

rorists. They put it so well when they claim that ‘anti-Palestinian racism is big business for Israel’. I know they actually mean this literally, as Israel’s security industry – tested on Palestinian lives and deaths – is also booming. But they also point to how this becomes part of an infrastructure of support-systems and grids that further sustain the normal workings of the militant settler state in the Middle East.

My three readings were underscored by the different (always intersecting) hats I try to wear: the researcher, the teacher, the ally. I imagine that this is what the authors were hoping for: that the text would be a platform for political education across multiple terrains. That they would help me to find new ways to articulate Palestine as present and integral to all the places where I am active: the classroom, the research, my union, the associations to which I belong, the everyday worlds in which I walk,

parent, eat, live. And that I would do this with a deeper understanding of the structures that shape unfreedom in Palestine and beyond. They spell out how to see and encounter the essential struggles of this moment – against empire, against racism, against capitalism – as entwined and requiring a systemic approach to solidarity, in ways that ‘strengthen all of us’. But as we embark on the next phase, what is already being called ‘an aftermath’, with new orders filtering in to settle the dust, erase the bodies, churn the rubble and blood into something we do not recognise or reckon with, they tell us to keep working, keep organising, keep shining the light on those lost. Because ceasefires are some of the most dangerous moments, as attention wanes and ‘normal’ sets in. As they remind us across *Resisting Erasure’s* beautiful, heartbreaking and always precise genealogy of our current moment: until Palestine is free, nothing is normal.

Sharri Plonski

The Mickey Mouse Industrial Complex

Vicky Osterweil, *The Extended Universe: How Disney Killed the Movies and Took Over the World* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2026). 320pp., £26.95 hb., 979 8 88890 366 7

Who owns Mickey Mouse? The world? From the beginning – 1928 – this spawn of trivial, commercial culture was subjected to philosophy, which asked the above question of him and posed many more. Walter Benjamin wrote about him in the 1930s. For Benjamin, Mickey Mouse is a cipher of cruel, alienating modern life. Yet he is also its consolation: nature morally mobilised against itself – and us. He is, above all, a figure of mirth, a laughter so visceral that it loosens up the masses, acting as sadistic cackle or safety valve. Mickey Mouse becomes a dialectical image of the possibility of life in which everything is solved, everything concludes in tremendous relief. Benjamin describes him as ‘globe encircling’, implying that he does belong to the world, and even belongs, more than anyone, to the oppressed.

Of course that cosmic tenure is also untrue. Mickey Mouse is, above all, private property. He is a trademark, a brand item, a logo. His world conquering has been identified as a vector of cultural imperialism. We live inside an enormous Disney comic which threatens to destroy

political nous – so note Ariel Dorfman and Armand Matelart in their 1971 study *How to Read Donald Duck*, an assessment of the ideological impact of Disney comics in Latin America. Infused with the revolutionary spirit of the Allende government, they confidently foresee a time after Disney that would be shaped by the social practices of people in revolt. But Pinochet came and, anyway, thereafter the Disney company went on to become one of the largest corporations in the world.

Vicky Osterweil’s *The Extended Universe* asks what universe Mickey Mouse and the whole Disney company have conjured into being. The subtitle leans into a contemporary vogue for explanatory-dramatic subtitles that have an air of Ted Talk historicism about them. Perhaps this is deliberate, ironic even. The claim may nonetheless be true. How did Disney kill the movies and achieve world take-over? The answers are various but largely come down to revised and anti-union labour practices and the tight management of intellectual property. The extended universe refers to the expansion of Disney and

its buying up of many franchises over its hundred years of existence. It refers to its consolidated ‘total marketing’ of a multi-output product now extended into subscription TV, theme parks, cruises, hotels, comics, plushies, happy meals. The Marvel Cinematic Universe, owned by Disney, could be a codeword for the marvellous cinematic universe in which nothing – including that which is not cinema as such – remains untouched by Disney’s effervescent commercial sparkle, the whole of life succumbing to ‘experience management’. Central to Osterweil’s analysis is that the totalising aspects of the The Walt Disney Company – and its subsidiaries Disney Entertainment, ESPN, LLC, Disney Experiences, with their many subdivisions including Pixar, Marvel, Lucasfilm, 20th Century Studios, Searchlight Pictures, Disney Parks, Disney Publishing Worldwide, The Muppets Studio – are most evident in its enforcement of Intellectual Property management. Disney created a highly efficient system for generating revenue, an ever-expanding ‘Disney world’ structured around franchises, all tightly controlled through strong intellectual property rights exerted on their own product and the ones they acquired.

Is intellectual property a misnomer? It is not really intellectual in any discernible sense, but it is property – characters, names, images, logos. If Adorno and Horkheimer labelled commercial mass culture the Culture Industry, Disney converted it to an IP management system. The themes of this book link to Osterweil’s previous one, *In Defense of Looting*, for Disney product is product intended never to be stolen. Such wielding of IP extends beyond the Disney universe to become a ‘principle’ that the company champions and secures. The chapter focussed on Mickey Mouse is provocatively titled ‘Mickey Mouse Wants You to Get Covid’. As Mickey Mouse was about to enter the public domain in 1984, the Disney company fought for an extension of copyright protection for twenty years. As the early rat-like Mickey Mouse of *Steamboat Willie* and *Plane Crazy* was again about to become public property, they prolonged it through the Sonny Bono Copyright Term Extension Act. Anyway, Mickey Mouse, with his circular black ears and white four-fingered gloves, is a registered trademark and withheld in that way from re-use. Osterweil shows how, through the same mechanism, other items – such as vaccines – are deemed intellectual property and their benefits denied to those who cannot pay. This claim is not speculat-

ive or associational. In 2020-21, Disney lobbied the US government, together with pharmaceutical companies and other IP-heavy industries, to oppose a proposal on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights at the World Trade Organisation. India and South Africa had requested a temporary waiving of vaccine patent protections in order to allow global manufacturing. The opponents’ justification was that weakening IP anywhere would threaten IP everywhere, a logic long used to defend Mickey Mouse’s remaining in copyright. The power that accrues to a system so expertly maintained and employed by a culture company decides who can live and who must die.



A wave of Disney-bashing took off in the 1990s concomitant with it reaching a market value way beyond anything it had achieved before then. For some, the Disney company appeared as a cultural pariah suffused with homophobic, racist and anti-feminist stereotypes, but it also seemed to be available to something more. Cultural and Media Studies jettisoned critical disdain for popular pleasures and enthused about participatory fan cultures and the dynamism of transmedial storytelling. Osterweil cites Eleanor Byrne and Martin McQuillan’s 1999 study

Deconstructing Disney. There they argued that Disney had become synonymous with a certain conservative, patriarchal, heterosexist ideology, loosely associated with American cultural imperialism. Disney films, merchandise, theme parks and the media conglomerate might not be in need of deconstruction as they are ‘self-evidently reactionary parables of the American right’. Yet, they insist, a deconstruction reveals how Disney product destabilises, undoes, self-explodes.

Osterweil’s approach is stranded between recognition of the subversive uses to which Disney stuff might be put – oppositional and resistant readings, encoding-decoding lore – and identification of it as capitalist capture. The results of punishing policies on IP, together with Walt Disney’s reactionary instincts and desire to police labour and achieve high returns, produces outputs that are more akin to those rebuked in Adorno’s standardisation thesis. While there are some nods to fan culture *détournement*, more prevalent is the stifling of different outlooks by those who have imbibed the sweet syrup of what Peter Watkins, a favourite of Osterweil, calls ‘the monoform’. Such a universe is not really extended, but rather narrowed. Culture is standardised into sameness. Franchises cookie-cut plots, characters and environments. Audiences are trained in serial consumption. Consumption is habitual. Everything becomes modular, repeatable, extendable. Fans are captured labour. On a break from writing this review, I walked and saw a London bus liveried in a Disney+ advert: ‘A lifetime of great stories’. Cradle to grave, everywhere, every moment, if you sign up here, forever. The panoply of entertainments that could exist – if things, that is to say, property relations, were otherwise – cannot.

And yet, we still hope for more, or the author does, for all this is driven by disappointment and betrayal. There is plenty of personal reflection in the book – memories of seeing Disney product as a child, throat aches, joy and awe, love, desire, self-clarification of gender and sexuality when young, annoyance around stereotypes here, fantasmatic relations there. It is all inside of us. I have encountered extreme versions of such affect before. Presenting work from my 2004 book *Hollywood Flatlands: Animation, Critical Theory and the Avant-Garde* at a Disney conference in a Holiday Inn in Fort Lauderdale in the early 2000s, I was reviled for speaking of Walt Disney and Leni Riefenstahl, Snow White’s dwarves and Nazi racial

policy, in the same breath. In the closing words, the conference organiser spoke affirmatively of the persistence of what Disney named ‘that fine, clean, unspoiled spot down deep in every one of us that maybe the world has made us forget and that maybe our pictures can help us recall’.

I thought things might have changed in Disney Studies, but became aware of a 2024 call for papers for a Disney-themed conference organised by Australia-based PopCRN – The Popular Culture Research Network – and titled, with no apparent sense of irony, ‘The Magic Kingdom: Exploring Disney’s Impact on Popular Culture’. Conference topics continued with the naïve tone that seems still to yearn for something once promised. They included: “‘Ohana means family. Family means nobody gets left behind or forgotten’: The importance of family in Disney”; “Everything is possible. Even the impossible”: Disney’s technological breakthroughs”; “‘Whatever choice you make, let it come from your heart’: Love in the Disneyworld”; “‘A queen is never late. Everyone else is simply early’: Depictions of royalty in Disney”; “All it takes is faith and trust: Religion and Disney”; “‘To infinity, and beyond!’ The eternal success of Disney’.

Osterweil’s analysis is far from all this, but she notes that ‘We still reflexively think of Disney as childhood giggles’. But do we? Or what ‘we’ does think like that? The adult who nostalgically remembers TV cartoons and theme parks? The parent who streams for a child what he watched on video thirty years before? Osterweil demurs from any monolithic view for or against Disney product. So much has changed in the past decades. Disney no longer possesses a reactionary reputation. Indeed, in some quarters it is accused of being excessively ‘woke’. For one, the acquisition of Pixar developed identity-focussed and social-emotional storytelling, a push for inclusivity and occasional affirmation of queerness. But the bigger point Osterweil makes relates to the extended universe: Disney is so gigantic that its output cannot be coherently characterised anymore. There is no Disney version. What is a Disney film? What is Disney product? Anything that provides bankable IP for Disney. A section titled ‘Intermission’ lists products not typically associated with Disney. It includes *Pulp Fiction*, Queen’s *Made In Heaven* album, *Scream* by Wes Craven, *Starship Troopers*, *Face/Off* and The Butthole Surfers. But owning is not making or conceiving that Disney magic,

and, in any case, this book is largely unconcerned with aesthetics or form – for example, Disney’s embrace of CGI is attributed to labour disciplining, globalisation, financialisation and IP management, rather than it being understood as an expressive, visual form of contemporaneity. Everything devolves down to ownership and property and the money logic that the culture has itself

become. But the most depressing reason Osterweil offers as to why Disney does not glower out as a dull beacon of reactionary cultural form nowadays is that the entire entertainment apparatus has remade itself in Disney’s image. As a result, Disney outputs no longer attract distinct ire – they are no longer exceptional, but exemplary. What a world!

Esther Leslie

The philosophy of revolt

Idris Robinson, *The Revolt Eclipses Whatever the World Has to Offer* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2025). 256pp., \$16.95 pb., 978 1 63590 243 3

In a 1972 interview from her cell at California State Prison, the interviewer presses Angela Davis, then awaiting trial, on the question of revolutionary violence. Rejecting the implicit premise that revolution is necessarily more violent than the system it seeks to overthrow, Davis reminds the white interviewer of some basic facts about life in the United States of America: that Black people are constantly exposed to violence; that racial profiling and police harassment are daily occurrences; and that her own life, too, has been shaped by atrocity – including the devastating story of four Black girls from her childhood block in Birmingham, Alabama, killed in a racist church bombing. ‘You ask *me* whether I approve of violence?’, Davis retorts. ‘When someone asks me about violence, I just find it incredible because what it means is that the person who’s asking that question has absolutely no idea what Black people have gone through, what Black people have experienced in this country since the time the first Black person was kidnapped from the shores of Africa.’

Watching Davis’s interview is a sobering experience for someone like me, whose mind, like that of so many white minions once trapped in Anglo-inspired philosophy departments, has been primed to think about violence from a position of structural innocence. Violence, we are taught, is something ‘out there’, something that happens to someone else for reasons beyond our control. Our job is simply to act as moral magistrates. The main example of this kind of thinking, of course, is the magically self-moving trolley that any undergraduate analytic philosophy student inevitably encounters: Do

you choose to pull the lever to act as a white utilitarian saviour or do you prefer to remain in the only slightly awkward position of white innocence?

From the position of the morally innocent bystander, it is but a short step to embrace the liberal non-violence doctrine. Undergirded by turn-the-other-cheek-Protestantism, the political correlate to non-violence is the belief that there are legitimate and non-legitimate ways of protesting incipient fascism and responding to state violence. In this peculiar liberal phantasy, the state only makes use of its armed monopoly on violence in exceptional cases, to uphold law and order. Should the state abuse its powers it is ultimately kept in check by constitutional law. Downstream from this is where you’ll find the most horrid people you’ll ever meet in a situation of political protest: the self-anointed guardians of peace, hell-bent on keeping everyone within the limits of respectability politics.

In his book, *The Revolt Eclipses Whatever the World has to Offer*, the philosopher Idris Robinson powerfully refuses any such nonsense. He also refuses white moral extortion when it comes to the question of violence, arguing, similarly to Davis, that ‘there is simply no way to avoid the spiral of violence that began at the very moment when the first wooden ships reached the shore of the Atlantic.’ For those whose very existence has been shaped and moulded by the slowly widening orbit of violence that is US American capitalism – the cosplaying fascist ICE goons are simply the latest and most shameless reinforcing of the existing racial hierarchies of power