

MICKEY MAJ'S MONEY

SLOUCHING TOWARDS A FUNDAMENTALIST DISNEYLAND



by Joel Schalit

Over the past year or so, the most archetypical icon of "family values," the Disney Company, has become vilified as the epitome of evil by the Religious Right. This anti-Disney sentiment came to a head June 18th, with the announcement of a boycott of Disney by the Southern Baptist Convention and its 16 million members. The once unimpeachable producer of children's films which mythologically justified everything from American imperialism to banal celebrations of German cars, has been charged with the crime of promoting homosexuality because of its support of same sex partner benefits, Gay and Lesbian Days at Disneyland, and most shocking of all, its endorsement of comedian Ellen DeGeneres' coming out publicly on her pasty white sitcom, *Ellen*.

It had been a long time coming. The Southern Baptist Convention had been warning Disney for over a year that its millions-strong denomination would boycott Disney if it did not change its attitude towards homosexuality in its film and television productions as well as its hiring practices. Finally, tensions between Disney and the leaders of the SBC reached a critical turning point, when church leaders introduced a motion calling for the ban. On June 18th, it was adopted, and many other Christian denominations in the US have sounded their voices in support.

Despite the fact that the Southern Baptist Convention took the initiative in its attack on Disney, several denominations, led by the agitation of the infamous American Family Association and other powerful groups in the Religious Right, had been calling for such a boycott for some time. After the Republicans lost the election, the Christian Coalition, under attack by the Federal Election Commission for purported voter fraud, had to find a new cause to reconstitute the voting constituency that the Religious Right had built over the past five years. Charging that America's number one producer of family entertainment was, in fact, a purveyor of so-called "anti-family" ideologies could not have been a more ideal way to create a new issue with which to rally Christian soldiers.

Even for simple-minded Christians, it's a no-brainer: When all attempts to take over political infrastructures appear to be failing, the next best thing to do is to create an artificial crisis which de-legitimizes the establishment as a justification for a renewed attempt at taking it over.

Nothing could have provided a better target for such an action than an icon like the Disney Corporation. And besides, if played right, it could even prove to be profitable! Somehow, if you could prove in the eyes of God fearing, *Fantasia*-watching, downwardly mobile, suburban consumers that Disney was in collusion with Satan to make homosexuality a legitimate lifestyle option, then one could certainly argue that such religious conglomerates as the Trinity Broadcasting Network were the real inheritors of Disney's legacy in order to make every parent want to force their children to watch religious television.

Economic strategies for cultural domination aside, the real thorn in the side of the Religious Right was Disney's legitimation of the very lifestyle and gender orientation that the Religious Right rejects. As obvious as that may seem, it's what lies underneath the Disney Corporation's economic endorsement of homosexuality which scares the Religious Right to death.

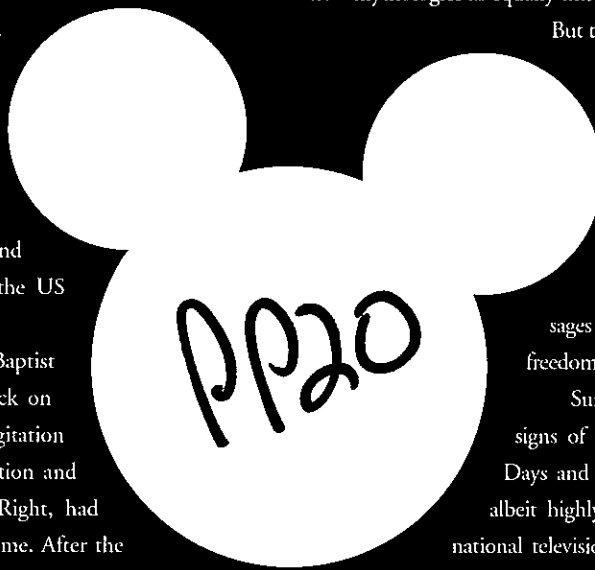
The seemingly easy transition that a company, which has historically produced cultural mythologies which legitimate a heterosexual, white, Christian culture, can make to a sexually pluralist and open one, appears to be too much to handle for some Christians because it means that the old cultural framework for maintaining social order is not binding. What inspires fear in Christian cultural planners is the possibility that the cultural imagery defined for America by Disney could indeed evolve into a sexually tolerant, seemingly liberated sexual framework which could produce new mythologies as equally influential as the old ones.

But that is not what concerns us here. This is just the backdrop to the real issue at hand for progressives who are caught in the awkward position of having to defend Disney—an enormous media conglomerate which has historically produced radically conservative cultural commodities with deeply reactionary messages hostile to such basic concepts as democracy, freedom and equality—for its hiring practices.

Sure, the dreaded corporate ogre has shown signs of increased benevolence by sponsoring Gay Days and giving its artists the freedom in certain—albeit highly controlled—instances to "come out" on national television but, as has been well documented, the Disney corporation remains an archetypical corporate and cultural monopoly with many entertainment subsidiaries which market whatever messages it deems profitable. It is these ideological inconsistencies that most of us have learned to live with because they characterize almost every aspect of cultural life in advanced capitalist societies. When the monolith seems flexible, you take what you can get and for that brief moment, you breathe a little more freely.

But it's this inconsistency that upsets religious moralists because, more than anything else, they want certain kinds of cultural monoliths, like Disney, to be infallible. That's why such organizations as the Southern Baptist Convention charge that Disney is undergoing a hostile takeover by "homosexual Jewish activists," as one Christian commented. They can't seem to get it in their heads that every capitalist orifice like Disney is bound to be radically inconsistent because that is how capitalism works: it fetishizes everything. So when it sees a pool of potentially lucrative consumers, it's going free them up for the consumption process just like it would any natural resource. Only this time it's human.

Many leftists are caught in this same fantasy world, but from the other side of the fence. They want corporations such as Disney to remain "fascist" and inflexible in order to fit into their own pseudo-leftist doctrine



of purity which tends to divide everything up between distinct spheres of good and evil. However, capitalism doesn't respect such boundaries. The exchange of goods and services, particularly in the cultural realm, tends to erase them because everyone, regardless of their political orientation, fetishizes certain commodities.

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Since punk politics come from progressive politics and abstract their submerged and defensive posturing even further, then looking at one proposed liberal response to the Southern Baptists boycott of Disney is a good place to start to see where we can make changes. The most popular proposal in place is to simply have liberals buy out Disney stock in order to bolster the company from the lost investments of conservative Christians, who are being told they should divest themselves of Disney stock as part of the boycott.

For those of us without the cash to invest in the stock market (don't believe the current hype about the market and America's growing riches. Most of us still don't have a dime to spare for Wall Street), we are being asked simply to "buy Disney." Whether it's by going to see *George of the Jungle*, or by picking up a pair of *Hercules* shoelaces, progressives are supposed to buy buy buy.

The logic behind these moves is to show public support for the firm's sexual politics by investing in it financially, at a time when conservative Christian investors are trying to influence company policy by withdrawing their financial support from the firm. If there's no threat to financial stability to Disney, or so the liberal logic goes, the firm will be forced to continue to recognize same sex relations when it comes to structuring employee benefits.

What's wrong with this strategy? Well, there are several problems. To begin with, it repeats the same liberal tactic of throwing money at social crises in order to find a cure to problems that have their roots in class conflict. Terminating deeply ingrained cultural prejudices such as religious homophobia by investing in a firm whose bottom line is still profit will not work because it sustains the economic divisions which give rise to homophobia in the first place! If the strategy of liberal investment in a firm like Disney accomplishes anything, at its best it will set an example for incorporating and tolerating sexual difference in the corporate environment of monopoly capitalism. At its worst, such an achievement will help assimilate sexual difference into an exploitative, hierarchical corporatist labor framework.

The tradeoff is simple. By investing in Disney to protect its recognition of same sex partnerships, we end up destroying the universal implications of gay liberation by aligning it with big business and the class conflicts it perpetuates to stay in business. This in turn ends up helping to transform sexual politics into identity politics precisely because we divorce sexual politics from class politics—the same politics that would prohibit anyone in their right mind from supporting the second largest media monopoly in the world, one which is openly hostile to labor, maintains large factories of underpaid workers in countries run by military dictatorships like Burma, and routinely promotes reactionary family values ideologies through its nauseous movie and music subsidiaries.

This kind of "alternative" act of consumption has always bothered me because it is quite literally—for lack of a better term—a sell out. Many pro-

gressives believe that investing in any form of culture is the only way to protect our universal freedoms. The problem with that kind of attitude is that it's defensive, not offensive. It lacks imagination because it tries to eliminate threats to civil liberties by throwing money at political problems which were caused by money in the first place.

Punk inherits this unimaginative, defensive posturing from liberalism because it fetishizes the act of buying musical commodities. No matter how many Sleater-Kinney or Dead Kennedys records you buy, consumption is consumption. It's within this incredibly limited space that punk attempts to act out its deep political imagination.

It's a space that becomes even smaller by its insistence on fetishizing not just the records, but the format which these recordings come in. You know what I'm talking about: the old record vs. CD debate. Arguing about music formats and investing tons of time and energy into preserving them doesn't really accomplish anything except create a new commodity where there was none, by aestheticizing the physical medium used to disseminate cultural commodities. This is a desperate move. Instead of insisting on preserving civil rights, punks insist on preserving ridiculous commodities like vinyl, until the next metaphor for alienation comes along, like Digital Versatile Discs, and the whole process starts all over again.

Maybe vinyl does sound better than digital, but if you buy as many records as punk zines tell you to, the chances are that your hearing is so bad that you probably can't tell the difference anyway. Besides, arguing over the superiority of analog over digital sounds fetishizes the character of sound in the same way that we fetishize distinctions between types of art, and this signals a loss of artistic and political imagination. Once again, the real discourse is lost in the noise.

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The lesson punks can learn from artificial crises such as the Southern Baptist's conflict with Disney is to look at the content and strategies of liberal replies to conservative cultural initiatives. Once again, liberalism ends up perpetuating the potential for future conflicts between communities of difference (whether they be sexual, ethnic or, as is the case with punks, cultural) with the so-called old guard or mainstream. Cases like the Disney conflict also shed light on the degree to which we ignore and overlook the political histories of the institutions we seek to be accommodated within, such as the culture industry, which tends to force us to fetishize everything, including the formats of the commodities they give us, as part of their overall monopolistic thrust that extends from Burma to our own buying practices. We have to recognize that what these types of liberal responses to conservative cultural initiatives do is force communities of difference—in a terrified and defensive response to minority ethnic, cultural and sexual persecution—to remake themselves in the image of the establishment. This in turn makes us continually complicit with the forces and relations of a system which deliberately produces marginalized sexual, ethnic and artistic subcultures in the first place. That's why instead of "Joining the man," as the 'Panthers were wont to say, we have to find other ways to distinguish ourselves from him. ©



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