THE LION KING [1994]

by

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The Lion King begins with the birth of a lion cub, prince apparent Simba (the voices of Jonathan Taylor Thomas and Matthew Broderick), son of Mufasa (James Earl Jones), the king of the Pride Lands. In a ceremony led by Rafiki the Baboon (Robert Guillaume), all the animals of the veldt come to pay their respects with the exception of Scar (Jeremy Irons), Simba's uncle who feels that the future throne is rightfully his. With the aid of three hyenas (Whoopi Goldberg, Cheech Marin, and Jim Cummings), Scar makes an unsuccessful attempt on the life of Simba and his playmate, Nala (Niketa Calame and Moira Kelly). Several years later, Scar engineers the death of Mufasa and manages to convince Simba that he was responsible for his father's death. Simba, depressed and guilty, leaves the Pride Lands while Scar and the hyenas take over. Simba wanders aimlessly until he finds two friends, Pumbaa the Warthog (Ernie Sabella), and Timon the Meerkat (Nathan Lane), who live in a jungle paradise. Here, he grows up. After many years, Nala comes to ask for aid. Her arguments fall on deaf ears until Rafiki arrives and convinces Simba to help. Simba returns to the Pride Lands to find the land decimated under Scar's rule. He fights and defeats Scar, who reveals the murder plot, thus relieving Simba of his guilt. Simba and Nala have a cub and the cycle begins again, sans Scar.

Without a doubt, *The Lion King* is Disney Studios' most complex animated film in recent years. It seems to have something to say – message-wise – to almost any age group. It is Disney's first film that seems to speak directly to non-White Americans. And it is also one of the most frightening animations in the Disney oeuvre. Because these and many other aspects of the film interlock so tightly, I fear that the following analysis will seem a little scattered and rambling. Please bear with me.

An increasing number of films, as we look at them closely, exhibit the following problem: When we see the film as a psychological metaphor, we get one set of messages; but from a sociological or political point of view, the results are vastly different – in fact, the psychology and the sociology can even be diametrically opposed. An example of this is the ending of *Thelma and Louise* [1991] when the two friends drive their car off a high precipice into space and imminent death. The political message is clear: in a repressive patriarchal society, there is no place for self-actualized women. Despite the fact that, throughout the film, they adopt the outward means of the dominant male culture – guns, violence, robbery, fast driving, drinking – they cannot achieve the goals awarded to men. However, from the psychological perspective, we get a very different story. Having suffered and learned, both about each other and about themselves, they are ready for the next stage of psychic development: they soar into the sky and transcendence. They fly (flee?) from the traditional female-identified earth into the male-associated sky to take their place in the heavens. The problem is obvious: how do we reconcile these messages?

The Lion King is even more complex and confusing. Not only do we have psychological and sociological messages running off in different directions, we also have several layers within each category that almost seem mutually exclusive, oxymoronic. When we look solely at the psychology, do we neglect important political implications about racism and sexism? When we look at the social implications, do we miss the wisdom it has to offer by taking it too literally? There are no simple answers to these questions. One possibility is to look at a film from both points of view, reconcile what we can, and, if necessary, live with the paradoxes that remain unresolved. These paradoxes, while disturbing, may actually be to the film's credit, for *The Lion King*, like real life, refuses to be simplistic.

Before getting too far into *The Lion King* itself, let us take a brief look at its background. Its most obvious predecessors are Disney's own *Bambi* [1942] and *The Jungle Book* [1967]. Jeremy Irons' reading of Scar, so languorous that he seems utterly bored with his own evil nature, has obvious precedents in George Sanders' version of the sly tiger in T*he Jungle Book*. *The Jungle Book*, too, is most un-Disney in drawing style. Like many parts of *The Lion King*, especially in the rendition of the meerkat Timon ("What do you want me to do? Dress in drag and dance a hula?"), it seems more a product of the Warner Bros. animation studios than the home of Mickey and Minnie. Timon, an obvious homage to Bugs Bunny, is the comic high point of the film.

(By the way, if you're wondering what a meerkat is, Suricata suricatta is a type of mongoose or suricate. Named by the French during the Renaissance, when they were first brought to Europe over the sea (mer) and looked like cats (chat). They are social animals, living in colonies of a few dozen. During the day, suricates bask in the sun either lying down or sitting up on their haunches facing the sun – sun-worshipping if we are willing to anthropomorphize that far. They live in South Africa, where they are domesticated and kept around the house or the farm to kill rats and mice. The young engage in boisterous play. They eat insects, spiders, and centipedes and the bulbs and tubers of certain plants. And they love avocados.)

Both *Bambi* and *The Lion King* explore of the role of leadership in the formation and renewal of a community – and the suffering involved in that journey. Until *The Lion King*, *Bambi* was also the single most prominent exposure of young children to the concept of death, especially the death of a parent. The death of Bambi's mother is off-screen and quick. The period of mourning lasts (in on-screen time) about twenty seconds, until Bambi's father steps in, takes emotional control of the young man, explains the facts of life and death to him, and they go off together. Bambi seems to suffer no aftereffects. Not so in *The Lion King.*

Compared to the austere portrayal of death in *Bambi*, in *The Lion King* death is brutal and graphic (perhaps in response to our changing social climate). Mufasa is trampled to death on-screen. Simba spends endless minutes with the corpse saying things like, "Dad, dad, wake up, dad," and in sad desperation goes to sleep under the giant paw of his dead father. Talk about jerking tears. And talk about disturbing young children.

And if these weren't enough, Simba is burdened with a crushing sense of guilt. Within the context of the story, Simba seems to suffer for about ten years. There is no parental figure (as in *Bambi*) to emotionally rescue him. Be forewarned. This is left to the elders that accompany their children to the movie theater. Also note that in Disney's universe, fathers are effective in assuaging the trauma of the death of mothers, while mothers are virtually ineffective in either comforting or rescuing their children from guilt regarding the death of their fathers.

There is another important comparison between *Bambi* and *The Lion King.* The animals around Bambi, the skunks, owls, chipmunks, squirrels, blue birds, rabbits – cuddly and gentle – are mostly ruminants or rodents. The role of predator and prey is downplayed – prominently absent are other common forest denizens like wolves, coyotes, bears, hawks, and so on. *The Lion King*, placed in the African savannas rather than the North American forest, is quite different.

The roles of predator and prey are quite clear in *The Lion King.* Mufasa dutifully explains the facts of ecology to his son, as would be expected in these politically correct times. But this idealized and naive view of nature has imbedded in it disturbing political implications. The animals that come in the morning to kneel down before Mufasa and his young son will, a few hours later, be served for lunch. I am sure this is a political metaphor many of us can identify with: society forces us to bow down to those that are about to consume us. What more can one say about today's typical worker/boss relationship? These animals know they are going to die and yet acquiesce. Is this the social ecology of an African Jonestown?

When young (and presumably naive) Simba asks about the fate of his zebra neighbors – "But Dad, don't we eat them?" – the explanation is that when the lions die, they become the grass that the zebras eat and thus complete "the circle of life." Easy to say when you're on top of the food chain. Perhaps Simba would have gotten a different story had he asked the zebras! This is a lot like the executives on the top floor of a skyscraper rationalizing their lifestyle in comparison with that of the janitors in the basement who maintain the building. In *The Lion King*, the aristocracy literally consumes the working class.

As you can see, there are some difficulties inherent in delving into this film. However, many aspects of the film are very positive. Unlike previous Disney films, *The Lion King* is not directed primarily at a white, middle-class audience (yes, I know that *Aladdin* featured both a male and female hero of color, but how many people of mid-Eastern origin were present in the primarily American audience?).

It is not only the placement of the film in Africa that gives an African American audience an opportunity to relate to many aspects of the film. The lions' domain is called the Pride Lands, an obvious reference to the "Black Pride" movement. Much of the music has a distinct African flavor. Peter Gabrielle and Paul Simon introduced African music into American pop culture in the early 70s, and it has taken significant roots. But now, with its adoption into the world of Disney, it is assured a permanent place among young

people. Can you imagine an African song having the same impact as "When You Wish Upon a Star?"

Perhaps the most satisfying aspect of the film is that the most intelligent and clever character is Rafiki the Baboon (a traditional African mythological figure). He is prescient, an artist, a priest, a shaman, a psychologist, a good friend, and a martial arts expert. He is obviously the most socially valuable and moral personage in the Pride Lands – and he is the only character in the film who speaks in a clearly African accent.

But even this has its downside. While it is truly wonderful to have a film that African American youngsters can connect with, this connection too, when expanded and explored, can make us pause. For instance, when projected into the stereotyped urban community, is Mufasa's death preparing African American youngsters for a similar experience? Does the fact that the lionesses provide the family with food reflect the stereotype of the matriarchal African American family with the absent father? Because it is easier to identify with the negative than the positive, negative aspects of contemporary urban life – from the absence of the father in the family to the women of the community holding most of the jobs; when the bad gang leader takes over, the neighborhood goes to hell – seemingly appear in *The Lion King* to hook the audience in order to give them the more positive messages.

Another fact of life faced by every child in an urban environment are the homeless. These, too, appear in *The Lion King*. On his trek from the Pride Lands, Simba is rescued by two homeless animals (people), Pumbaa the Warthog and Timon the Meerkat. This echoes many recent films in which street people are a source of natural wisdom. For instance, in the recent *Ghost* [1990], a derelict apparition shows Patrick Swayze the ins and outs of haunting, and in the even more recent *Home Alone 2* [1992], the pigeon lady teaches Kevin the value of relationships. The wisdom that was once romanticized as the domain of "natural beings" (Tonto shows the Lone Ranger the ropes; Sabu teaches the soldiers how to fight; Forrest Gump teaches America how to be America) is now romanticized into the province of the homeless. This is an interesting way to dismiss their plight by raising them to valuable members of society.

Many other characters are as complex and ambiguous. The evil Scar is at the top of this list. As his name implies, his external physiognomy reflects his internal corruption. This device has a long tradition in films: The rapacious Indian kidnapper that John Wayne pursues in *The Searchers* [1956] is named Scar. The bandit that kills Humphrey Bogart in *Treasure of the Sierra Madre* [1948] has a scar over his eye that is almost identical to Simba's uncle. And then there are several gangster films with *Scarface* in the title [1932, 1941, 1962, 1983]. But Scar's evil nature goes far beyond his physical appearance.

Through Scar, *The Lion King*'s politics run across the rivers of time. When Scar organizes his hyena troops, the film makes obvious references to Leni Riefenstahl's documentary on the rise of Hitler, *Triumph of the Will* [1935]. We even see ranks of goose-stepping hyenas. (One question is whether the filmmakers are referring to Hitler

directly, as they were in *Pinocchio* in 1940, or to the more contemporary manifestation, Neo-Nazism.) On the other hand, Scar is the only lion with black hair and a very dark face – is, in fact, the physically darkest character in the film. How does this jibe with the Black Pride ideas advanced in other aspects of the film?

So, Scar kills Mufasa while Simba broods; ay, there's the rub. There is an obvious relation here to *Hamlet*, which, I feel, is not to be disparaged. *The Lion King* is almost a prequel – that is, it answers the question what did Hamlet do before he returned to the castle at the beginning of the play? On a more serious note, *The Lion King* offers quite a different solution to the burden of guilt than does *Hamlet.* As a great benefit to all those young people who are forced to read Shakespeare in high school – typically *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth*, and *Hamlet* – this film offers an alternate, more positive solution to problems than death as required by the Bard of Avon. In a day when (this is being written in 1994) teenage suicide is the second most common cause of death among youngsters, we should go to great lengths to offer them alternate solutions.

Psychologically, aside from the expected Disney version of a coming-of-age story, guilt holds a central role in this film. Simba feels guilty about the death of his father, Mufasa. While this feeling is common in children at the death of a parent or close relative, it is even more common with divorce. Children often see themselves as the reason for a parental separation. Here, Simba flees his feelings, finds a paradise where he can drown his sorrows in physical pleasures. Is this a comment on the attractiveness of drugs and alcohol to youngsters?

Paradise always works well as a psychological metaphor. However, *The Lion King* is quite different from other paradise stories, like Genesis, which begin with the characters living unconsciously in paradise followed by an expulsion into consciousness. Here, Simba regresses into the unconscious after the death of father. Once there, his friends teach him to sing Hakuna Matata, "take it easy, nothing matters." The theme song of this domain is *The Lion Sleeps Tonight*, which, I suggest, is to be taken as a psychological comment – Simba is asleep in his own unconscious. As a psychological metaphor, living blindly in paradise without a thought for the conflicts one must face is a perfect picture of regression, of living an unconscious life. In fact, Simba crosses a very symbolic bridge to get into this unconscious retreat (and he later crosses another bridge to get out).

This state of denial works for Simba until figures from home – significantly, a male and a female – challenge him and force him to confront himself. Here Nala works both as a character and as a metaphor for an aspect of Simba's maturing psyche. For a young man Simba's age, one of the first archetypes commonly confronted once an exploration of the unconscious begins is the Contra Gender Function – in this case the Anima. Simba's Anima figure is strong – whenever we see Simba and Nala playing, she winds up on top, even as an adult. Simba's Anima forces him out of the safety of his all-male isolation into a more balanced state of relatedness – with the community, with the land, and with his mate. Unfortunately, once the powerful Nala has done her thing, *The Lion King* follows the (infamous) Disney tradition in which women are powerful

characters until the end of the film when they are turned into docile and domesticated mates.

The other character that brings young Simba back from the unconscious is Rafiki the Baboon. Here, he functions as a substitute father figure – a powerful male aspect that has been missing in Simba's life. He functions as mentor and trickster in addition to all his other qualities. Such a perfect father image should make us all jealous.

As one would expect of any Disney film, *The Lion King* uses mythological references to bridge the real and the fantastic. We should not be surprised to find serious and contemporary themes, like the death of a father, in fairy tale films like *The Lion King*. There has always been a brisk commerce between the realistic and the fantastic, especially in the realm of film. The traditional *Beauty and the Beast* theme (filmed in the 1946 Jean Cocteau masterpiece and the 1990 Disney version), for instance, is echoed in films like Alfred Hitchcock's *Suspicion* [1941] where an innocent Ingrid Bergman marries Cary Grant only to come to suspect he is a murderer out to do her in. In the end, this "beast" turns out to be a true lover – it seems impossible for Cary Grant to play any sort of beast for very long. Thus, we should expect a confluence of mythology and contemporary images in any fairy tale film.

The mythological basis of *The Lion King* is very complex and, like an octopus, extends its mythological tentacles into many ages and nationalities. Here are a few examples. When Scar becomes the evil king, the land suffers; with either Mufasa or Simba in power, the land blossoms. This type of connection between the land and the ruler is found in both Oedipus and in the myths surrounding the Holy Grail and the Fisher King. At the contemporary end of the mythological spectrum is Rafiki striking a martial art pose to do battle. Being aged, he recalls the image of Mr. Miagi from the several *Karate Kid* [1984, 1986, 1989] films, while his pose and his drawn and pinched face is a caricature of Bruce Lee. For contemporary culture, Bruce Lee is no less a mythological figure than Percival or Oedipus.

The representation of gender roles in Disney films has come in for some recent examination (again, please remember, this is being written in 1994). Remember, the whole point of Disney's animal-starring animations is that we project ourselves into the characters. The animal hero's characteristics become our own, the others' become those of either our friends or our enemies. But how far should this go? When, for instance, does biological accuracy become social commentary? When it is made clear in *The Lion King* that the lionesses hunt and supply the pride with food, are we to take this as a model of contemporary life? Do we have here a reflection of a family style in which the woman goes out of the home to earn a living and the father takes care of the household and the children? Is this what the socially and politically conservative Disney studios are now saying?

Some of the complexities of *The Lion King* can be seen as resulting from the historical process involved in the evolution of a story from oral into literary tradition (despite the fact that this is one of the few "original" stories produced by Disney). Like

most Disney versions of fairy tales, *The Lion King* contains many of the elements our contemporary tales have accreted in their passage from oral tale for adults to written tale to children's literature. This is important to consider because *The Lion King* (along with many other Disney animations) is important because of its instant popularity and instant canonization into acceptable children's fare. The Disney versions of many fairy tales – *Pinocchio, The Little Mermaid, Sleeping Beauty, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* – have become the major texts in our culture.

Most oral tales are mature entertainment for adults, often bawdy and risqué. This aspect, as anything that is "adult," of course, is attractive to youngsters. At this level, *The Lion King* connects with its younger audience by providing something they really like – a good gross out. Simba eats grubs – audience reaction, "Yuk." The Warthog is flatulent – audience reaction, "Yeah." By the way, is this the first Disney-animated flatulence?

As these stories move from the oral into the literary tradition, they are written down by adults with the intention of transforming them into literature for children. As a result, these adults add various layers to make them more didactic and less pure entertainment. For instance, the warnings to young Simba not to go into the Elephant's Burial Ground are similar to those given to *Red Riding Hood* not to stray from the path to grandmother's house, or the young wife's prohibition from opening a certain door in *Bluebeard's Castle*. Message: Parents (and husbands) know best and should be obeyed.

Because of this layering, *The Lion King* is so psychologically complex that it speaks to almost every age, from a very young child to an adult. As with many fairy tales – and the films derived from them – there is a moral pedagogy that dominates the film for the very young viewer: obey your parents, don't lie, don't be too clever or you'll wind up fooling yourself. At a more mature level, the film deals with death as a part of the normal ecology of the world. Like *Bambi*, it deals with the death of a parent and prescribes mourning which is neither frivolous nor debilitating (*Batman's* Bruce Wayne would do well to watch this film and take its messages regarding death to heart – then he would have no need for the compensatory persona of Batman). Death, according to this film, is part of the natural world – something to be avoided, but if unavoidable, to be accepted as normal.

So, who is this film for and who should go see it? In one sense it is for everybody and in another it is not for unaccompanied children. First, the film is quite violent – its G-Rating is certainly borderline. While no one is killed on screen, the big fight scene is filmed in slow-motion with faces clearly being jarred in the tradition of *Raging Bull* [1980] or *Rocky* [1976]. This is not the kind of film that you can drop into the video player and go to cook dinner. You should expect to explain a lot of things to the very young. On the other hand, it recaps, as many fairy tale films from Disney, important aspects of the maturation process. It delves into ecology, which, when we avoid seeing the political metaphors inherent there, is a nice introduction to the idea for the young. The film allows an African American youth audience to relate to a major motion picture as never before. In addition to all the complex psychology and sociology in this film, it is very beautiful – wall to wall eye candy.

The Lion King. Directed by Roger Allers and Rob Minkoff. Screenplay by Irene Mecchi, Jonathan Roberts and Linda Woolverton. Songs by Tim Rice and Elton John. Distributed by Walt Disney Pictures, 1994.