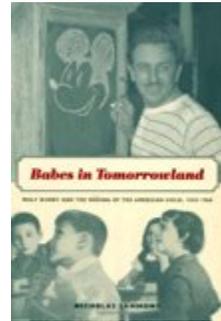


Nicholas Sammond. *Babes in Tomorrowland: Walt Disney and the Making of the American Child, 1930-1960*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005. 472 pp. \$23.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-3463-7.

Reviewed by Stephen M. Gennaro (Department of Art History and Communications, McGill University and Childhood Studies, Division of Humanities, York University)  
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## Reassessing Disney's Role in the Production of a Generic American Child

In every class that I teach in childhood studies, media studies, or cultural studies, my students are treated to the film *Mickey Mouse Monopoly: Disney, Childhood and Corporate Power* (2002), which builds on the ideas of Henry Giroux's *The Mouse That Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence* (1999) by asking: if our children are introduced to our culture (and learn how to be accepted socially and culturally) through stories, and Disney is the primary storyteller, are we critical enough of the stories that Disney is telling our children? It is amazing that after showing that film the class usually divides into three groups: (1) the group who is "changed" and can no longer look at Disney the same way; (2) the group who sees the points raised in the film but still love Disney and therefore cannot believe what the film is stating; and (3) the group who dismisses the film as a violent attack on an institution which was fundamental to their childhood and therefore could not be involved in any agenda beyond entertainment. Sammond places arguments surrounding Disney in the historical context of the first half of the twentieth century and in doing so suggests that Disney is not the producer of the ideology of the generic American child, but instead that Disney's connection to the ideology of the generic American child is part of the outcome of intersecting discourses about what a child is. By placing Disney the company, the institution, and the individual in discussion with the intersecting discourses about child-rearing—what is a child, what is the role of the child in society, and what effects do the media have on children—Nicholas Sammond's 2005 publication of *Babes*

*in Tomorrowland* goes above and beyond Grioux, *Mickey Mouse Monopoly*, or any other piece written about Disney to date.

Perhaps the most convincing point in *Babes in Tomorrowland* is made at the very beginning, which questions the assumption that "if bad media makes bad kids, then surely good media will create good ones" (p. 2). Sammond wants to unpack how arguments about the harmful effects of media on children also suggest, as the above quote stipulates, that "good" media can have a positive or beneficial effect on children. This assumption greatly benefited the Disney Company over the course of the twentieth century as it aimed to present itself as a company that produced media products like films, television shows, and theme park experiences about which Americans could feel good. Disney focused on presenting a unified image of its founder and its productions that drew on the ideals of the generic American child and was rooted in ideological assumptions about what a child was supposed to be. The second main theme that Sammond wants to unpack is simply the assumption that bad media make bad kids, which is based on assumptions about what a child is, the child's role in American society, and the notion of a generic American child. This idea of the generic American child emerged in the twentieth century through what Sammond terms a "discursive matrix," which in this book refers specifically to changing ideas about what a child should be (and not the actual lived experience of children) as they were expressed in

(1) popular works of literature on child-rearing practices, like John B. Watson's in the 1920s and Dr. Spock's in the 1940s and 1950s; (2) popular works of sociology like *Middletown* (1929), *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), and *The Organization Man* (1956), all of which suggested that there was a universal middle-class persona that was central to American culture (and which was in jeopardy of being lost due in a mass consumer society); and (3) discussion of the effects of media on children and how companies such as Disney responded to these discussions.

The argument in *Babes in Tomorrowland* aims to establish that beginning in the 1920s Disney entered into the existing public discourse about the negative effects of new media (such as cinema) on children, and existing discussions in child-rearing practices (such as the adolescent psychology of G. Stanley Hall, or the behaviorist approach of John B. Watson), which suggested that there was one generic or universal child. Disney entered into these discussions about the child and its role in American society through popular culture by aligning itself with an image, both in its products (first films, then television shows, theme parks, and commodities) and in its portrayal of its founder Walt Disney. Disney's aim was to appear as a media entity whose products and founder were beneficial to the generic American child. In aligning itself with the discourses about the generic child, Disney helped naturalize the persona of this generic child as one that was "white (largely male), Protestant, and middle-class" (p. 2). Where Sammond differs from almost all other current writers on Disney is that he suggests that Disney's role in this development of the generic American child was merely as an accomplice, who benefited significantly from fears about the negative effects of media on children, emerging discourses in adolescent psychology, mass consumerism and its focus on children, and changes in child-rearing practices in the first half of the twentieth century. Disney was not the creator of the generic American child ideal. Sammond is able to demonstrate this point by weaving together six in-depth chapters which explore each of the exterior discourses making their way through popular culture in the first 60 years of the twentieth century—their history, their changes, and their supporters and dissenters. In allowing the reader to step outside of the prevailing anti-Disney discourse which positions the company as a media monster and child-influencer, Sammond is able to more fairly explore questions about Disney's power. He shows how other factors, such as the emerging social scientific and psychological discourses about adolescence, in addition to the rise of mass consumerism and continual advance-

ments in information and communication technologies, were at play in the creation and maintenance of a dominant ideology of the generic American child. Having established that Disney was involved in the creation and maintenance of a dominant ideology (but not the only party involved), Sammond is then able to question how it is that Disney continues to perpetuate a generic ideal that represents only a small number of children, and the natural ideology of childhood which is devoid of the authentic voices of children.

If there is to be one critique of this book it concerns the form and presentation of the ideas. The topic, source work, and methodology/presentation are not innovative. Sammond deals with several main themes common to childhood studies, such as: (1) "childhood" as a milieu-dependent social construction versus "child" as the physical living being under the age 18 (as defined by the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child); (2) children's interaction with the media tends to center on the topic of how negative media has a negative effect on children; and (3) the media portrays children as either the future of our society, in need of protection and guidance, or the pariah of our society, from whom we need protection. Likewise, Sammond's scholarship tends to be in line with the current trend in childhood studies to cross over multiple disciplines and to center on the ways in which ideological discourses about childhood are reproduced and made real in popular culture. Furthermore, Sammond's choice of sources is not unique either. The connection between *Middletown*, *The Lonely Crowd*, and *The Organizational Man* (in addition to C. Wright Mills, whom Sammond dismisses as irrelevant to the project in his introduction) is not a new connection. Anyone interested in the status panic around the changing roles of the middle class in post-World War II America would find a variety of works that center on these texts. Likewise, the connection between Hall, Watson, Freud, Mead, and Dr. Spock is not new either, as anyone who is interested in adolescent psychology and the changes in how adolescents learn and should be taught will be introduced to each of the above authors and more by performing a simple Google search on "adolescence."

Lastly, the methodology and presentation of the work is not unique, as the book itself reads like a doctoral dissertation. The book closely follows the template for how to write a dissertation in the area of communications, with an introduction that overviews the project, six chapters of approximately thirty pages each that are extremely in-depth and centered around the meshing of multiple interdisciplinary discourses, and a conclusion

that is centered in the critical theory (in this case Marx and Foucault) that is talked around but almost completely absent from the rest of the book. As the template would have it, chapter 5 deals nicely with the notion of gender, chapter 6 provides a case study, through Disneyland and the idea of the frontier, and the conclusion summarizes what has happened since the 1960s and postulates where we go from here. Often the chapters are heavy and require multiple readings before all of the information can be processed. Although each of the chapters individually could be used in a course kit, especially the introduction or chapter 5 (on gender), the book as a whole is written in a fashion that would make it difficult to place on an undergraduate reading list, even for a course that dealt specifically with Disney, or the creation of childhood.

What is interesting and unique about Sammond's work is not the subject matter, the methodology, or the sources he uses, but rather the combination of the three. Although many authors recently have taken to the task of critiquing Disney for the significantly large role it plays in cultural production, especially with regard to children and childhood, Sammond is the first person to do so by properly situating Disney in popular discourses about child-rearing, popular media, adolescent psychology, consumerism, middle-class fears, and new media in the first half of the twentieth century. In this regard,

his project is extremely ambitious but also extremely successful and important to the field. The only other book that I have come across to argue anything other than "Disney as the evil corporation who shapes and warps the mind of children while owning a monopoly on what is the American child" is Douglas Brode's *From Walt to Woodstock: How Disney Created the Counterculture* (2004). However, unlike Brode, Sammond suggests a more balanced and less biased approach to the scholarship of Disney. In many ways, then, Sammond's piece is as important to current literature on the creation of a universal or generic child as Harry Hendrick's on "the construction and reconstruction of British childhood." [1] Sammond deserves congratulations for tackling several key questions in childhood studies and articulating what for many years has been a popular topic of discussion in literature, theory, and film: namely, how much power does Disney have, and of even more importance, where and how did this power originate and become naturalized into our current understanding of children, childhood, and media.

#### Note

[1]. Harry Hendrick, *Children, Childhood, and English Society, 1880-1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

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