

Disney



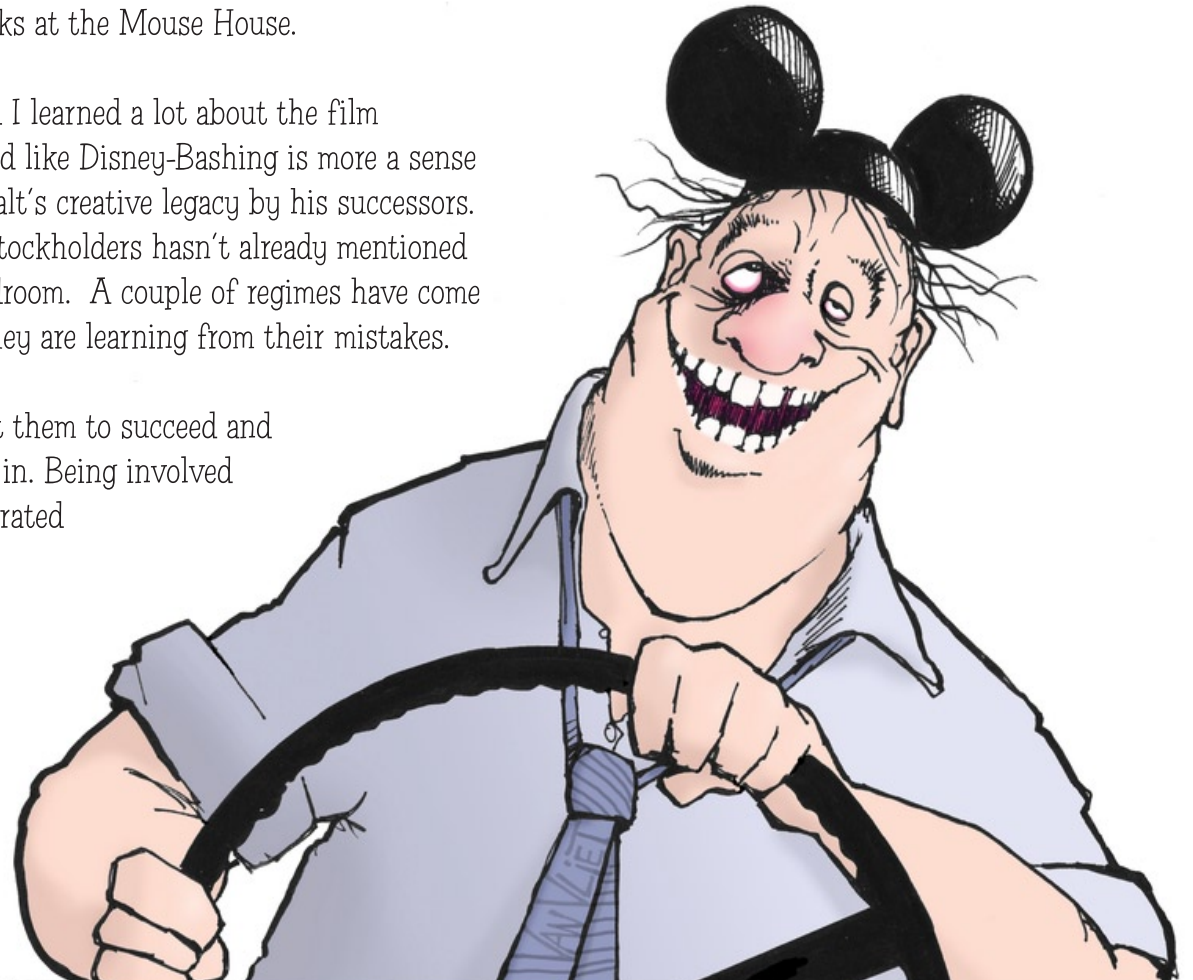
Life with the Mouse

Like many children, the very first live-action movie I ever saw was a Disney film. It was the classic, Mary Poppins and the imprint of that experience was as if it was cast in cement, certainly to be blurred and softened by time, but there as long as I exist. (Even today, jumping in and out of paintings and dancing with penguins remains a very appealing concept. But it makes me wonder how I would have turned out if my first movie experience was Psycho...)

To a kid growing up in New Jersey, Disney Studios was more like a fable than a place and if you had any artistic ambitions, it existed somewhere in your mind just left of Nirvana and right before you entered heaven. Exposure to Disney's efforts made me realize that magic was a worthy goal in life. The fates were kind to me, or at least had a sense of humor, as much of my career eventually became intertwined with those fabled folks at the Mouse House.

My experiences working at Disney started with TRON and I learned a lot about the film business and its machinations while there. What will sound like Disney-Bashing is more a sense of frustration at what some have called the betrayal of Walt's creative legacy by his successors. But I'm not pointing out anything that an angry army of stockholders hasn't already mentioned while they were busy storming the Magic Kingdom's boardroom. A couple of regimes have come and gone since my first job there and one can only hope they are learning from their mistakes.

In spite of my frustrations with Disney, I desperately want them to succeed and try my best to help them on every project they involve me in. Being involved with them essentially since childhood is like having a venerated relative with a drinking problem. You respect them for what they have done, love them in spite of what they do, but wish to God they would stop driving their car on the sidewalk through crowds of pedestrians.



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The Dead Zone

In 1966 Walt Disney died, leaving a creative leadership vacuum without an heir apparent. The magic that fueled his movie machine started leaking out of the system and by the late seventies and early eighties, films from both the live action and animated features had deteriorated from bad to an embarrassment.

Disney Studios had once been the epicenter of creativity and magic, yet without Walt at the helm, management became stuck in the past, confused by the present and absolutely terrified of the future. They relied on "formulas" that someone (or some committee) had deemed "successful" in choosing their film projects, and then proceeded to toss them into the production machine, fully expecting viable product to emerge at the end. The end results were epics like, "The Cat from Outer Space", "CondorMan" and the infamous "Black Cauldron" (which was proudly hailed as 12 years in the making). The once noble ship of Disney Studios had become a rudderless hulk heading for the jagged rocks of oblivion. Rumors abounded of the studio going belly-up if things didn't turn around soon and common consensus was that the theme parks could only support the studio for so long. Things were looking pretty dark for the Mouse...

But in that darkness a few people struggled to reverse what seemed to be an inevitable course of self-destruction. At the forefront of this effort was Tom Wilhite who had enough smarts and common sense to realize that the key to getting people to watch their movies was to produce something interesting enough that someone might actually want to see it. Or maybe, show them something that they have never seen before! While that may elicit a big "Well, DUH!" from you, it apparently hadn't occurred to anyone else at the studio at the time. For Disney, that was radical thinking.

During Tom's time at the studio he managed to introduce a number of interesting new film projects to the studio. Most were a breath of fresh air in a stale environment, some were actually pretty damn good, but one would emerge to re-write the rules of filmmaking. TRON was brought in and the film making process was about to change forever.

Tom had glimpsed the future in spite of the corporate haze and wrestled its moribund system into accepting change. While we expect courage of conviction and vision from our filmmakers, we have grown to expect its absence in studio executives. Without his courage and vision, Tron would probably have never ever ended up there. I suspect that he felt like he was beating his head against a stone wall most of the time, yet somehow he made things happen.

