

Understanding Disney: The Manufacture of Fantasy. By Janet Wasko. Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Press, 2001. 264 pp. ISBN 0745614841.

To use Disney as an example of media convergence or of cultural imperialism has become somewhat of a cliché. It seems that over the past decade almost every leftist publication has had its “Disney issue,” while academics and professionals from backgrounds as diverse as engineering, business administration, anthropology, and fine arts have contributed to the now vast amount of literature examining all things Disney. The Walt Disney Company’s prominence, ubiquity, and overall influence on consumer culture has provoked a wide-ranging critical debate, spanning across a variety of disciplines, in an attempt to identify and understand Disney’s various facets. In a marked departure from these previous works, leading political economist Janet Wasko not only provides a much needed mapping of the relationships among Disney’s many, and often contradictory, facets, but also posits that Disney-focused studies and the ensuing debates are themselves contributing factors of the Disney phenomenon. *Understanding Disney* is thus aptly titled, as it introduces readers to a critical and theoretical understanding of “Disney” as a site of serious academic inquiry.

The ideas expressed in this book first emerged as a university course that the author taught at the University of Oregon. The course materials were designed to enhance students’ understanding of the political economy of communication through the application of its theories and methodologies to the specific case study of Disney. By integrating textual, discourse and audience analyses, Wasko’s approach also contributes to a stream within communications research that attempts to bridge the gap between political economy and cultural studies. This technique is especially crucial when the subject of study is involved in what Wasko calls the “manufacture of fantasy”; wherein carefully branded products and consumption experiences are portrayed and interpreted according to a corporate discourse that promotes a deliberate and controlled vision of fantasy, imagination, and fun.

Wasko begins by tracing Disney’s turbulent progression from a modest, two-man animation studio to the international multi-media/merchandise giant that it is today: through its strict management and labour practices; the development of techniques and technologies that greatly homogenized the animation process; its massive merchandizing and cross-promotional initiatives; its strict control and enforcement of copyright and intellectual property policies; as well as its diversification into almost every popular form of mass entertainment and leisure (from storybooks to cruise ships). Despite blatantly capitalist corporate practices, Wasko suggests that generally uncritical historical accounts and press coverage, combined with Disney’s own heavy-handed public relations and marketing strategies, have worked to produce a highly mythologized public perception of the company. She demonstrates how Disney maintains a “magical” aura through the use of “Classic Disney” themes and values (including individualism, escape, magic, innocence, and romance), which are consistently expressed across the gamut of Disney products, texts, and spaces. Finally, Wasko conducts a brief overview of the research to date focused on Disney’s audiences, including the Global Disney Audiences Project on which she collaborated in 2001. Throughout her analysis, Wasko highlights key concepts and practices, identifying a continued emphasis on “control” and “synergy” as particularly indicative of Disney’s underlying business ethos.

Wasko’s commitment to plurality and comprehensiveness is manifested through the sheer immensity of information and material that is included in the study. The work relies predominantly on an exhaustive overview of the existing academic literature, but also includes press materials, corporate publications, and even fan-created Web sites. A number of different approaches are considered, while conflicting opinions and results are compared and contrasted. Wasko’s critical reading of these materials also enables her to identify legitimate gaps in the current body of research, both in terms of the methods used and the

regular omission of some important areas of inquiry. Despite the complex nature of Wasko's methodology, the book's structure and accessible writing style nevertheless promote a natural, intuitive transition through the varied concepts presented; from producer, to product, to discourse, to audience and consumption.

Thus, in spite of the enormity of the subject matter addressed, Wasko succeeds in painting a coherent—if somewhat panoramic—picture of the Disney universe. Her approach is consistent with Mosco's assertion that the political economy of communication should place subjects within a wider social context. Yet, in her assessment of the Disney discourse, this penchant for totality skirts the realm of essentialism. By reducing all (or at least most) Disney products created within the past seventy years to a singular "Classic Disney" format, Wasko's analysis runs the risk of excluding important shifts in the Disney genre, especially as it moves into new media channels and global markets. Although the majority of Disney's animated films, including more recent features, surely share at least some of the characteristics listed as typical "Classic Disney," there are and always have been a number of Disney films (and television series, books, comics, et cetera) that "deviate" from this standard format. A more useful approach would be to consider how these divergent themes, characters, and storylines also play a role in the construction of the Disney brand, instead of discounting them as benign anomalies.

Even the most thorough overview can fail to cover every aspect of such a vast and intricate topic. In fact, Wasko warns several times throughout the book that compiling a complete inventory of Disney's near-limitless holdings would be virtually impossible. It is nonetheless unfortunate that Wasko neglects to include in her analysis some of Disney's more recent collaborations and attempts to respond to resistant or locally competitive foreign markets (such as Japan), as well as growing competition within new media industries (for example, video game, mobile technologies, et cetera). Emerging newcomers and local challenges to Disney's traditional tactics seem to have forced the company to become more accommodating, as with its 1996 distribution deal with Studio Ghibli (a highly successful Japanese animation studio) or its collaboration with Square (producers of the best selling *Final Fantasy* video game series). Disney's otherwise clear obsession with control and synergy seems to demand a more conscientious assessment of those cases where control has been relinquished in favour of strategic alliances that take full advantage of a competitor's superior market positioning or better quality product.

Despite these occasional omissions, *Understanding Disney* remains a necessarily broad yet critical introduction to Disney as a cultural, social, and global phenomenon, as well as an invaluable resource for those wishing to pursue further inquiries into this area. It contains a wealth of information, including an extensive notes section and thorough bibliography, as well as key criticisms of both the Disney empire and of the transnational consumer culture. Wasko provides scholars and students seeking to apply an integrated political economy approach with the methodology required for a thorough analysis of the global media monoliths that increasingly dominate the international cultural environment. In terms of a successful amalgamation of cultural studies and political economy perspectives, however, Wasko falls somewhat short of her goal to present a cohesive union of two, traditionally divergent, epistemological approaches. Although *Understanding Disney* provides readers with a clear trajectory of how to get from (A) political economic analysis to (B) cultural studies, the theoretical framework remains dichotomous and the two perspectives are never satisfactorily merged.

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