Deconstructing Disney Through Music

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**Introduction**

*The Lion King* was never slated to become a classic. In fact, at the time of production for *King,* Disney was simultaneously working on *Pocahontas,* the story they believed would be their mega blockbuster. (Rodosthenous, 2017). Thus, *The Lion King (King)* emerged as Disney’s greatest dark horse to date, as the monetary success it spawned is still unchecked in Disney’s animated universe. The film’s influence has grown exponentially. *King* spawned a sequel, soundtracks, a billion dollars in revenue, and a Broadway play that has been seen by over 90 million people in locations all around the world. (Rodosthenous, 2017). The monetary success is easily quantifiable, but arguably as important is *King’s* vast cultural impact.

What has pushed me to examine *The Lion King* is rather simple. In my childhood, there are few movies I remember having elicited a lasting impact quite like *King.* While I have memories of watching other Disney curated films, *The Lion King* is the sole survivor that has upheld importance well into adulthood, and one that I have always strongly revered. There are many frameworks from which one could analyze the film. After all, it has been criticized for a variety of isms since its initial release (Rodosthenous, 2017). However, my essay will implement the cultural vantage point to drive my analysis. Using cultural analysis, I will deconstruct several aspects of the film that perpetuate harmful cultural messages ranging from blatantly troublesome to micro aggressive.

While my scope covers *The Lion King* as a film, I will be focusing my analysis specifically on songs from the soundtrack and their corresponding scenes in the film. Music has a way of transcending time, as many who watched the film as a child may still hold the lyrics in their memory. The three songs I will focus on specifically are *I Just Can´t Wait to be King,* *Be Prepared* and finally *Can you Feel the Love Tonight* The aim of this essay is to deconstruct *King* in a way that exposes the pedagogical nature of the film, in how it relates to teaching audiences (specifically children) about our collective cultural understanding. I will begin by summarizing the film, in preparation for heavier legwork on the aforementioned songs and scenes. Firstly, I will use the concepts of myth and hegemony to analyze the seemingly benign “traditions” that the film repurposes problematically in regards to rulership and power. Secondly, I will use concepts of racial stereotyping and media representations that poke holes in the representations of the adversary or “villainous” characters in the film. Lastly, I will focus my scope on the relationship of Simba and Nala, and how it uses doxa and stereotyping to create an ideal snapshot of a culturally appropriate romantic male-female relationship. In doing so, I will create a more nuanced discussion around a profoundly important children’s film.

**Textual Description**

The Lion King was released in June of 1994 to United States audiences. (The Lion King, 1994). *The Lion King* is an animated musical that takes place in the African savannah. The film draws many parallels to Shakespeare’s play, *Hamlet,* despite being the first story Disney did not appropriate from prior fairytales. (Murphy, 2013). The film follows a young cub named Simba, the royal successor to his father, and current king, Mufasa. Mufasa is the overseer of Pride Rock, the land his pride has claimed as their home. Mufasa’s brother, Scar, serves as the film’s main antagonist. Scar insidiously plots to overthrow his brother and consequently devises a plan to murder Mufasa in order to gain control of the kingdom. Additionally, Scar elicits a group of unruly hyenas who follow his every instruction, and serve as his henchmen.

Scar then decides to murder Mufasa by casting him into a gorge where a group of stampeding antelope wait below. He does this by leading Simba to the gorge, and subsequently using his hyenas to create a catalyst for the stampede. Scar then alerts Mufasa that Simba is in danger and Mufasa quickly rescues Simba from the gorge. However, Simba watches anxiously as Mufasa attempts to claw his way out of the gorge, eventually gaining enough traction to climb up to the ledge. Mufasa comes face to face with Scar, who digs his claws into Mufasa, causing him to plummet back into the stampede below. After doing so, he plays upon Simba’s childhood naivety to shift blame onto Simba and lead him to believe that he’s responsible for Mufasa’s death. Scar subsequently advices Simba to banish himself from the pride lands and never return. Scar thus ascends to leadership, where he very poorly integrates the lion pride with his hyenas.

Simba runs off into the jungle where he meets his two friends and ill-mannered mentors, Timon the meerkat and Pumba the warthog. Simba adopts a laissez-faire approach to life, curtailing responsibility in favor for relaxation. Despite his newfound lifestyle, Simba still struggles to come to terms with Mufasa’s death, believing well into adulthood he is responsible for his death. Simba is ultimately discovered in the jungle by his childhood friend turned love interest, Nala. Nala, who has been scouting for food in the midst of a devastating famine, is surprised to see Simba as he has been assumed dead by his pride. After their lover’s relationship is solidified via song, Nala pushes Simba to return to Pride Rock to take his rightful position as the king. Simba vehemently refuses, which ultimately leads Nala to leave him behind in the jungle.

Lovesick and frustrated, Simba ventures off by himself where he encounters his father’s old advisor, Rafiki. Rafiki initially pesters Simba, but ultimately leads him to a night sky where Mufasa’s body emerges from the clouds. With coaxing from an ethereal Mufasa, Simba has a change of heart and realizes he must return to Pride Rock to take control of the throne.

Simba is mortified by the conditions of Pride Rock, and his fellow lions are shocked to see him alive. This greatly panics Scar, who initially mistakes Simba for Mufasa. Once he realizes the lion is Simba, he attempts to exploit Simba by telling the pride members he murdered Mufasa. After the confrontation turns physical, Simba is pushed into the exact physical position his father was, hanging by the side of a ledge. Scar mocks Simba, saying the scene looks familiar. He then reveals it was him who killed Mufasa. The truth of Mufasa’s death is revealed to the pride, as Scar attempts a final Hail Mary, telling the lions the hyenas are responsible for the horrific conditions of Pride Rock. A physical battle breaks out between the lions and hyenas, however most notably Scar and Simba. Simba ultimately pushes Scar into a corner, where Scar is devoured by the hyenas he previously tried to incriminate.

In the end, Simba takes control of the throne in a grandiose display. The last scene of the film shows Nala and Simba on top of Pride Rock, overlooking the savannah and the animals within it. Rafiki presents their newborn cub, and balance is restored in the kingdom.

**Analytical Framework**

In this section, I will concisely describe the cultural studies framework. I will also discuss some of the concepts that I will integrate into the analysis section of my essay, before finally citing similar academic studies that utilize cultural studies as a framework.

Before discussing critical cultural framework, I will first define culture. Culture is important to understand, as it is the cornerstone of understanding why it is necessary for analysis. Culture can be understood as the intersection of various practices, beliefs, and artifacts, recognized and upheld by a select subsection of people. (Ott and Mack, 2014). Often times, these intersecting ideas and items are reflective of a certain time in history, that thus gives insight into the common ideology of a society. (Ott and Mack, 2014).

Subsequently, ideology can be understood as a system of ideas that serves to create invisible guidelines for the operation of subcultures. (Ott and Mack, 2014). Ideology subtly drives individual groups to perpetuate normative practices, as they relate to their certain group’s interests. Now that I have outlined culture, I will briefly describe some of the concepts you will come across in the analysis portion of this essay. Myth, as it pertains to cultural studies, is understood differently through a critical lens. It refers to a story that is sacred, that works to repurpose ideology in regards to an object. (Ott & Mack, 2014). Myths can be understood very simply at face value, but have greater implications when viewed in a greater context. (Ott & Mack, 2014). Doxa is somewhat similar to myth, in the sense that it alludes to greater contextual influence. However, Doxa functions as cultural knowledge that is beyond reproach. Doxa is essentially an undisputed “truth” of a culture, the “truth” having been adopted to work seamlessly in tandem with cultural norms. (Ott & Mack, 2014).

An overarching concept found in this essay is hegemony. Hegemony is important for many different avenues of critical media studies. Hegemony is the dominant ideology that guides cultural norms. It is a system used to erase alternative avenues of thought and functionality, heavily reliant on power dynamics and the submission and acceptance of the governed. (Ott & Mack, 2014). *The Lion King* has hegemony in spades, nearly all conflicts in Simba’s heroes journey involve overcoming challenges to restore hegemony. Hence, this makes hegemony a large focal point of this essay, as it will apply to nearly every critique I offer.

Now that I have laid the foundation for key concepts of this essay, I will turn my attention to prior studies and critiques that deal with similar criticism. Through my research, I discovered while Disney films are highly critiqued, the music within them less so. One notable text is *The Disney Musical on Stage and Screen,* a collection of scholarly essays edited by George Rodosthenous. The book contains an essay titled *The Lion King: A Blockbuster Feline on Broadway and Beyond* by Barbara Wallace Grossman. It is not entirely in the same vein as my analysis, but it touches on cultural problems present in *King*. In specific, issues with the racial presentation of the hyenas in *King* (Rodosthenous, 2017).A criticism I will explore in my own essay.

Additionally, I came across a book by Dr. Henry Giroux called *Impure Acts: The Practical Politics of Cultural Studies.* Within *Impure Acts* is an entire chapter that discusses Disney’s direct and indirect influence on culture at large. Much of Giroux’s argument is centralized on Disney’s dominance, which is evident through the vast number of media subsidiaries they own. (Giroux, 2013) When a company has such a tantalizing grip on media, like Disney, even seemingly benign decisions have greater implications for culture at large. Despite the illusion that media is accessible and diverse, Disney owns some of the most important media avenues that adults turn to for information (Giroux, 2013) Many of these adults have grown up on Disney films that give guidelines for how to process society at large. (Giroux, 2013). Hence, *Impure Acts* serves as a notable study on Disney’s cultural prowess. Additionally, in another text of his, Giroux discusses the important impact that Disney has on culture (Giroux, 2010). Children subconsciously look to Disney for messages pertaining to society and its functionality. Learning through Disney is widespread and recognizable (Giroux, 2010). making children more apt to trust Disney’s messages.

Before transitioning, I feel it is imperative to stress the importance of power within cultural studies. Without the implementation of power, these concepts become far less impactful. Power is at the cornerstone of nearly all frameworks and thus must be heavily challenged and referenced throughout.

**Analysis**

Despite the sometimes overly saccharine nature of Disney films, I have always found *King* to be a touch more rugged. Even acclaimed film critic, Roger Ebert, found much of the content to be inappropriately solemn for children (Rodosthenous, 2017). This solemn nature that Ebert speaks to, conveniently for me, is omnipresent in the soundtrack. However, lyrically, the content goes far beyond solemn. At best the lyrics are questionable, at worst offensively outré in their nature. Let’s begin with one of the most famous songs of the film, *I Just Can’t Wait to Be King.*

*I Just Can’t Wait to be King*

*I Just Can’t Wait to Be King (King)* is Simba’s swan song to childhood, centralizing on his desire for kingship. Despite being targeted at child viewers, much of what Simba sings about IS representative of the problems in modern day culture, especially as it pertains to the leadership of minority communities. At the climax of the song, Simba and Nala literally climb on top of “governed” animals to reach the top of the pyramid. All the while, the animals cry out “let every creature go for broke and sing” after Simba proclaims “Everywhere you look, I’m standing spotlight” (Rice & John, 1994). Incidentally, we never hear any concerns from the “working-class” animals, simply a blind allegiance to Simba’s radical, and self-serving, ideas.

Myth is a sacred story, working with tenants of hegemony to create infallible guidelines for communities (Ott & Mack, 2014). The tradition of “kingship” has gone unchallenged both in *King* and in reality. In our current cultural climate these sorts of non-reverent, unhinged, declarations actually become acceptable, which makes Simba seem less formal and perhaps even more relatable. In actuality, Simba, even post childhood, remains egocentric. We hear extensively about the desires surrounding Simba, but never the animals who Simba stands upon literally and metaphorically. The literal interpretation of the song is far different from the myth surrounding it (Ott & Mack, 2014). The myth has greater implications for the importance of adhering to leadership and placing importance on those in powerful positions. This is the higher-level narrative (Ott & Mack, 2014). meaning that this containment of hegemony by proxy is not always obvious, but rather integrated so deeply into our understanding it seems benign. Simba’s intentions are clearly rooted in his power as the top predator of the jungle. He will be “free to run around all day” and free to do things “all [his] way” (Rice & John, 1994). Hegemony rewards this type of senseless ambition as admirable, especially for men.

Perhaps it would be less concerning if Disney was not so unilaterally influential for children (Giroux, 2013). Parents and educators have to work tirelessly against media message like those in *King.* (Giroux, 2013) Simba is a likeable hero, a cute and cuddly lion cub, with an unusually sonorous dialect and singing style. Above all else, he is destined for supreme leadership. The messages of leadership in *I Just Can’t Wait to be King* become conflated with the need for power, difficult for children to differentiate. Disney directs these messages at children, some even borderline infantile, who are easily influenced and taught. (Giroux, 2010) What *I Just Can’t Wait to be King* seems to teach is the idea of coerced consent. There is no discussion of democracy within the Pride Rock universe, and no opportunity for voices to be exercised regarding leadership. It may seem unnecessary for the animal kingdom, but the song is more reflective of our unique human practices than that of animals. After all, the variety of issues discussed in *The Lion King,* are far more relevant to our unique human practices than they are of animals. Children can digest these messages, and see the parallels within *The Lion King* and our own social reality as humans. Essentially, nothing in this song’s portrayal of leadership is by chance.

Zazu, the hornbill, serves as an advisor to Simba, and plays an instrumental role in overseeing the cub. He has a feature in the song, usually refuting Simba’s declarations. Eventually, Simba dismissively cries “kings don’t need advice from little hornbills” (Rice & John, 1994). It seems innocuous enough, after all Zazu does not have any type of appointed leadership in the kingdom, however, Zazu has been a loyal servant of the pride. He is knowledgeable regarding the kingdom, and yet his insights are quelled and he is often treated as an “other”. The main takeaway of this musical number is to establish and celebrate the hierarchy, a system that redistributes power disproportionally amongst culture[s] (Rockler, 2010) The system is naturalized, in an attempt to make various members of a society accept it as normal (Rockler, 2010). This attempt is successful on and off the screen, and remains a cornerstone that allows hegemony to thrive.

*I Just Can’t Wait to be King* is a testament to the celebration and naturalization of power systems that feel highly antiquated. Still, Western society often values abrasive leaders, as does the kingdom surrounding Simba. We recognize that a kingdom must consist of animals to govern, but the interests of, arguably the majority of the kingdom, go absolutely unchecked. We accept this hegemonic display of rulership, because historically, it has roots.

*Be* *Prepared*

Every great Disney film has a diabolical villain who obstructs the heroes’ journey. In *King* it is decidedly Scar. Because Scar is initially ineligible to rule the kingdom, he takes to creating his own “counter culture”, and ultimately forces the hyenas within it to integrate with the ruling class of lions. The irony of this scenario, is from a critical cultural perspective it could actually be arguably progressive. However, the portrayal of these actions frames it as something heinous.

Dialects play a role in establishing how certain groups are categorized in the *King* universe. Before the song begins, the audience receives a clear understanding of power dynamics between Scar and his hyenas through overt positioning and “subtle” accenting clues. However, there is no room for misunderstanding, the accents are implicitly clear. Scar speaks in an exaggerated United Kingdom accent, whereas the hyenas speak in Ebonics. To be clear, there is nothing inherently wrong with speaking in Ebonics, or any other minority specific slang. It is Disney’s biased utilization of it that makes it malicious. Racial hierarchies have historically worked to limit a perceived inferior group’s participation in society, limiting possibilities (Rockler, 2010). This is evident in the relationship of the hyenas to Scar. The hyenas are at the mercy of Scar, used as a pawn in his scheme to ultimately drive out Simba and Mufasa. Scar blatantly shares his distaste for the hyenas in Be Prepared, beginning the song with “I know that your powers of retention are as wet as a Warthog’s backside…it’s clear from your vacant expressions the lights are not all on upstairs.” (Rice, 1994). What’s even more disturbing is the hyenas, upon hearing this sung to them, remain jovial. They bounce around as Scar makes his own impromptu replica of Pride Rock, positioning himself as physically higher. He looks down upon the marching hyenas, instructing them of what they will do, of course “quid pro quo” as expected. (Rice, 1994).

Why do these choices ultimately matter? They matter because they are upholding a dangerous tradition. White people, presumably who Scar represents, have historically been in positions of power that ignored and oppressed the needs of minority groups, positioning their comfort above universal equality. (Rockler, 2010). This is eerily parallel to the situation of the hyenas. They lack upward mobility and ultimately fight on behalf of Scar. It’s a uniquely American lens from which we can digest this aspect of the film. Protagonists all speak in traditional American English accents. Even Scar speaks with a British accent, a country that was historically viewed as a threat to American democracy. Below even Scar, however, are of course the hyenas. The hierarchy is abundantly clear, and the film uses accents to imply a very orderly and strategic categorization.

The hyenas seem to believe there are incentives to acting on behalf of Scar. Often minority groups will accept certain ideology because they determine it could be potentially beneficial for them. (Ott & Mack, 2014). At one point as *Be Prepared* is underway, a hyena asks “and where do we feature?” (Rice, 1994). implying their position as supplemental to Scar’s ultimate plan. Once Scar professes the king will be killed, the hyenas seemingly rejoice “No king! No king!” (Rice, 1994). This is quickly dismissed by Scar who shouts “Idiots…there will be a king. I will be king!” (Rice, 1994). Scar subsequently promises they will never go hungry under his leadership. Of course, this is of vital importance to the hyenas, causing them to passively shift into accepting Scar as king.

Ultimately, we have to be mindful of minority portrayals in media. Especially media that is directed toward children. Childhood is an integral stage in which we begin to internalize values that are projected to us. Disney, in spite of its family friendly nature, is still a corporation that begets children with ideas about how the world works (Giroux, 2013). In the case of Simba and Scar we see two sides of the same coin. Two lions singing about their unrelenting desire of rulership (power). The only difference being Scar’s angled as the designated villain, and his henchmen being portrayed as ethnic and thus, inferior. *Be Prepared,* subsequently, sends a naturalization message about how minority characters fit into the hierarchy.

*Can you feel the love tonight?*

Academy award winning (Rodosthenous, 2017). *Can you feel the love tonight (love),* will be my final point of analysis. The relationship of Simba and Nala, offers insight into doxa, and how doxa can influence and dominate how children view relationships. Especially considering Nala’s efforts to get Simba back to Pride Rock are fruitless, all things considered.

Doxa represents knowledge that is beyond reproach, and repurposed as common ideology (Ott & Mack, 2010). Arguably, this is concept is overwhelmingly a part of Simba’s journey to kingship. In this specific instance, doxa insists that Simba’s journey to kingship and reconciliation is incomplete without a romantic prospect. The song harmoniously begins with musings of “can you feel the love tonight…the world, for once, in perfect harmony with all its living things” (Rice & John, 1994). A staunch departure from Nala’s initial concerns with the crushing famine currently plaguing Pride Rock. Although the problems are briefly touched upon at the initial reconciliation, they are undercut by the musical number. The musical number that positions two childhood friends as sudden lovers, despite not having a prior romantic connection.

The problem with defaulting to a romantic relationship as means to propel the narrative, is that the media is completely oversaturated with them. Thus, the idea that a romantic partner is necessary for leadership, becomes normative and expected (Ott & Mack, 2014). Consider Nala and Simba’s relationship remains strictly platonic? Western society is conditioned to believe that it is less meaningful. Particularly when we have been fed images that “family friendly” and traditional “family-oriented” individuals are the only ones who are competent to lead.

The relationship also reaffirms the need for continued social power (Ott & Mack, 2014). Simba would not be as powerful if their relationship was strictly platonic. After all, this is Simba’s redemption arc, and a mate will make him seem a more competent leader than Scar. In fact, Scar does not pursue a romantic relationship whatsoever, and in this context, he seems even more villainous because of it.

Nala, like many women who are portrayed in Disney films, is furthermore given the burden of having to curtail Simba’s emotional struggles. When she asks for transparency, he responds with “so many things to tell her, but how to make her see?” (Rice & John, 1994). Despite Nala’s gentle coaxing, she is ultimately unsuccessful and furthermore passively villainized in the process by Timon and Pumba as they say their friendship with Simba is “doomed” (Rice & John, 1994). Because hegemonically, there exists a stereotype that once two people are involved romantically, they by default lose the relationships with their friends in the process. Nala, in a strange roundabout way, encourages the preservation of Pride Rock’s hierarchy, because politically motivated societies allot opportunity and leadership to a specific few (Rockeler, 2010). Even though Simba likely has little to no leadership skills, having lived independently with two friends through his formative years, he still is the natural born leader of Pride Rock and this of course trumps any other viable candidate. Not to imply that Scar’s leadership is beneficial for anyone but himself, but once Simba returns, the last we see of the hyenas is their murder of Scar. The hyenas, who offer a potential differing standpoint to many of the lions, are not valuable in the homogenous utopia.

Essentially, Nala and Simba’s relationship is important because it works to restore a natural hierarchy in the kingdom. It can be argued that part of Nala’s motivation is to preserve the social power of Pride Rock. It is common for doxa to work in tandem with upholding the power of socially dominant groups (Ott & Mack, 2014). Furthermore, Nala understands that Simba’s leadership will ensure the lions regain control of Pride Rock. This is a toxic course of action for both Simba and Nala. It implies that Nala’s sole purpose is to bring Simba back to pride rock, secure a marriage, and ultimately restore balance in the kingdom. For Simba, it means a rejection of a new lifestyle, a lifestyle he may authentically be better suited for, in exchange for power and restoration to Pride Rock that only he can provide. What’s certain in their relationship is expected behaviors and a traditional course of action, in accordance to beliefs that are promoted by doxa. If doxa represents the common-sense narrative of a culture, Simba and Nala fall perfectly in line with these teachings of hegemony.

**Conclusion**

Despite being over two decades old, *The Lion King* has solidified itself as one of the most important pillars of culture Disney has ever released. The Lion King is a relatively interesting film to critique, because there are so many angles from which one could base their argument (Rodosthenous, 2017). However, *King* is culturally important because of its gigantic success and breadth of messages that are harmful to youth. (Giroux, 2010) Analyzing a children’s film was an unusual task, but certainly an important one. Afterall, I feel humans are most malleable and impressionable in their earliest stages of life. Children soak up information without having the skillset to process and question it. *The Lion King* and films like it teach children how the world operates, it only seems benign because it is packaged so innocently.

I strongly believe humans are at their best when they can welcome and process knowledge, concepts, and beliefs from a variety of differing cultural viewpoints. When writing this essay, I wondered what it would have been like, had there been more attention to detail in some of the authentic cultural practices of the African savannah. Despite *King’s* geographical location, it remains a staunchly American film. This is why conversations about culture matter. Since its release, Disney has tried to integrate more diversity in their films. While I think Disney has made notable strides, there is still much the company can do to create a more enriching experience. Cultural studies matter for this reason, and will continue to matter so long as there is a disparity along racial and ethnic lines.

Like most any human pursuit, the film is not without flaw. If humans can learn to critique what they love, and remain open to the process of receiving difficult information, there is no reason Disney cannot continue to progress in creating more nuanced representations of culture.

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