family audiences, such as Viacom/Paramount, which owns the Nickelodeon cable network. Yet, Southern Baptists and others have focused specifically on Disney, seemingly due to the aforementioned long-standing “brand-name” image of the company as “clean” and “safe.” As Operation Rescue protestors would write on placards to protest the 1998 “Lesbian/Gay Weekend” at Disney World, “What would Walt think?”⁸

With this in mind, writing a book that goes into detail about the relationship between Disney and homosexuality might only add fuel to the fundamentalists’ fire, giving them page after page of proof that there *is* some conspiracy afoot, that Disney has become part of a “gay agenda.” The phrase “gay agenda” has been commonly bandied about by many right-wing groups to combat the growing public awareness and acceptance of homosexuality across American society. Cries of a gay agenda have been used in efforts to deny “special rights” to homosexuals (labeling nondiscrimination in the workplace, equal opportunity housing and parental custody rights as somehow “special rights”), in arguments against legalizing same-sex marriages, as well as in debates over allowing homosexuals to serve openly in the military. These conservative alarmists argue that the homosexual community schemes to concertedly undermine heterosexuality, “the foundation of American civilization.”⁹ Yet, while accusations of a gay agenda have been used in diverse controversies, most complaints point at the entertainment in-

dustry—claiming that a “gay Mafia” of homosexual executives is attempting to sway public opinion with films, TV shows, music acts, etc. biased in favor of homosexuality. Consequently, Disney’s EEO policy (which covers sexual orientation) and its domestic-partner benefits program have been used by critics to prove the existence of a gay agenda within the company.

While this work aims to describe the importance of Disney to gay culture, and conversely the growing importance of gay culture to Disney, in no way does this discussion somehow prove the existence of a gay agenda within the corporation or anywhere else. This relationship is a longstanding one in terms of lesbian/gay culture’s use of Disney, but the relationship has been ever shifting, and the company’s attitudes towards homosexuality have to be analyzed carefully. Whereas the new Disney includes sexual orientation within its EEO statement, gay and lesbian employees during Walt’s life by and large remained closeted for fear of harassment and being fired. Whereas the company now seems to be very aware of its gay and lesbian customers, it seems quite likely that Walt and most members of the studio during his reign had no idea of how lesbians and gay men were relating to their output. Also, the newer policies do not necessarily hail a radically pro-gay-rights attitude for the company. Rather, they are largely a reaction to changes in the entertainment industry at large and attempts by Disney to remain economically competitive. In order to analyze the distinct shifts in the relationship between Disney and lesbian/gay culture, I have divided my discussion into two sections, each discussing a separate period. The first section focuses on the history and texts of the Walt Disney Company during Walt’s lifetime, when the studio and American society at large attempted to ignore and deny homosexuality’s existence; the second section deals with the relationship between Disney and lesbian/gay culture since the 1960s, when gay rights activism grew stronger and louder in American society and when the company went into an economic and creative tailspin until Michael Eisner took charge in 1984.

A few more words are in order on the concept of a “gay agenda” as it relates to one of the structuring issues of this piece. In order to envision such an agenda, one needs to assume there is an easily defined idea of a “gay community.” Successfully encircling such a community quickly proves impossible. Homosexuals have spent most of the twentieth century hiding from persecution. Hence, individuals often

remained isolated from each other—making it hard to speak of a unified community outside of large urban areas that allow a relatively small space for gay and lesbian neighborhoods or ghettos to develop (such as West Hollywood, Greenwich Village and the Castro District). To speak of a “gay community” also begs the question: who is included in this community, and how can one talk about only “one” community? Many lesbians feel themselves separated from gay men (and vice versa) because of gender. Transgendered individuals don’t easily fit the prescribed paradigm for either lesbians or gay men. There is wariness on the part of many homosexuals towards bisexuals. Homosexuals are also not above the biases and prejudices of the society in which they are raised, and issues of racism and class prejudice in homosexual communities have begun to come to the foreground recently. Similarly, so-called “fringe groups” such as the North American Man/Boy Love Association (NAMBLA) and the S&M subculture continually have to fight to be recognized within the homosexual community. One can see the fragmented nature of the homosexual community within the relationship of Disney to homosexual culture. While chapters 2 and 4 attempt to show how lesbians and gay men could find Disney texts to appreciate from their own perspectives, both chapters clearly show that, due to the prevalence of the patriarchal viewpoint in mainstream filmmaking, there is much more material to enjoy as a gay man than as a lesbian (the wealth of male characters, the “drag queen” nature of the cartoon villainesses, etc.). Hence, while this work attempts to discuss the wide range of “non-straight” sexual orientations, discussing Disney’s relationship with “homosexual culture” perforce overemphasizes gay male response. It is precisely the problematic nature of describing an all-encompassing “homosexual culture” that complicates the seemingly more accepting attitude of Disney towards homosexuals over the past decade, a problem upon which the final three chapters directly focus.

With such fragmentation in mind, it becomes hard to envision a concerted, mutually agreed upon “gay agenda.” On the other hand, it is much easier to recognize the existence of two other agendas at work when discussing the relationship between Disney and homosexual culture. The first is a “heterosexual agenda” that has tried to deny, repress and erase the existence of any and all sexualities that do not fit within its narrow framework. From the concerted elision of passages dealing with same-sex acts in modern European translations of Greek and Roman texts to specific bans of materials dis-

cussing such matters (including book burnings and arrests) to denying funding to research that supported the existence of “non-straight” desires, modern Western society has worked ceaselessly to naturalize heterosexuality and demonize or pathologize all other conceptions of sexuality.¹⁰ The history of Disney itself can be viewed as a specific example of a conscious heterosexual agenda. As chapter 1 attempts to show, the success and power of the Walt Disney Company has been primarily based upon upholding the discourse of heterosexual primacy. While Walt and his various (if not necessarily all) employees agreed with such a viewpoint by and large, historical evidence shows that the Disney image was shaped by very specific outside forces impacting upon the company. Early animation by Walt Disney and his studio points out that there was not an inherent interest in “moral, upstanding entertainment,” but the company learned quickly that power, wealth and critical regard lay in heeding messages from audiences, church groups, other Hollywood studios and even the federal government about making shorts and feature films that preserved the constructed heterosexual imperative. The accusations by conservative groups in the 1990s of a gay agenda can consequently be viewed as another concerted attempt to squelch mainstream acknowledgement of the existence of the polymorphous workings of sexual desire.

The second agenda analyzed throughout can be termed a “capitalist agenda,” which works tirelessly to maximize profits, control market share and expand revenue and control by continually diversifying products and seeking out new customers. Some at first may not see how such a capitalist agenda would affect a company’s attitudes towards sexuality, but economic considerations have strongly influenced Disney’s discourse of sexuality throughout the twentieth century. Chapter 1 describes how profit margin and corporate finances most definitely guided the studio’s move towards a “family” image. Similarly, chapters 3 and 5 examine how that same capitalist discourse has been primarily responsible for markedly shifting the company’s regard towards homosexuality in recent years. Typical of all late capitalist conglomerates (following the ideas of Ernest Mandel and Frederic Jameson), Disney has had to find new markets to tap into in order to further expand its power.¹¹ Remaining within the narrow confines of its former image endangered the future of the company in the early 1980s, with profit margins dwindling and hostile takeovers threatening. When Disney moved

to find new markets, it was probably inevitable that the studio would reach out to the untapped “gay community” for their dollars. In doing so, Disney was following the strategy of many other companies, both within and outside of the entertainment industry. While obviously delighting many lesbian and gay individuals in the process, such a shift is marked more by economic concerns than by gay political activism. Disney wants more money, and if that means giving a nod to potential homosexual customers, then so be it.

It is important to recognize that it is these economic pressures—this capitalist agenda—that have led Disney to recognize a “gay market” for its product, and *not* a “gay agenda.” Yet, it is even more important to acknowledge how this capitalist agenda also impacts upon those who identify themselves as homosexuals, not just within the company’s employee roster but within the audience. Non-straight consumers of Disney are just as affected by the capitalist system as is Disney itself (if not more so). If Disney’s attitude towards sexuality is affected by economic decisions, then these same economic decisions have the potential to control and limit the possible uses of Disney products by non-straight consumers. To address this issue, each section is divided into separate chapters that alternately focus on production and reception. Chapter 1 examines how the studio produced a discourse of sexuality during Walt’s life; chapter 2 examines how homosexual individuals seemed to have used the “Disney discourse” during this time frame. Similarly, chapter 3 examines the changes within the Walt Disney Company towards sexuality since Walt’s death, while chapter 4 examines how these changes seem to have affected how Disney was used by homosexual consumers. Chapter 5 acts as a synthesis, examining specifically how production strategies attempt to affect the use of Disneyana by homosexuals. Through this organization, Disney’s relationship with gay culture is specifically analyzed as a manifestation of capitalist discourse attempting to define and regulate the modern conception of homosexuality.¹²

Numerous writers recently have focused on how various societal factors, or discourses, have affected concepts of sexual identity in Western society—medical, legal, religious, etc. Such “social constructionist” discussion seems opposed to the work of numerous researchers who have searched for a medical or genetic cause for sexual preference from the end of the nineteenth century to today.¹³ This research eventually may show that gay men and lesbians do not simply “choose” to be ho-

mosexual. Such findings would bolster calls for civil-rights legislation—and certainly put to rest the notion that homosexuality can be somehow “unlearned.”¹⁴ Yet, even if a “gay gene” is eventually found, this in no way invalidates the importance of social conditioning on human behavior and thought processes. Even though most of Western society views heterosexuality as a natural drive, many would also acknowledge the differences between cultures or the changes over time in ideas of beauty and attractiveness—from the Rubenesque full female form to the thin waifish figure of Twiggy, for example. Similarly, a “gay gene” would not explain the diversity of expression which comes under the heading of “homosexuality.” Would a “gay gene” work for a male-to-female transsexual who desires men? And would it work in the same way for a “conventionally” masculine gay man? Would a “gay gene” determine if a lesbian was butch or femme (or none of the above)? Tied to this work, would a “gay gene” *mean* all homosexuals would respond identically to Disney films or theme parks?

Historical research seems to indicate that the conception of the term “homosexuality” itself is not fixed and has shifted meaning throughout the twentieth century. During the first half of the century, it was common to define homosexual men as effeminate. Both “straight” hegemonic culture and the marginal homosexual culture accepted this definition. Those men who were attracted to other men, but played the “masculine” role, weren’t as easily considered to be homosexual.¹⁵ Similarly, lesbian culture in the middle of the 20th century often mandated identification with either a “butch” or “femme” persona, and frowned upon individuals who broke from this binary structure.¹⁶ Such examples stress how social concepts affect identity and behavior and deconstruct the idea of sexuality as a natural, biological inevitability. Instead of some predetermined essence, sexuality is defined by a network of social discourses that surrounds the individual, such as the discourse of the medical profession or the law. These discourses attempt to “naturalize” their opinions, trying to convince the individual that the discourse is inevitable and taken for granted. In so doing, social constructionism describes a power relation between the individual and these social forces.

One of the most powerful discourses in modern Western society is the mass media. A steady output of movies, television, popular music and literature represent to individuals certain learned conceptions of how the world functions. People learn how to relate to others (and even

more importantly to themselves) by identifying with characters or narratives presented in popular culture. Rather than overt oppression by police or the armed forces forcing people into behaving and thinking a certain way, “ideological state apparatuses” (as Louis Althusser named them) such as the church, the family structure or popular culture work more subtly and benignly to draw the individual into the thought patterns of the ruling culture. While societal pressures obviously try to inculcate the individual as heterosexual, social discourse also addresses (sometimes obliquely, sometimes violently) non-heterosexual identities. With the conception of heterosexuality, the conception of its opposite or “other” is also present—homosexuality. Constructionists argue that heterosexuality needs a conception of homosexuality to differentiate and define itself more clearly. This study of Disney’s ties to gay culture provides one example of how popular culture affects the construction of one’s self-identity as a homosexual, even as it primarily attempts to naturalize heterosexuality.

Michel Foucault’s landmark study of the development of “sexuality” as a method of self-definition has had profound influence on those who analyze the social construction of sexualities. Many have found hope in Foucault’s discussion of turning social discourse on sexuality back upon itself. In *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1, *An Introduction*, he writes

Discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy . . . homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand its legitimacy or “naturalness” be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified.¹⁷

But, there are reservations with using such a position to celebrate freedom from homosexual oppression. Homosexuals may find their own voice—but they are using the system’s words, rather than finding their own. In doing so, the system remains empowered. As Foucault says in the last sentence of the book, “The irony of this . . . is having us believe our ‘liberation’ is in the balance.”¹⁸

By focusing on the power of economic discourse in the social construction of homosexuality, one can see readily the irony Foucault is de-

scribing. Foucault describes how conceptualizations of sexuality are “linked to the economy through numerous and subtle relays . . . proliferating, innovating, annexing, creating and penetrating bodies in an increasingly detailed way.”¹⁹ As I have mentioned, Disney’s need to create newer consumer bases for its product has pushed the conglomerate (and many other corporations during this period) to annex, penetrate and create a concept of “the homosexual consumer.” While many lesbians and gay men may find acknowledgement and recognition a major victory in the battle for “liberation,” studying Disney’s marketing towards “the homosexual consumer” in chapter 5 will exemplify exactly how limited the “liberation” can be. Disney’s growing acceptance of a “lesbian” or “gay” audience, I will argue, has the ironic potential of decreasing an individual’s ability to use the company’s products through a wider “queer” sensibility.

I make an important distinction between the term “queer” and the terms “lesbian” and “gay” in the ensuing pages. The terms “lesbian” and “gay” occur frequently, particularly in reference to concrete individuals and their readings of Disney (and of themselves). Yet, these two terms are also used to demarcate a specific sexual identity—and to examine how these two specific identities have been shaped by social discourse. In contrast, “queer” is used here to acknowledge and discuss the wide range of expression of sexual desire, a range that includes *but goes beyond* “gay” or “lesbian.” Activists such as Queer Nation began to use “queer” in the late 1980s to be more inclusive of gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, transsexuals—in short, the wide variety of sexualities (and, hopefully, the diverse racial/ethnic and class identities) which are created by the matrices of social discourse. Soon, academics began to use the term to discuss theories of sexuality, specifically the slippage or breakdown of attempts to categorize individuals according to a gender or sexuality. Alexander Doty describes this new use of “queer” as “an attitude . . . that begins in a place not concerned with, or limited by, notions of a binary opposition of male and female or the homo versus hetero paradigm.”²⁰ This is not to say that a self-identified “queer” individual is somehow successfully outside of hegemonic discourse and thus somehow “freer” or “better” than a self-identified “lesbian” or “gay man.” It is impossible to completely escape societal constraints in one’s conception of the world and self-identity. Yet, this use of “queer” attempts to recognize “homosexuality’s” place in the social structure,

and to complicate the regulation of self-identity created by such terms as “lesbian” and “gay”—to problematize (like Foucault) the notion of “gay liberation.”

Historical evidence indicates that lesbians and gay men have read Disney artifacts from a non-heterosexual viewpoint throughout the company’s history. In the early years of the studio, when Disney executives by and large did not realize or acknowledge a “gay sensibility” towards their product, such readings perfectly encapsulated how marginalized communities encounter and use objects from mass culture for their own ends (as theorized by such authors as Michel de Certeau, John Fiske and Henry Jenkins).²¹ Yet, the growing awareness of the gay community in recent years by the Walt Disney Company, and a purposeful marketing towards this community, complicates and, at times, challenges the celebratory nature of many reception studies. By acknowledging the use of modern marketing techniques and current trends in audience research, this study will employ Foucault’s theories of power and discourse to analyze the dialectic between the Walt Disney Company and homosexual consumers of their products, specifically how modern capitalism and advertising have affected how lesbians and gay men have defined and expressed their sexuality. Sometimes looking a gift horse in the mouth reveals the prize to be of Trojan lineage.²²

When I first thought of delving into the relationship between Disney and gay culture, I encountered resistance and worried looks from a number of people. Some felt that I could not prove that such a relationship existed—as if I had to find a “smoking gun” within the files of the Walt Disney Company, some sort of secret memo signed by Michael Eisner saying to proceed with its “gay agenda.” Also, people seemed worried that my work would only entail a series of outings of various artists and executives that had worked for the company—again, emphasizing the need to prove that someone had meant for Disney’s output to be read queerly. I had never felt the need to prove intent by the Walt Disney Company; as long as evidence showed that homosexual *audiences* were understanding Disney through a “gay sensibility,” then a relationship existed whether Disney approved of it or not. As time has gone on, specific events have shown that Disney is cognizant of the presence of lesbians and gay men within their employee roster and within their potential customer base. Yet, this does not mean that I now have proof of Disney’s “gay agenda.” Rather, this analysis shows how business in-

terests have worked to make Disney acknowledge that homosexuality simply exists.

Lastly, there was the indication from the worries about possible outings that such a study would create a retaliation against Disney, which would then scale back its acknowledgement of homosexuals. Years have passed, though, and (to put it mildly) this is now like asking to shut the barn door after the horse has escaped. Furthermore, such trepidation is predicated by the fact that lesbians and gay men “had a good thing going” with Disney, an assessment with which I do not wholeheartedly agree. Since this development is directly tied to corporate plans for more profit and power, homosexuals have as much to be guarded about as Christian conservatives who have decried Disney’s shift. As this work hopes to show, the “homosexual community” may gain some concrete benefits from such explicit acknowledgement, but there is a trade-off for such acknowledgement, in which capitalism increasingly works to control how homosexuality is conceived and addressed. If nothing else, the reluctance that some expressed to me about tackling this topic brought to light how important it was to drag this relationship “out of the closet” in order to point out the advantages and disadvantages of reading Disney queerly.

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