

Jens Paasen

If You Want to Belong, You Have to Buy

Disney's *Pocahontas* and consumerism in a natural disguise

One of my earliest childhood memories is how my godmother took me to the movies to watch Disney's *Pocahontas* in 1995, when I was seven years old. I remember vividly how much I desired to have the spinning arrow compass from the movie afterwards, and a couple of days later my godmother bought it for me. Back then, I thought it was the coolest thing ever. Today, I realize how my purchase contributed to a mechanism that grossed more than \$346 million for that single movie, sequels and merchandise not included, and I ask myself how Disney managed to arouse such a strong need for a compass in a seven-year-old boy. Jack Zipes answers that question, claiming: "[...] the quality of the film is incidental to the routine of attendance and production of consumptive desires based on ideological sameness" (14). That compass was about preserving the good feelings I connected to watching the movie for a short time, spending time with my aunt, buying popcorn and soda, joining a community of viewers and having something exciting to talk about in school, at least before *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* was released, and I suddenly felt an irresistible desire for a stuffed version of a Gargoyle.

In the *Iliad*, the Greeks construct a huge wooden horse and hide a select force of men inside. The Trojans pull the horse into their city as a trophy, thereby letting in the Greek soldiers unnoticed. In *Pocahontas*, Disney seems to use a similar stratagem. I believe that the movie uses nature as a Trojan horse to plant messages of consumerism in the viewers' minds. The Walt Disney Company wants to sell families their movies, as well as a whole range of products related to them. Their overall strategy appears to be to make parents believe that their movies are suitable for their children and offer good, moral messages. The Disney emblem serves as a promise for child-oriented entertainment, providing simplified messages and a happy ending. In *Pocahontas*, that happy end is missing as Smith does not get the girl in the end. Half of the Disney promise is not kept. In an attempt to balance this omission, Disney appears to include notions of environmentalism to substitute for the absence of a happy ending.

However, true environmentalism is contradictory to a disposable consumerist culture. Disney follows Garrard's definition of environmentalists as "the very broad range of people who are concerned about environmental issues such as global warming and pollution, but who wish to maintain or improve their standard of living as conventionally defined, and who would not welcome radical social change [...]" (18). This definition ensures the message of environmentalism, but does not exclude conventional consumerism. To instill environmentally sexy consumerism in children, *Pocahontas* proceeds in three steps: First, the notion of a nature-culture dichotomy is reinforced. Then, the idea of human dominance over nature is suggested in order to justify human exploitation of nature. Eventually a consumerist culture is strengthened.

The idea of a nature-culture dichotomy is the first introduced in the movie through the juxtaposition of the English settlers and the Powhatan Indians. The first two scenes focus on the settlers, the third scene presents the Native American community. Roxana Preda refers to their respective social structure as a *societas* for the settlers and a *communitas* for the Powhatans. While the *societas* is marked by a strong hierarchical structure and interests in individual profit, the *communitas* emphasizes closeness to nature in living in a rhythm attuned to the natural one of the seasons. Preda writes: "The Powhatans live in an ecological paradise in which there is no separation between the human and the natural world" (326). Although young viewers' culture is likely to be closer to that of the settlers, Disney presents the settlers as intruders to the ecological paradise of the Powhatans. This becomes apparent in scene 11, when the settlers begin to dig up the land, fell the trees and use explosives in their search for gold. The viewing child will probably side with the Indians and their seemingly perfect world. For the course of the upcoming conflict, Disney has created a nature-culture dichotomy, establishing the Powhatans as the "good" side, ensuring that the young audience sides with them.

In the next step, the movie introduces the idea of human dominance over nature, i.e. there exists a hierarchical order between nature and culture. The movie achieves this ordering through depictions of anthropocentrism using nature as special effect. In scene 2, the settlers' ship, the Susan Constant, is shown in a violent storm. The power of culture is suggested in this scene. Shortly before governor Ratcliffe comes on deck, the former storm promptly turns into a mild shower. Ratcliffe's very presence seems to coerce the forces of nature to retreat, thus demonstrating the dominance of culture. In scene 12, we find a similar case. Smith, scouting the terrain, perceives the presence of a stranger and hides behind a waterfall, ready to shoot. As he notices Pocahontas' shape through the falling water, he jumps out and points his gun at her. The situation is, then, strongly dramatised. Pocahontas' body appears from out of the mist. The wind softly plays in her hair. She looks at Smith with a mixture of innocence and vulnerability. He looks deep into her eyes and wades through the water to reach her and then she runs off.

Here, two details can be easily overlooked. First, the mist virtually appears within a second, and second, the roar of the waterfall suddenly stops. These seemingly circumstantial details appear in a new light, when considering the role of cultural supremacy. The mist only serves to provide the moment with more pathos. The waterfall appears analogous to the storm in scene 2. Natural phenomena are simply subordinated in human presence, or seem to appear and disappear, in order to accentuate a situation where humans are in the centre of attention. In other words, the mist and the waterfall are not independent natural phenomena in this scene. They are mere effects, switched on or off in the right moment to contribute to the anthropocentrism. Through moments like these, Disney exposes the young viewers to a notion of human dominance over nature through the message that nature is a vehicle for human expression.

Finally, a consumerist culture has to be introduced to the child. Two examples from the movie illustrate this culture in a vivid way. On three occasions in the movie, Pocahontas acts as a translator between the settlers' culture and her own. In scene 7, she tells Grandmother Willow how she dreamed about a spinning arrow. Later in the movie, we learn that the spinning arrow is actually a compass. In this scene, Pocahontas approaches the alien culture for the first time and translates the unknown concept of the compass into the realm of her own people. The compass becomes a spinning arrow. In scene 8, she climbs up a tree and, glancing over the landscape, notices the sails of the Susan Constant which seem to glide slowly over the treetops. Answering Grandmother Willow's question about what she is seeing, she says: "Clouds. Strange clouds." In scene 18, John Smith and Pocahontas talk about gold. To her question as to what gold is, Smith explains that it is yellow, comes out of the ground and is really valuable. Pocahontas, then, shows him corn.

These translations: compass to arrow, sails to clouds, and gold to corn, and the sequence in which they occur are more than a coincidence. All the items with which Pocahontas is confronted are essential to the upcoming transatlantic trade, marking the beginning of modern capitalism. Pocahontas defangs this complex idea by translating it into concepts from the realm of her tribe which are suitable for children. In doing so, she embeds consumerism into the world of nature with which the Powhatans are associated, thus subliminally exposing the young viewers to ideas of consumerism.

Pocahontas' individualist nature, referred to as "her mother's spirit" in scene 3, brings her even closer to this culture. In scene 5, Chief Powhatan wants Pocahontas to accept Kocoum's hand in marriage and illustrates the situation through nature by saying, "You are the daughter of the chief. It is time to take your place among your people. Even the wild mountain stream must someday join the big river." The analogy between Pocahontas and her people and the big river and the wild mountain stream is obvious. Joining the community is naturalized. But Pocahontas does not want to join the big river. Her struggle for independence and individuality appears as antithetical to the mass culture she

is supposed to join. John Smith emerges as an alternative to Kocoum's proposal. He fosters her independence through his own and uses it to separate her further from her tribe and father. She sides with the settlers. This becomes apparent through her attempts to convince her father to talk to the settlers and the heroic saving of Smith forming the climax of the movie. When Grandmother Willow says, "You know your path, child. Now follow it!" she actually means, you chose a side, now support it. Her siding with Smith and the other colonists over her tribe smoothes out the settlers' invasion.

To presents the proto-American settlers as individualists is somewhat counterintuitive as the Western culture is very conformist in the ways it is socialized into expressing individuality. We are taught to buy different clothes, phones, cars etc. to express our individuality in order to be special and loveable and in order to be accepted as a member of our society. We have to buy to be individual so we can fit in. Consumerism thrives on the ideas of individuality Pocahontas is representing.

At the end of the movie, Pocahontas and John Smith have to separate. Seeing her standing on the cliff facing the Susan Constant, the viewer is left with the feeling that she became a stronger and more independent and individual woman through meeting Smith and that she is "going to make it," though there is no happy ending. Looking seaward, a powerful gust of wind carrying colorful leaves appears from behind her, unerringly bearing down on the ship and reaches Smith. It creates a last, powerful link between her and Smith, emphasizing her new relation to the settlers, rather than the tie to her tribe. By making her a translator and fostering her individualist nature through the meeting with Smith, Disney seems to embed the proto-consumerist culture of the settlers into the world of nature Pocahontas has been associated with throughout the movie. To come back to my initial anecdote: I did not want the compass because I was so interested in navigation at the time. I somehow wanted to stay part of the environmental Indian community I sided with and paradoxically I felt like I could only achieve this through buying something related to the movie. My compass was a label that brought me close to that world and made me like the movie character I admired for a short time and gave me a feeling of being as strong and individual as her. Carrying around my compass showed people that I had been part of that movie and still was, that I was an individual and, in being so, a part of society. As an adult, I still think that *Pocahontas* is a wonderful movie. However, I question whether we really want our children to believe that they can buy their individuality and whether we want them to be depending on consumerism in order to feel as individuals.

Literatur

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