

# Walt Disney's *Dumbo* as a Reflection of American Culture and American Values

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Of Walt Disney's original five feature-length cartoons, on which he lavished enormous energy, *Dumbo* is the only one based on an American story, a relatively obscure 1939 book by author Helen Aberson. Made in 1941, *Dumbo* showcases American values on the eve of World War II, at the peak of American liberalism, while documenting aspects of American issues and society that endure today if in somewhat different forms, including entertainment, family, entrepreneurship, black-white relations, immigration, discrimination, idealism, and our love of rooting for the underdog. A film so perfectly constructed that it never becomes tiresome to watch, *Dumbo* is completely accessible to second-language students, for whom it can become a delightful illustration of American culture and values. Made quickly with simple line drawings and flat areas of color, without the complexity or multi-plane animation of the other four classics (*Snow White*, *Pinocchio*, *Fantasia*, and *Bambi*), *Dumbo* runs only 64 minutes, a fact which bedeviled distributors at the time but which makes it ideal for classroom use.

## What are American Values?

The American values most commonly presented to our students are those outlined in the textbook *American Ways* by Datesman, Crandall, and Kearny. The authors list six: individual freedom, self-reliance, equality of opportunity, competition, material wealth, and hard work. Although, in the course of their text, the authors mention American religion as well as the colonial, immigrant and frontier experiences, the Constitution, and the American family, they fail to extrapolate from these other important values that characterize and often distinguish Americans from other societies or to define more specifically concepts like "individual freedom." Among these neglected values are: self-government, rule of law, uniform justice, equal rights, community-building, faith, optimism, hospitality, personal generosity, idealism, and a love for the "underdog." These have long historical roots and are also the values that tend to endear Americans to others, while those identified by Datesman et al. sometimes serve to alienate them.<sup>1</sup>

*Dumbo*, of course, is the quintessential underdog, a baby elephant with oversized ears, shunned by his fellow elephants, loved only by his mother and his unlikely friend Timothy, a mouse. Timothy's sense of justice, optimism, and generosity along with cooperation from

another unlikely source, some raucous crows, help Dumbo turn his handicap into an asset: he learns to fly, demonstrating faith, determination, and self-reliance. As Dumbo's manager, Timothy is quick to capitalize on his friend's talent, and Dumbo's success translates into material wealth: at the end of the movie he and his mother ride in their own luxury railroad car.

## **Motherhood**

Among the values espoused by *Dumbo*, motherhood is second only to generosity and self-reliance. Playing on the pre-sex-education notion that storks bring babies, the film begins with a fleet of storks delivering babies to the circus, culminating with the somewhat delayed delivery of Dumbo to his mother. Dressed as a Western Union messenger, this stork tries to deliver a "Happy Birthday" singing telegram<sup>2</sup> along with Dumbo but is eventually yanked out of the moving railroad car by a hook (apparently part of a signaling device), in a humorous reference to vaudeville.

The delay in Dumbo's delivery allows the filmmakers to show a kaleidoscope of mother love as a bear, kangaroo, hippo, tiger, and giraffe greet their new babies. The sequence is repeated in variation later in the film when Dumbo visits his mother, incarcerated for defending him. The song "Baby Mine" plays on the soundtrack as we see mother animals sleeping with their babies, the hippo, giraffe, tiger and kangaroo reprised, with zebras, hyenas, monkeys, and ostriches added to the line-up. This scene remains one of the most famous in animation history for its tender evocation of the mother-child bond, shown only through the entwined trunks of Dumbo and his mother, who can't reach out any further to him because of her chains.

From the Victorian period to the Second World War, motherhood was highly sentimentalized in American culture, giving rise to the expression: "as American as motherhood and apple pie" —mothers being the ones who made the pies. No World War II propaganda film, documentary or fiction, was released without some reference to mothers. The very fact that American families were often separated, either because children moved further west to seek their fortunes or, later, from farms to cities, intensified rather than diminished the cult of motherhood. Although the cult lost its luster for the baby boom generation, today's so-called "culture wars," largely a debate over what form the American family should take, are its direct descendants. The intensity of feeling on both sides testifies to the enduring hold motherhood and family have on the American consciousness. Dumbo's ability at the end of the film to elevate his mother and give her a comfortable life through his own success was indeed part of the pre-Social Security American Dream.

## **The Circus**

Introduced to America from Europe in 1793, the circus came to imprint itself deeply on

the American imagination in an era before movies, much less computer games or television. American circus-men invented both the circus tent—the “Big Top”—and the circus train and were partial to the circus menagerie, all important features of *Dumbo*. Embodying both community-building and individualism, the circus provides an ideal metaphor for American society—a community in process, always on the move, peopled by individualists. “Running away to join the circus” became the clichéd threat (and occasionally the reality) of children looking for adventure and self-expression.

The *Dumbo* circus draws on many realities of circus life, including wintering in Florida, as did the Ringling Brothers Circus, which moved its winter headquarters to Sarasota in 1927. The African-American roustabouts, who, with the elephants, put up the circus tents and the big parade as the circus moves into town were typical of the American circus.<sup>3</sup>

An important reference to the American circus is *Dumbo*’s real name: “Jumbo, Jr.,” which changes to *Dumbo* when the lady elephants laugh at his ears. His mother remains “Mrs. Jumbo” throughout the film, however. Jumbo, from whom we get the word “jumbo,” meaning “very large, was a real elephant, his name meaning “elephant” in one African language. Captured as a baby in Africa in 1861, Jumbo grew to be the world’s largest elephant (parodied in the film when the Ringmaster introduces *Dumbo* as “the world’s smallest little elephant”) and lived in the London Zoo. Acquired amidst great fanfare by circus owner P. T. Barnum in 1882, Jumbo was an instant celebrity and seemed to enjoy circus life until he was tragically hit and killed by an unscheduled freight train after closing a show in St. Thomas, Ontario. A Jumbo ballad— “Jumbo was an elephant as big as all creation./He sailed across the ocean to join a mighty nation” —linking the giant elephant with the emerging power of the giant country, was still being intoned by school children in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, who well understood the play on *Dumbo*’s name. Mrs. Jumbo is presumably Jumbo’s mate (or widow?), the filmmakers having taken some poetic license with the dates.

Another element in *Dumbo*’s circus with links to American legend and ballad is the circus train, Casey, Jr. John Luther “Casey” Jones was a skilled locomotive engineer who died heroically in a 1900 train crash in Mississippi, while successfully slowing his train sufficiently to save all of his passengers. Friend William Saunders composed a ballad in his honor that became a favorite on the vaudeville circuit, securing Jones’ legendary status.

The characterization of Casey, Jr. in *Dumbo* also draws on the “Little Engine that Could,” a story that appeared in various print venues from 1906 on, one popular version being a 1930 book, published by Platt and Munk and illustrated by Lois Lenski. The story tells of a little engine that pulls a train (full of toys in later versions) over a mountain after many bigger engines have refused the job, all the while chanting “I think I can, I think I can, I think I can,” the chant we hear between puffs as Casey, Jr. pulls the circus train over a similar mountain. The toys in the later “Little Engine” incarnations are led by a clown,

which neatly links that train story to *Dumbo's* circus train, which, unlike real circus trains that could consist of hundreds of cars, is tiny and doll-like. The “Little Engine” moral, too, is one that *Dumbo* wishes to convey: no matter how little or disadvantaged, the individual who keeps trying will succeed, i. e. the importance of self-reliance, hard work, and determination.

## **Animals and People**

*Dumbo* is often criticized because the crows that help Dumbo learn to fly are so obviously African-American stereotypes, an issue I will deal with at length below. In fact, all of the animals are human stereotypes, beginning with the stork-as-Western-Union-messenger. Unlike the painstaking attempt to create realistic deer in *Bambi*, *Dumbo's* animators worked fast and were not chiefly looking for animal realism. Famed animator Vladimir “Bill” Tytla, who animated *Dumbo*, used his baby son rather than real elephants for inspiration (Thomas and Johnston 133). *Dumbo's* big blue eyes, in fact, mark him as white child.

Other stereotypes include the snobby, gossipy lady elephants, whose prototypes were a feature of many 30's movies. Their elegantly caparisoned heads stand in for the hats and feathers such women sported in live-action movies. *Dumbo's* mother would presumably be similarly outfitted while performing, but, because she is “at home” expecting her baby, she wears a little pink bed cap throughout the film, even after *Dumbo* is born, which serves to distinguish her sympathetic character from the other matrons. Besides costume details, the animals betray their human prototypes through their accents. Timothy Mouse, based on the brash, can-do, inner city immigrant-descendant (think James Cagney or Mickey Rooney characters), speaks with a Brooklyn accent. His voice is that of Edward Brophy, who played gangsters in many movies. Timothy wears a drum major's uniform, perhaps to signify his cheerleading role as *Dumbo's* mentor.

Human stereotypes notwithstanding, the story also uses the animals as animals where convenient. The weight of elephants is a critical story component. We are first made aware of it when the stork brings his overly heavy bundle containing *Dumbo*, which persistently sinks in the cloud the stork has perched on (as only animated storks can do). The collapse of the elephant pyramid in *Dumbo's* first, failed appearance is particularly devastating because of their weight. Crows, unlike the African-Americans they are based on, fly, and this, of course, is a crucial story element. Elephants' fear of mice is exploited in one scene where Timothy frightens the lady elephants as revenge for their rejection of *Dumbo*, a scene made twice as funny because their human prototypes stereotypically share this aversion. Meanwhile, the friendship between *Dumbo* and Timothy provides an on-going irony, typical of many buddy-mismatches in literature from Hal and Falstaff to Huck and Jim.

Humans and animals coalesce again in the Pink Elephants sequence, a tour de force of

pure animation, when the expression “seeing pink elephants,” a polite way to refer to drunkenness, is brought to life by pink elephants dancing, writhing, and transforming to music.

Although animals dominate the film, people characters include the African-American roustabouts, the crowd attending the circus, including the boys who torment Dumbo, the ringmaster, and the clowns. These involve more accents: the gravelly voices of the roustabouts, who sing about themselves, the various working class/country-rube accents of both the boys and the clowns, and the Mediterranean accent of the overweight, over-important Ringmaster. The Ringmaster is marked as a foreigner, probably a southern European, given his dark skin and twirly mustache, because many who performed in circuses came from abroad or pretended to, which added to the circus’s exotic allure. The clowns’ characterization as boisterous, irresponsible idiots simply extends their dramatic personae. (Clowns were, in fact, gifted and sophisticated performers.)

### **The African-American Presence in Dumbo**

The first African-Americans we see in *Dumbo* are the black roustabouts, who work alongside the elephants to put up the circus tents. While the obvious comparison between the men and animals is insulting on one level, strong men, white and black, especially athletes, among whom there were a number of celebrated African-Americans in the 1930’s, were often compared to strong or swift animals. Moreover, the elephants are the stars of both the movie’s circus and the movie itself. They are referred to, by themselves and Timothy Mouse, as “a proud race,” a subtle indication, perhaps (and not at all beyond liberal Hollywood’s conceiving), that the men working beside them should also be thought of as “a proud race.”<sup>4</sup>

Our second encounter with African-Americans in *Dumbo* is that with the anthropomorphized crows, who speak a black dialect of English and wear clothes associated with certain black stereotypes of the time: the preacher, the gambling boss, the hipster, and so on. At first, the crows make fun of Dumbo and Timothy, demonstrating yet more stereotyped behavior: singing, dancing, and joking, in the manner of popular African-American entertainers of the time. However, when Timothy tells Dumbo’s story, the crows are immediately repentant and sympathetic. As would-be African-Americans, they understand difference and discrimination only too well, and they want to help Dumbo. Although black men and women helping whites, especially children, served as a common theme in movies and literature, such characters were generally slaves or otherwise faithful servants. In contrast, the crows in *Dumbo* are free agents and decide, independent of any imagined obligation, to help another being suffering discrimination.

The two appearances of African-Americans, first as men and then as crows, are linked in the scene in which the crows push Dumbo off the precipice, so that he will learn to fly.

“Let’s go, heave-ho,” they chant, echoing the roustabouts, who “hey-heave” the stakes and ropes of the circus tents into place.

The crows, of course, succeed in their mission, and teach Dumbo to fly. Not only sympathetic, they are wise because they understand how to use “psychology, you know, psychology” to help Dumbo overcome his fear of flying. The movie ends with the crows sitting on a telegraph wire. African-Americans may have been marginalized in 1941 America, but they are not marginalized in *Dumbo*. They are the last thing we see and hear— “So long, glamour boy!” —as the circus train moves into the distance.

## ***Dumbo* and World War II**

It is hard, looking back from 50-plus years of America the Superpower, to imagine the America of 1941, unwilling and unprepared to go to war. Japan and Europe had been at war since 1937 and 1939, respectively, and this is reflected in the “montage” sequence illustrating Dumbo’s success, where a headline reads: “Bombers for Defense,” and we see a squadron of Dumbo-shaped airplanes, another indication of the film’s “liberal bias,” since in those days it was liberals who wanted the United States to enter the war to combat fascism.

*Dumbo* intersected with the war in another way. Released in October of 1941, the film was to have had a cover-story in the December 8 issue of *Time Magazine*, only to be supplanted by the inferno at Pearl Harbor. *Time* editors considered a date for a *Dumbo* cover later in December but eventually deemed the film too frivolous for a nation so suddenly at war (Gabler 381). The months that followed were among the scariest in American history as the United States, its Navy crippled, plunged into a war for which it was ill-prepared and accordingly suffered defeat after defeat. Years later, Japanese filmmaker Ozu Yasujiro would comment, presumably tongue in cheek, “Watching *Fantasia* [from among a stash of enemy films captured in Singapore] made me suspect that we were going to lose the war. These guys look like trouble, I thought” (Bordwell 8). Axis leaders might just as well have looked at *Dumbo* and taken the little elephant’s rise from ignominy and defeat as equally prophetic.

“Mouse and elephant, black and white.” I turned to my class and smiled. “This looks a lot like Obama’s America. It really wasn’t that good in 1941, but that’s American idealism, always hoping to get better.” In so many ways, *Dumbo* reflects the Once and Future America, picturing the values of an imperfect, immigrant nation, always looking to a more perfect future.

### **Notes**

- 1 The authors sometimes note these additional values in passing, but don’t emphasize them. Their acknowledgement of Americans’ love of an underdog comes only by implication in their recommendation of the movie *Seabiscuit*, 23.

- 2 Western Union invented the singing telegram, which became a reliable source of humor for filmmakers and comics, in 1933.
- 3 The *Dumbo* circus is probably more as the men who drew it remembered it from their youth than a 1941 circus. Circuses, like everything else, suffered during the Great Depression, and elements like the parade began to disappear.
- 4 Liberalism and racial insensitivity went hand-in-hand in this period as evidenced by the fact that the filmmakers, for script purposes, dubbed the crow leader “Jim Crow,” a demeaning reference to African-Americans that became synonymous with Southern apartheid. The animators, however, would have seen little difference between picturing a literal “Jim Crow,” i. e. a crow named Jim, and a literal pink elephant. For more on the ambivalent nature of African-American representation in animation during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, see Christopher P. Lehman, *The Colored Cartoon: Black Representation in American Animated Short Films, 1907–1954*, (Amherst, MA: U of Massachusetts P) 2007.

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