**Reversal of Roles: Subversion and Reaffirmation of Racial Stereotypes in *Dumbo* and *The Jungle Book***

**By Alex Wainer**

**Introduction**The history of the American motion picture has seen a progression of African- American stereotypes offered for entertainment that, more often than not, has displayed these stock "characters" in a derogatory manner. Donald Bogle arranged these stereotypes in a simple taxonomy he believed encompassed the range: the tom, the coon, the tragic mulatto, the mammy, and the brutal black buck. He argues these types have persisted in some form or other throughout the first five decades of representations by filmmakers in the dominant (i.e. white) American film industry. Indeed it isn't difficult to notice the uniformity of portrayals in the standard Hollywood film product.

Among the chief producers of Hollywood film products has been the Walt Disney studios, long considered a purveyor of wholesome films. This paper will examine two Disney animated films that feature characters apparently depicting black stereotypes: *Dumbo* (1941) and *The Jungle Book* (1967). In terms of Walter Fisher's four rhetorical motives, the first film features a group of characters who **subvert** the standard-issue stereotypes of blacks typical of the period. The second can be seen as a reversal of this subversion of stereotypical roles as it presents characters apparently **reaffirming** the stereotypical "uppity" blacks who will not stay in their place.

**Dumbo**In the 1930s, Walt Disney's studio had produced a number of cartoons with racial stereotypes. One study has noted the use of native cannibals in *Alice Cans* the *Cannibals* (1933), "three sassy black girl cats" in *Pluto's Judgement Day*, and a blackbird based on Stepin Fetchit in *Who Killed Cock Robin?* (1935). In *Fantasia's* "Pastoral" sequence, there appeared in the original release version a black "maid" centaurette with hair in pickaninny style braiding a white centaurette's tail. By the 1950s, the character had been snipped out of subsequent release prints. The 1946 release, *Song of the South*, was Disney's adaptation of Joel Chandler Harris' Uncle Remus stories combining live portions of Uncle Remus and other characters with the animated stories of Brer Rabbit's adventures. Bogle criticizes the film for its dated view of contented, servile Negroes on Old South plantations, but does note that Uncle Remus' moral insight was preserved. In *Peter Pan* (1953), it can be argued that Indians are typecast as a race mainly defined by their sexuality in the "What Makes the Red Man Red?" musical sequence. The lyrics and action offer the explanation that the feelings stirred in pursuit of Indian women makes Indian men retain a permanent flush of arousal. Though coded with the standard coating of Disney's wholesome style, the implicit characterization of Indians as an oversexed race links them with myths of black men under Bogle's category of the Stud.

Arriving in 1941, *Dumbo* was the fifth animated feature film produced by the Disney studio. As were the previous films, *Dumbo* was a collaborative effort and labor intensive as is all full animation. Disney, the creative genius, would serve as the sparkplug, giving shape and oversight to the stories which would be executed by his army of talented animators. As in previous pictures, Disney had proceeded with his creative personnel through the beginning stages of the new story including the storyboarding and story meetings where various ideas were discussed and decided by Disney. At this point, though, for the first time, Disney's commitment to the project ceased or at least greatly diminished, according to Dick Huemer, one of Disney's animators. Possibly labor difficulties or the studio's financial straits preoccupied him, but this aberration from the routine brought Huemer and fellow animator Joe Grant together to prepare a reworked storyline and new ideas. The two delivered a series of chapters to Disney in a successful attempt to revive his interest in the feature. Disney ordered the film back into production, The film had a smooth completion that brought a much-needed profit to the studio. Did Disney's distancing from *Dumbo's* production process mean he had little to do with the crow sequence? One can't say. The collective and collaborative creativity involved in creating a feature length animated film is so diffuse that even though *Dumbo* carries the unmistakable "Disney touch," specific ideas and characterizations cannot be clearly credited to any one person. Like all releases bearing his name, *Dumbo* carried Disney's imprimatur as well as his particular enthusiasm for this project. Mosley describes how Disney's faith in Dumbo overcame his brother Roy's and RKO salesmens' reluctance, to market a cartoon feature that at sixty-four minutes, was longer than a short but too short to be feature-length.

The crow sequence takes place close to the climax of *Dumbo* after the young elephant and his friend Timothy Mouse have drunk some water spiked with a discarded alcoholic beverage. This precipitates the famous, surrealistic "Pink Elephants On Parade" sequence. The two awaken high up in the branch of a tree greeted by five rowdy crows who think it outrageous to find an elephant up in their "place," a treetop. The startled twosome crash to the ground and are pondering how they could have wound up in the tree when the head crow "Jim," or in some versions "Dandy," jokingly calls after them with the suggestion that maybe they flew up to the tree limb. This is seized on by Timothy who sees this as the only way they could have reached the height. The crows grow hysterical with laughter and ridicule as they sing, "I be done seen about everything, 'When I Seen an Elephant Fly.'" The indignant Timothy plops his tall band hat before him as a pulpit and preaches a sermon (in a Brooklyneeze accent) shaming the crows for mocking the "orphaned" little elephant (his mother has been imprisoned as a "mad elephant" after a frantic defense of her child from mocking boys). The mouse's rhetorical skills move the crows to tearful remorse whereupon they offer to assist Timothy in teaching Dumbo to fly. Soon the crows and Timothy have cajoled and pushed a nervous Dumbo to a high precipice where, raising a large dust cloud with his flapping ears, Dumbo takes flight, discovering that his source of grief has become a great gift. The happily amazed crows reprise their song, this time in giddy celebration of Dumbo's success.

Some have read the crows' characterization as a negative racial stereotype. Richard Schickel said, "There was one distasteful moment in the film. The crows who teach Dumbo to fly are too obviously Negro caricatures." Grant, after quoting Schickel, responded that these are good characters in a film with plentiful bad ones:

It seems strange that racial offence should be discovered in their depiction: is it somehow alright to caricature whites but not blacks? That surely is a very deep racism, far deeper than anything in the friendly portrayal ... of the crows... although perhaps naming one of them Jim Crow was a little questionable.

Leonard Maltin also agreed that critics may be overreacting to the crows:

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 the scene, and if offence is to be taken in hearing blacks call each other "brother," then the viewer is merely being sensitive to accuracy.

Indeed, Michael Wilmington even goes so far as to refer to the crows as "father figures," self-assured individuals who are "obvious parodies of proletarian blacks." He describes the crows as the most entertaining part of the film.

Far from being shambling, oafish Step 'n' Fetchit types- -the boiling point for any attack on racial stereotypes- -Jim Crow and his "brothers" are the snappiest, liveliest, most together characters in the film. They are tough and generous. They bow down to no one. And, of course, it is they who "teach" Dumbo to fly.

There is no question the dialogue is a black, colloquial dialect similar to that of Amos n' Andy, except it is faster and less extreme in character. For example, when the apparent leader of the group, Dandy, discovers the other crows observing Dumbo and Timothy asleep on the tree limb, he takes charge: "Uh, what's all the rookus? C'mon, step aside brothuhs, uh, what's cookin' around heah? What new? What fryin', boys?" The sharpness of their exchanges with each other is evidenced when Timothy seriously entertains their joshing suggestion that Dumbo must have reached the tree limb by flying. Laughing among themselves, each in turn offers his bit to the "routine." "Did you ever see an elephant fly?" "Well, I seen a horsefly." "Ha! I seen a dragonfly!" "I seen a housefly!" (Laughter). This is the segue into the delightful "When I Seen an Elephant Fly."

For these characters to inhabit the pantheon of standard black stereotypes in Bogle's taxonomy, they would have to approximate the characteristics of one of the categories. The only type to which one can even begin to compare them is the coon, the pure version Bogle describes as ""no-account niggers, those unreliable, crazy, lazy, subhuman creatures good for nothing more than eating watermelons, stealing chickens, shooting crap, or butchering the English language." By this description, there is little in the crow's behavior to link them to what was then a common stereotype.

Dumbo, a social outcast from his circus community, has only Timothy for a friend. When his drunken flight takes them to the tree tops where the crows live, it is there, away from the little elephant's "place," where he learns what great ability he possesses. Though the crows initially seem a little disreputable, especially to Timothy, it turns out they are the only other individuals who understand Dumbo's predicament. Both Timothy and the crows share the experience of not quite fitting into the larger society (Timothy had earlier frightened the grown elephants and seems to have no other friends.) The crows as caricatures of lower class blacks immediately imply a marginality to mainstream society. This enables them to be especially susceptible to Timothy's sermonizing over Dumbo's outcast state.

The crows' racial identity is further implied when they perform their song in a jazz style complete with scat stylizations and one playing the jazz "trumpet" through his beak. Rather than a pejorative depiction, this is the bounciest, most rollicking sequence in the story. This joking, joyous demeanor is as much a part of the crows collective character as their ability to fly. Because they *can* fly, they are able to help Dumbo to take flight; he now shares in one of their abilities. This is an interesting and compelling picture of members of a traditionally downtrodden race helping another oppressed individual find a form of heretofore undreamt of freedom.

**The Jungle Book**  
The last animated film to which Walt Disney provided any oversight was *The Jungle Book*, his greatly altered version of the Rudyard Kipling stories. It retains only the central story of the boy Mowgli raised by the panther Bagheera until he is ten, whereupon, Bagheera decides to return the boy to his proper home with other humans. Before Mowgli's eventual return to the world of men, they meet Baloo the bear who, in his carefree way, seeks to be a parent to Mowgli. Soon the boy is abducted by monkeys and brought before their chief, King Louie, who demands that Mowgli bring him the fire men own and control: an emblem of civilization. When Mowgli insists he is unable to comply, King Louie grows abusive, in a slapstick way, in his insistence on obtaining the gift of fire. When Baloo and Bagheera intervene, a wild melee ensues, resulting in the destruction of the temple ruins where the monkeys live. Mowgli escapes with his guardians.

Greg Metcalf contrasts Kipling's original Mowgli stories with Disney's greatly revised narrative and simplified characters. In the original story, the monkeys are silly and frivolous creatures who ask Mowgli to tell them how to weave the grass that forms the houses of men. When Mowgli demonstrates, the foolish monkey's quickly forget and are distracted. They have no leader and no order, in contrast to the rest of the jungle. None of Kipling's characterizations of the monkeys suggest they represent any ethnic group.

Metcalf sees the film version as Disney's conservative, reactionary response to the social upheaval of the 1960s. He perceives King Louie and company as Disney's version of uppity blacks discontent in their "slum" (the temple ruins), trying to force Mowgli to facilitate their rise into mainstream society. Metcalf quotes the lyrics of King Louie's song to underscore his premise: `"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...'" This is sung to a jazz beat in a scat style not unlike that of the crows. The voice sounds African-American, and the monkeys suggest caricatures of negative stereotypical African natives. All this lends credence to Metcalf s argument.

Metcalf goes further though, arguing that Louie's name is an obvious reference to Louis Armstrong, when in fact the voice is Louis Prima's, a more likely source of the name. Metcalf also suggests that Louie's stuffing of Mowgli's mouth with bananas is symbolic of the lure of illicit drugs (i.e. smoking banana skins) associated with the black underclass, jazz clubs, etc. This and other assertions are often difficult to see when one actually looks at the film itself;, however, his central proposition, that the monkeys could be read as discontented blacks seeking entrance into the white world where they obviously do not belong, has more plausibility.

One may find ironic similarities between this scene and the crow scene in Dumbo 26 years before. Both Dumbo and Mowgli arrive at a location apart from their own "place" or "family," Dumbo via his alcohol-induced flight and Mowgli unwillingly abducted by the monkeys. Both are treated to a musical performance by a group of strangers singing jazz-style songs with scat; in each song, one of the performers makes a horn shape with his mouth to produce trumpet sounds. In these ways as well as in the way the characters are drawn and vocalized, the two groups represent caricatured blacks.

Caricaturing itself is not the issue. Most cartooning is caricaturing of some sort, and the mimicry is not necessarily mockery. What occurs in *The Jungle Book*, however, is the depiction of a racial stereotype that is devious, mischievous, and "casualty violent." Violence leads to the destruction of the monkeys' home environment when they are frustrated in their attempt to be admitted into (the white) man's world. (The monkeys charge Baloo with a battering ram whose head looks like a classic depiction of the blackface native caricature from so many cartoons of the 1930s and 40s). Is the Disney film saying, through symbolic language, that this is what happens when blacks try to rise above their "station" in life? If this was not the conscious message, one can argue that bad judgment was used in the choice of images, dialogue, and lyrics.

The biographical record states clearly that Disney did not like blacks or Jews and avoided association with them. However, as mentioned earlier, it is difficult to trace the origins of specific characterizations to their source. Disney oversaw production of *The Jungle Book* but his level of involvement is hard to determine. Richard Schickel points out how distracted Disney was by the many other projects he was now managing as head of an expanding entertainment empire. Disney indicated apparent inability to be emotionally involved with this animated feature when, after expressing disapproval for some rushes from the film, he remarked, "I don't know, fellows, I guess I'm getting too old for animation." Nevertheless, whether or not Disney was the mind directly behind the images in either *Dumbo* or *The Jungle Book* is not really relevant. Even if some other creator-contributor can be credited with the characterizations, all carried the mark of Disney and his general approval.

**A Motive View of Animation**  
Walter Fisher proposed that rhetoric operates "as man's principle means of symbolic inducement to attitude and action," and functions in the "influencing of ethical choices." Any mediated form of discourse may function rhetorically as it "expresses a theme or thesis, an inference or judgement, which is to be preferred above any other proposition or proposal that relates to its subject matter... rhetorical discourse creates an 'image,' a value-oriented interpretation of some part of the world." Fisher posits that the rhetor carries in his mind a certain conception of both himself and his audience. Rhetoric will persuade if its message resonates with the audience's images of the subject. Fisher's essay also argues that rhetors approach their task with a view to selecting a motive to achieve their end. He lays out four basic motives that may be implemented appropriately according to the specific situation.

These four motives or kinds of rhetorical situations will be outlined: affirmation. concerned with giving birth to an image; reaffirmation, concerned with revitalizing an image; purification, concerned with correcting an image, and subversion, concerned with undermining an image.

Addressing the two sets of images under consideration here, *Dumbo's* crows subvert the common image of blacks at that period in Hollywood film history. The monkeys in *The Jungle Book* reverse this position to become a reaffirmation of negative, even ugly, stereotypes.

The crows are self-assured, free-wheeling, fully realized animated characters. Comparing them to other contemporary cartoon images of blacks, the qualitative difference is obvious. For example, *Scrub Me Mama with a Boogie Beat*, a 1941 cartoon short by Walter Lantz, traffics in the most demeaning of comic racial stereotypes: shiftless Negro layabouts living in "Lazytown," enjoying their watermelon and leisure until a buxom, light- skinned jazz singer gets off the riverboat to bring some rhythm to town. By contrast the crows are energetic, self- possessed, with a wry sense of humor. True, the voice characterizations may remind us of Amos and Andy, but the crows lack the characteristic foolishness of the famous radio characters.

In several ways, the crows parallel the function and importance of the seven dwarves in Disney's first animated feature, though the crows come across as generally brighter, quicker, and wittier. The dwarves were characterized by one or two distinctive qualities, Bashful, Dopey, etc. Likewise, visual and vocal cues quickly indicate the particular traits that fit the crows according to the names informally assigned them during the film's production: Glasses Crow, Preacher Crow, Fat Crow, Straw Hat Crow and, of course, Jim or Dandy Crow.

By the logic of some critics, short or fat or bespectacled people or ordained ministers might take exception to negative images presented by the crows. The same logic condemns Disney for presenting questionable images of dwarves in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*. More appropriately, one may discern Disney's characteristic depiction of the little person (whether Dumbo, Pinocchio, Snow White or other Disney characters) who finds aid and common cause by joining others outside the social mainstream, (dwarves, crickets, mice, crows). The alliance usually brings good and desirable ends and offers reassurance to children and adults alike that to be weak and alone need not be one's destiny: the most unlikely individuals may help the meek inherit the earth.

Conversely, the monkeys in *The Jungle Book* more easily bring to mind long- entrenched images and characteristics associated with pejorative stereotypes. Looking at the monkey figures, one is reminded of old cartoon caricatures of big lipped, wide-eyed cannibals ready to boil a (white) intruder in a black kettle for dinner. Additionally, the monkeys are not as differentiated as the crows.

The seductive jungle rhythms of the monkeys' jazz music is enough to keep Baloo the bear bouncing to the beat irresistibly even as he attempts to rescue Mowgli. Such seductiveness could be considered part of the sensual milieu that supposedly characterizes "jazz-clubs," the havens of oversexed blacks. The lyrics indicate Louie's desire to somehow force his way into white society. The uppity ape must be shown he cannot leave his "place."

Coming in 1967, after years of the civil rights movement, the scene in *The Jungle Book* is at worse a display of retrograde racist rhetoric coded as a children's tale, or at best, an insensitive throwback to earlier standard cartoon stereotypes. To have offered such an anachronistic portrayal so many years after the generally positive one in 1941 is inexplicable and embarrassing. The film is a sad reaffirmation of negative images coming at a time when sensitive artists would have been wiser to promote characters at least on a par with those in *Dumbo*, if not offering still better ones promoting images of a common, if diverse, humanity.