

Review

Jason Sperb, *Disney's Most Notorious Film: Race, Convergence, and the Hidden Histories of 'Song of the South'*. University of Texas Press, Austin, 2013. ISBN 978-0-292-73974-1 (hbk) 278 pp.

Jason Sperb has written a very detailed, well-researched history and ideological analysis of the production, marketing, and reception of *Song of the South*, its transmediated products, and Disney Studios. *Song of the South* (1946; dirs. Harve Foster and Wilfred Jackson) is set in an ambiguous historical moment (whether pre- or post-Civil War is uncertain) in the American south and centres on the relationship between Johnny (Bobby Driscoll) – a young white boy brought to a plantation in the wake of his parents' rocky marriage – and Uncle Remus (James Baskett) – an aged African-American worker on the plantation. During their encounters, Remus tells Johnny stories involving the characters Brer Rabbit, Brer Bear and Brer Fox, all of which have some parabolic significance to Johnny's immediate situation.. *Disney's Most Notorious Film: Race, Convergence, and the Hidden Histories of Song of the South*, follows the film from the sociocultural, political, and industrial conditions under which it was created, to its 1946 premiere, through its four rereleases and its ultimate transmediated dissipation, up until now, including current internet fandom and demands for another rerelease. Demonstrating extensive excavation of reception, production, and marketing materials alongside Sperb's overt ideological positioning, this monograph is an example of great research that is unfortunately made difficult reading through his style and structure.

The introduction forcefully admits an ideological positioning, before giving a brief history of the film's release, contemporary conditions, subsequent appearances, and problematic representations. Chapter 1, 'Conditions of Possibility: The Disney Studios, Postwar "Thermidor", and the ambivalent origins of *Song of the South*', addresses the conditions under which the film was produced. Sperb discusses the "thermidor", or, the inevitable period of cooling (specifically attitudes towards African Americans), often to reactionary ends, that tends to follow periods of social and political change and advance. Sperb also describes the situation of Disney Studios, as particularly precarious and financially unstable in light of Walt Disney's risky aesthetic ideas which influenced the production, style, and structure of *Song of the South* (particularly the combination of live action (the Uncle Remus and Johnny scenes) along with animation (Brer Rabbit and co.

scenes), and even incorporating the two onscreen together in the final shot). Concluding the chapter, he briefly analyses the form and structure of the film, ultimately suggesting that it is not a good film in its own right: being stilted, clichéd, melodramatic, and uneven.

Following this, Sperb more thoroughly delves into the release and reception of the film, this time on its first 1946 iteration. "Put Down the Mint Julep, Mr. Disney": Postwar Racial Consciousness and Disney's Critical Legacy in the 1946 Reception of *Song of the South* takes more time to explicate some of the elements Sperb deems particularly offensive and racist in the film, and unearths reception materials which demonstrate contemporaneous reservations about *Song of the South's* representations of African Americans. Through critical reviews, letters to editors, and statements from members of the NAACP Sperb shows that there was a heightened consciousness of racial representation at the time, and that the public was not yet enthralled by Disney's corporate strategy of generational nostalgia, so that neither Disney nor its product had the adamant advocates it might find decades later.

Sperb does not commit a chapter to the 1956 re-release of *Song of the South*, instead he leaps directly to the successful and highly anticipated 1972 rerelease, occasionally glancing back in "Our Most Requested Movie": Media Convergence, Black Ambivalence, and the Reconstruction of *Song of the South* to the tepid, and occasionally outraged response to that earlier release. He shows how, by 1972, nostalgia, along with the thermidoric social response following the civil rights movement in the 1960s (during which time, notably, the film was not rereleased), intensified the public's desire to see the film. Also, Sperb draws attention to the instances of media convergence – children's storybooks, musical records, and so forth, which maximised the text's potential and allowed it to, in different forms, be distributed to and consumed in the home.

As an extension of this, Sperb devotes his next chapter, 'A Past That Never Existed: *Coonskin*, Post-racial Whiteness, and Rewriting History in the Era of Reaganism', to a discussion of Ralph Bakshi's film *Coonskin* (1977), which appropriated the form, structure, and characters of *Song of the South*, in what Sperb deems an astute and confrontational, if somewhat problematic, commentary on racial representation in and the contemporary evasive racial discourse around the Disney film. This leads Sperb to engage with theories of whiteness, particularly evasive whiteness – the idea that the predominance of whiteness is reinforced by the fact that it is culturally invisible, and the politically touted view that the avoidance of racial discussion is itself racially sensitive, and which in turn prevents necessary discourse. Sperb links this, and the 1980 and 1986 rereleases of *Song of the South* to Ronald Reagan's Presidency, which was also coupled by a social and political nostalgia which Disney catered to. This chapter again engages with the film's reception to demonstrate the more vehement defence of the film by supporters, and their dismissal of any problematic racial representations.

As *Song of the South* has not been rereleased by Disney since 1986, Sperb then discusses Disney's strategy of stripping and disseminating the film's most lucrative parts in a transmedia strategy. in 'On Tar Babies and Honey Pots: Splash Mountain, "Zip-a-Dee-Do-Dah," and the Transmedia Dissipation of *Song of the South*' his focus is on uses of the film's

Oscar-winning song and on Splash Mountain, the Disney theme park ride which recycles music, characters and scenes from the film,. Here Sperb also aims to forge an ideological analysis of theme park rides and narratives, which has been little researched.

This then moves to a discussion of the ongoing discourse and reception around the film in 'Reassuring Convergence: New Media, Nostalgia, and the Internet Fandom of *Song of the South*' where Sperb addresses ongoing views and defences of the film, as well as online fandom and campaigns for the film's rerelease. The internet has made the film more accessible than in years past, and allowed current fans and critics to (re)interpret its representations. In his conclusion, Sperb speculates on the likelihood and how lucrative a rerelease might be for Disney, stressing his own view that the film should be made available to encourage further discourse around race.

Since *Song of the South* is almost seventy years old and has been released multiple times, the scope of this project is certainly extensive in chronological terms, with a broad range of supporting material, advertising and texts resulting from its transmediation. Sperb confronts the challenge well, and demonstrates a unique ability to engage with multiple resources and formats for a solid approach to reception studies. He proves equally adept at researching the reception of seventy-year old releases through fairly traditional means, as well as exploring current fandom utilising internet resources. The information Sperb brings to light, and the extent of his discovery is impressive. His book also aids an understanding of the development of the business strategies at Disney Studios.

Although Sperb details a clear overarching aim in terms of chapter development, within the individual chapters Sperb's drive and trajectory is unclear. There is a tremendous amount of cross-referencing between chapters and periods, and ultimately he repeats himself often. While there may be a particular goal or theme to each subsection, the organisation of these occasionally seems arbitrary, and within the subsections, the theme becomes muddled amongst points that he is rereading, so a forward progression of argument gets lost. Unfortunately, a lot of great insight is ultimately difficult to trace through other parts of the book. In spite of this problem, Sperb demonstrates he is a talented researcher and has extensively and thoroughly examined his subject. This is a tremendous effort, and I hope that future projects will see Sperb combine his complex, academic analysis, with a clearer and more reader-friendly structure.

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