The Power of Words in Disney's Songs

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Popular media, especially music and movies, can play a significant role in shaping people's beliefs and attitudes. Animated movies produced by the Walt Disney Company, which blend animation and music, serve as particularly powerful tools for conveying values and ideologies, since their targeted audience consists of young viewers, who are highly impressionable and can easily internalize Disney's worldviews, which are often criticized. This chapter examines how ideological messages are interwoven into the song lyrics in a selection of Disney's animated movies. By analysing the song lyrics, we aim to disclose the various ideological subtexts that they contain and define why they are problematic. The analytical part is divided into three sections: the first section investigates examples of song lyrics that promote American values; the second takes a closer look at gender stereotyping and promotion of romantic love, while the third discloses racial political incorrectness.

Keywords:
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Introduction

The term propaganda originates from the early 17th century, as Sheryl Tuttle Ross (2002, 16) explains, when it was used to denote the spreading of the Christian faith through "persuasion, preaching, or education" (2002, 17). The term became widely used only in the early 20th century, "with the development of various mass media," which allowed "access to an ever-increasing audience for mass persuasion" (Tuttle Ross 2002, 17). With its widespread use, the word propaganda received a negative connotation, for as Bruce Lannes Smith (2024, n.p.) explains, it has become associated with "the more or less systematic effort to manipulate other people's beliefs, attitudes, or actions by means of symbols," such as words, gestures, monuments, music, etc.

Works of art, particularly forms of popular art,[1] such as various kinds of music and movies, often have the power to influence people's beliefs and attitudes, for they are consumed by a great number of people primarily for entertainment. Ideological messages conveyed through popular art forms tend to be more difficult to detect and identify in comparison to those in overtly ideological texts; however, they can have an even greater impact. Tuttle Ross refers to art products used for propaganda as "propagandistic art" (2002, 25), and claims (2002, 18) that a work of popular art is considered as propaganda if it fulfils the following conditions: 1) it conveys an epistemically defective message; 2) this message is used with the intention to persuade; 3) it is targeted at a socially significant group of people, and 4) it is issued on behalf of a political institution, organization or cause.

Many animated movies, as products of popular art intended primarily for children, can also be considered propagandistic art as defined by Tuttle Ross. The Walt Disney Company, as one of the leading producers of animated movies, has often been criticised for transmitting problematic ideological messages, and it is no secret that their movies have an enormous influence on children globally—and not only on children, on adults as well. Henry A. Giroux and Grace Pollock claim that in the 21st century, Disney "represents the new face of liberal power" that can shape "the identities, desires and subjectivities of millions of people across the globe" (2010,

[1] According to the Editors of *Britannica*, the term "popular art" refers to any music, literature, theatre or other art form (motion pictures included, unless they fall under the category of fine art or elite art), "intended to be received and appreciated by ordinary people in a literate, technologically advanced society dominated by urban culture" (2023).

XV). Similarly, Julie C. Garlen and Jennifer A. Sandlin define the Walt Disney Company as "a major cultural force that shapes everyday life practices and identity formations through its representations of family values, gender, sexuality, race, class, ethnicity, 'Americanness', childhood, pleasure" (2016, 1–2) etc. Additionally, they claim that Disney's texts are "powerfully seductive narratives of fantasy, hope, love, and escape" and as such they represent a "cultural ubiquity that is unparalleled in popular culture" (Garlen and Sandlin 2016, 14). Annelee R. Ward agrees that Disney is a very important part of contemporary culture, which influences people's "perspectives of morality either explicitly or implicitly" (2002, 9).

Disney's powerful influence on children as the audience, however, seems particularly problematic, for, as Ward (2002, 1) acknowledges, its animated movies often provide the very first narratives from which children learn about the world and from which they get messages about how to live and what is right. Andreas Müller-Hartmann (2007, 399) argues that part of the danger of Disney's influence on children lies in the fact that their animated movies claim to offer "innocent childhood fun and pure entertainment" (2007, 399), which supposedly makes them safe for children to watch without parental monitoring, despite the "ideological subtexts" (2007, 399) that they contain. Nowadays, society has become increasingly sensitive to ideological messages and intolerant towards any kind of political incorrectness.[2] Many Disney animated movies, to which millions of children across the world have been exposed through decades, are today subject to scrutiny because of ideological subtexts they transfer, such as messages of "American dominance" and of "ethnic and gender stereotyping" (Müller-Hartmann 2007, 399).

Music is an integral part of the aesthetics of Disney's animated movies. As Victor Kennedy explains, music has often been used as propaganda and protest, the most well-known examples being songs containing pro-and anti-war themes, "but just about any topic is fair game" (2024, 257). Müller-Hartmann (2007) notes that music in Disney's animated movies has great power, for it speaks to children's emotions, and together with the cute animations, it gains access to children's sub-conscious. According to Tuttle Ross (2002, 21), the effectiveness and potential danger of propaganda lies precisely in its appeal to emotions. Ward (2002, 4) claims that Disney is well aware of the fact that music as well as visuals add to the potential power of a

[2] There does exist, however, a list of cartoons, referred to as the Censored Eleven and consisting of Looney Tunes and Merry Melodies cartoons that have been banned since 1968 for being overly offensive because they depict racial stereotypes; among them is also a Bugs Bunny cartoon from 1941 (Gillett 2021).

movie, while Tracy Mollet (2013, 121) reports that Disney was one of the first producers to use song to tell its stories, and its first animated feature, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), used the best sound technology available at the time. Mollet adds that music in movies helps to "build tension" and create "sentiment at pivotal story points" (2013, 121), while Henry A. Giroux acknowledges Disney's "brilliant use" of musical scores, as well as the talents of its songwriters and composers, such as Howard Ashman and Alan Menken, [3] "whose skilful arrangements provide an emotional glue of the animation experience" (1995, n.p.).

This chapter takes a closer look at a selection of songs from several Disney animated movies that were released in the 20th and in the beginning of the 21st centuries. By analysing the lyrics in these songs, we aim to disclose the various ideological subtexts that they contain and define why they are problematic. The analytical part of the chapter is divided into three sections: the first section investigates examples of song lyrics that promote American values; the second takes a closer look at gender stereotyping and promotion of romantic love in the selected song lyrics, while the third section deals with the issues of political incorrectness that can be found in the song lyrics.

Promoting American Values

Many Disney animated movies are based on fairy tales that originate from folk tales that were written down by the Brothers Grimm and other collectors. However, Disney introduced many changes in its interpretations of these fairy tales. Simon J. Bronner notes that the tales known worldwide as "Grimm's tales" have "a special American impact" (1998, 187) because they have been recontextualized into mass culture by Hollywood. Bronner argues that Disney Americanized fairy tale figures for popular consumption, turning them into "stylized vehicles for popular entertainment of romance, music, and comedy rendered gleefully through cineramic animation" (1998, 187). Similarly, Ward (2002, 2) points out that generations of children are familiar only with Disney fairy tales, while the original stories are forgotten or ignored. What she finds particularly problematic is that "Disney rewrites the original tales for its particular version of American values" (2002, 2). We

[3] Howard Ashman wrote lyrics and Alan Menken wrote music for Disney's *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast*, and after Ashman's death in 1991, Menken teamed up with other lyricists and wrote scores for *Pocahontas*, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, *Enchanted*, *Tangled* and others (Green 2024).

will examine a selection of song lyrics from Disney's interpretations of several fairy tales to define in what way they help promote American values as well.

Let us begin with Disney's oldest full-length animated feature based on a fairy tale, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, which was released in 1937 and achieved, as Mollet reports, "a high level of popularity and critical acclaim" (2013, 109). Jack Zipes notes that Disney completely changed the original fairy tale to transform it "into something peculiarly American" (1994, 87), and the movie's song lyrics contribute to this Americanization. The simple lyrics of the dwarfs' song "Heigh-Ho," for instance, promote hard work as a (quick) means to prosperity:

> We dig dig dig dig dig dig dig
> In our mine the whole day through
> To dig dig dig dig dig dig dig
> Is what we like to do
> It ain't no trick to get rich quick
> If you dig dig dig with a shovel or a pick
> In a mine! In a mine! ("Heigh-Ho")

That hard work leads to success and prosperity is the essential idea of the American Dream, which, as Jennifer Murtoff explains, consists of the belief that the USA is a "land of opportunity," allowing the possibility of "upward mobility, freedom, and equality for people of all classes who work hard and have the will to succeed" (2024, n.p.). However, Mollet notes that the American Dream of success was seriously jeopardized by the Great Depression of the 1930s, and that the purpose of Disney's 1937 *Snow White* was to relay "new ideas about the American Dream," infusing "hope and positivity into a society struggling with the Depression" (2013, 111). For this purpose, the dwarfs were transformed by Disney to represent "the common man of America," as well as "the community spirit" that was promoted by Roosevelt's New Deal[4] (Mollet 2013, 118).

When Snow White is left alone in the forest, after the huntsman mercifully lets her go instead of killing her, she stumbles upon an empty and untidy house and decides to clean it. While she is cleaning it, she sings the song "Whistle While You Work." The lyrics of the song promote the idea that work is something pleasant, particularly

[4] The New Deal was a program of US President Roosevelt's Administration (1933–1939), the purpose of which was to bring about economic relief to the ravages of the Great Depression by introducing reforms in various sectors that increased the scope of activities of the federal government (*Britannica* 2024).

if everybody works together. With the help of forest animals, Snow White manages to clean the dwarfs' house in no time, singing that "it won't take long when there's a song / to help you set the pace" ("Whistle While You Work"). As Mollet (2013, 121) points out, this song, like the dwarfs' "Heigh-Ho" song, echoes the community spirit promoted by Roosevelt's politics, and both these work songs played a crucial part in Disney's promotion of collective work. Bronner additionally observes that Disney's Snow White needs to do more menial work than the one in the original fairy tale before marrying the prince, which helps support the idea of "rags to riches rise" (1998, 209), which is an important part of the American Dream.

Another song from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* encouraging a positive attitude to life is "With a Smile and a Song." After Snow White finds herself all alone in the forest, she asks the birds what they do when things go wrong. The birds whistle that they sing a song, so Snow White starts singing, too: "With a smile and a song / Life is just like a bright sunny day / Your cares fade away /And your heart is young" ("With a Smile and a Song"). As Mollet suggests, this song exemplifies "the spirit of optimism and hope the American people had to keep in their hearts in order to prosper" (2013, 121). The character of Snow White thus personifies the spirit of "good nature and good will" that was promoted in the 1930s USA (Mollet 2013, 121).

Like Snow White, Cinderella, the protagonist of the eponymous 1950 Disney animated film, also deals with her hardships with optimism. Waking up from a lovely dream to a not-so-lovely reality at the beginning of the movie, she tells us in a song that "In dreams you lose your heartaches / Whatever you wish for, you keep," and that if you "have faith in your dreams / Your rainbow will come smiling through" ("A Dream Is a Wish"). Like Snow White, Cinderella is also close to and liked by animals. In "The Work Song," the animals observe how exigent Cinderella's stepmother and her stepsisters are towards Cinderella, suggesting that Cinderella is hard working.

> Cinderelly, Cinderelly
> Night and day it's Cinderelly
> Make the fire, fix the breakfast
> Wash the dishes, do the moppin'
> And the sweepin' and the dustin'
> They always keep her hoppin'. ("The Work Song").

Besides being hard working, Cinderella is of course also beautiful and good natured, as the song "Cinderella" from the beginning of the movie tells us:

> Cinderella
> You're as lovely as your name
> Cinderella
> You're a sun set in a frame
>
> Though you're dressed in rags, you wear an air of queenly grace
> Anyone can see a throne would be your proper place. ("Cinderella")

Despite her hardships, Cinderella remains gentle and kind, so she deserves to be rewarded by marrying a prince and acquiring wealth. The rags-to-riches story is already there in the classic European fairy tale; however, as Bronner notes, with Disney's *Cinderella*, "the attraction of wealth and status as prevalent Hollywood themes came to the fore" (1998, 211). This animated movie is also an example of what Bronner (1998, 211) refers to as Disney's globalization of the theme of material wealth bringing happiness, acquiring material wealth being an important American value.

A more recent example of a Disney animated movie based on a fairy tale that also promotes the idea of hard work leading to prosperity and happiness is *The Princess and the Frog* (2009). The movie is loosely based on the folk tale "The Frog Prince" and is partly also based on the novel *The Frog Princess* by American author E. D. Baker, a parody of the original fairy tale. Disney changed the folk tale considerably and Americanized it by giving it a distinct American setting (New Orleans in the 1920s) and by making it a "rags-to-riches" story, for Tiana is not a princess but a poor working class young woman. It is also interesting that she is not fair-skinned and fair-eyed, like older Disney princesses were, but is of African American descent. She might be poor, but she has a clear goal in life: to open her own restaurant, although her prospects for that seem very slim. However, Tiana strongly believes that with hard work she can make her (American) dream come true, as she says in the song "Almost There":

> I remember Daddy told me
> 'Fairytales can come true
> You gotta make 'em happen
> It all depends on you'
> So I work real hard each and every day

> Now things for sure are going my way
> Just doing what I do
> Look out, boys
> I'm coming through. ("Almost There")

As in the original fairy tale, Tiana kisses a frog who claims to be a prince—but not to marry him afterwards, like the princess in the original story, but because he has promised her to help finance her restaurant. She has no wish or aspiration to marry him, nor does she believe in love—at that point, that is. She is firmly convinced that to have her own restaurant is the only thing that will make her happy. However, towards the end of the movie, Tiana, who after the kiss turns into a frog herself, and the prince who remains a frog, realise that they have fallen in love, and the movie ends with them turning back into humans, and after marrying, they run their own restaurant together—which represents material wealth for Tiana as a modern Cinderella.

Promoting Stereotypical Gender Roles and Idealizing Romantic Love

Disney is often criticized for presenting stereotypical gender roles and idealizing romantic love, for, as Giroux notes, "the construction of gender identity for girls and women represents one of the most controversial issues" (1995 n.p.) in Disney's animated movies. In 2012, two professors from the University of Mississippi, Joyce Olewski Inman and Kelli M. Sellers, designed a first-year composition course titled "The Disney Dilemma," the aim of which was to make students consider the ways in which Disney had "shaped their ideas about gender, race, education" (2012, 39) and similar topics. The students first had to write an essay on how Disney had influenced their understanding of gender, and as the two scholars report, the essays confirmed the existence of the "Disney princess culture," which serves as a "master narrative that shapes our culture's understandings of gender roles and expectations of girlhood" (Olewski Inman and Sellers 2012, 40). They further note that Disney "promotes an idealized princess character" that is defined by "moral virtue and physical beauty and whose success and happiness are linked to securing a husband and finding contentment in the heteronormative domestic realm" (Olewski Inman and Sellers 2012, 41). As we will see, the idea of romantic love bringing happiness to beautiful and good-natured damsels in distress is also transmitted through Disney's song lyrics.

Snow White, the very first Disney princess—who has been degraded to a servant by her wicked stepmother in Disney's movie—has a sole objective in life, which is "For the one [she] loves / To find [her]", as she says in the song "I'm Wishing" from the beginning of the movie. A prince who passes by hears her song and immediately answers it with his own song, "One Song," in which he declares his love for Snow White: "One song / My heart keeps singing / Of one love / Only for you."

Bronner notes that the prince's "courtship song" serves to highlight "the romantic interest" (1998, 209) in the movie. Shortly after Snow White hears the prince's song, she is chased away by her stepmother; however, she does not lose hope that her prince will find her and that they then will live together happily ever after, as she says in the next song:

> Someday my prince will come
> Someday we'll meet again
> And away to his castle we'll go
> To be happy forever I know. ("Someday My Prince Will Come")

Cinderella from the 1950 animated movie is another classic Disney princess, waiting for her prince to come and make her happy. The opening song "Cinderella," sung by a chorus, tells us that though she is "dressed in rags," Cinderella wears "an air of queenly grace," and "anyone can see a throne would be [her] proper place" ("Cinderella"). This song also announces that if she gives her heart a chance, it will lead her "to the kingdom of romance," where she will see her "dreams unfold" ("Cinderella"). This indeed happens before long; at the royal ball, Cinderella dances with the prince, and as they are dancing, they sing the song "So This Is Love" in their minds. In the song, Cinderella says that love is "what makes life divine," then they both claim to possess "the key to all heaven," and agree that love is "the miracle that I've been dreaming of" ("So This Is Love"). There are a few obstacles that need to be overcome, but love wins over evil, and Cinderella soon finds herself married to the prince and living happily ever after.

The Sleeping Beauty (1959) also features a typical Disney princess, Aurora (or Briar Rose, as the three fairies call her to conceal her real identity), who, like the earlier two Disney princesses, reinforces "domesticated stereotypical gender roles for women" (Olewski Inman and Sellers 2012, 44). Disney made some changes to the plot to emphasize Aurora's Disney princess features. Unlike the original fairy tale,

Aurora is taken away to the woods by three fairies to be kept safe until the day of her 16th birthday is over. On that day, Aurora meets a prince in the woods (the one she has been betrothed to since her birth but does not know it). Prior to meeting him, she sings the song "I Wonder," in which she—like Snow White—wishes for her prince to find her:

> I wonder, I wonder
> I wonder if my heart keeps singing
> Will my song go winging
> To someone, who'll find me
> And bring back a love song to me? ("I Wonder")

Aurora then starts singing the song "Once Upon a Dream" and waltzing with an imaginary prince (represented by an owl covered with the prince's cloak that it stole from him):

> I know you
> I walked with you once upon a dream
> I know you
> The gleam in your eyes is so familiar a gleam
> Yet I know it's true
> That visions are seldom all they seem
>
> But if I know you
> I know what you'll do
> You'll love me at once
> The way you did once upon a dream. ("Once Upon a Dream")

When the prince hears Aurora's singing, he takes the place of the imagined lover, and after a brief exchange of words with her, he repeats the first stanza of the song. Then they waltz to the choir singing the second stanza and their destiny is sealed. After conquering some obstacles, Aurora will marry her prince, and her happiness will be secured.

It needs to be noted that these early Disney princesses were created before the second wave of feminism of the 1970s. A more recent female protagonist, Belle from *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), is in many ways still a typical Disney princess: she is beautiful and good-natured, and she is dreaming of finding her prince; she does, however, appear to be a stronger, less dependent heroine than the previous Disney

princesses. In the song "Belle" from the beginning of the movie, we learn that she stands out from the rest of the village people:

> Her looks have got no parallel
> But behind that fair façade
> I'm afraid she's rather odd
> Very different from the rest of us
> She's nothing like the rest of us
> Yes, different from the rest of us is Belle. ("Belle")

The villagers also observe that Belle has always "her nose stuck in a book" ("Belle"). She reads about heroines who meet their princes, and she longs for an "adventure in the great wide somewhere," and "to have someone understand," as she says in the song "Belle (Reprise)." That is why she prefers the Beast—once she discovers his tender, understanding and loving heart that is captured in a fierce animal body; admitting that "he's no Prince Charming," she still discovers "There's something in him," as she sings in the song "Something There"—to Gaston, the local macho man, who is supposed to be "everyone's favourite guy" (as his friend Lefou says in the song "Gaston"). Gaston is a typical self-centred provincial man, who believes that he deserves Belle and is convinced that she will marry him. By rejecting Gaston's offer of marriage and by defending her father, whom the village people want to put in a lunatic asylum, Belle showcases bravery and independence. Realizing that she loves the Beast, she goes to his rescue when the village people want to kill him. Although some critics see Belle as a "Disney feminist" (Jeffords in Mollet 2019, n.p.), Giroux and Pollock argue that she is similar to other modern Disney heroines, such as Jasmine from *Aladdin* and Ariel from *The Little Mermaid*, in that her strength is visible only in childish wilful acts that become insignificant when she finds her true love (in Olewski Inman and Sellers 2012, 43). Indeed, Belle is just as happy to find her true love as the early Disney princesses were, and the love story between her and the Beast (who turns back to a handsome prince at the end) is a "Tale as old as time," as the lyrics of the theme song "Beauty and the Beast" inform us.

Non-Gender-Related Political Incorrectness

Several Disney animated movies have been accused of political incorrectness related to race issues. Christina Berchini (2016) exposes racialized representations in movies such as *The Jungle Book* and *The Lion King*. Giroux (1995) also points out that racist stereotyping appears in both these movies, as well as in others, such as *Aladdin*. What

Giroux finds problematic is that these movies universalize whiteness "through the privileged representation of middle-class social relations, values, and linguistic practices" (1995, n.p.). He further claims that cultural differences in these movies "are expressed through a 'naturalized' racial hierarchy, one that is antithetical to a viable democratic society" (1995, n.p.); therefore, what children learn about race from watching such movies is highly worrying.

Disney's *The Jungle Book* (1967) is based on Rudyard Kipling's collection of stories with the same title (1895). Kipling is nowadays remembered in particular "for his celebration of British imperialism" (Steward 2024, n.p.). Many of his imperialist and nationalist ideas can be found in *The Jungle Book* stories. As Sue Welsh argues, a classic way of reading these stories is as "an allegory for the position of the white colonialist born and raised in India" (2019, n.p.), for the boy Mowgli becomes master of the animals in the jungle, just like the British come to rule in India.[5] Disney's interpretation of *The Jungle Book*, however, introduces a new kind of racism that is not present in Kipling's work. The most problematic in terms of political correctness is Disney's depiction of the apes. According to Cory Lund (2017), "these monkeys are *plainly* coded as black characters in an extremely harmful way" (2017, n.p.), not only by their physical features but also by their voices that are "forced into a gravelly, exaggerated register" (2017, n.p.), representing unintelligent African American people. The king of the monkeys, the orangutan King Louie, was added by Disney, for such a character does not exist in Kipling's stories. King Louie's song "I Wanna Be Like You" that he sings to Mowgli is among the most overtly racist Disney songs for its clear message that black people are beneath white people and aspire to be like them.

> Now I'm the king of the swingers
> Oh, the jungle VIP
> I've reached the top and had to stop
> And that's what's botherin' me. ("I Wanna Be Like You)"

Metcalf argues that in these first lines of the song, King Louie clearly states that he "he has gotten as far as he can go as a monkey; that is to say, being black" (in Barlett 2024, 7). In the next stanza and in the refrain that follows, King Louie continues by

[5] In 1999, Disney released the animated movie *Tarzan* based on E. R. Burroughs' 1912 story *Tarzan of the Apes*, which also has a strong message of racial superiority of white people: Tarzan becomes King of the Jungle on account of his whiteness, just like Mowgli does in India.

telling Mowgli that he wants to be human like him to progress further, which in Metcalf's interpretation would mean that he wants to be like white people:

> I wanna be a man, mancub
> And stroll right into town
> And be just like the other men
> I'm tired of monkeyin' around!
>
> Oh, oobee doo
> I wanna be like you
> I wanna walk like you
> Talk like you, too
> You'll see it's true
> An ape like me
> Can learn to be human too. ("I Wanna Be Like You")

The whole performance of this song reminds one of an African American singer's performance—the character's name itself being, as Metcalf points out, "a clear reference to Louis Armstrong" (in Barlett 2024, 6). Additionally, Christina Barlett (2024, 7) points to the fact that Disney used jazz music for King Louie's song instead of R & B or rock and roll music—which were more popular at the time of the movie—with a specific purpose: it sonically represents "both the blackness and the wildness of the monkeys," and as such it was Disney's "default choice for depicting social 'Others' and the uncivilized" (2024, 7). Particularly problematic in this context are the lines "An ape like me / Can learn to be human too" ("I Wanna Be Like You"), which suggest that a black person is less human than a white person. That Disney at some point realized how problematic this song is is suggested by the fact that in the 2016 version of the movie, King Louis is no longer a comic character, and some lyrics in the song "I Wanna Be Like You" are changed. For instance, the line "An ape like me" has been replaced by "Someone like me" ("I Wanna Be Like You", 2016"), and "Can learn to be human too" has been replaced by "Can learn to be like someone like you too" ("I Wanna Be Like You", 2016).

The much-loved Disney's *The Lion King*, released in 1994 and featuring only animals, is also problematic in terms of politically incorrect messages that it delivers, although they are not as direct as in *The Jungle Book*. The movie opens with Simba's birth. When his father, king Mufasa, proudly shows him to his subjects, the song "Circle of Life" is playing. The song's opening lyrics tell us that "From the day we arrive on the planet," we become part of the world, where "[t]he sun rolling high / Through

the sapphire sky / Keeps great and small on the endless round" ("Circle of Life"). This is followed by the refrain:

> It's the circle of life
> And it moves us all
> Through despair and hope
> Through faith and love
> 'Til we find our place
> On the path unwinding
> In the circle
> The circle of life. ("The Circle of Life")

John Morton explains that the metaphor of "the circle of life" is loosely appropriated from "contemporary ecological consciousness of nature" (1996, 312), where all beings are interconnected. However, Morton further notes that it is also a "social metaphor for law, order and enlightened hierarchy" (1996, 312), and Mufasa's kingdom and his subjects are "an allegorical representation of legitimate order" (1996, 313), where "those at the top of the food chain also nourish those nearer the bottom" (1996, 313). Lee Artz agrees that "the circle of life scene" at the beginning of the movie clearly presents the established "social order and its validity" (2003, 10). Yehuda Siegel, on the other hand, points out that in the "natural fixed social order," which she calls a "feudal social order" (2021, n.p.), into which Simba is baptized while the song is playing, "there is no chance of upward mobility" (2021, n. p.) for those who are not at the top; therefore, the song clearly propagates the established social order that allows no changes.

Simba, of course, is at the top of this order. As a cub, he learns from his father that one day, he will become the ruler of Pride Lands. He welcomes the idea and immediately imagines himself in his future role, singing the song "I Just Can't Wait to Be King." In the song, he says he will surely be "a mighty king," "the main event / Like no king was before," and he is already "brushing up on looking down" in his preparations for this role, fully aware that "Everywhere you look I'm / Standing in the spotlight" ("I Just Can't Wait to Be King"). While the audience finds the cute little lion and his aspirations funny and adoring, there is no doubt that Simba is training to be on top of the world of strict hierarchy and authority.

The distinction between the ruling class and their subjects in the movie is also visible in the language of the characters. Giroux (1995) notes that the language in the movie is racially coded, for Mufasa and other members of the royal family speak—as well as sing—"with posh British accents," while the hyenas speak and sing "in racially coded accents that take on the nuances of the discourse of a decidedly urban, black and Latino youth" (1995, n.p.). According to Giroux, racism in *The Lion King*—as well as is several other Disney movies—is visible in both the "presence of racist representations and the absence of complex representations of African-Americans and other people of color" (1995, n.p.), and through this, Disney teaches children that "cultural differences that do not bear the imprint of white, middle-class ethnicity are deviant, inferior, unintelligent, and a threat to be overcome" (1995, n.p.). Indeed, the hyenas in the movie represent a threat to the established social order because of their tendency towards "anti-social behaviour" (Artz 2003, 13), particularly since they bond with Mufasa's treacherous brother Scar, who is plotting to overthrow Mufasa's order, which he reveals in his song "Be Prepared." In this song, he promises hyenas a better life and "a shining new era" ("Be Prepared") if they help him in his plan. When the hyenas ask him what is in there for them, Scar tells them:

> I know it sounds sordid
> But you'll be rewarded
> When at last I am given my dues
> And injustice deliciously squared
> Be prepared! ("Be Prepared")

Although Scar promises rewards to the hyenas, who are at the bottom of the social scale, when he is king, he also clearly states that in this new social order, they will not be equal to him:

> The future is littered with prizes
> And though I'm the main addressee
> The point that I must emphasize is
> You won't get a sniff without me! ("Be Prepared")

Some see Scar's ideas as "progressive politics" (Siegel 2021); however, it is clear that he wants to be at the top, probably because he does not stand the idea of being merely the king's brother. Once he becomes king after Mufasa's death, his new order turns out to be much worse than Mufasa's, leading only to anarchy and starvation. Eventually, Simba returns as a grown-up lion to save Pride Lands, and the hyenas

who helped Scar come to the throne turn against him when he is defeated by Simba. Simba restores the old order of assumed power structures and re-establishes the circle of life, with himself at the top. The movie ends the way it begins, with a strong message in favour of the establishment, that is of those who have the power.

Disney's *Pocahontas* came out the same year as *The Lion King* and is based on a real character, a young Native American woman. As David A. Price (2024) informs us, Pocahontas was born in 1596 near what is now Jamestown, Virginia, the daughter of the chief of the Powhatan empire; she became friends with the English settlers at the Jamestown colony in Virginia at the age of 10 or 11, and she has the merit of fostering peace between the British and Native Americans. Disney's movie altered several historical facts. As Ward reports, it changed the girl's "age, looks and accomplishments from the few historical facts that we do have to a romanticized beauty" (2002, 2). These modifications enabled Disney to change the encounter between Pocahontas and the leader of the settlers, John Smith, into a love story. This love story is in the centre of the movie and helps propagate several ideas. For one, it presents the colonial leader John Smith in a positive light. Smith stands out among the English settlers in the movie, for he is handsome, strong, brave, and experienced. He is not after gold, like the other Englishmen sailing out to the new world, but seeks to tame the new land as part of an adventure, as he says in the song "Mine, Mine, Mine":

> Hundreds of dangers await
> And I don't plan to miss one
> In a land I can claim
> A land I can tame
> The greatest adventure is mine! ("Mine, Mine, Mine")

Governor Ratcliffe and the other settlers sing different lyrics to the same tune, for they are tempted by the gold they believe they will find in this new land. Ratcliffe orders his men to:

> Mine, boys, mine
> Mine me that gold
> Beautiful gold
> Make this island
> My land! ("Mine, Mine, Mine")

Ratcliff and his men also believe that the Native Americans who inhabit the new world are "savages," "barely even human," as they say in the song "Savages, Savages, Savages:"

(Ratcliff)
What can you expect
From filthy little heathens?
Their whole disgusting race is like a curse
Their skin's a hellish red
They're only good when dead
They're vermin, as I said
And worse.

(English settlers)
They're savages! Savages!

(Ratcliff)
Barely even human.

(English settlers)
Savages! Savages! ("Savages, Savages, Savages")

This song is extremely racist, for it refers to Native Americans as "filthy little heathens," "a disgusting race," and "vermin." It presents them as inferior to white Europeans, who in their turn believe they are superior because of their advanced culture. In the view of the settlers, this justifies their plan to confiscate the Native Americans' land and take possession of its riches. John Smith, however, does not share this degrading opinion about Native Americans, for his encounter with Pocahontas makes him realize that the term "savage" is problematic and that it does not (fully) apply to Pocahontas.

In the song "Colors of the Wind," which Pocahontas sings to Smith, she challenges his idea of who a savage is: "If the savage one is me / How can there be so much that you don't know?" ("Colors of the Wind"). She also questions his white colonizer's ways:

You think you own whatever land you land on
The Earth is just a dead thing you can claim
/…/
You think the only people who are people
Are the people who look and think like you. ("Colors of the Wind")

In the following lines, Pocahontas challenges Smith's knowledge of the world by evoking her own knowledge of nature:

> Have you ever heard the wolf cry to the blue corn moon
> Or asked the grinning bobcat why he grinned?
> Can you sing with all the voices of the mountains?
> Can you paint with all the colors of the wind?
> Can you paint with all the colors of the wind? ("Colors of the Wind")

Throughout the song, Pocahontas juxtaposes John Smith's worldly knowledge and experience to her knowledge of nature, an area in which he seems ignorant. She also stresses her connectedness with nature, saying that "the rainstorm and the river" are her brothers, and "the heron and the otter" are her friends, and that they are "all connected to each other / In a circle, in a hoop that never ends" ("Colors of the Wind"). This song is problematic, however, for it promotes the idea that Native Americans are much closer to nature than white people, who are more cultured. Additionally, by presenting Pocahontas as kind and good-natured, the song helps promote the idea of her being a "noble" savage. As Sophie Gilbert mentions in an article published in *The Atlantic*, the Powhatan Nation and other Native American groups are critical of Disney's *Pocahontas* for turning Pocahontas into a trope of "the Good Indian," particularly by showing that Pocahontas "offers her own life to help save a white settler" (2015, n. p.). As the movie presents it, Smith is taken prisoner by the Indian tribe (because they believe he shot an Indian), and Pocahontas is the one who saves him from execution. As Gilbert (2015) reports, the Powhatan Nation believe that Disney should not base the movie on this event, which probably did not even happen. Additionally, Charles Grymes argues that the movie presents an embellished version of the history of the colonialization of Virginia by offering "a sanitized version of the harsh, conflict-ridden interaction between Native Americans and English colonists settling in Virginia" (n.d., n.p.). By putting the love story in the centre of the movie, Disney diverted attention away from the conflicts and thus embellished its version of history to enable as little judgement as possible.

Disney's portrayal of a peaceful coexistence between the Native Americans and the English settlers continues in *Pocahontas II*, released four years after the first movie, with the subtitle *Journey to a New World*. After Pocahontas saves Smith's life in the first movie, the Indian chief agrees to peace, but this does not suit Ratcliffe, who shoots at Smith. Smith is wounded and needs to be sent back to England. He begs

Pocahontas to go with him, but she chooses to stay in her homeland as the movie ends. At the beginning of the second movie, the Native Americans and the settlers live in peace. Pocahontas believes John Smith is dead, because she has had no news of him. When a new group of settlers arrives, led by John Rolfe, the latter invites the chief of Indians to come to England to meet the king. As he refuses the offer, Pocahontas volunteers to go instead. More conflict follows, caused by Ratcliffe, who has lied to the king that there is gold in Virginia to be able to fight with the Native Americans. However, at the end of the movie Pocahontas' mission is successful, as she manages to prevent war, and together with John Rolfe she returns to Virginia.

The song "Between Two Worlds" that Pocahontas and John Rolfe sing at the end of the movie has a powerful message: their love will help conquer all the differences between the two worlds, that of Pocahontas and that of Rolfe and the white settlers, and both sides will live in harmony—despite the fact that the white settlers came uninvited and occupied the land where Native Americans had lived before. Pocahontas says that "We will take the past and learn how to begin / And we'll build a bridge of love / Between two worlds" (Between Two Worlds"), to which John Rolfe responds: "I know that we can find a home for you and I /And we'll build a bridge of love / Between two worlds" ("Between Two Worlds").

It is noteworthy that both *Pocahontas* movies offer an embellished version of Pocahontas' life, while in reality it was much less fortunate. According to Price (2024), the historical facts are that after John Smith left for England, Pocahontas was kidnapped; she lived in captivity in Jamestown for some time and was converted to Christianity and baptized Rebecca; and later she married John Rolfe, which brought peace between the Native Americans and the settlers. Two years later, in 1616, Pocahontas went to England with her husband and a year-old son, where she was paraded around and used by The Virginia Company as a "device to publicize the colony and to win support from King James I and investors" (Price 2024, n.p.), and she died a year later of a disease, while preparing to return to America. Even more worrying than the altered history in the movie is the fact, as Cornel Pewewardy (n.d., n. p.) points out, that most American children first learn about Native Americans from animated movies like *Pocahontas*. Pewewardy (n.d., n.p.) harshly criticizes the overt racism in the movie that "implies a value judgement of white superiority" as well as the extremely negative effect that this has on children of Native American descent who attend American schools and are called "savages" by their classmates, imitating the white settlers in the movie.

Conclusion

Disney's animated movies are packed with ideological subtexts; it is therefore not surprising that they have caught the attention of many scholars, critics, and journalists. This paper takes a different approach to investigating the subject, however. Based on the assumption that music and songs represent powerful weapons of propaganda, we look at song lyrics in a selection of Disney's animated movies to reveal how they help transmit ideological messages in these movies. The song lyrics are divided into three categories: those promoting American values, those promoting stereotypical gender roles and idealizing romantic love, and those transmitting politically incorrect messages about racial issues. Analysis confirms that song lyrics play an important role in transmitting or in reinforcing the ideological messages of movies. It reveals that in older Disney movies, ideological messages transmitted through song lyrics are more direct (for instance, the promotion of hard work and community spirit in two "work songs" from the oldest full-length feature *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*; or the severely racist song "I Wanna Be Like You" from the 1968 *The Jungle Book*), while in more recent movies, ideological messages in song lyrics tend to be less direct and more subtle, in line with how Disney's movies are changing with time, and (or in particular) owing to the society's increasing intolerance of political incorrectness. If in the past Disney overtly promoted stereotypical gender roles (Snow White, Cinderella, and Aurora from *The Sleeping Beauty* all sing about hoping for their prince to come and make them happy), contemporary Disney princesses tend to be less submissive and less concentrated on romantic love (Tiana from *The Princess and the Frog*, for instance, sings about her wish to open a restaurant), and in the 2016 Disney version of *The Jungle Books* there is no longer such a direct connection between the apes and African Americans, as some problematic lines in the song "I Wanna Be Like You" have been replaced. However, even if Disney is trying to be more politically correct in their contemporary animated movies, older movies still circulate among millions of children who are not yet able to apply critical analysis when watching these movies for pleasure and entertainment. The question, therefore, remains whether animated movies like *Pocahontas* should be banned or edited for calling Native Americans "savages."

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