Greg Metcalf

"It's A Jungle Book Out There, Kid!": The Sixties in Walt Disney's *The Jungle Book*

Walt Disney has long been praised and vilified for the world view that is presented in his animated films. A defender of traditional American values or a cultural strip-miner who turned complex classics of children's literature into simple-minded pablum, Walt Disney produced a widely-consumed vision of how things are and how they should be. The recent release of the 1967 animated film *The Jungle Book* on videotape offers the opportunity to examine the values and opinions which are being expressed in one of Disney's animated films.

The Jungle Book is uniquely suited for such an analysis. It is the last film which Walt Disney took an active part in producing and it has a bare-bones plot which is carried by what the Disney organization called "strong characterizations." During the three years that *The Jungle Book* was being produced, American society was going through changes which appear to have had a significant effect on these characterizations and the content of the film. Specifically, Disney's 1967 film presented caricatures of those changes he saw as threats to his America—Rock and Roll, Drug Culture, Black, Women's and Homosexual Rights Movements—and presented his solution to the problems facing the American youth.

I

> The Rock Culture signalled the appearance of a radically different youth culture in the late-1960s, one that saw alienation as a way of life. . .. The scenario shifted from the innocuous non-adult world of *Beach Blanket Bingo* and Beatlemania to the anti-adult sphere of Sergeant Pepper and Haight-Ashbury. Rock Culture became a collective voice that made sense of revolution. People embraced its reality, values, and alternative vision to the prescribed way of life by articulating, reflecting, and reinforcing the social flux of the period.
>
> —George Plasketes [1]

The times of *The Jungle Book*'s creation and release were filled with challenges to what Walt Disney perceived as the right way of living. While Disney rarely stated his political beliefs explicitly, he was a Goldwater/Reagan conservative and he saw his values as Protestant, middle class, and mid-western. The late 1960s could not have been comforting to Disney.

First off, there was the issue of Civil Rights and related racial protests and violence. Close to home, Disney's *Dumbo* and *Song of the South* were increasingly criticized for their unsympathetic or racist portrayal of black Americans. The validity of the criticism was always denied, but Disney pulled the films from public exhibition for a while.[2] At the same time, the Watts riots in Los Angeles in 1965, alone, caused over 200 million dollars of damage. The man who had once declared himself "the King of Los Angeles"[3] could hardly have overlooked these events taking place in his own back yard.

Likewise, the Women's Liberation movement had begun in earnest, and a rising counter-culture promoted homosexual rights and drug experimentation. And rock and roll music seemed to support all of it. Not only were these movements supplanting Disney and his conservative political friends in the pages of popular magazines, they were also reshaping the entertainment business.

In 1967, the year Disney released his *Jungle Book*, the Academy Award winning films were *In the Heat of the Night* and *Guess Who's*

Coming to Dinner (movies in which black Americans demanded to be treated equally with whites), *The Graduate* and *Bonnie and Clyde* (films criticizing traditional values and presenting alternate lifestyles without condemnation). The New York Drama Critics Award went to the theatrical versions of *Cabaret* (homosexuality uncondemned) and *Your Own Thing* (an alternative lifestyles theme). The Beatles were getting more coverage than Barry Goldwater, some of it for John Lennon's observation that the Beatles were "more popular than Christ."

The significance of these changes for Disney can be seen in comparing Disney's version of *The Jungle Book* to the original stories by Rudyard Kipling, specifically in an examination of the characters, however mutated, which survive the transformation.

II

You can work it out by Fractions or by simple Rule of Three,
But the way of Tweedle-dum is not the way of Tweedle-dee.
You can twist it, you can turn it, you can plait it
till you drop,
But the way of Pilly-Winky's not the way of Winkie-Pop!
—Kipling, *The Jungle Book* [4]

Rudyard Kipling wrote *The Jungle Book* seventy-three years before Walt Disney transformed it into one of his most successful animated films. Kipling's *Jungle Book* contains three stories that deal with Mowgli, an Indian baby who is raised by wolves after Shere Kahn, a crippled tiger, attacks his family. Mowgli learns the law of the jungle in his ten or eleven years living as a wolf, but he is forced back into the man-village by some of the wolves who are hostile to his humanity. Before leaving the jungle he scares away Shere Kahn, the tiger, with fire that he has stolen from the village. Later, while herding cattle for the village, he catches the returned tiger unawares and kills him with the help of his wolf-brothers. Because of his abilities and the jealousy of the village leaders, Mowgli is cast out of the man-village as a witch.

In another story of Mowgli's youth, when a student of Baloo, the revered teacher of the Law of the Jungle, he is kidnapped by the leaderless monkeys, who want him to teach them how to weave huts so that they can gain the respect of the other creatures of the jungle. Kaa, the boa constrictor, helps Baloo, the bear, and Bagheera, the panther, rescue Mowgli. A story in *The Second Jungle Book*, recounts Mowgli's compelling the greatest of the jungle creatures, Hathi the elephant, to destroy the man-village and drive the humans away.

In Disney's version, Mowgli is found in a basket in a wrecked boat on a river bank by Bagheera, the panther, who recognizes that a man-

cub should not be left untended and takes Mowgli to be raised by a family of wolves. After ten years, Shere Kahn, a tiger who hates all men, comes to that part of the jungle, and Bagheera insists on taking Mowgli to the man-village where Mowgli will be safe. As Mowgli is dragged unwillingly toward the man-village, he encounters a series of animals who try to hinder or hurt him. Finally, Mowgli scares off Shere Kahn with lightning-spawned fire. While there is no longer a reason for Mowgli to leave the jungle, love strikes, and Mowgli willingly follows a little girl into the man-village while his animal friends return to the jungle.

As is common in Disney versions, character complexities are removed. For example, Kaa is simply evil in Disney's version, where Kipling's Kaa is a self-serving snake who saves Mowgli, but also feasts on monkeys in a manner which is repulsive to the other creatures of the jungle. While the resulting simplification does make the characters more one-dimensional, it also makes their remaining, or any added, character traits and symbolic qualities more easily discernable.

III

> In the early stages, the story was all about the panther and the troubles he had getting the young boy Mowgli back to the man-village. Each of the animals they met along the way reflected a different philosophy....
>
> —Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston[5]

Disney's Mowgli is a little boy who, though nominally Indian, shows every sign of being a modern American Caucasian. Except for a deeper tan and a pudgier nose, he could be Wart, the young king Arthur in Walt Disney's 1963 animated film, *The Sword in the Stone*. Or an updated Pinnochio, sans shellac. Mowgli speaks unaccented American English, while the animals he encounters each speak with distinctive accents. And—so obvious that it is easily overlooked— Mowgli has somehow acquired a loincloth during his years in the jungle, setting him apart from all the other naked jungle residents.

Mowgli's generic American boyhood is further established in his relationship with the wolf family which raises him. His wolf parents disappear from the scene as soon as they have accepted him, and his litter brothers magically remain little puppies—they have been drawn as dogs, not wolves—while Mowgli ages ten years. When it comes time for him to leave, they climb all over Mowgli and lick him an a manner that calls to mind the famous Pepsi commercial (later Bagheera tugs Mowgli by his loincloth, repeating the iconic Coppertone advertising image of a puppy pulling at a tanned baby's diaper). These are the only

animals who remain unable to speak, for, unlike Kipling's wolves, these are not Mowgli's brothers; they are his pets.

As in the case of Disney's 1940 *Pinnochio*, Mowgli's story has become the interrupted journey of a disobedient child. In Pinnochio's case, he's truant from school. Mowgli won't go "home"—to the man-village. Each little boy is insistent on ignoring the wishes of those who know what's best for him. Therefore, each one gets into trouble. Where Pinnochio had only a conscientious cricket at his side, though, Mowgli is gifted with two exemplary foster parents.

Mowgli's first foster-parent is Bagheera, the panther who takes him from the wrecked boat and deposits him with the wolf family and ten years later takes him to the man-village because he knows that a matured Mowgli must be among his own kind. It is Bagheera, never quite comfortable with his role as guardian, who protects Mowgli throughout the movie. Bagheera is the stern parent who wants what is best for the child, even though Mowgli can't understand his concern. Sebastian Cabot, the maternal butler Mr. French in television's *Family Affair*, provides the voice for Bagheera.

Having no real parents, Mowgli is free to adopt them where he finds them. After rejecting Bagheera's tough love and good intentions, Mowgli finds a fun and permissive father in the person of "Papa Bear" Baloo. Baloo the bear is a slob with a knack for living effortlessly in the jungle. He can defend himself in a fight, but the bear is basically a soft touch. He's also a little slow on the uptake—quite a shift from Kipling's Baloo, the teacher of all the Laws of the Jungle, who is as dour a character as Disney's Bagheera. Disney's Baloo is a liberal in his child-rearing, as much a pal as a parent to Mowgli, and he is a social liberal as well. He likes the monkeys' jazz music and hip speech as much as they do and, much to the frustration of Bagheera, he sees nothing wrong with marrying out of his species.

The film also presents a negative example of the too stern parent in the form of Colonel Hathi, leader of the Dawn Patrol and father of Mowgli's nameless elephant doppleganger. Hathi is the rigid parent who views a family as a military operation, swatting his wife's rump when she fails to pass inspection. He is so wrapped up in his organizational rituals that he forgets his son and shows no concern over a lost child in the jungle, dismissing Mowgli's disappearance as "fortunes of war and all that" until his wife intervenes.

The film, then, defines by example for its audience good parents and bad parents at the extreme. Hathi has confused his family and his business. In Bagheera and Baloo we find the contrast between the stern conservative parent who is misunderstood by the child but still does

what is best for him and the permissive liberal parent who is willing to let the child do as he wishes. The Disney view of which is right is clearly stated; Baloo's permissiveness allows Mowgli to be captured by the monkeys. Bagheera must once again intercede to save the boy. Eventually Baloo also realizes the wisdom of Bagheera and agrees to do what is best for the boy. Stern, although not overly rigid, parenthood triumphs.

IV

Bagheera: Shere Kahn hates man and he's not going to allow you to grow up to become a man . . . just another hunter with a gun.
Mowgli: We'll have to explain to him that I'd never do a thing like that.
Bagheera: Nonsense. No one explains anything to Shere Kahn.
—Walt Disney's *The Jungle Book*

Just as the Disney version removes any connection between Mowgli and his parents, it also robs the tiger of his unique motivation. Kipling's Shere Kahn pursues Mowgli because the boy is a meal and an insult to Shere Kahn's stature in the jungle. Disney's Shere Kahn hunts Mowgli simply because he hates all men. Shere Kahn never mentions eating him. He simply hates. It is probably not going too far to suggest that this was also Disney's world view; that is, there are hostile, irrational forces out there who just want to destroy what is good in the world. If pressed, Disney probably would have identified the forces as Communism, the Soviet Union, or the Union movement in America — or the combination of all three.

However we see this malignant force, it speaks through Kaa and is in harmony with the Vultures, whom it thanks for delaying his victim. These alignments become evident in subtler threats to Mowgli beyond the menace of pervasive malignant forces out there.

V

How can you talk to a guy like that? Next thing you know, he's got you hypnotized, and you're standing on a corner in Hollywood, dressed like one of the Pointer Sisters.
—Friend warning Jodie Foster in *Foxes*

Kaa is the first bad influence who actually appears in the film. He drops down upon Mowgli immediately after the boy insists that he doesn't need Bagheera's protection and he doesn't need to go to the man-village. Kaa is a snake with a whiny voice that resembles a Truman Capote impression and a speech impediment which causes him to stress "essssessss" in an almost lisping manner.74 Kaa also has a whimpering laugh and a habit of lasciviously licking his mouth while gazing at

his intended victim. Kaa hypnotizes Mowgli, lulling him into a false sense of security with sensual promises as he wraps his body around him and has his way with the powerless boy.

Kaa is about as sexual a character as one can find in the de-sexed world of Walt Disney. Kaa's speech habits and seduction of the innocent conform to the 1960s caricature of a child-molesting homosexual who drags the defenseless into a world of sensual debasement. Kaa's line while seducing Mowgli is also a typical attribute of the child molester. He sings that he is Mowgli's only true friend, and he will fix it so that Mowgli will never have to leave the jungle if he only trusts Kaa. This aspect of Kaa's character is revealed in a scene between Shere Khan and Kaa which resembles Sidney Greenstreet's attentions to Peter Lorre in *The Maltese Falcon*. Greenstreet plays an aristocratic and slightly sadistic villain (note Shere Kahn scratching the inside of one of Kaa's nostrils with his claw), ever so politely trying to extract information about the location of the prize from the fidgety Lorre, who plays Cairo, a turncoat of questionable, perhaps multiple, sexual preferences. The message is that little boys should beware whom they talk to and whom they trust. Especially if the people in question talk funny and "flounce," as the animators put it, when they move.[7]

VI

> There has been considerable controversy over the Black Crow sequence in recent years, most of it unjustified. The crows are undeniably black, but they are black characters, not black stereotypes. There is no denigrating dialogue, or Uncle Tomism in this scene, and if offense is to be taken in hearing blacks call each other "brother," then the viewer is merely being sensitive to accuracy.
>
> —Leonard Maltin on *Dumbo*[8]

In light of the Civil Rights movement and the riots which occurred during the production of *The Jungle Book*, the monkeys are the most interesting of the conservative social influences in the film. The monkeys steal Mowgli from his parent Baloo and then cruelly pummel Baloo and ridicule him as he goes crashing down a cliff. The monkeys then drag Mowgli off to meet their leader, King Louie.

In the grand Disney tradition, the monkeys are stereotyped caricatures—Leonard Maltin's opinion not withstanding—of black Americans, except for a few "hippie fellow swingers" who come complete with enlarged sideburns. Beyond having "black" accents, they dance around to jazz music, talk in hipster slang, and sing scat. They also have prominent lips, a point stressed by Baloo who wears two coconut halves to exaggerate his lips when he disguises himself as one of them. The

monkeys are drawn in the manner of early cartoon stereotyping of African Americans.

King Louie—a name Disney added in a clear reference to Louis Armstrong—presides over a kingdom that is a slum in "the man-village ruins." He is assisted by a right-hand monkey with a white shock of swept-back hair and a tail swept out like the traditional image of a plantation houseboy in tails. This sidekick also plays trumpet solos on his lips in the same way it was done by one of the acknowledged "black" crows in *Dumbo*.

By juxtaposing Mowgli with these monkeys-as-blacks, Mowgli is more clearly defined as white. Having established the situation, then, as Disney's generic American white boy dragged into the slums by blacks, Disney then presents two more of his insights into the nature of the 1960s Black Experience. First, King Louie forces bananas into Mowgli's mouth where they sit like oversized cigars or marijuana joints. These bananas have the same effect on Mowgli as his hypnotism by Kaa. Mowgli gets glassy-eyed and develops an enormous dumb grin. Remembering the stories prevalent in the 1960s of banana-skin smoking, it would appear that King Louie is getting the boy stoned. Before you know it, Mowgli and his grin are up dancing around with the monkeys.

And why was Mowgli kidnapped? King Louie explains that he has gotten as far as he can go as a monkey; that is to say, being black. Now he wants to be a man, white, and he sings, "I want to be a man, man-cub/

And stroll right into town And be just like the other men;/ I'm tired of monkeying around I want to be like you./ Oh yes it's true I want to walk like you,/ Talk like you do. You see it's true./ An ape like me Can learn to be human too . . ."

Mowgli is supposed to accomplish this transformation by giving Louie fire—very different from the hut-building of Kipling and an interesting demand in the context of the Molotov Cocktail hours of the later 1960s. When Mowgli explains that he doesn't know how to make fire—in effect, that the monkey is not going to be able to pass as a man—Louie becomes casually violent and begins to bounce Mowgli around by his hair. This cruelty is significant because the monkeys are the only creatures who are gratuitously cruel to Mowgli and his foster parents Baloo and Bagheera.

Baloo and Bagheera, of course, arrive to save Mowgli, sneaking in on the monkeys while they are carried away in their jazz and banana-inspired revelry. In the process of trying to hang onto Mowgli, and in striking out at Baloo and Bagheera, the Monkeys successfully destroy what is left of the ruins which are their home. Given the fact that blacks rioting in Watts destroyed large sections of their communities in the same city and at the same time that *The Jungle Book* was being made, the parallels seem a little too obvious to ignore. A Disney explanation is being offered to Americans in the late 1960s for black discontent. Simply, the film argues, blacks want to be white and become destructive when they find out that they cannot.

VI

Dizzy: Hold it lads, look what's coming our way.
Ziggy: Come on, lads, Come on! Let's have some fun with this little fella, this little blokey. . ..
Buzzie: Aw, just look at him. Why the poor fellow. You know, he must be down on his luck.
Dizzy: Yeah, or he wouldn't be in our neighborhood.
—the vultures discussing Mowgli in Disney's *The Jungle Book*

After being saved from the Monkeys, once again escaping Kaa, and having run away from his foster parents, Mowgli arrives in the middle of a burned-out desolate landscape spotted with pools of fetid water and a dead tree which supports four vultures. The vultures, who are bored and looking for some cheap thrills while waiting for something to die, recognize Mowgli's dire situation and offer their friendship.

The vultures' motives for initiating the relationship seem fairly innocent at first, but as they sing the song "That's What Friends are For," they are shown for what they are. These are creatures who prey

on those less fortunate than themselves, creatures who consume the defenseless. When Shere Kahn shows up, they run over each other trying to escape while Kahn thanks them for detaining his victim. The vultures then hang around ready to pick Mowgli's bones when Shere Kahn is done with them. They are foul weather friends. Opportunists. Beatles.

There are four vultures; three have Beatle hair-cuts and talk with Liverpudlian accents. Dizzy has a voice that might well be John Lennon's as he tells the "lads" to take a look at Mowgli. The three sing—Mowgli is recruited as their fourth—although, in deference to Disney's hostility to rock and roll, the group sings a barbershop quartet.

The one vulture who does not sing, Buzzie, is obviously older than the others. Buzzie has the Cockney accent of an earlier generation of British entertainers and he is balding. Buzzie sympathizes with Mowgli, and convinces the others to help Mowgli after Baloo is apparently killed. It is again Buzzie who tells Mowgli how to scare away Shere Kahn with fire.

These Beatles—or "hippies," as one of the animators characterizes them—are willing to profit by Mowgli's misfortune until they are shown the light by their elder. They are not beyond hope. They help Mowgli and, therefore, are superior to those hippie-monkeys who hung out with the black-monkeys who remained cruel to the end. By their age and by the company they keep ye shall know them.

Interestingly, while these vulture-hippies are shown as redeemable, they choose, in the end, to remain in squalor rather than to fly over to the beautiful sunny jungle clearing, literally a few feet away. And in the end they are where they began, mimicking the indecision routine from *Marty*, as they unproductively try to decide what to do for some cheap thrills. Although they retain the possibility for positive action, these are the Rock Culture members that Plasketes noted; they choose to remain alienated and prefer to live under a cloud rather than moving on to light.

VIII

Bagheera: Baloo, you can't adopt Mowgli as your son.
Baloo: Why not?
Bagheera: How can I put this? Birds of a feather should flock together. . ..

—Walt Disney's *The Jungle Book*

To make it clear that Bagheera was in fact right, Mowgli is given the choice at the end of the film of staying with his buddy-parent, Baloo, now that Shere Kahn has been defeated, or going to the man-village.

Mowgli willingly chooses to go into the man-village, a detail insisted upon by Disney during the scripting of the film. Mowgli's return to the man-village is facilitated by the presence of a coquettish young girl with the doe-eyes of a 1960s painting by the Keanes.

The unnamed girl's success in enticing Mowgli into the man-village confirms two more staples of the Disney world. As Dorfman and Mattelart have noted, a female's only power in Disney's comic books comes through flirtation.[9] With minor alterations for the mothers that appear in Disney films, this seems to hold true for the movies as well, at least this one. The girl drops her water jug and Baloo observes, "She did that on purpose!" The suddenly smitten Mowgli refills it and follows her back to the village.

And lest we think that Mowgli is heading for anything but a middle-class (albeit deeply suburban) existence, the girl has lured him to her with a song that tells him exactly what lies in store for him:

> Father's hunting in the forest
> Mother's cooking in the home
> I must go to fetch the water
> Till the day that I am grown
> Then I will have a handsome husband
> And a daughter of my own
> Then I'll send her to fetch the water
> I'll be cooking in the home
> My own home/My own home[10]

Lest we've still missed the point, Baloo and Bagheera spell it out for us: "He's hooked;" "It was bound to happen;" "He's where he belongs. . . and we should get back to where we belong."

IX

> It is just as it should be, Baloo. [Bagheera said] Our Mowgli is safe in the man-village at last. He has found his true home."
> —Walt Disney presents *The Jungle Book*, A Little Golden Book[11]

> 'Man Pack and Wolf Pack have cast me out,' said Mowgli. 'Now I hunt alone in the jungle."
> —Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*[12]

The message left with the viewer of Disney's *The Jungle Book* is very different from that given the reader of Kipling's original. Kipling's Mowgli ends up as a child without a home. After his experiences in the world of man and the world of the jungle, the young boy is unable to fit into either society. In the end Mowgli settles in the jungle, an uneasy compromise.

Kipling's more unsettling theme, that Mowgli fits in nowhere and is destined to be an outsider wherever he goes, Disney turns on its head. His version repeats the message of many Disney films: Everyone has a place to belong. Know your place and stay there. Even Disney's jungle bum get the point, as Baloo, not Kipling's wise Baloo, explicitly states this message: "he's where he belongs... and we should get back to where we belong."

Of all the themes in Disney's *The Jungle Book*, knowing your place is the most clearly stated, and it is the message that most easily transcends the time the film was made. This basic theme is one of the traditional American values that many of Disney's films bring home to their audience, and these values are further reinforced through a condemnation of bad characters who veer from this conservative tenet. The monkeys are wrong because they are rude; they want to leave their lot in life and become white, because they come between a "father" and his child and, like the vultures and Kaa, they interfere with Mowgli's return to his place. Even Baloo, the liberal, who loves Mowgli like his own cub, comes to see that a boy deserves a traditional upbringing and that the boundaries exist for a reason. Disney's world of conservative values triumphs, even in the late 1960s, confirming Pete Seeger's axiom, "If you don't know by now, little lady, I'll tell you; lullabies are propaganda."[13]

Walt Disney's *The Jungle Book* appears in a world of changing social structures, and presents a didactic, if metaphorical, film which defends the values which he sees as crucial by attacking the changes he perceives as wrong. Rudyard Kipling's stories of a boy who fell between cultures—a story which would have also been relevant to the American public in a time of changing values—was turned into an affirmation of traditional values, a clear statement that the right thing to do was not to drop out but to know your place and reject attempts to change the world around you.

But the movie doesn't stop at a simple restatement of traditional values; it chooses to attack those who pose alternatives to the tradition. These alternatives are presented in distorted caricatures of the youth movement, blacks, and other "seducers of the innocent," which portray their values as self-serving, self-hating, or just ridiculous.

American Studies
University of Maryland
College Park, Maryland 20742

ENDNOTES

[1] George Plasketes, "From Woodstock Nation to Pepsi Generation," Unpublished manuscript, Bowling Green University, Department of Communications, 1984. p. 8.

[2] Leonard Maltin, *The Disney Films,* New York: Bonanza, 1973. p. 78.

[3] Richard Schickel, *The Disney Version*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968. p. 364.

[4] Rudyard Kipling, *The Jungle Book,* New York: The Century Company, 1894. p. 264.

[5] Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston, *Disney Animation: The Illusion of Life,* New York: Abbeville Press, 1981. p. 407.

[6] These traits, which might be dismissed as "snakiness," are absent when this snake reappears as Sir Hiss in the 1973 Disney film *Robin Hood.*

[7] Thomas and Johnston, p. 426.

[8] Maltin, p. 52. Maltin overlooks a few lines like, "Why don't you boys get back where you belong?" directed at the crows by Dumbo's protector, Timothy the Mouse.

[9] Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart, *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic,* New York: International General, 1975. p. 64.

[10] This same theme, without lyrics, occurs at two other points in the film: when Mowgli is accepted into the domestic bliss of the wolf family and, in a minor key, when Baloo must tell Mowgli that he should go to the man-village. This foreshadowing provides emphasis the third time we encounter it and also hear the lyrics.

[11] Walt Disney Productions, *The Jungle Book,* New York: Golden Press, 1967. p. 23.

[12] Kipling, p. 128.

[13] Pete Seeger, The Tacoma Park Folk Festival, 1985.