Of mice and money men

The sinister grip that Disney exerts on children's imaginations may finally loosen

If Comcast's takeover of the Disney Corporation goes ahead, the world's biggest media conglomeration will be built around one of humankind's most ancient practices. Investing animals with human characteristics is something we've been doing since we first applied charcoal to the walls of a cave. Ten thousand years later, as the $500m we have just spent watching Finding Nemo suggests, we still see ourselves as animals and animals as ourselves.

This suggests two things to me. The first is that, however much we assert our independence from nature, our consciousness remains in its thrall. Our minds were shaped when nothing was more real to us than the fear of being eaten and the fear of not eating. Peter Jackson, in his Lord of the Rings trilogy, deliberately exploits this primordial memory, by exposing us to giant hyenas and mastodons: two of the palaeolithic animals with which our minds evolved. Steven Spielberg's tyrannosaurs and velociraptors, though they appeared more real, were less compelling. Could this be because, pre-dating rather than predating us, they played no role in the development of our evolutionary consciousness?

The second is that, though our engagement with the world is supposed to have been governed by a detachment from the objects of our curiosity ever since the Enlightenment, our tendency to project our minds into animals, plants and inanimate objects is undiminished. Anthropomorphism is an irredeemable human characteristic, and let he who has never sworn at his computer be the first to deny it.

But while there is something very old about Disney, there is, or was, something very

new about it too. It welded commercial, cultural and political power in a way the world had never seen. I remember being struck in the 1980s by the conjunction of two images. One was a photograph of the May day parades in Moscow, with rockets looming over the heads of the marching soldiers. The other, taken six weeks earlier, was a photograph of a St Patrick's day parade in New York, in which giant Goofys and Donald Ducks were suspended above the marchers. The Soviet display was a conscious attempt to project power, the New York parade merely a celebration of the symbols of nationhood. But the St Patrick's day iconography seemed to me almost as sinister as the May day manoeuvres, and for a while I couldn't understand why.

Was it simply that age-old prejudice against the upstart nation that had helped to shove Britain back in its box? It is hard for British people, even those who contest imperialism, to rid themselves of the resentments of a toppled empire. But I think I had got over it by then. Was it because Disney characters symbolised the crass and trivial aspects of American culture? Which other country, after all, constructs its national image around cartoon animals?

Well, just about all of them. Britain's lion and unicorn are, if anything, more ridiculous than Disney's caricatures, for the simple reason that they demand to be taken seriously. There is nothing as risible as those innumerable servile states whose eagles or lions or dragons proclaim the status of top predator. But in the ubiquity of the Disney characters we encounter just the opposite: hegemony represented by an infantilised mouse and an infantilised duck. Far from seeing this as ridiculous, I find it deeply frightening.

It's not just because of what I have read about Walt Disney and the corporation he founded. Today we know that the world's favourite uncle was a wife-beating, child-grooming, union-busting employer of Nazi war criminals, who denounced Hollywood dissidents to the House unamerican affairs committee and made mendacious propaganda films such as Our Friend the Atom. The corporation has repeatedly been exposed for contracting its toy- and clothes-making work to atrocious sweatshops. In 1996, the year in which Disney's chief executive, Michael Eisner, made $565m, the workers stitching Disney's branded clothes in Haiti were earning as little as a dollar a day. In China today, according to a new report by the US national labour committee, a factory producing Disney toys enforces 130-hour weeks, with a day off every two months. But my fear of the dominance of Disney's magic kingdom is about more than this.

One of the paradoxes of our times is that, as western societies age, their culture is infantilised. Just as the number of elderly people in America and Europe begins to tip the scales against the young, youth culture is exalted as never before. And the youths

we celebrate are getting younger. There's a simple reason for this. It is easier to get inexperienced people to part with their money (or to persuade their parents to part with their money) than it is to deceive the elderly. Money chases youth, and culture chases the money. Advertisers determine the content of television shows and newspaper features, which in turn shape our cultural consciousness.

As Eric Schlosser has shown, it was Walt Disney who "perfected the art of selling things to children". He developed a vertically integrated business in which his TV programmes sold his films, and his films sold his theme parks and toys. He was able to drum up fealties among children that no other corporation had been able to summon. The Mickey Mouse Club he established in 1930 helped to pioneer a new form of brand loyalty, and to extract the names, addresses and preferences of its members. Only one company – McDonald's – has captured children as effectively as Disney, and for the past eight years McDonald's and Disney have enjoyed an exclusive global marketing agreement. In both cases, a hard hegemonic will is exercised through the commercialisation of "happiness" and "fun". Disney's creation and domination of the youth market represents the definitive triumph of the empire of commerce.

So perhaps we should not be surprised to see, in that St Patrick's day parade and in so many other events over the past 60 years or more, people marching behind the mouse and the duck. It may be an unconscious display of power, but it is a display of power none the less. "Hollywood conquered the world," the American critic Michael Medved told the Daily Telegraph last year, "long before America had conquered it economically or militarily ... Its films were our advance legions." In the 40s, the Motion Picture Export Association used to call itself "the little state department". One Hollywood producer described "the meshing of Donald Duck and diplomacy" as "a Marshall Plan for ideas". The United States, he announced, needed Hollywood more than it needed the H-bomb.

Walt Disney's characters are sinister because they encourage us, like those marchers, to promote the hegemony of the corporations even when we have no intention of doing so. He captured a deep stream of human consciousness, branded it and, when we were too young to understand the implications, sold it back to us. Comcast's hostile takeover bid suggests that the power of his company to seize our imaginations is declining. A giant media corporation may be about to become even bigger, but if the attack means that Disney is losing its ability to shape the minds of the world's children, this is something we should celebrate. #