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Staying True to Disney:
College Students' Resistance to Criticism
of *The Little Mermaid*

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This article discusses the implementation of a media literacy program in a college classroom in the form of an extended critique and analysis of Disney's The Little Mermaid. Students' decoding of Disney's messages and their resistance to critique of the film are analyzed using four areas of research: audience research, media literacy, critical pedagogy, and psychology's cognitive dissonance theory.

Disney films, for many, are an important part of growing up. Due to the duration of the Disney legacy of economic success, children and adults alike have memories of viewing Disney films that have become intertwined with the experience of childhood. Yet, much research exists that points to troubling Disney ideologies (Giroux, 1999; Smoodin, 1994), and problematic portrayals of gender roles (Cuomo, 1995; Hoerrner, 1996; O'Brien, 1996; Sells, 1995), racial stereotypes (Buescher & Ono, 1996; Nodel, 1997), and violence (Newberger, 1994). A growing number of educators are raising these issues in media literacy settings to

foster critical analysis of the messages and the institution of Disney (Bell, Haas, & Sells, 1995).

This article discusses the implementation of such a media literacy program in a college classroom in the form of an extended analysis of Disney's *The Little Mermaid* and discussion of the relationship of that text to the Hans Christian Andersen tale on which it was based (*The Little Seamaid*). Data were collected from student reflection papers that demonstrate their decoding of Disney messages, their responses to the comparison exercise, and—most of all—their resistance to critique of the film. The research question that drives this study is: "For those who construct preferred meanings and receive great pleasure by doing so, when they are exposed to the deconstruction of their favorite text in a negative light, how do they respond?" In the following, we first will examine the teacher's goals and the execution of the class, the method of data collection, and then introduce the four areas of research and theory that inform the study before presenting the findings.

Context

A professor (not one of the authors) at a large public university in the East Coast offered a course that compared and contrasted Disney's animated fairy tales with the versions written by the Grimm Brothers and Hans Christian Andersen on which the movies were based. Each unit typically consisted of reading a fairy tale, viewing Disney's film of the same story, and reading articles on the tale and/or the movie.

This study focuses on the unit of "The Little Mermaid," in which the students were expected to read Andersen's original tale *The Little Seamaid*, read Jack Zipes' (1983) "Hans Christian Andersen and the discourses of the dominated" and view Disney's *The Little Mermaid*. Zipes' article focused on class analysis and he interpreted the mermaid's yearning for ascending to the superior human world from the deep sea as an allegory for Andersen's life-long struggle of striving to, but never being able to, become a member of the Danish bourgeois elite because of his humble origins from a cobbler father and a washerwoman mother. The instructor of the course also provided biographical information that the mermaid's tortured and unanswered love toward the prince was a metaphor for Andersen's homo-erotic desire toward his "adopted brother" Edvard Collin. Such desire is exemplified in his letter to Collin: "I'm longing for you as if you were a lovely Calabrian girl with dark blue eyes and a glance of passionate flames . . . you do not reciprocate my feelings! This affects me painfully or maybe this is in fact what binds me even more firmly to you" (Andersen, 1975, cited in Zipes, 1984, p. 74). According to both the instructor and some students, after viewing Disney's *The Little Mermaid*, there was heated debate between the "for" and "against" Disney camps, with most of the discussions focused on the representation of the Little Mermaids in the film and her steadfast aspiration of getting her prince. In the last class of the unit, the students responded in writing to an in-class assignment, answering the following questions: "Had you read Andersen's

tale before the class? How do you compare Andersen's tale with Disney's adaptation? Did your opinion of Disney's Little Mermaid change after reading Andersen's tale or discussing it in the context of the class?" There were 126 writing samples collected. Among them, there were 23 that contained little more than plot summaries of Disney's *The Little Mermaid* and/or *Andersen's The Little Seamaid* and those samples were excluded because they did not address the questions. Thus, 103 student writing samples were analyzed. Each of the answers was numbered, and when that response was cited, the number is used instead of the respondent's name.

Theoretical Background

Four areas of research and theory inform the analysis of the study. First, audience research, with the tradition of using audiences' interpretations of the media text to explore interrelationships between hegemony and identities, is discussed as a major theoretical element. This study investigates subjects' reactions when they are exposed to a media literacy discourse that challenges hegemony. Second, research and theory regarding media literacy itself provide a useful theoretical framework. Media literacy curricula often examine the media text with the goal of helping students become critical readers who challenge not only the media but also the dominant ideology. This work is a case study of students' responses to such an effort. In fact, though much research on media literacy describes apparent successes at increasing critical analysis, it is found here that students resist critiques of something they have loved and enjoyed since they were children—Disney's popular animated films. When we investigated the reason for the respondents' resistance and the strategies they came up with to rationalize their resistance, we found that psychology's cognitive dissonance theory, though it comes from a very different paradigm, provides important insights as the third theoretical area. Finally, when students' resistance occurs in the classroom, critical pedagogy theory and research attempt not only to understand why students resist psychologically, but also to examine issues of power within and beyond the classroom walls. Therefore, we draw upon this body of work as well in discussing the resistance of college students to critical analysis of a favored Disney film.

Audience Research

In his influential "encoding/decoding" model, Stuart Hall (1980) states that preferred meaning is encoded in the message and the encoder exerts power, thereby naturalizing the codes which achieve "near-universality" (1994, p. 261). By so doing, it closes down the semiotic and polysemous possibilities of the messages. Thus, the audience most often produces meanings within a very narrow range. The encoding power also constrains the audience from liberating themselves

from the hegemonic text even though they are very capable of producing their own oppositional readings.

Henry Jenkins speaks powerfully about the audience's struggle against the encoded text. Jenkins (1995) studies the Boston-based Gaylaxians, an organization for gay, lesbian, and bisexual science-fiction fans and their friends. Because of the program Star Trek's underlying philosophy of creating a universe in which humanity will live together in peace despite its differences, and because of its relatively progressive approach in dealing with real-life social issues, gay activist fans have forcefully voiced that the program is in need of gay and lesbian representations. Jenkins' article demonstrates the active, intense, and vigorous resistant readings among Gaylaxians, but his conclusion is not celebratory. The struggle those gay fans have been through is not "empowerment" as John Fiske (1989, p. 68) suggests, but a complicated dynamic between audience as the active agent and the text which defines the audience's freedom.

Jenkins's examination of the fans' loyalty toward the program is most illuminating in understanding the text's hegemonic power. According to Jenkins, the fans often identify with the program's characters, the producers, and their ideologies even though they are dissatisfied with the program's lack of representation of themselves. Thus, their resistant reading occurs "within rather than outside" the ideological framework of the program, and the battle is fought "in the name of fidelity to the program concept" (Jenkins, 1995, p. 263). Some fans do break away and produce their own text, appropriating and transforming the popular media to gain their own voice. Although those rewrites provide alternative culture forms and can be empowering for writers and readers, many fans do not consider that circulating those fan 'zines within their subculture community can satisfy their desire for "visibility and recognition" (p. 264). Jenkins states, "the aired episodes, even within fandom, enjoy an authority which cannot be matched by any subcultural production" (p. 264).

McKinley (1997) and Condit (1989) also speak about the dominant power of the text. Using the metaphor of swimming with the tide to describe constructing identity along with the dominant ideology, McKinley demonstrates the "active" and "engaged" teenage viewers of *Beverly Hills 90210* as "enthusiastically stroking and kicking to accelerate their progress" (p. 235). In McKinley's ethnographic study, we see that in everyday practice, when viewers watch popular media for entertainment, most of them actually produce meanings within the dominant ideology and receive pleasure from it. Even though a media text is open to interpretation, it has a "framing" power that limits the range of the decoding and discussion.

Condit (1989) also questions the possibility and the prevalence of constructing resistant and oppositional readings among audiences. She interviewed a pro-life activist and a pro-choice activist while each was watching a program of *Cagney and Lacey* with her. The chosen episode dealt with abortion issues, with a liberal approach. Condit found that though the interviewees had opposite views,

they came up with an identical understanding of the program. Similar to McKinley, Condit questions if the polysemous quality of texts many cultural study scholars emphasize may be overstated and should be scaled down. In contrast to the pro-choice activist experiencing pleasure and praising the program, the pro-life activist is burdened with the larger task of "deconstructing the dominant code and reconstructing their [his/her] own" (p. 114). Condit also points out the importance of understanding the audience's decoding abilities and its access to oppositional codes and counterrhetorics. As an educator, Condit concludes with her call for colleagues to use teaching undergraduate students as a device to create social change. She states optimistically, "For our students, decoding alternatives, through painful effort, can become pleasurable resources they can use throughout life" (p. 119).

For our study, Hall's insistence on reserving power in the encoding side, Jenkins's examination of the Gaylaxian's complex relationship with the *Star Trek* program, McKinley's study of how teenagers construct hegemonic readings of *Beverly Hill 90210*, and Condit's questioning of the abilities of popular audiences to construct resistant readings—as well as her assertion of the importance of education—are all important theoretical and conceptual tools for analysis. While most of the media literacy curricula exercise almost exclusively in the cognitive domain and particularly on deconstruction of the media text, we question whether students' "understanding" a critical view (in this case, the instructor's feminist critique of Disney's *The Little Mermaid*) necessarily lead to their "acceptance," "agreement," or attitude change.

Media Literacy, Critical Pedagogy, and Resistance

The course assignments and writings examined here as a case study fit under the broad heading of media literacy. The course itself is designed to encourage critical analysis of the messages in many texts, including the original tales and the modern media adaptations. This approach to media literacy is content-based (Meyrowitz, 1998) with the goal of "discriminating responsiveness" or the fostering of critical thinking (Brown, 1998). The idea is to have students apply existing skills for critique and analysis to media content and practices. Not only are media messages scrutinized, but the social, political, and economic forces that shape those messages are considered as well (Lewis & Jhally, 1998).

This definition, however, is somewhat limited in nature. Many media literacy scholars suggest deconstruction of media messages and practices are only part of the ideal focus of media literacy, with the construction of alternative media forms an empowering and instructive counterpart (Aufderheide, 1998; Hobbs, 1998). Others find the use of media literacy for the primary purpose of protection from the ills of media consumption elitist as well as ineffective because they run counter to young people's typical enjoyment of media experi-

ences (Buckingham, 1998; Collins, 1992; Halloran & Jones, 1992; Hart, 1997; Masterman, 1980). Hobbs (1998) states:

> Too often, the protectionist stance leads to an instructor-focused class-room, where the teacher tells the students the "facts" about media's negative influence . . . and the student listens quietly and take notes for the test. Such an approach to teaching may cause students to parrot the correct interpretations—the ones the teacher has sanctioned—and, in so doing, media literacy education may lose its authenticity and its relevance to students' lives. (p. 19)

Hobbs' caution is relevant for the study at hand, since the resistance was apparent in the findings. However, given the open-ended nature of the essay questions to which the students responded, the critique of both the Andersen tale and the Disney movie, and the debate among students in which several points of view were voiced, we believe that the instructor, in this case, avoided the pitfall of the "missionary approach" to media literacy.

Nonetheless, resistance to critique of favored texts is still possible, even when attempts are made to avoid privileging one reading over others. Lusted (1986) conceptualizes pedagogy as "the transformation of consciousness that takes place in the intersection of three agencies—the teacher, the learner and the knowledge they together produce" (quoted in Lather, 1991, p. 3). In this model, teachers are not the knowledge transmitters, students are not mere receivers, and knowledge is not a never-changing body of facts and materials. When the learning process becomes organic and has moved away from the "banking" model (Friere, 1970), knowledge is produced through the three-way interaction of teacher, student, and knowledge, and the result becomes unpredictable. Though the freedom from confined roles may produce a favorable learning climate, at the same time resistance is also possible. Students may not accept teachers' positions on issues and material discussed in class (similar to the "preferred meaning" discussed above). Rather, they may construct their own interpretations and lessons that run counter to the one the teacher is attempting to convey. Critical pedagogy celebrates these scenarios and deems them instructive for all parties.

When facing students' resistance, Lather (1991) states that educators should reflect on their own "imposition tendency" (p. 76) and examine the conflicts between teachers "empowering" students by imposing their own ways of thinking. She also examined how students reacted to new perspectives encouraged in one particular women's studies class that challenged what they had "known" regarding "what a woman should be." One student came up with a working definition of resistance:

> A word for the fear, dislike, [and] hesitance most people have about turning their entire lives upside down and watching everything they

have ever learned disintegrate into lies. "Empowerment" may be liberating, but it is also a lot of hard work and new responsibility to sort through one's life and rebuild according to one's own values and choices. (Kathy Kea, Feminist Scholarship Class, October, 1985, quoted in Lather, 1991, p. 76)

This quote reflects the daunting task at hand for the students whose writing samples are examined here: to critique and scrutinize a text—*The Little Mermaid*—that many have known and loved for quite some time. The analysis of the text could signal an end to the relatively uncritical entertainment and escape provided by many media experiences, replaced by a dramatic, wide-sweeping questioning of many social institutions, media and otherwise.

Cognitive Consistency, Dissonance, and Balance Theories

Although it operates from an entirely different paradigm that is psychological in nature and has a micro-level focus on the individual, balance theories in general and cognitive dissonance theory in particular also inform this research. These theories are based on the general notion that individuals are motivated by a desire to keep their beliefs and opinions (as well as their behaviors) consistent with one another. This area of research and theory applies to the study at hand in that the students enrolled in the class examined here had two types of information and messages to weigh. One was their experience, past or present, with viewing *The Little Mermaid*, which their writing responses show was largely very favorable. The other was their subsequent experience in the classroom, in which they were presented with arguments and research inquiry (in the form of their classmates' responses to the instructor's open-ended questions) regarding problematic aspects of the film, which were largely negative. The students were presumably faced with the dissonance, or imbalance, that these two conflicting messages caused.

Festinger (1957) is credited with the original arguments on which cognitive dissonance theory is based, which center on the occurrence of psychological inconsistency between two or more linked thoughts or feelings. Later formulations focus on the role of one's self-concept as a key element, in that inconsistent or conflicting cognitions threaten the stability and balance of one's view of oneself (Aronson, 1992). The effect of the discomfort caused by cognitive inconsistency is typically the creation of a need or desire to reduce the feeling of imbalance by changing attitudes (or behaviors) or by justifying or rationalizing the conflict (Stadler & Baron, 1998; Stone, Wiegand, Cooper, & Aronson, 1997). Therefore, individuals strive to realign their views by changing one or the other or by proving to themselves somehow that they weren't really in conflict after all. Research suggests individuals employ many strategies to reduce their feelings of cognitive dissonance, including rationalization

or coming up with justifications for one of their positions or complicated rea-
soning and arguments by which one can argue that the apparent conflict does
not exist.

This body of research also applies to the study at hand in that the written
expressions of the students will be assessed to determine whether they were
employing strategies to reduce possible dissonance caused by conflicting mes-
sages or feelings about *The Little Mermaid*. Students' responses may well reveal
ways in which they can successfully navigate the course—which requires critical
examination of texts—and, at the same time, retain the pleasure many presum-
ably obtain from viewing the film.

Findings: the Loss of the Original

While examining the data, our first observation was how deeply penetrating
Disney's influence had been. *The Little Mermaid* came out in 1989, when most
of the students were 9 to 13-years-old. Although the box office record has
shown that *The Little Mermaid* was a blockbuster and generated $84.4 million in
United States in 1989, the students' responses made the figure "come to life."
Among 103 people, 96 had seen Disney's movie (93.2%) while only 12 people
(11.7%) had read Andersen's original tale before the course. The media's power
was well recognized by the students and was seen as "natural," as indicated in a
respondent's writing, "I am, naturally, most familiar with the Disney little mer-
maid story."

Many of the students did not know that Disney's version was based on
Andersen's story, arguably one of the most well-known fairy tales in the world.
One expressed disappointment when he found out that *The Little Mermaid* was
an adapted version instead of an original story. He wrote, "I felt that the people
who wrote *The Little Mermaid* took a lot of ideas from the Andersen's story, so it
makes me feel that they are almost copying off him." Some expressed delight,
such as this response: "I am glad to know where the story originated from," and
the majority thought that reading Andersen's tale made them appreciate how
creative and wonderful Disney's version was:

> I liked Disney better than the original tale from which it stemmed. I'm all
>   for the music and the happy-ever-after factor. (014)
> After reading Andersen I realized how Disney edited the tale . . . he made it
>   more enjoyable for both children and adults. (034)
> I dislike the Andersen because it was not fun. (068)
> I like seeing how imagination can change a story drastically from the original
>   and not take anything away from the tale. (072)
> But after this class I want to see it more and more. The film clips were so
>   cute and make me want to sing along. (216)

The Comparison Between Andersen's and Disney's Version

In Hans Christian Andersen's tale, written in 1837, the little seamaid is curious about the human world and longs to have an immortal soul which can only be achieved through the love of a human. She falls in love with the prince and in order to earn his love, she exchanges her voice for a pair of legs in a bargain with a sea witch, under the condition that if the prince does not marry her, she will turn into sea foam. However, although the prince is fond of the little seamaid, he loves and eventually marries another princess. Heartbroken, the little seamaid plunges into the sea, but because of her goodness and God's blessing, she turns into a "daughter of the air" and can earn herself an immortal soul through good deeds. Disney's revisions of Andersen's tale took out all the religious elements and concluded the story with a happier ending. Price Eric eventually saves the Little Mermaid Ariel from the evil witch and they get married and live happily ever after.

While describing Andersen's version, the most often used descriptions were "depressing," "gloomy," "dark," and "sad," but also "realistic" and "deep." In contrast, the descriptions of Disney's version included: "I love the music," "funny," "happy," "enjoyable," "entertaining," and "modern," but also "shallow." Those almost dichotomous descriptions often applied to the drastically different endings in these two versions.

Comparing the reception of Andersen's and Disney's versions, Disney's was overwhelmingly more popular. Almost all respondents liked Disney's version. In fact, there were only two respondents (1.6%) who harshly criticized Disney and rejected it wholesale. They said: "Analyzing Disney films has definitely hindered my enjoyment of them. I felt that . . . I was a little girl, forced to watched these horrible sexist pieces of work"; (015) "I . . . was very disturbed when Disney's version came out. Many of the important messages in Andersen's story were left out or sugar coated by Disney. Analyzing . . . mass media is highly important . . . . These messages tell us something about the world/culture we live in and shape our views." (234) However, comments such as these were extremely rare.

Disney has also demonstrated the power of "happy-ending" narratives, and this theme came up often in the comparison between the tales. There were 17 people (16.5%) who preferred Disney's version because it was "romantic" and had a happy ending—the essential reason why they loved Disney's *The Little Mermaid*.

> *Maybe I'm being overly romantic, but I never liked Andersen's version because of the unhappy ending. Sure, I know that Disney changed the story in a major way, but I like happy endings and romance.* (054)
>
> *I have read Andersen's version before in a children's book when I was younger. I recall being disappointed and sad when the ending is not concluded with happiness. I had seen Disney's* Little Mermaid *and along with everyone else had received it with sheer pleasure.* (060)

Disney made the story happier for me so I did enjoy it very much. (201)
I am glad they changed the ending. I don't want to see Ariel die. (240)
Disney always gives a happy ending. People pay for that. (314)

In turn, Andersen's tale was harshly criticized for its religious and moralistic elements, and its "tragic" ending because the little seamaid did not get her prince. There were 13 people (12.6%) who stated that they disliked Andersen's story because of the "eternal soul business" and one student wrote that the reason he preferred Disney's over Andersen's story was because "hokey love stories are better than hokey Christian stories."

The Disney Devotees

Among the respondents, 50 people directly answered the question, "Did your opinion of Disney's *The Little Mermaid* change at all after reading the Andersen tale or discussing it in the context of this class?" Among them, 45 (90%) did not change their opinions about *The Little Mermaid* and still liked it. Among the five who said that their attitude *did* change, none provided much critique of Disney. Some focused on details.

> *I like [that] Disney removed all the earn the soul theory, but I would have liked for Ariel to hurt when she walked.* (032)
> (This respondent was referring to Andersen's tale that after the little seamaid became a woman, her feet hurt tremendously when she walked. The respondent also referred to the ending of the tale that little seamaid could earn eternal soul by doing a good deed.)

Some saw problems with Disney, but those opinions were offset by positive views. A handful of respondents pointed out negative elements in Disney's version, such as the sexist stereotypes and sexual overtone, but their criticism was balanced with their approval, often for the movie's entertaining values, and particularly of Ariel's portrayal as a strong and independent woman. The following are some examples of those remarks.

> *Disney's movie is so enjoyable to watch (sad but true) so overall, I have a good feeling about the movie even if I object to some of the content.* (004)
> *Sometimes even if wrong messages are being portrayed the movie can still make you warm and fuzzy inside.* (006)
> *I enjoy the colors still. The songs. I still get sucked into it.* (314)
> *I can appreciate the way they [Disney] changed Ariel into an adventurous, rebellious, determined heroine instead of just "beautiful and melancholy" as in Andersen's tale.* (033)
> *Ariel . . . a resourceful, witty and adventurous girl.* (229)
> *I think I love Ariel more now because she had the go-get-em attitude.* (066)

> *She had a mind of her own, which most of the others [other Disney charac-*
> *ters] did not. Seems like she is more of a strong, independent young*
> *woman.* (075)

"I Love, Love this Movie"

It may not be surprising that this group has a very high percentage of people who
loved Disney's *The Little Mermaid* and considered the movie a favorite. Fourteen of
them (31.1 %) showed particularly intense emotions when they described the movie.

> *I love the movie. It is romantic, cute, and a true fairy tale. It is what every*
> *child wants to see.* (019)
> *I have loved, loved this movie since it has come out.* (076)
> *I love, love, love the Disney version.* (031)
> *It's still my favorite . . . . When I watch a movie I usually identify with certain*
> *characters and almost make it fit my life.* (078)
> *With Disney movies if I love them, there is nothing you can do to sway me*
> *from that. It's an emotion or a relation that I feel with a particular story*
> *or character.* (073)
> *I can't even explain how much joy the Disney movie* The Little Mermaid
> *fills me with. I love it so much and analyzing it only makes me appreciate*
> *it more and adds a little dimension of fun facts that I can use the occa-*
> *sional lull in conversation. I named my dog Sebastian after Ariel's little*
> *helper.* (239)

For many, the happy ending was essential for them to like the film, either
because they themselves were "romantic" or like happy endings or they thought
children's movies should have happy endings. There were 12 (26.7%) people
who held this view.

Why Didn't They Change Their Minds?

After reading the original tale, watching the film, listening to the instructor
deconstructing the film (as well as the fairy tale), and participating in the class
discussion during which many of the movie's problems were raised, why was
this group of Disney's devotees not swayed by the new knowledge and perspec-
tives they acquired through the class? The following is an attempt to identify the
"defense" mechanisms and tactics developed to not be influenced.

"If I Don't Like the Analysis, I Don't Have To Believe It"

There were 13 respondents (28.9%) among this "did not change opinion"
group who held the attitude that if the analysis did not fit within their pre-existing
schema of views, they could simply ignore it. Or they emphasized the entertain-

ment value of the movie, believing people need not be so serious about analyzing it. One respondent pointed out why so many people had a hard time analyzing the film: "I can see where one might have a sentimental attachment to something that is broken by analyzing its non-superficial meanings" (227).

Judging from the following remarks, she was probably right about why people were defensive.

Analysis Was Overdone

One strategy students employed to dismiss criticism of the film was to think of that critique as overly harsh, picky, or misplaced. The following remarks demonstrate this common approach.

> *I don't think analyzing films is bad as long as you don't do it to the point where you're actually looking for things that are wrong with the movie. I think entertainment should be one's main concern.* (001)
>
> *. . . I believed people created a lot of nonexistent symbolism, meanings and B.S. in their analyses. . . .* (014)
>
> *Analyzing a film to me can ruin it for me if people are totally one-sided about their interpretation of the movie.* (035)
>
> *I think a moderate amount of analyzing is good, but it can be overdone.* (017)
>
> *. . . nothing could ever ruin it for me. The only problem with the class discussions was that people seemed to read too much into the movie, losing its original intention as a children's movie.* (080)
>
> *Analyzing a film adds a certain depth to the film but overanalyzing a film and picking every little bit apart ruins it so you start to look too closely at other films and lose the entertainment quality which is what film essentially is, which is to be entertaining overall.* (084)
>
> *When I think people read too much into it, I just ignore it.* (217)

Liking Supercedes Supersedes Analysis

For some people, analysis or criticism of something they like would automatically be either rejected or ignored. It seems that simply stating how much they loved the movie was enough of a reason for them not to take the criticism into account.

> The Little Mermaid *is my favorite Disney film so I don't think that reading Andersen's tale or discussing the film itself in class would change my opinion at all.* (077)
>
> *Because* The Little Mermaid *is my favorite Disney movie, it would be very hard to change my opinion.* (082)
>
> *If I already like the film, no amount of negative analysis will change that.* (083)

My opinion of The Little Mermaid *doesn't change at all because I love the Disney version as it is. Analyzing the film only added a little insight and didn't change the story for me at all.* (208)

When I first see a film I gain an impression from it which stays with me. It is very difficult to change or dislodge that impression through analysis. (214)

It does bother me when people try to bash the film . . . sometimes, it's hard to think about such negative things about a film you really enjoy. (023)

One of my favorite Disney movies . . . with this tale, nothing can ruin it for me, because it's a favorite. (228)

"It Makes Me Enjoy the Film More"

Some people only used the classroom-based analysis to reinforce what they already knew or felt, and thereby gained pleasure from it.

I love analyzing the films that we do in this class. It makes it a thousand times more enjoyable to see it again. I pick out so much more to look at than I ever did before. I appreciate every little aspect of the film. (218)

. . . discussing and viewing the Disney tale gave me back the respect I once had for the tale before my image of Disney was shattered during this class. (033)

I think that analyzing a film enhances films that I enjoy and gives me more reasons to hate films that I don't enjoy. (077)

Discussing it has just shown me where the tale originated from. I still think the film is excellent and thankfully nothing has been ruined for me (I don't think anything can though). (013)

Different Stories: Like Comparing Apples and Oranges

Another very prevalent discourse that emerged was that some people viewed Disney's and Andersen's versions as entirely different stories, instead of Disney's as an adaptation of Andersen's. This seemed to ease the pressure for people to compare Disney's version against the tale from which it was adapted. There were 10 people (22.2%) who held this view. The following are some sample remarks:

It's just different from the Andersen story, that's all. Disney changed it in any way they needed in order to suit the purpose of the film, and I have no problem with that. (003)

I don't think my perspective of the movie changed because they seem to read like two totally different stories. (022)

Disney alters its stories enough that they can be seen alongside their parent tales without feeling the need to compare the two. (214)

> *It is an entirely different story from the Andersen tale, so discussing that has had no effect on my opinions of or how I view the film.* (212)
> *I had already looked at the two as two separate pieces. Both were enjoyable on their own level.* (211)
> *I liked the film before and I like it now. I just see Andersen's version as different. You must take each tale as its own and either like or dislike for itself.* (020)

The Separation of Enjoyment and Analysis

At least 12 (26.7%) people in the group said they had the ability to separate their analysis of the film and their enjoyment of it. Or somehow, they could hold contradictory views without reconciling them. Thus, their understanding of the criticism did not affect their devotion to the movie. Here are some of the example remarks.

> *I like to watch films for entertainment, not for inside hidden meanings.* (029)
> *I can look at a movie without analyzing it. I can also analyze it and so when I just want to enjoy the music, I can, but when I want to get something from it, I will analyze it.* (034)
> *I go into a state of mesmerization (sic) that allows me just to enjoy it. But when I think afterward and analyze the movie I question more of the methods and reasons.* (308)
> *Analyzing a film can be good I suppose but I suppose there are just some films one wants to watch without thinking too much and let the magic of love happen right before your eyes. I suppose Disney's* The Little Mermaid *was just one of them.* (236)
> *Analyzing a film doesn't ruin it. I can still watch* The Little Mermaid *and be really entertained but when I want to, I can allow myself to think about the portrayal of genders and what social messages are contained in a Disney film.* (019)

Some people considered having this kind of ability fortunate.

> *I am lucky in that I have no problems with analyzing things and then going back and enjoying it on its most basic level of entertainment.* (238)
> *I am good at keeping things of such different styles separate in my mind.* (050)
> *I still love it . . . analyzing how Disney had changed things does kind of annoy me now—the whole bit about wider gender stereotypes and stuff like that. . . . I couldn't always analyze the film as I am watching it, while in a way it is good because I could still actually enjoy the movie for what it is without analyzing it to death.* (064)

Others did not have the skill of "separation" before the class but were happy to learn it. "When I first started analyzing these movies, I had a hard time separating things but it's not as bad anymore. I've gotten used to it" (239).

Some pointed to a difference between affective enjoyment and cognitive analysis.

> *I don't think a learned adult can view a film without analyzing it as a social text . . . . Analyzing something from a more than superficial level adds to my cerebral enjoyment. . . but my basic (primal) feelings of a film remain the same.* (207)
>
> *I think it is interesting to look at all the possible interpretations of the different meanings but in the end I go back to seeing it the way I did before.* (208)
>
> *I like taking things at face value. . . too much analyzation (sic) ruins it for me. But it does help me to understand more about the film.* (209)
>
> *I swear that before this class, I wasn't nearly as "feminist kill men" as I seem to be . . . . analyzing makes me much more cynical. . . I got a better appreciation of Disney's version. While I don't find it realistic, I love the film . . . .* (007)
>
> *I feel that [analysis] just allows more insight to the film, helps find hidden meanings or messages . . . . As far as enjoyment. . . it does not take anything away.* (020)

It is important to note that the views of treating Disney's and Andersen's stories as different versions, separating criticism and enjoyment, liking happy endings or picking and choosing analyses to fit existing schema were also prevalent discourses in the whole group. The following is a comparison between this group (people who directly stated that they did not change their minds after the classes, 46 people) and the whole group (103 people). As Table 1 indicates, the discourses analyzed are prevalent in both groups.

Disney and Childhood

Children in the United States grow up with Disney. Watching Disney's videos and films, going to Disney theme parks, and using Disney products are often connected to childhood memories that give Disney a power with which few in the media industry can compete. Here are some samples of how *The Little*

TABLE 1 Students' Responses

Attitudes/ Group	Love It/ Favorite	Happy Ending	Analysis	Different Stories	Separation/ Contradiction
Did not change their minds (46)	14 (31.1%)	12 (26.7%)	13 (28.9%)	10 (22.2%)	12 (26.7%)
The whole group (103)	26 (25.2%)	17 (16.5%)	26 (25.2%)	16 (15.5%)	22 (21.4%)

Mermaid was connected to people's childhood and had a lasting influence even into adulthood.

> *I enjoyed so much when I was little and still do enjoy.* (010)
> *I like* The Little Mermaid *a lot because it was one of the first animated films I ever saw.* (209)
> *I had seen it and along with everyone else had received it with sheer pleasure.* (060)
> *I was introduced to the Disney version first which affects me somehow.* (065)
> *I will always love the Disney version. I remember seeing this in the movie theater.* (237)
> *I still find Disney's* The Little Mermaid *to be as exciting as it was when I first saw it.* (079)

Disney's Formula

Some respondents recognized that Disney used a "formula" in their children's movies and the film's creators routinely made deliberate changes from the original versions to fit that formula. Yet, rarely was this insight assigned a negative interpretation.

> *I just look at it* (The Little Mermaid) *as a completely different genre itself* = "Disney." (005)
> *Disney's version made me think about how much Disney changes tales and molds them to an audience-friendly version. They definitely exploit these original fairy tales to create something happy for everyone.* (226)
> *I would have expected that they would be different because I know that Disney changes the stories to fit a mold.* (225)
> *I know they had to have changed the story because of the portrayal of Ariel and other women and how they have stereotyped Disney thin, more developed bodies than a girl of that age.* (012)

However, some also acknowledged that Disney may have conditioned them into liking or needing the formula, which prevented them from enjoying something different.

> *I realized how much the Disney version influenced me . . . while I was reading the little sea maid, I was picturing Ariel, from the Disney story. I was actually quite disappointed to see such an old-fashioned frumpy-looking girl in the pictures. Isn't that terrible? I was conditioned to expect the long-haired, doe-eyed, big-breasted girl from Disney, not a "normal" looking mermaid/girl!* (045)
> *I guess that's a result of being conditioned to expect happy endings.* (064)
> *Always a Disney fan, I find it hard to criticize Disney. It is hard to change my impressions.* (235)

Some respondents also perceived that it was impossible to make Disney change that formula. They considered Disney's need to make money over their own pleasure or more prosocial messages and they did not seem to object to it. The following are some examples:

> *I wish I could see a Disney movie that didn't necessarily have a happy ending, but maybe that's just a pipe dream.* (035)
>
> *I like the ending of Andersen's because of the "reality." But there is no way that that would be marketable in a film version so I see why they [Disney] changed it. I really don't think my opinion could change about this film.* (053)
>
> *I don't really judge Disney films. After seeing* Pocahontas *I gave up trying to be critical. I think it is pretty hopeless.* (043)

Overall, students seem to be critical, at least aware, of Disney's formulaic storylines, yet they are not able to reject Disney, to break away from its spell.

Conclusions

In this study, the students' responses have an overarching theme: Despite the instructor's facilitation of a critical discussion, they did not want to change their attitudes about Disney's *The Little Mermaid*, which has given them intense pleasure and fond memories since they were children, and they articulated a few strategies which enabled them to uphold their previously existing opinions. They ignored or dismissed the criticism as "overdone" (such as "people seemed to read too much into the movie, losing its original intention as a children's movie" or ". . . overanalyzing a film and picking every little bit apart ruins it so you start to look too closely at other films and lose the entertainment quality which is what film essentially is."). They said that they liked the film too much to allow criticism to affect them (such as, "If I already like the film, no amount of negative analysis will change that" or ""It's hard to think about such negative things about a film you really enjoy" Or "When I first see a film I gain an impression . . . It is very difficult to change or dislodge that impression through analysis."). However, when comments fit well with their existing schema, they were accepted (such as, "I love analyzing the films . . . It makes it a thousand times more enjoyable to see it again." or ". . . analyzing a film enhances films that I enjoy and gives me more reasons to hate films that I don't enjoy.").

The respondents' unwillingness to let challenging thoughts threaten their secured selves was even more apparent when one-fifth of the respondents said that though they acknowledged problems with Disney's *The Little Mermaid*, they could also suspend their criticism while watching the film and, therefore, still enjoy it. They let their contradictory views of Disney co-exist instead of constructing a cohesive global view that may have forced them to make a choice that privileged one or the other view. In order words, those respondents argued that they could be critical—in fact, they seemed to take pride in being a critically minded intellectual,

as one respondent said, "I don't think a learned adult can view a film without analyzing it as a social text." Nonetheless, by claiming that they could suspend their analytical minds, they could safely retreat to their former response to the film without going through the painful process of psychological rupture and rebuilding.

From the paradigm of psychology, students' defensive strategies can be viewed as ways to rationalize away the cognitive dissonance that their enjoyment of the film and, therefore, still their participation in scrutiny and critique of the film produced (Festinger, 1957; Stadler & Baron, 1998; Stone et al., 1997). Students may have been uncomfortable with the inconsistency and imbalance these conflicting experiences caused. Therefore, they found useful ways, such as dismissing the comparison of the texts because they were too different or separating the experience of enjoyment of a film from analysis of it, to justify their enjoyment of the media text by resisting the critique. No matter what the strategies the students used and the reasons for applying them, they served the same function: to avoid the construction of oppositional readings and to enable students to conform to Disney's ideology.

Moreover, students' acceptance of the Disney hegemony also was evident when they acknowledged Disney's formulaic plot in every animated film (arguably, most pronounced in *The Little Mermaid* since Disney drastically changed the tragic ending of Andersen's tale to their happy one). Some even viewed that Disney has "conditioned" them to desiring that formula, or articulated the impossibility that Disney would change because the company wants to make money. In other words, Disney's practice, even when it was viewed negatively, was seen by many of the respondents as "natural" and "unchangeable."

The results of this study correspond to the notion that some elements of media literacy-oriented curricula that seek to deconstruct media messages may be ineffective because of the enjoyment audience members experience in relation to those media texts (Buckingham, 1990; Collins, 1992; Halloran & Jones, 1992; Hart, 1997). From an audience research perspective, Jenkins (1995) demonstrated how hard it is for fans to break away from their favorite programs. This certainly was found here, although, in the case of Disney, it is even more complicated. Disney is often perceived as part of the quintessential "America," and in the public discourse, the words "childhood," "innocent," and "magical" are closely related to its cultural products. Also, because of the nature of the animation, children are exposed to Disney at a very young age and, as children often do, they watch their favorite videos and films again and again and the attachment intensifies. All these phenomena, along with the fond memories associated with childhood, add to the difficulty of fans using a critical lens to watch Disney's films. Some fans in the study were able to articulate the strong attachment to Disney when they made remarks such as, "Always a Disney fan, I find it hard to criticize Disney" (235).

However, the fan phenomenon can not satisfyingly explain why the media analysis course discussed here did not help most students become critical toward Disney's *The Little Mermaid*. From an educational standpoint, it is too pessimistic to assume that education cannot provide opportunities for transformation,

even for devoted fans. Further investigation of how the course was designed and taught is necessary.

At first glance, one may suspect that the instructor may have exhibited a missionary mentality, imposing her own aesthetic and moral standards in the class and trying to protect the students from "harmful media" (Hobbs, 1998). Likewise, a possible critique is that the instructor may have elevated Andersen's work as "high culture" in comparison to the popular culture, such as Disney's animated films, as "low culture," and indirectly or directly discriminated against the latter. These attitudes may have resulted in students' negative reaction. However, while examining the data, the instructor's comments—as well as her framing of the assignment and facilitation of debate—clearly showed openness, encouragement, and respect, and that attitude was consistent with the way she interacted with students as well. In addition, the students did not show what Hobbs (1998) had voiced concern about, parroting the teacher's "correct" reading. On the contrary, the students seemed to feel very comfortable in disagreeing with what the teacher advanced as one possible interpretation, even when this assignment was not anonymous. It also needs to be noted that in class discussions, some students expressed very harsh criticism toward Disney, so the teacher's critical opinion was not the only one in class, a pattern that was evident when the respondents mentioned some "people" criticized Disney.

However, the course design did have a limitation that is shared by many media literacy curricula—the analysis of the media text occurs in isolation, becoming an end in itself. We argue that in order to have a holistic understanding of media texts, we need to analyze them in the context of their production (political economy) and consumption (audience research).

Students seem to take Disney's popularity and influence for granted, as demonstrated when a student remarked, "I am, 'naturally,' most familiar with the Disney little mermaid story [than Andersen's tale]." This "naturalness" is in need of deconstruction. Disney's products may have their merits that help them to become blockbusters, nevertheless, Disney's dominance of the market has much to do with the company's economic muscle and the synergistic within its media outlets. If analyzing Disney's animated movies is isolated from analysis of the U.S. media system, and if students are not provoked to contemplate the implication of Disney's dominance—as one of a handful of transnational, multi-billion dollar conglomerates that assert tremendous influence over our news and entertainment (McChesney, 1999), it is understandable that students may trivialize the issue and consider Disney's dominance natural, inevitable, and impossible to change.

Indeed, the word "entertainment" was frequently invoked to describe *The Little Mermaid*, implying that a movie is not something to be taken seriously, or, will not have any effect, or further, when someone *is* capable of being critical of a movie that would mean it then be rendered ineffectual.

Furthermore, media should not be examined as something "out there," removed from audience's participation, but rather in terms of self-reflection of one's own values, judgments and prejudices. That is, students should be made aware of

their active participation in their interpretation of the text and the implication of their perpetuation of certain myths and stereotypes. This is particularly important for the students in this study because what was asked of them was to challenge what they have believed in and admired, namely Disney, before they took the media literacy course. Without making connections to what they expect of themselves as men and women and what they think others expect of them (such as their ideas of being happy and in love), *The Little Mermaid* serves only to entertain for the moment and leaves no trace of personal and social inquiry once the movie is over.

This study, at its most superficial level, may look like a "failed" class because the teacher seemed not to be able to make students critical of Disney's *The Little Mermaid*, contrary to the design of the course. However, the students' resistance provides opportunities for examination of some important issues media literacy educators need to grapple with. Perhaps an important lesson is that students' resistance can be a rich resource for pedagogy development, and, although the authors here offered many possibilities of ways to improve the curriculum, "learning" is always subject to interpretation and without guarantee.

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