

ALADDIN – 1992

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In a mythical Arabian kingdom, Aladdin survives as a thief, accompanied, and abetted by a monkey named Abu. He meets and falls in love with Princess Jasmine who has attempted to escape from the palace where she, like Aladdin, feels trapped and restricted. Aladdin is recruited by the Sultan's evil vizier, Jafar, to retrieve a magic lamp from the Cave of Wonders. The boy ends up with the lamp and discovers inside a wisecracking Genie who can grant the owner three wishes. Through the genie's magic, he impersonates a wealthy prince to impress the princess, but finds the ruse ineffective; it is his true self that interested her all along. Jafar attempts to marry the princess himself, but Aladdin foils the plot and saves the day.

Aladdin [1992] is Disney's 31st feature-length animation. The most successful are adaptations of fairy tales: *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* [1937], *Cinderella* [1950], *Sleeping Beauty* [1959], *Pinocchio* [1940], *The Little Mermaid* [1991], and *Beauty and the Beast* [1991]. The success of the latter (\$140 million in domestic revenues and seven Academy Award nominations) has spurred Disney to try again . . . with *Aladdin*. The story has been done before as *The Thief of Baghdad*. The 1924 version, starring Douglas Fairbanks as the athletic hero, is perhaps one of the most imaginative silent films ever made. The 1940 version features Sabu as the thief who helps the prince, but Rex Ingram as the Genie (along with the eye-popping sets and Technicolor) steal the film. I would recommend both these versions as equal in many ways to the Disney version (I would avoid, however, the 1978 British TV remake by Clive Donner and the 1961 Italian version featuring Steve Reeves).

Robin Williams' vocal pyrotechnics are what make *Aladdin* faster, jokier, and broader than any of Disney's previous animated features. Williams is given free rein to do his schtick (remember Robin, schtick is an anagram of kitsch) as the Genie producing a demented, celebrity-impersonating, hyperactive blue blob. The Genie transforms into (among others) caricatures of Jack Nicholson, Eddie (Rochester) Anderson, Robert De Niro, Walter Brennan, Rodney Dangerfield, Ethel Merman, William Buckley, Señor Wences, a turkey, Arsenio Hall, a sheep, Arnold Schwarzenegger, a bee, Ed Sullivan, and Groucho Marx (and his duck) (in black and white). There are references to other Disney films: the word "addelepatad" is from *Bambi* [1942], the Greek lake and the evil monster from *Fantasia* [1940], the crows from *Dumbo* [1941], the crab from *Little Mermaid*, and *Pinocchio* appears full face. Among the several film makers honored by mention is Preston Sturges (the maker of *Hail the Conquering Hero* [1944]). And practically

everyone on the animation team that produced the film is caricatured as a figure standing around in the crowds.

If *Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast* are girl's films, this is a boy's film. But there are other, more significant, changes. While *Aladdin* uses what has become a Disney tradition of symbolizing psychological states dealt with by young people in the various characters that appear on screen, it also contains some radical changes in the areas of gender politics and even economics (more on these later). Like Disney's most recent features, the animation is stunning – a combination of the finest hand art with dazzling computer-generated graphics – and most of the film seems designed around Persian calligraphy and graphics. Another obvious change from previous Disney films is its speed. It is almost two hours of MTV-like fast cutting should increase Dramamine consumption among many older viewers, the younger set having been inured by years of music videos. This may come as a shock, for Disney cartoon characters have always been relatively subdued and chaste. Comparing Disney's Donald Duck to Warner Brother's Daffy Duck is a good example: Daffy = Donald + Franz Kafka. The current Genie is like an Alvin on acid.

Aladdin and Jasmine have been carefully designed so that contemporary audiences will easily identify with them. Aladdin is from a broken home, he lives on the streets, he is a ghetto kid whose survival skills are peaked from necessity, and, as his theme song says, he's "One Jump Ahead" of the law. He suffers from inflation (dreams of great destinies) and deflation (he must pump up his courage to speak to a girl he meets on the street, Princess Jasmine in disguise). Typically teenage. He stakes his future in the lamp's magic, not realizing his true value is within himself and has been there all the time. Messages aimed at adolescents have changed little since *The Wizard of Oz* [1939].

Physically, the drawing style of the film is quite abstract, yet Aladdin is clean and muscular, with a narrow waist and broad shoulders (his chest seems to be the only anatomical feature that is significantly detailed). His cleanliness, of course, must be "natural," since he seems to have no place to bathe and lives on the streets as an urchin. Jasmine is interesting, too. Her anatomy is also different from previous Disney heroines. She seems a little older and more developed than Ariel of *Little Mermaid*, though just as naive and trusting of the world outside her cloistered home. Her room in the cotton-candy palace resembles nothing more than a very fancy bird cage and symbolizes her feelings of confinement. Gone, however, is the "cute" Disney girl with her turned up nose. In profile, Jasmine's nose reveals ethnicity, she could indeed be from the mid-East. It bears a strong resemblance to Barbra Streisand's!

Jafar's angular drawing style contrasts him to the roundness of all the other characters. He seems like a caricature of Conrad Veidt who played Jaffar (sic) in the 1940 version of the story. He and Iago are also associated throughout the film with warm colors like red, orange, and gold, while Aladdin and Jasmine are associated with cooler greens and blues. As the action builds, the colors become brighter, thus cleverly manipulating the audience into "feeling" what is going on in addition to "seeing" it. This

is one of the things that animation does very well: the viewer can be manipulated in many more ways than with live action.

Drawing from the mythical tradition of giving the hero a magical helper for his questing journey, Disney provides many of his characters with animal helpers: just as Siegfried had his talking bird, Pinocchio has Jiminy Cricket, and Cinderella has a small domestic zoo. The associations we are invited to make with these animals help define their owners' personalities. In China, for instance, the monkey is credited with the power of granting good health, success, and protection. He is also related to sorcerers and fairies. In India, when Rama, one of the ten incarnations of the god Vishnu, lost his beautiful bride to a marauding demon, it was the monkey Hanuman who discovered her whereabouts and led the god to her rescue. In African cultures, and thus in America, the monkey is associated with the trickster, the figure that learns and teaches by apparently getting one into trouble. Abu, Aladdin's larcenous monkey companion certainly corresponds to these archetypes.

When Jasmine quite vocally refuses to be an object (to be either admired or manipulated by men), she is, in many ways, another incarnation of the Catwoman we see in *Batman Returns* [1992]. Appropriately, Jasmine's companion is the tiger, Rajah. The tiger as symbol has two aspects: the wild beast and the tamed animal. This certainly reflects Jasmine's situation – she is at once desirous of the wildness of adventure and tamed by her social and political status as princess. When the tiger appears in association with other animals, its symbolic significance varies according to the relative status of the animal opponent. For instance, a tiger will be superior when struggling with a snake. But when fighting a winged creature, he is inferior. This is borne out in *Aladdin* as the Jafar/Iago combination regresses him to a powerless cub (at the same time regressing Jasmine to a servant).

Just as Rajah is an extension of Jasmine, the misanthropic parrot is an extension of Jafar's personality. His name, Iago, the psychological seducer of Othello, needs little comment (but note that Iago sounds like "Ego"). Parrots are imitative birds, learning to speak by copying what they hear and having no inventive intelligence of their own. Presumably, this is the relation between Iago and Jafar. Yet, it is Iago who has most of the ideas, most notably that Jafar himself should marry the princess. If the parrot's ideas are better than the master's, this does not speak well of the intelligence of the master! The parrot also reflects other aspects of Jafar's personality: ostentatious coloring, attempts to fly to unachievable heights, pieces that do not fit together (the parrot has teeth), and so on. On the other hand, Iago is loud, extroverted, and impulsive, while Jafar is quiet, introverted, and calculating. Between them they form a balance (one not achieved by the other human/animal combinations of Aladdin/Abu and Jasmine/Rajah). Jafar's snake, on the other hand, through its Biblical associations with the Devil, clearly represents his evil side. (There are several other Biblical elements in the film. For instance, Aladdin's descent into the cave is an inversion of Daniel entering the lion's den (Daniel 6:16-28).)

Aladdin marks a change in Disney's view of women's roles. In *Snow White*, the heroine is a princess, presumably being groomed to be the queen. I assume for that

rulership role she has been taught several languages, the prevailing legal system, statecraft, international relations, and so on. In a word, she is no dummy. But there is a coup, and she finds herself on her own in the forest. As Snow White approaches the Dwarfs' house, she looks through the window and sees chaos – obviously, a bachelor's house. Unbidden, she decides that it is her role to clean the place up! She reaches for the doorknob but hesitates: she straightens her dress and fixes her hair – before entering a *man's empty house*! This attitude toward women's roles has changed little in a half century of Disney's animated features. Until recently, that is.

The last three Disney films – from *Little Mermaid* to *Beauty and the Beast* to *Aladdin* – have shown an interesting progression. While a little more contemporary in its approach, *Little Mermaid* has strong echoes of these older attitudes: a young woman must have a man fall in love with her without using her voice! What is left for her to use to attract him? *Beauty and the Beast* represents a radical rethinking of the studio's attitude toward women. Beauty reads books! She decides who will be her mate (compared to the first man that comes along as in *Sleeping Beauty*). We see a slow shedding of Disney's conservative mid-Western distrust of education and intellect. Gaston, Beauty's rejected suitor, is shown to be a macho boor. While everything ends happily in marriage and the confirmation of patriarchal authority, this small change in attitude is a real surprise. A progressively increasing pro-intellectual attitude seems to be forming. Now comes *Aladdin*, with another leap away from the old Disney mold – admittedly it is much more subtle, but ultimately it may be far more important.

Economist Robert Reich, President Clinton's Secretary of Labor, recently outlined his theory of the economic history of the United States. Briefly, he sees three phases. First is an era of infinite resources when power concentrates where the resources are located. Second follows an era of manufacturing, when power transfers to the crossroads where the raw materials needed to manufacture objects come together. The third phase, which we are now entering, begins when manufacturing is no longer an exclusively American privilege. Today, factories can be built anywhere in the world. In Reich's third phase, America will make its fortune on its brains – invention, discovery, design, innovation, and so on. The concentration of power, he claims, will therefore be at the sites of this intelligence – the universities. (Parents and educators take heart. If he is heard, there may be a light at the end of the dark tunnel of educational budget cutting.) Many of these ideas appear in Reich's book, *The Work of Nations*, Knopf, 1991. What strikes me about *Aladdin* is that in a subtle and symbolic way it is telling much the same story!

Aside from Jafar, the nemesis, *Aladdin* has three main characters: Aladdin, the Princess, and the Genie. Aladdin complains that he feels trapped, yet being a thief, he has free access to all the material goods and resources of the city. The Princess feels trapped, yet, living in the palace and having almost infinite power, she can make anything happen that she wishes. The Genie is a slave to whomever owns the magic lamp that is his prison, yet by a simple mental process he can make anything happen that his master wishes. Here are characters that correspond quite well to Reich's three phases of American economic history. And what happens to them is even more fascinating.

Aladdin does not want to be the sultan; he sees this as only another form of entrapment. Jasmine seeks personal freedom and does not want to be the Queen, for this would force her to remain in the palace, rather than to travel and see the world as she wishes (needs?). At the end of the film, despite the happy feelings we get, this is exactly what happens: they get married and are trapped forever in their designated roles. They never achieve their freedom. Who does achieve freedom? The Genie! Is the film saying that possessing objects and materials is not the path to freedom, possessing power is not the path to freedom, but possessing mental capabilities *is* the road to freedom? This would seem a logical step, seeing the ideological changes from *Little Mermaid* to *Beauty and the Beast* to *Aladdin*. Whether the parallels between *Aladdin* and Reich's historical model are coincidence or a portent of a basic change in America's attitudes toward the intellect remains to be seen.

The ideology of *Aladdin*, like most of Disney's films is quite complex, though most of it clearly leans toward the conservative. Bad are vanity, misrepresenting one's social status, attempting a palace coup, marrying someone much younger than one's self, trying to gain advantage over political heads of state. Good are marriage, father's power, honesty, keeping promises, sharing with the poor, helping others in need, serving one's country, sacrificing personal feelings for the general good, and so on. On the other hand, we can make another list that is quite different, where money (forbidden in the cave of wonders and ignored by Jasmine on the fake Prince Ali's entry into the city), being macho (which is not condemned with the quite vehemence it was in *Beauty and the Beast* – Gaston dies), disrespecting women's freedom to choose, are all bad, while education and enlightenment – symbolized by the lamp – are good.

In the post-Cold War world, we are constantly surprised by the changes taking place in the political and ideological worlds. Amongst these are some out-and-out political role reversals: Suddenly we find liberals actively supporting American interventions abroad in places like Somalia and Bosnia, while conservatives are urging caution. Are similar political changes taking place in films? Are there changes afoot in that once arch bastion of conservatism – the Disney Studios? Two years ago, we were presented with the blatantly conservative ideology of *Little Mermaid*. Last year we were surprised by *Beauty and the Beast*, with its condemnation of macho men, its pro-literacy and anti-gun stances. And now *Aladdin*. What changes are on the horizon? Between the ideological changes and the advances in computer-assisted illustration, animation may well be entering a new Golden Age. We will have to wait and see.

Aladdin - Produced and Directed by John Musker and Ron Clements. Screenplay by Ron Clements, John Musker, Ted Elliott, and Terry Rossio. Music by Howard Ashman, Alan Menken, and Tim Rice. Production Design by R. S. Vander Wende. Art Direction by Bill Perkins. Distributed 1992 by Buena Vista Pictures (Walt Disney Co.).