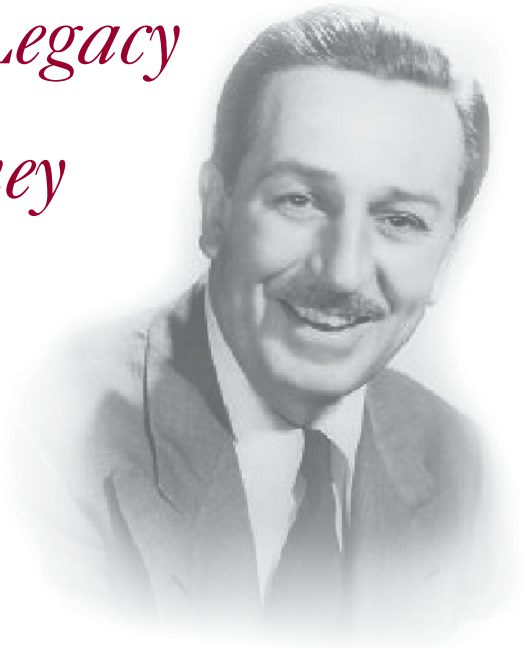


*The Life & Legacy  
of Walt Disney*

**Panel Discussion  
Neal Gabler, Moderator**



**Annenberg School for Communication  
University of Southern California  
November 15, 2006**

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### The Norman Lear Center

The Norman Lear Center is a multidisciplinary research and public policy center exploring implications of the convergence of entertainment, commerce, and society. From its base in the USC Annenberg School for Communication, the Lear Center builds bridges between eleven schools whose faculty study aspects of entertainment, media, and culture. Beyond campus, it bridges the gap between the entertainment industry and academia, and between them and the public. For more information, please visit [www.learcenter.org](http://www.learcenter.org).



### Neal Gabler

Neal Gabler, Senior Fellow at the USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center, is an author, cultural historian, and film critic. His first book, *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood*, won the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize and the Theatre Library Association Award. His second book, *Winchell: Gossip, Power and the Culture of Celebrity*, was named non-fiction book of the

year by *Time* magazine. *Newsweek* calls his most recent book, *Walt Disney: The Triumph of American Imagination*, "the definitive Disney bio."

He appears regularly on the media review program *Fox News Watch*, and writes often for the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*. Gabler has contributed to numerous other publications including *Esquire*, *Salon*, *New York Magazine*, *Vogue*, *American Heritage*, *The New York Republic*, *Us* and *Playboy*. He has appeared on many television programs including *The Today Show*, *The CBS Morning News*, *The News Hour*, *Entertainment Tonight*, *Charlie Rose*, and *Good Morning America*. Gabler also hosted *Sneak Previews* for PBS.

Gabler held fellowships from the Freedom Forum Media Studies Center and the Guggenheim Foundation. He served as the chief non-fiction judge of the National Book Awards and judged the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prizes.

Gabler has taught at the University of Michigan and at Pennsylvania State University. He graduated summa cum laude from the University of Michigan and holds advanced degrees in film and American culture.



### Harriet Burns

As the first woman ever hired by Walt Disney Imagineering in a creative rather than an office capacity, Harriet Burns helped design and build prototypes for theme park attractions, as well as final products featured at Disneyland and the New York World's Fair of 1964.

Born in San Antonio, Texas, Burns received her Bachelor's Degree in Art from Southern Methodist University in Dallas, and went on to study advanced design for another year at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque.

In 1953, she moved to Los Angeles with her husband and small daughter and accepted a part-time position designing and producing props for television's *Colgate Comedy Hour* along with interiors and sets for Las Vegas Hotels, including the Dunes.

Subsequently, she was hired to paint sets and props for the new *Mickey Mouse Club* television show. Burns soon began coordinating the show's color styling and even designed and built the famous "Mouse Clubhouse."

She later joined Walt Disney Imagineering (formerly called WED) where she helped create Sleeping Beauty Castle, New Orleans Square, the Haunted Mansion, and more. She also helped construct Storybook Land, which features model-size villages inspired by Disney animated movies, such as *Pinocchio* and designed all of the "singing birds" in the Enchanted Tiki Room, the first Audio-Animatronics attraction at Disneyland.

Among other contributions, Burns worked on everything from figure finishing to stage design for attractions featured at the New York World's Fair in 1964, including Great Moments with Mr. Lincoln and The Carousel of Progress. On occasion, she would appear on segments of ABC's *Walt Disney's Wonderful World of Color*.

Burns retired in 1986, after 31 years with Disney.



### Alice Davis

At Walt Disney Imagineering (WDI), Alice Estes Davis was the original "designing woman." Married to Disney Legend Marc Davis, she enjoyed a remarkable Disney career of her own.

Born in Escalon, California, she received a scholarship to attend Chouinard Art Institute in

1947, where she met future husband, Marc, who was an instructor.

One day, years later, she received a call from Marc. He needed a costume designed for some live-action reference footage to inspire his animation of Briar Rose in *Sleeping Beauty* (1959).

Alice recalled, "Marc wanted to see how the skirt worked in live dance steps, and that was my first job at Disney."

In 1963, Alice collaborated with art designer Mary Blair on the research, design and creation of more than 150 highly-detailed costumes for the Audio-Animatronics children of It's A Small World.

Alice translated Marc's original drawings of the pirates' attire into clothing designs and patterns for all of the costumes featured in *Pirates of the Caribbean*. When the attraction opened in 1965, guests were dazzled by the animated figures and their colorful, textured pirate-wear. Alice also contributed to General Electric's *Carousel of Progress* and the *Flight to the Moon* attractions. She continues consulting for the company and making special guest appearances at Disneyland events.



### Blaine Gibson

Born in Rocky Ford, Colorado, in 1918, Blaine attended Colorado University, but left school to join The Walt Disney Studios in 1939. While working as an in-between artist and assistant animator, he took evening classes in sculpture at Pasadena City College and studied with a private

instructor. Among his animation credits are *Fantasia*, *Bambi*, *Song of the South*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *Peter Pan*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *101 Dalmatians*.

After animating all day at The Walt Disney Studios, Blaine would go home at night and sculpt. In 1954, Walt Disney happened to see one of Blaine's art exhibits, which featured several animal sculptures, and recruited him to work on special projects for his new theme park, Disneyland.

Blaine ultimately went on to create hundreds of sculptures from which Audio-Animatronics figures and bronzes were produced for exhibits in the 1964 New York World's Fair and Disney theme parks. Among his credits, Blaine contributed to such attractions as Great Moments with Mr. Lincoln, Pirates of the Caribbean, the Haunted Mansion, and Enchanted Tiki Room. He also sculpted all 41 U.S. Presidents, including Bill Clinton, for the Hall of Presidents at Walt Disney World.

After nearly 45 years with The Walt Disney Company, Blaine retired in 1983. He has, however, continued to consult on such projects as The Great Movie Ride at Disney-MGM Studios in Florida. In 1993, the same year he was named a Disney Legend, Blaine created a life-size bronze of Walt and Mickey Mouse standing hand in hand. The statue, called "Partners," is located at the Central Hub in Disneyland.



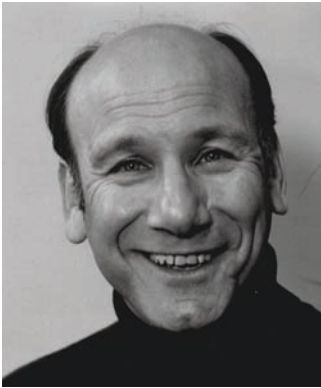
### Richard Schickel

Richard Schickel is a film critic, documentary film maker and movie historian, who has written over 30 books, among them *The Disney Version*; *His Picture in the Papers*; *D.W. Griffith: An American Life*; *Intimate Strangers: The Culture of Celebrity*; *Brando: A Life in Our Times*; *Matinee Idylls*; and *Good Morning Mr. Zip Zip Zip*. His 30

documentaries include *Charlie: The Life and Art of Charles Chaplin*; *Woody Allen: A Life in Film*; and *Shooting War*, which is about combat cameramen in World War II.

Schickel has just completed a book about Elia Kazan and a documentary about Martin Scorsese, which is the eighteenth in the series of portraits of American film directors he has made over the course of his career. He has held a Guggenheim Fellowship, and was awarded the British Film Institute Book Prize, the Maurice Bessy prize for film criticism, and the William K. Everson Award for his work in film history. His recently completed reconstruction of Samuel Fuller's classic war film, *The Big One*, was named one of the year's Ten Best Films by the *New York Times*, and he has won special citations from the National Society of Film Critics, The Los Angeles and Seattle Film Critics Associations, and Anthology Film Archives. He has been reviewing movies for *Time* since 1972 and writes a monthly column, *Film on Paper*, for the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*.

## *The Life & Legacy of Walt Disney*



Marty Kaplan, Director of the Norman Lear Center



**Martin Kaplan:** My name is Marty Kaplan, I'm the Associate Dean here at the Annenberg School and I'm also the Director of the Norman Lear Center, which is a center at the Annenberg School devoted to the topic that entertainment affects everything, whether it's news or politics or architecture or religion or education. There is something about the need to capture attention and to hold attention and to get audiences which has shaped so much of what's going on in society that it deserves to be looked at. And one of the pleasures of the Lear Center is my long-term association with a senior fellow of the Lear Center, which in the tradition of speaker introductions, I'm going to delay for a moment but telegraph nevertheless.

Our topic today is Walt Disney and there are many people here who have either worked for Walt Disney or worked with the Walt Disney Studios or spent time thinking and writing about Walt Disney. Let me introduce some of them to you first. To my right is a gentleman who wrote a book in 1968 called *The Disney Version*, which to show you its popularity has been reissued twice –

**Richard Schickel:** Never been out of print.

**Martin Kaplan:** Never been out of print. Revised editions in 1984 and 1997. He has written one of the seminal studies of the idea of celebrity and it's called *Intimate Strangers*. He has been either a regular or occasional film critic for *Time* magazine. His many books and documentaries include books about Clint Eastwood, Elia Kazan, Marlon Brando, and Woody Allen. Please welcome

Richard Schickel.

Who here has been to Disneyland? All right, that's a pretty safe guess. Well, you are all then beneficiaries of the work that several people here have done. If you have ever been on, for example, It's a Small World or Pirates of the Caribbean, the costumes of those characters were designed by one of our guests here. Her late husband, Marc Davis, is one of the Nine Old Men, I guess they're called –?



**Alice David:** Yes, that's right.



(From Left to Right) Neal Gabler, Alice Davis, Richard Schickel, and Marty Kaplan

**Martin Kaplan:** – the great group of original Disney animators. He created the characters of Tinker Bell and Cruella DeVille. And she and her colleagues here were involved in much of what we think of as the theme park attraction side of the Disney Studio. Please welcome Alice Davis.

There is a part of the Disney Studios' where I actually worked for 12 years, which is the kind of R&D facility, and these days it's called Walt Disney Imagineering. But when it started, it was called WED, Walter Elias Disney, and then MAPO for Mary Poppins. We have here two people who worked at WED and MAPO on many of the original attractions, including, for example, Mr. Lincoln from the World's Fair in 1964. These days, it might seem like everyone has that kind of stuff, but there was a time in which an Audio-Animatronic talking President Lincoln was one of the miracles of the Earth. They also designed attraction after attraction – the Jungle Cruise, the Tiki Room – so much of what we think of as the Disney theme park. Please welcome Harriet Burns and Blaine Gibson.



**Neal Gabler, Author of "Walt Disney: The Triumph of American Imagination"**

*I feel I know Walt Disney because essentially he and I lived parallel lives for the last seven years that I was researching this book and going through all of his papers.*

**Gabler**

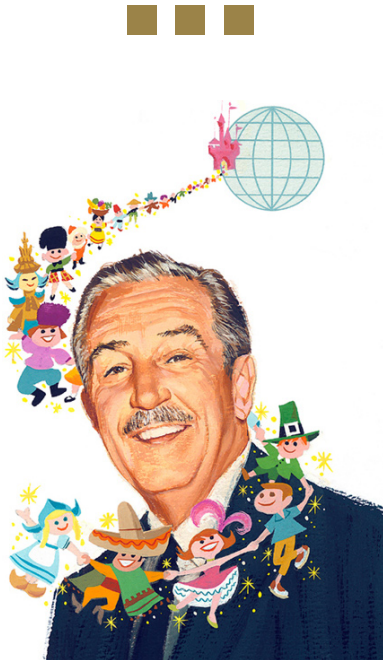


And now to introduce our occasion for getting together today. He has written many books, including a biography of Walter Winchell, and a group biography of the Hollywood studio system called *An Empire of their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood*. One of his books, *Life, the Movie: How Entertainment Conquered Reality*, could, in effect, be the motto for what we study at the Lear Center. It's a special pleasure to us that he is a senior fellow of the Lear Center and has a new biography just out, *Walt Disney*, please welcome Neal Gabler.

I'm going to toss it to Neal for some comments and then there will be a kind of easy, comfortable conversation, and at a certain point you will find it irresistible not to be part of it and you will be welcome to join it. So, Neal.

**Neal Gabler:** I feel in a way that I've kind of dampened the conversation because we were in the Green Room a moment ago and I was just sitting back, I was just listening to them talk and it was absolutely fascinating.

Now, I feel I know Walt Disney because essentially he and I lived parallel lives for the last seven years that I was researching this book and going through all of his papers. I wrote an article for the *Washington Post Book World* this last weekend in which I described method biography. Method biography means that among the many things biographers are – they're thieves, they're detectives, they're psychologists – they are also method actors, because when you embark on a biography you have to find in yourself correspondences between yourself and your subject. When I researched this book, I did so chronologically. I went through all of Walt's papers in chronological order at the archives so that I could stay in the moment with Walt and get to know him.



*He was a man of enormous self confidence and we may hear a little bit about that this afternoon, but at any given point in his life he wasn't sure that he was going to be successful. He was hoping, but he didn't know.*

Gabler

We all know that Walt Disney is going to be enormously successful in the end, he's going to make *Snow White* and he's going to make these other great animations and he's going to build the theme parks and he's going to do *It's a Small World* and all of that – but Walt Disney didn't know. He was a man of enormous self-confidence and we may hear a little bit about that this afternoon, but at any given point in his life he wasn't sure that he was going to be successful. He was hoping, but he didn't know. And so, when I researched the book, I tried to stay in the moment with him, both to make the book more tactile, to give you the sense of suspense, the sense of what Walt is thinking and feeling at any given moment of time, but also so that the reader will share the experience with Walt. And I did that for seven years.

But this afternoon, you're going to have the opportunity, and so am I, to hear from people who didn't have to go through Walt's archives, and didn't have to rely on method acting, as I did, because they *knew* Walt Disney, they worked with Walt Disney, and they can give you their version of Walt Disney. I'm going to kind of open it up and I hope we'll have a rather free-floating discussion here. I want to begin with Mr. Gibson and ask him this question. You started work at the Studio in 1939, if I'm not mistaken.

**Blaine Gibson:** Yes.

**Neal Gabler:** So you went there very early.

**Blaine Gibson:** I was an apprentice for a while. Animation takes a long time.

**Neal Gabler:** Yes, and at the Disney Studio, it took a long time to work your



way up through the ranks, did it not?

**Blaine Gibson:** It did. Probably one of the main reasons was because the Nine Old Men never got any worse. They were better as they got older. And it was awfully hard to get in.

**Neal Gabler:** And they weren't all that old, either.

**Blaine Gibson:** No, no, no.

**Neal Gabler:** Not at that point.

**Blaine Gibson:** Walt was only 38 when I started, and he was 17 years older than I was, so actually it was a bunch of young people.

**Neal Gabler:** Do you remember the first time you saw Walt Disney? Met him?

**Blaine Gibson:** I can't remember exactly, but I saw him often and he was always friendly and said "hello." But I didn't make any aggressive moves toward him because I was in awe of him from the very beginning actually. I felt he was a father figure in a way. Once I started animating on features – I was in effects animation for ten years and character animation for ten years – the happy time was when I was a character animator. We had something called sweat boxes to the very last, projection rooms where people met to look at dailies. They were hot. People would watch the dailies and sweat. Walt would look at the dailies and he would be sitting in the back and it was rather impersonal for the most part. You would see your scenes running all through and he would go through it: "I like that group of scenes. That's working very



Walt Disney and Blaine Gibson



*I saw him often and he was always friendly and said "hello." But I didn't make any aggressive moves toward him because I was in awe of him from the very beginning actually. I felt he was a father figure in a way.*

Gibson

well. No, I think we need some work on this.” That was the kind of relationship you had with Walt, in animation. But that all changed when we went over to Imagineering. Everybody was on a personal basis with him at that time.



Harriet Burns

*We could never remember that name, Anaheim, because no one had ever heard of that place. It was just a bunch of orange groves. There were other rumors that it would never work, nobody would go that far. Who was going to drive 40 miles to a play park?*

Burns



**Neal Gabler:** Do you remember the first time you met Walt?

**Harriet Burns:** Yes. I was actually hired to do the sets and props with Bruce Bushman for the Mouseketeer television show. TV was newish and he was always experimenting with new things, and so that was fun. He was telling me about what we should do on that, his whole idea of this big Mouseketeer. I thought it sounded pretty corny, these Mouseketeers and so forth. And then he said, “Now, you won’t be shooting all the time, so when you’re not you can work with these art directors on this park that I’m going to build.” There was this rumor of this park and that was all –

**Neal Gabler:** That’s all he said? This park? he didn’t –

**Harriet Burns:** No, he didn’t define it. I think other people had told me it was down in Anaheim and we could never remember that name, Anaheim, because no one had ever heard of that place. It was just a bunch of orange groves. There were other rumors that it would never work, nobody would go that far. Who was going to drive 40 miles to a play park? Because the original plan, set across from Disneyland, had this little train thing, and not a real park. So that was my beginning with Walt. And we had a great relationship because there were only three of us.

Originally, we were in a boxcar because there was no space for us in the animation building. So he just stuffed all the odd-ball people down in this little



*Everything was an experiment. So it was quite exciting and it was exciting for Walt. He would almost be dying to use whatever – if we were soldering, he wanted to do it. He even took a flit gun out of my hand once and said, “Let me try it.”*

**Burns**

boxcar. We were with the machine shop, which was great for us because we had all the tools, all the power tools and so forth. And then later we were in a big warehouse-type building on the backlot. And still there were only three of us. So that made for a wonderful relationship with Walt, very informal. He would just come down when he got a chance from the animation building.

**Neal Gabler:** How often did you see him in that period?

**Harriet Burns:** Well, sometimes daily, sometimes once a week, depending on the project and depending on his schedule. He would just come down when he could. It was terrific because all of the products were new, all of the paints were new, everything. Fiberglass had just been out a few years. Xerox had not been developed yet and we had to use carbon paper. Everything was an experiment. So it was quite exciting and it was exciting for Walt. He would almost be dying to use whatever – if we were soldering, he wanted to do it. He even took a flit gun out of my hand once and said, “Let me try it.” It was a marvelous relationship during all of that period. And then we went over in ‘62 to Glendale, when we had to do the World’s Fair project. That was big stuff. We got a crew, larger crews, and that was entirely different.

**Neal Gabler:** Did the relationship change when you moved to Glendale?

**Harriet Burns:** Not really, except he had to get in a car and drive over there. He was as friendly. In the boxcar, he would sit on this old stool with a broken rung and tell us stories. He had more time then and it was only three of us. At Imagineering, he had to walk around and see everybody’s project. So it was different. There was less time with him.

**Neal Gabler:** Alice, do you remember when you first met Walt Disney?



Alice Davis

*When [Walt] went to leave he said, “You are going to work for me someday.” And I thought to myself, “Oh, sure, sure” and left it alone. About three or four years later the telephone rang and it was his secretary, who said, “Walt wanted me to call and ask you if you want to do the costumes for ‘Small World.’” I said, “I would love to.” And she said, “Okay, be here tomorrow at 9:00.”*

Davis



**Alice Davis:** Yes, I do. My husband and I had only been married about six months. We had just bought a house. I had been tearing off wallpaper from the walls, getting them ready to paint. So I called Marc and said, “You’re taking me to dinner tonight because I’m too tired to cook.” So we went to the Tam O’Shanter for dinner, which was near the house –

**Neal Gabler:** Which was one of Walt’s favorite restaurants.

**Alice Davis:** Yes, and ours, too. We were sitting having a drink before dinner and this hand appeared on Marc’s shoulder and this voice said, “Is this your new bride, Marc?” I looked up and it was Walt Disney and we didn’t even ask him to join us, he just sat down and joined us. He started asking me what I did professionally and I said, well, I was a costume designer. And he asked where I had worked and so forth and I said I had done a number of different things. I was controlling the American woman by elastic for four years doing brassieres and girdles. And I’d worked for a fabric company designing things for small companies that wanted beach clothes but couldn’t afford a designer. And I had done some work for the Studio, but he didn’t know it, and I didn’t mention it.

But when he went to leave he said, “You are going to work for me someday.” And I thought to myself, “Oh, sure, sure” and left it alone. About three or four years later the telephone rang and it was his secretary, who said, “Walt wanted me to call and ask you if you want to do the costumes for ‘Small World.’” I said, “I would love to.” And she said, “Okay, be here tomorrow at 9:00.”

**Neal Gabler:** And that was that.

**Alice Davis:** That was that.

**Neal Gabler:** The rest is history.

**Alice Davis:** Right. And I got to work with these dear souls. I also got to work with Mary Blair and my husband, and we didn't have any fights.

**Neal Gabler:** You and your husband or you and Mary Blair?

**Alice Davis:** My husband. Mary Blair, I absolutely idolized practically all of my life. My mother was an art teacher and she saw some things that Mary Blair had done when she was going to Chouinard. I was educated in regards to Mary Blair from a very young age.

**Neal Gabler:** I'm curious. You mentioned Mary Blair, who was one of the very early female artists at the studios. Some of you who know Disney lore know that there weren't a lot of women.

**Alice Davis:** No.

**Neal Gabler:** There were almost no women animators at the studio, only a handful, and almost no women working at the Studio outside of ink and paint in those early days. How did Walt treat women?

**Alice Davis:** I don't know. He treated each one differently, don't you think, Harriet?



Original sketch by Alice Davis of a Thai girl for *It's a Small World* attraction

**Harriet Burns:** I certainly was happy with how he treated me.

**Alice Davis:** Me, too.



Gabler and Davis



**Harriet Burns:** I never even thought about it. I was the only female on the backlot and I never even thought about how he treated women, plural, because I was –

**Alice Davis:** There was one woman, Retta Scott, that Marc said had a very strong hand and was a very good animator.

**Neal Gabler:** She was the first female animator.

**Alice Davis:** She was the first. There was another woman who designed backgrounds –



Gibson and Burns

**Harriet Burns:** Thelma Witmer?

**Martin Kaplan:** Let me do something mischievous, if I could. The view of Walt, which we've just gotten here, might in some ways be in contrast with the view of Walt that Richard Schickel has and portrays in his book. And they say in the movie business without conflict, no drama.

**Richard Schickel:** Well, I'll open by saying that I'm extremely disappointed with Neal because I find his treatment of Goofy and Pluto just totally inadequate. They are scarcely mentioned in the book.

**Neal Gabler:** There is a reason for that. Let me just add Walt hated Goofy.

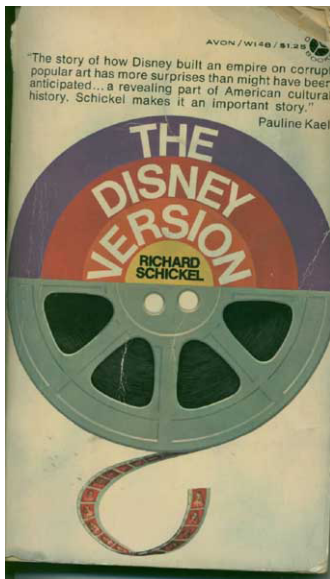
**Richard Schickel:** Well, tough! I like him and I thought Pluto was really his greatest character.

**Neal Gabler:** Yeah, Pluto was.

**Richard Schickel:** Because he was so animatable. Pluto and the fly paper is classic. It's one of the greatest things I've ever seen and he was a wonderful dog. He was pure dog. Essence of dog. That's my primary criticism of his book.

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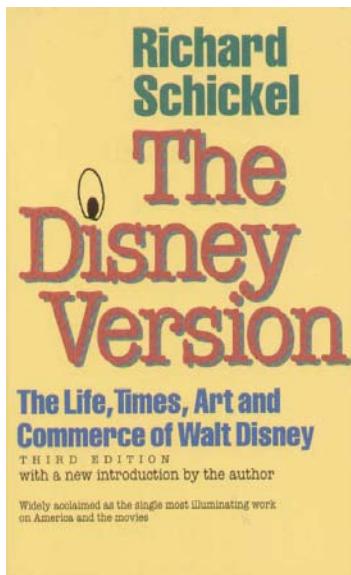
Schickel



1969 Edition of Schickel's  
*The Disney Version*

I'll mention the first time I met Walt. The book I wrote had been proposed to me actually by an editor at Simon and Schuster. He gave me a list of titles that he would be interested in me writing on. That was the one and for some reason, he said, well, that would be interesting. So I got in touch with the Studio and they were running a little tour – I was living in New York at the time – a little tour on the Disney airplane, a week at the Disney Studio. I went to Disneyland, went out to wherever the Imagineers were. I think it was in Glendale at the time. This was about 1966 or 7, not long before Walt died. We toured the Studio; we met all kinds of people, including Walt, who we had lunch with I think twice. It had been openly said that I was thinking of writing a book and he was interested in that. He wondered – he said the *Reader's Digest* had been after him to have an official biography done and would I be interested in doing that. I didn't want to turn the man down so I said, "Well, let me think about it." But I said I think I'd really rather be more independent than that.

He was very pleasant to me. I come from the Middle West, as he did – from



3rd Edition of Schickel's *The Disney Version* (1997)

*[Walt] reminded me of a lot of the men that I had known as a kid growing up. Guys who had their own little businesses, very successful, probably about the size that Disney had been in the mid-30s, kind of a small business growing. These men were affable, McCarthy-ite, Republicans, and like Walt, had a very stern sense of controlling their enterprise and therefore their own destinies.*

Schickel



a suburban small town, not a country small town, the way he did – and he reminded me of a lot of the men that I had known as a kid growing up. Guys who had their own little businesses, very successful, probably about the size that Disney had been in the mid-30s, kind of a small business growing. These men were affable, McCarthy-ite, Republicans, and like Walt, had a very stern sense of controlling their enterprise and therefore their own destinies. They were people that you go to sports night at the high school and they would be there and my father would introduce me to them and all of that stuff. So I felt I was kind of familiar with Walt in a basic human way.

It's funny, the book came out not long after Walt had died, and I thought it was decently critical but not horrendously so. I didn't have him, as other people have had him, wandering madly through the tunnels of Disneyland and acting like a crazy person. It's an honorable book, it's an honest book, as I saw it at the time. But it was the first book that even dared to raise a little finger and say, wow, there are a few things here that aren't so wonderful about Walt. And you'd have thought I'd – I don't know –

**Martin Kaplan:** Mother Teresa?

**Richard Schickel:** – committed some kind of crime against a national institution from some of the reviews. But I didn't feel that way about him. I felt that there were severe limits on his imagination, despite what everybody says. I thought he was a technological genius. I thought he had a certain genius in the economic realm. I thought that at a certain point artistically he became stunted. I was never, peace on all of you who work there, a big fan of the theme parks. The substitution of ersatz reality at that level seems to me kind of dangerous, but that's a lonely voice in the wilderness now because you can't



*The substitution of ersatz reality at that level seems to me kind of dangerous, but that's a lonely voice in the wilderness now because you can't walk into a restaurant or anything else without encountering some form of Disneyfication. Everybody has a theme and a damned Tiki Room or something. This is America as we experience it in very large measures throughout the United States and I'm not a fan of that.*

Schickel



walk into a restaurant or anything else without encountering some form of Disneyfication. Everybody has a theme and a damned Tiki Room or something. This is America as we experience it in very large measures throughout the United States and I'm not a fan of that. Nonetheless, your subtitle is "Triumph of the American Imagination," and I wondered if you meant that ironically.

**Neal Gabler:** I do mean it both ironically and seriously. The triumph for the American imagination is not altogether a good thing.

**Richard Schickel:** No kidding.

**Neal Gabler:** What Walt Disney did more than anything else is demonstrate the power of wish fulfillment. That's a triumph. There is no question that Walt Disney demonstrates the triumph of the imagination over reality. That is really kind of the theme of his life. It's interesting that you ask that question, because people just assume that I must be glorifying Walt, and anybody who has read the book knows that the book is very balanced.

**Martin Kaplan:** Anyone who has read it by now in the days that it's come out is from the Evelyn Wood School.

**Richard Schickel:** I want to say that, as a biography of a man, I am full of admiration of this book. It is as good and rounded and balanced a portrait of an individual as one is likely to read. There are other fine, great biographies, but this is an extremely good biography. If we were to have a quarrel, it would be over ideology not over portraiture. That's my thumbnail description of my response.



Sculptures created by Gibson



*Most of the animators did what they liked to do and did best. Coincidentally, it usually fit what Walt wanted.*

Gibson

**Neal Gabler:** I want to pick up on something in your book, and I want to ask the three of you, how much was Walt responsible for the things you did? There is a feeling that Walt hogged credit for everything, particularly as time went on. In the early days there was an acknowledgment that *Snow White* came out of Walt's head and he determined literally every frame of that movie. But when you get to the theme parks and the attractions at the World's Fair, was Walt simply someone who came in and said "I like that, I don't like that," as you were pointing out earlier Mr. Gibson? Or did he say "This is what I want. See if you can give it to me?" I'm most curious to talk about Walt's contribution. This is the question that was often asked in his lifetime: What is it that Walt Disney did?

**Blaine Gibson:** You are asking me?

**Neal Gabler:** Yes. All of you.

**Blaine Gibson:** I'm the oldest. Actually, my viewpoint is that Walt had basic ideas that were set and they were set by the story people and all of those people. But when he distributed the sequences, say to the Nine Old Men, who were supervising animators, what was done actually was what the animator wanted to do based on their concept of sticking with an overall story.

**Neal Gabler:** Right.

**Blaine Gibson:** My feeling was that most of the animators did what they liked to do and did best. Coincidentally, it usually fit what Walt wanted, when he approved of the animators. That doesn't mean there weren't other talents there that left because they didn't agree with this approach. They would go someplace else or start their own business.

*Walt wanted things to be convincing. He was no Andy Warhol or anything like that. He was Walt. And whatever he did, in my opinion, it was because that's what he liked. It isn't universally liked. We either like Walt or we don't.*

Gibson



But as far as I could see, my mentor, Frank Thomas, did what revolutionized animation, as far as Disney was concerned. Not a lot of people might agree, but Frank, a brilliant Stanford graduate, introduced in *Snow White* something that hadn't ever been achieved. He had the dwarfs surround Snow White's bier and they made audiences actually cry because of Frank's animation. The Dwarfs, even old Grumpy, sniffing and having a sad time departing. Of course, Walt approved of that. He thought it was great.

But in the time that I animated, Walt wanted things to be convincing. He was no Andy Warhol or anything like that. He was Walt. And whatever he did, in my opinion, it was because that's what he liked. It isn't universally liked. We either like Walt or we don't. I agree with you, he wasn't a Mr. Happy-Go-Lucky Guy, ready to treat you with a lot of respect all the time.

**Neal Gabler:** Yes.

**Blaine Gibson:** I learned pretty early on it was much more important for you to do your best, to work and do what you liked, than try to second guess what Walt wanted.

**Neal Gabler:** But early on, Walt would essentially issue orders, at least as I see them in the story meeting notes. As time went on, I got the feeling that he did that less and less and became more and more disengaged.

**Blaine Gibson:** I think that's true. Ub Iwerks, who was Walt's right-hand man, told me, "All I was doing was Walt's ideas." But Ub was much more talented as an animator and he was much more gifted in solving certain kinds of mechanical problems that were later on very important.

**Neal Gabler:** Right.

**Blaine Gibson:** But Ub was an animator, and animators are very personal. They don't want anybody, director or anybody else, to fool around with their work until they are through with it. And actually Walt would come in and tamper with Ub's exposure sheets. Both you guys know what an exposure sheet is? It's timed with accents that the animator has to follow, especially if there is a musical accompaniment to it. Ub didn't like that. So he went to Roy. Walt happened to be in New York. Did you know this story? He went to Roy and said "I'm going to start my own business," which he did. Walt was horribly disappointed with Ub.



Disney and models

**Neal Gabler:** The postscript is that Ub Iwerks had 20% of the Disney Company –

**Blaine Gibson:** That's right.

**Neal Gabler:** – and Walt bought him out for \$2,920. And if you don't believe the Iwerks family still regrets it – only imagine what 20% of the Disney Company is worth! So how much was Walt responsible for the things that you did?



**Harriet Burns:** He was a great deal responsible, but of course he had art directors and he really appreciated their ideas, too. When we were doing Chinatown one time, he came in and I had this little model – model-making was his hobby, so that was another reason why he loved our department. We started every attraction with a three-dimensional model because he didn't

think that it was sufficient just to have illustrations. And also he liked to see the model. We had this little scope you could look through and you could imagine or even photograph any model. It was wonderful. They were beautifully done models because he could make a beautiful model. His standards were high. So I had all this wonderful little filigree on the Chinatown to show him when he came in Monday morning. He came in and he didn't even look at it. He said, "We're not going to do Chinatown." We had a Chinese philosopher at that time that was to rise and give Confucius sayings in a restaurant.

**Neal Gabler:** This was the first Audio-Animatronic figure, right?

**Harriet Burns:** Yes, but the term wasn't invented yet.

**Neal Gabler:** Yes, right.

**Harriet Burns:** But the Chinese philosopher would rise and so forth. And so Walt came in and said, "We're not going to do the Chinese philosopher. There's no reason to do a Chinatown at all because San Francisco has a good one. We have a little one here." He said, "We'll just skip that and we'll do one of the presidents, like Washington or Lincoln." This was all his idea. On one of the days when he came in and sat on the old stool and gabbed, he said, "Someday we'll do all of the presidents and we'll have a whole hall of presidents." It was just talk, because there was not room at Disneyland.

And so instead of the Chinese philosopher we would do Washington or Lincoln. He had played Lincoln as a school kid and he liked Lincoln, so he said, "We'll start with Lincoln." Then Blaine sculpted Lincoln and I developed the skin, working with Bart Thompson, the chemist, bringing my old Dry-Rite from



Great Moments with Mr. Lincoln

*On one of the days when he came in and sat on the old stool and gabbed, he said, "Someday we'll do all of the presidents and we'll have a whole hall of presidents." It was just talk, because there was not room at Disneyland... He had played Lincoln as a school kid and he liked Lincoln, so he said, "We'll start with Lincoln."*

**Burns**

home and cooking the skin. He had different products that I would add, like simonizers and thickeners and so forth and different pigments. We worked on a veriflex, we called it at that time, the skin that's used on all of the pirates and everything.

*And sometimes we thought the idea was crazy. But then we'd say, "Well, after all, it's his cookie. He can do anything he wants."*

**Burns**



**Harriet Burns**



**Neal Gabler:** So the original Lincoln figure was Walt just coming in and saying we're going to build Lincoln.

**Harriet Burns:** Yes, that's right. And sometimes we thought the idea was crazy. But then we'd say, "Well, after all, it's his cookie. He can do anything he wants."

**Neal Gabler:** Did he tell you that he wanted it to rise, to talk?

**Harriet Burns:** Yes, oh yes. And he would act everything out, as you know.

**Neal Gabler:** Right.

**Harriet Burns:** He was a wonderful actor. He acted everything out. He scraped his back against the paint cabinets when we were talking about a bear. He animated everything himself. But Lincoln was the first real Animatronic.

**Neal Gabler:** When you were fabricating it, did he come in and criticize it?

**Harriet Burns:** Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Oh, yes. And then the machinists got involved and some of them become very specialized in AA. Walt was at a table with us when it was a piece of plywood on a bunch of sawhorses – that was

our table – and that’s when they thought of the word Audio-Animatronic. They were saying, well, it should be animated and engineered and so forth. Someone said “Animatronics.” And they thought that was a good word. Then someone said, “but it’s audio too,” so they decided it would be Audio-Animatronic.



*Marc would do maybe five different bear ideas. He would have a jazz band, a one-man band, a country band, a circus band, and another one. And he would hand these out one at a time to Walt. Marc said it was like handing Christmas presents to a little kid. Walt would be very excited about each sketch.*

Davis

**Neal Gabler:** How much was Walt responsible for the things you did?

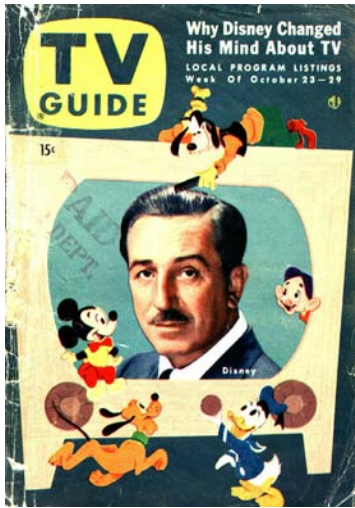
**Alice Davis:** He was very responsible, but there was something that Walt did that was interesting also. He would say to Marc, “I want to do a western river ride, or pirates, or a bear band, which he wanted to have to entertain people up in the mountains.” So Marc would do maybe five different bear ideas. He would have a jazz band, a one-man band, a country band, a circus band, and another one. And he would hand these out one at a time to Walt. Marc said it was like handing Christmas presents to a little kid. Walt would be very excited about each sketch. But then he would decide which one he wanted and that’s the one Marc would go with.

**Neal Gabler:** And then would he come back and tinker with the drawings.

**Alice Davis:** Oh, yes. He would come back and check the drawings Marc did and then he would go with Marc to see what Blaine was doing with the sculpting of the bears and then go to the machinists and see what they were doing.

**Neal Gabler:** Richard?

**Richard Schickel:** Well, I think all of these stories illustrate what’s very clear



*The great intellectual  
adventure of his life, as  
a filmmaker at least,  
Fantasia, was a  
flopadeeny.*

Schickel



from your book. When Disney animation was really hitting it out of the park, the period between, say, *Snow White* and *Bambi*, he was probably the world's greatest story editor. If you read those story conference transcripts in your book, you really get a sense of a man deeply engaged in the narrative that he was trying to tell, of choosing the alternative paths to tell that narration most coherently and in a most understandable way. I thought he was really great at that.

The problem that comes up in your book was twofold. The strike at Disney in 1940 was –

**Neal Gabler:** You were there, right?

**Blaine Gibson:** It was sad.

**Richard Schickel:** It was an enormously embittering experience for Walt. He couldn't believe that this band of brothers that he had had at Hyperion had deteriorated into these squabbling factions. It hurt him profoundly.

Simultaneously, the great intellectual adventure of his life, as a filmmaker at least, *Fantasia*, was a flopadeeny.

**Neal Gabler:** Right.

**Richard Schickel:** And that hurt him terribly, because he had been the adored figure of the American intellectual community in the 1930s, the logical successor to Chaplin, who was his friend as well. These two failures and then the war coming along and the studio kind of just hanging on by making government films and not really being very creative. And there was that



strange, long pause after the war –

**Neal Gabler:** Right.



*Maybe he wasn't the most intimate of buddies with his animators, but I think he liked being in that group and being the leader of that group and being so creatively involved in the products that he was making.*

**Schickel**

**Richard Schickel:** – where he seems to be groping around.

**Neal Gabler:** He's playing with model trains all the time.

**Richard Schickel:** Yes, and having Buddy Ebsen come in and do dance numbers, which he's translating into the primitive Audio-Animatronic sitting on his desk. He was obsessed with Buddy Ebsen and his dancing, for God's sake. All of those things alienated him from what I think he probably loved best because he was kind of a lonely guy. Maybe he wasn't the most intimate of buddies with his animators, but I think he liked being in that group and being the leader of that group and being so creatively involved in the products that he was making. As the business grew, he was just utterly distracted. There are only, let's say, 12 or 14 hours in a day and he couldn't attend to everything. He couldn't be in the story conferences on a daily basis for hour upon hour. There was a quote in my book – I forget if you had it or not – by an Anglo-Indian writer named Aubrey Menon who came to visit.

**Neal Gabler:** Yes, I do quote that in my book.

**Richard Schickel:** And Menon was struck by the driven nature of Disney. He was not Uncle Walt. He could *be* Uncle Walt, but at the heart of it was a guy out of poverty frightened by the possibility he might fall back into poverty. Driving, driving, driving, driving, which I think distracted him. And then I think the aesthetic limit on Disney was realism. As you talk about the American



*He liked the purity of childhood. If you look at all of the animated films he did, the ones he directed and had a great deal to do with, there was no slang ever used. He had Jack Cutting checking all of the different countries, so that there was no hand movement or body movement that meant anything but good.*

Davis



imagination, the American imagination pretty much stops, except at the upper levels, at realism. There is a fundamental contradiction in terms there. Animation is not real. So to drive animation more and more toward reality instead of differing forms of it – I wouldn't go so far as call it abstraction, but slightly less representational forms – I think put a limit on animation for him, which, as those kinds of pictures began to fail a bit, led him to the kind of realism he wanted in the parks.

**Neal Gabler:** Right.

**Richard Schickel:** He took that impulse of his that it's got to be real, it's got to be real, it's got to be more real than ever. And he put that into the parks, with, to my taste, disastrous results. But you can't argue with success.

**Neal Gabler:** Did you notice a change in Walt over time?

**Alice Davis:** I knew him only when I would meet him with Marc going to special affairs and so forth. I had worked in the studio, but he didn't know it at first. But I want to say I think that Walt's childhood had everything to do with what his life became.

**Neal Gabler:** I agree.

**Alice Davis:** He liked the purity of childhood. If you look at all of the animated films he did, the ones he directed and had a great deal to do with, there was no slang ever used. He had Jack Cutting checking all of the different countries, so that there was no hand movement or body movement that meant anything but good.



*Disney animation in those days was brilliant and it remains brilliant. I'm not going to argue against Pinocchio. I think it's a great movie.*

**Schickel**

*Lady and the Tramp* – 50 years ago that film was made and it is just as good and pure today as it was when it was made. All of the films are classics because of this, up until the time when Walt stopped doing animated films and left it to the other animators. Then they started putting in slang and different things and they are not classics. Like the one where the genie turns into different characters.

**Neal Gabler:** *Aladdin*.

**Alice Davis:** How many people can tell you who the characters are that the genie turned into now?

**Richard Schickel:** It's true, but on the other hand, it's –

**Alice Davis:** It's dated. It's dated.

**Richard Schickel:** I don't know. It's a pretty live movie.

**Alice Davis:** It's not classic. It's dated.

**Richard Schickel:** Well, Disney animation in those days was brilliant and it remains brilliant. I'm not going to argue against *Pinocchio*. I think it's a great movie.

**Neal Gabler:** It's one of the greatest movies.

**Richard Schickel:** I would even be a little easier than Neal is on maybe *Dumbo*

and *Bambi*. I think those are extremely agreeable movies. I do think the world changes and probably what you say is correct. As an animator, he lost touch with it, he was less interested in it, and he was driven in other directions, especially by the theme parks, but also by his dreams about Epcot and all of that kind of design. He seemed to have a need to impose order. I think his enemy was chaos. You can trace it through Neal's book. The often vain attempts to order that anarchical bunch of guys who were drawing animations and doing –

*“I want it pristine and clean on the outside. I want the lawn mowed, I want beautiful flowers. I want people to know that I have a clean park and they can bring their families and they can come.” That was the reason he started Disneyland: he didn't want to take his daughters to carnivals.*

Davis



**Neal Gabler:** The *Sorcerer*.

**Richard Schickel:** Yeah.

**Neal Gabler:** Well, the *Sorcerer* is perhaps my favorite movie.

**Richard Schickel:** Exactly, yeah.

**Alice Davis:** I'll give you an example. Marc asked Walt what he wanted to do with the Haunted House. It had been sitting there for eight years, empty.

**Neal Gabler:** Was it eight years?

**Alice Davis:** Yes. So Walt wanted Marc to do something for the inside. And Marc said, “What do you want us to do to the outside? Do you want to do Charles Addams or what?” And he said, “No. I want it pristine and clean on the outside. I want the lawn mowed, I want beautiful flowers. I want people to know that I have a clean park and they can bring their families and they can come.” That was the reason he started Disneyland: he didn't want to take his

daughters to carnivals and all the filth in that.

**Richard Schickel:** Yes, he mentioned that frequently.

**Alice Davis:** So this is how it all started.

**Neal Gabler:** Did you notice a difference after the strike? Was the studio different?



**Blaine Gibson**

**Blaine Gibson:** There was a little bit of limbo there for a while. I was still a youngster, but actually I went out on strike.

**Neal Gabler:** You did!

**Blaine Gibson:** Because my boss, Ken Hultgren, who nowadays would be considered an incidental animator, pretty much requested that I go on strike. He was a very fine draftsman, but not a good animator. Our supervising animator, Eric Larson, was a wonderful man and he was heartbroken that we went out. He thought we were betraying him.

**Alice Davis:** He was a sweetie.

**Blaine Gibson:** I was so young and insignificant. As I said, I was an assistant animator to Ken Hultgren. Looking back on it, I felt that I should never have gone out. Yet I could see certain things, inequities. A whole bunch of people who were doing the in-between work, like Ken, felt that they weren't getting their fair share. To me, as a young kid, I felt that inequity. Naturally, the guys that were making \$300 a week, which at that time was quite a bit of money,

were happy. But there were a lot of them just called in to do the movie who didn't have that sense of security and they weren't happy.

**Neal Gabler:** Did Walt treat you differently when you came back?

**Blaine Gibson:** Actually, I was let go for a while. Ken Hultgren was let go after an arbitrator came in and said, "This many that stayed in are going to be let go, and this many people walking the lines are going to be let go." They called me back to finish up, clean up some Bambi things and other stuff Ken Hultgren had done. He was let go and never came back. They never hired him back, except on a contractual basis to do some flying ravens on *Sleeping Beauty*. So I was let go for a while, but one of the guys from the inside said, "Blaine, I think you can come back now." Walt probably didn't know anything about any of this stuff. I don't think he did. But he was obviously very upset.



**Neal Gabler:** Yeah.

**Alice Davis:** The strike destroyed Bill Tytla, absolutely destroyed him.

**Blaine Gibson:** Bill Tytla was a wonderful animator.

**Alice Davis:** Right.

**Blaine Gibson:** And I knew him and Marion.

**Alice Davis:** He came to our house quite often.

**Blaine Gibson:** Right. When I was in "traffic" – Walt started us all in "traffic"

so we wouldn't think our department was the only one.

**Neal Gabler:** "Traffic" was essentially the office boys.

**Blaine Gibson:** Yeah, we were office boys.

**Alice Davis:** You learned all over the lot.



*The idea was that the studio was comprised of musicians, story men, and story sketch men, and we had to go through all of those departments and really see what the studio was about, not what we were about.*

**Gibson**

**Blaine Gibson:** The idea was that the studio was comprised of musicians, story men, and story sketch men, and we had to go through all of those departments and really see what the studio was about, not what we were about.

**Neal Gabler:** Right.

**Blaine Gibson:** Walt was good at that. That was very good. But the effects of the strike weren't easy. One of my friends came up to me in tears and said, "You caused me to lose my job." He was one from the inside that was laid off. They hired me back again, see, but he had been laid off. And we almost lost our friendship.

**Martin Kaplan:** There is an interview, Neal, that you gave to a reporter from the *Los Angeles Times*. I want to quote a passage and get a reaction from it. "Disney's employees," this is not quoting you directly but paraphrasing you, "showed a legendary loyalty to their boss. But records suggest the studio was more like a cult than a corporation." And there is a quote from Neal, "There was an obsessiveness in how Walt dealt with everything, a cruelty in how he dealt with people who did not serve his ends. Walt wanted only to perfect the

world he was building. If you didn't serve that end, he had no interest in you. If you served it at one time and no longer served it, he had no interest in you." Is that too tough a judgment, do you all think?

**Blaine Gibson:** Having started in '39 and remembering, I would say it would not be too tough a judgment. If you happened to be a top animator or someone in that top group, it would seem like that was a very tough statement. My friends were Marc Davis and Ollie Johnston and Frank Thomas and Milt Kahl and those guys. I was in the same wing as they were. I was comfortable in there, too, even though I was just a beginning animator compared to them. But there were a lot of people out there that weren't happy and they were the guys later on that went from studio to studio.

*Every year I read the theme park attendance figures published by the amusement business. They're estimates, but every year I look at them and I say the same thing, "Walt, you did it again."*



One of the reasons they got the union was the layoffs that came after every picture, which none of us liked. And the thing of it is Walt would say, "Well, the union is going to get them a job somewhere else." But it was tougher than that. Later on, when I headed up the Sculpture Department for Disney, I said, "We're going to have to have quite a few sculptors to help me do all this stuff. But by the same token, we can't retain them on a constant level." I actually heard Walt say, "Oh, they'll probably get a job out there, won't they, somewhere? Don't they belong to the union?" That was kind of the attitude. But how many of us in his position would do something different?

**Martin Kaplan:** I promised to open up the room to questions. Would anyone like to join the conversation now?

**Unidentified Audience Member:** Every year I read the theme park attendance figures published by the amusement business. They're estimates,



but every year I look at them and I say the same thing, “Walt, you did it again.” Because the Disney parks based on the Disneyland model are far and away the biggest draws. And I don’t think the Disneyland caché or mystique explains that entirely. So I was wondering if the members of the panel could reflect on what it was that Walt Disney personally brought to the table that apparently nobody, including his own Imagineers, has been able to bring since then?



Disney and friends

**Martin Kaplan:** We have several current Imagineers sitting right here.

**Alice Davis:** Have you been to Tokyo Disneyland?

**Unidentified Audience Member:** No.

**Alice Davis:** You should go. You wouldn’t have said that. Tokyo Disneyland is a beautiful park.

**Unidentified Audience Member:** Oh, you mean the DisneySea?

**Alice Davis:** No, the whole park. The whole park.

**Unidentified Audience Member:** I’m just talking about the attendance and the numbers. The parks that are based on the model with the Main Street and going up to the plaza and –

**Harriet Burns:** The spokes.

**Unidentified Audience Member:** Yes, the spokes, that sort of model, are still the biggest draws in the world, which is not to put down the other parks



Blaine Gibson

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intense feeling about it.*

Gibson



at all.

**Martin Kaplan:** And your question is why did he have that magic and none of the competitors do?

**Unidentified Audience Member:** Right.

**Blaine Gibson:** I'm not saying this to defame Mike Eisner, but he came up with California Adventure right adjacent to Disneyland. People went in there and they'd say, no, I want to go back to Disneyland. My feeling is that Disneyland had heart. Walt and the people he chose to work on it, everybody, put their heart into what they did. And a lot of the other kinds of parks are done by people who do it professionally, but they don't have that same intense feeling about it.

**Neal Gabler:** Did you feel that intensity?

**Richard Schickel:** I don't know that there is heart in it anymore.

**Alice Davis:** Yes, there is.

**Richard Schickel:** In other words, the design is fabulous. It's almost unimprovable from a point of view of urban planning.

**Blaine Gibson:** Yes.

**Richard Schickel:** It's great. But what goes on in Disneyland now? There are obviously tons of variations. They keep building new rides and improving old

rides, all of that stuff. The fundamental thing with Disneyland, Disney World, for all I know, Tokyo Disney, is that they sell nostalgia and cuteness. There are these ersatz adventures that always come out in a happy place and a little fake alligator gets shot in the thingy. I think that stuff is dangerous. It's pandering to the lowest common denominator of American thought, culture, and life. You can't argue with it, it's hugely successful, but I don't think there's anything in there that is authentically heartfelt. I think it is conventionally heartfelt. Oh, so cute, and the tiny little bottom and all that stuff. I think if you keep throwing that stuff at people – I'll make a huge leap – if you keep throwing that stuff at people, you get the Iraq war. I really do believe that, because it's whack.



*The fundamental thing with Disneyland, Disney World, for all I know, Tokyo Disney, is that they sell nostalgia and cuteness... I think that stuff is dangerous. It's pandering to the lowest common denominator of American thought, culture, and life. You can't argue with it, it's hugely successful, but I don't think there's anything in there that is authentically heartfelt. I think it is conventionally heartfelt.*

Schickel

**Blaine Gibson:** I disagree with you.

**Alice Davis:** That's a long stretch.

**Neal Gabler:** I wanted to ask a question. Did you feel Walt's passion and his intensity?

**Blaine Gibson:** Oh, sure.

**Alice Davis:** Yes.

**Neal Gabler:** Or did you feel he was –

**Harriet Burns:** No, we definitely did.

**Blaine Gibson:** But he did not nitpick. The artists had to do what they did.

Granted, we had artists who would have pleased Richard, who left –

**Richard Schickel:** Walt Kelly would be one.

**Blaine Gibson:** Yes.

**Richard Schickel:** John Hubley.

**Blaine Gibson:** Yes, and they're great guys. I knew them. They were great.

But Walt was Walt and the people that stayed with him actually liked what he wanted them to do. As I said earlier, they were not trying to be Andy Warhol or somebody else.

*I believe his work was heartfelt, completely. It's when you start passing it down to the generations that I think it becomes less authentic.*

Schickel



**Neal Gabler:** But Richard is describing a manipulation and there is a line between manipulation and intensity. Did you see Walt as a manipulator saying oh, boy, this will really get them?

**Blaine Gibson:** No.

**Neal Gabler:** Or Walt as a passionate, intense –

**Alice Davis:** No, he was talent.

**Richard Schickel:** Just quickly, I believe his work was heartfelt, completely. It's when you start passing it down to the generations that I think it becomes less authentic.

**Neal Gabler:** Oh, right.

**Alice Davis:** Not only that, but he had the ability, which very few people have, to entertain and please the youngest to the oldest. Very, very few can do that.



*In biography, they say no man is a hero is valid. Maybe no man is a hero to his biographer. You go into it saying "I need to be critical, tell the whole story." Forty years from now, are we going to find out that Bill Gates knew nothing of PowerPoint? Are we going to find out he knew nothing about computers?*

**Harriet Burns:** That was his idea, to have a place where children, their parents, and their grandparents and friends could all gather and enjoy and be clean.

**Alice Davis:** Not too long ago I read in the paper about problems up at Magic Mountain. That they'd lost the ability to appeal to families. It had become all teenagers and problems. While people keep going back to Disneyland because Disneyland is the children, the parents, and the grandparents, and it's a family unit. Disneyland and Disney World are the only places at the moment where you can go that's safe and a pleasant world to be in.

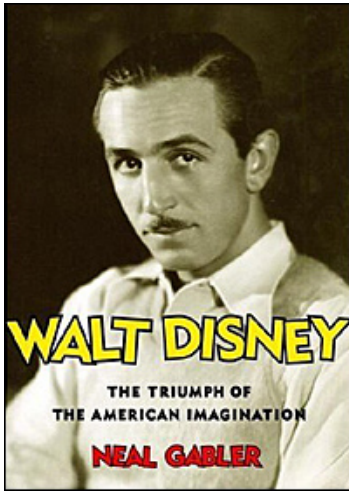
**Richard Schickel:** Well, not this grandparent.

**Alice Davis:** That's your problem.

**Neal Gabler:** Maybe he doesn't want to live in the Iraq war.

**Martin Kaplan:** Could be. Or maybe he put it altogether. Go ahead.

**Unidentified Audience Member:** In biography, they say no man is a hero is valid. Maybe no man is a hero to his biographer. You go into it saying "I need to be critical, tell the whole story." Forty years from now, are we going to find out that Bill Gates knew nothing of PowerPoint? Are we going to find out he



*When I wrote this book, one of the things I wanted to convey to the reader is why you should be reading about Walt Disney in the first place. Do I like him, do I dislike him – again irrelevant, but I'll tell you this: I love his life. And that's all a biographer should care about.*

Gabler



knew nothing about computers?

**Richard Schickel:** Well, Walt was a genius. There is no question about that in my mind.

**Neal Gabler:** Often a biographer is asked “Did you like him?” That’s a question I get all the time. To me, that’s absolutely immaterial. It never entered my consciousness. Because I wasn’t sitting down with Walt Disney and having beers, Walt Disney and I were not going to the USC game, though he did often attend USC games, by the way.

**Richard Schickel:** Didn’t Ron play for USC?

**Neal Gabler:** Yes, he did. His son-in-law. And then later he went on to play for the Rams. The question for me that’s relevant (and I should add parenthetically here that Joyce Carol Oates famously coined the word “pathography” to describe biographies that are dedicated to tearing down the subject) is that I think there is a flaw in that process. While it’s perfectly legitimate to talk about the warts and problems of a character, a biography that’s dedicated to tearing down a subject generally shortchanges the reason why you’re writing about that subject in the first place. I’d say before you deconstruct a figure, you sure as hell better construct it.

When I wrote this book, one of the things I wanted to convey to the reader is why you should be reading about Walt Disney in the first place. Do I like him, do I dislike him – again irrelevant, but I’ll tell you this: I love his life. And that’s all a biographer should care about.

David McCullough once spent two years working on a biography of Picasso and came to the conclusion that he hated him and didn't want to spend time with him. That is absolutely beyond my comprehension. So you hate him, so what? Do you love his life? Because if his life is complex and metaphoric and has narrative, then that's what matters. It did not matter to McCullough. But, to me – did I like Walter Winchell? I don't know. I don't care. I loved his life.



*If the life is interesting, if the work is interesting, it should be a good book. But there is that inner thing that just stays your hand, pushes you away from it, and I think ultimately pushes the reader away.*

Schickel

**Richard Schickel:** It's substantially true what Neal is saying, but not completely. I didn't write a biography of Walt Disney. I did a study: Walt and his works. But I did once write a book almost as long as Neal's – almost impossible to imagine. It was about D.W. Griffith.

**Neal Gabler:** A darned good book, by the way.

**Richard Schickel:** Fewer footnotes too. But I came to loathe Griffith. I just thought he was a stupid man, a racist, and a generally bad guy.

**Unidentified Audience Member:** Now, does that affect the work? It must have.

**Richard Schickel:** Of course it did. Instead of taking seven years it took me fifteen years, half of which were spent doing something else because I couldn't stand it. And people come up to me and say, "Oh, I love that book." I say "What? I never liked the book. Well, thanks very much." I adore Elia Kazan. And I loved writing that book. I think it's the best book I ever wrote and I don't care what any reviewer says about it or anything. I just liked him. I liked the man, I liked his work, I believed in his work.

Neal is right, if the life is interesting, if the work is interesting, it should be a good book. But there is that inner thing that just stays your hand, pushes you away from it, and I think ultimately pushes the reader away. I think Neal is very, very strong on Walt's flaws and virtues. As I said at the outset, this is a very good biography of that man. And I think he likes him. He may not want to admit it, but I think he actually does like Walt Disney.

*He really was an American in an old-fashioned way that's disappearing. I like the fact that he didn't wear his emotions on his sleeve, I liked his austerity, I like the fact that he bought his suits off the rack, and I like the fact that he worked like a dog. And I like the fact that he was a chain smoker for all of that.*

Schickel



And you know the funny thing is I kind of like Walt Disney, for all his flaws and stuff. He really was an American in an old-fashioned way that's disappearing. I like the fact that he didn't wear his emotions on his sleeve, I liked his austerity, I like the fact that he bought his suits off the rack, and I like the fact that he worked like a dog. And I like the fact that he was a chain smoker. But the truth of the matter comes through in Neal's very decent portrayal of this man who was not by any means an entirely indecent guy. He was just kind of gruff and hard to know in any intimate sense. Well, if you're from the Middle West, that's basic. Nobody knows anybody out there.

**Martin Kaplan:** Vanessa?

**Vanessa Schwartz:** We keep referring to Walt Disney as nostalgic and conservative, but in his mid-life, he basically had a huge fight with his brother, risked all of his money, and sold himself to television for an idea that was radical, revolutionary, forward-thinking, technologically oriented and sophisticated. So, this is no less a part of what he did than his animation and Disneyland – it's a real world built by animators, a real world built by people who used to draw. Now, that was pretty amazing as a kind of concept. Unlike Richard, I don't think it's a terrible thing and I don't think it led to the Iraq war either, but –



**Richard Schickel:** Well, I don't either.

**Neal Gabler:** It was a derogative comment.

**Richard Schickel:** I couldn't resist it.



*He was a technological modernist. And he put that genius – and I think it was true genius – to work in the service of these nostalgic values.*

**Schickel**

**Vanessa Schwartz:** So I have two questions, guys. One is, why persist in the idea that he is conservative and old fashioned? Nostalgia is one of the most forward-thinking parts of modernity. Contained within modernity are our notions of nostalgia, first point. He was a kind of technologist. He bet the farm. So (a), why do people persist in thinking of him as nostalgic, and (b), here's a man who had thousands of people working for him; can we also talk about his kind of genius in operationalizing others to put into place a large vision. His understanding did not stop at his abilities.

**Richard Schickel:** That's the complexity of it. Every step of the way, and you just read right through it, he was always on the cutting edge, starting with putting sound on animated cartoons, putting color into the cartoons, da, da, da, da, da.

**Harriet Burns:** He was doing it first.

**Richard Schickel:** He was a technological modernist. And he put that genius – and I think it was true genius – to work in the service of these nostalgic values. So that's the complexity that obviously kept Neal fascinated. One of the complexities, I think. I don't find the contrast in that. It's just keeping two ideas going simultaneously, which is the test of the mind, as F.

Scott Fitzgerald said.

**Alice Davis:** I would like to say that everybody thought Walt wanted money, wanted to make a lot of money. He wanted to make money only so he could build something else.

**Blaine Gibson:** That's right.

**Alice Davis:** He wanted money to build with. He didn't want it for himself.

**Blaine Gibson:** Yes.

**Harriet Burns:** Very unmaterialistic.

**Richard Schickel:** Luckily a few pennies come to him.

**Alice Davis:** And the other thing is how far forward he thought. When television first started, it was in black and white and everybody was doing it in black and white. He was shooting in color. Everybody said, "You're wasting so much money for God's sake, do it in black and white." And he said, "It's going to be in color."

**Harriet Burns:** That's what he said about the Mouseketeers.

**Alice Davis:** "I'm going to have everything in color."

**Harriet Burns:** Yes. He said, "I can do it in color."

*When television first started, it was in black and white and everybody was doing it in black and white. He was shooting in color. Everybody said, "You're wasting so much money for godssake, do it in black and white." And he said, "It's going to be in color."*

Davis





*He was something of a libertarian liberal. By that I mean Walt was very suspicious of money. He didn't like it very much. Saw it as a means to an end.*

**Gabler**

**Alice Davis:** He had color before anybody else had it for television.

**Richard Schickel:** Yeah.

**Harriet Burns:** I said, "Nobody will ever be able to afford a color TV, except a big company."

**Alice Davis:** And he said, "No, families will."

**Richard Schickel:** Neal, can you think of a single place where he lagged behind technologically? I can't.

**Neal Gabler:** No. And in terms of values, the word conservative is often attached to Walt Disney, aesthetically and politically. Yet there was a very interesting book by Douglas Brode of the University of Texas, called *From Walt to Woodstock*. The thesis of the book, and it's surprisingly convincing, is that Walt Disney was in many ways a kind of progenitor of the counter-cultural generation. Whether you buy that argument or not, I do think that to talk about Walt politically as a conservative, at least as we use the word now, is something of a misnomer.

This is oxymoronic, but I'll throw it out anyway because Richard was talking about the two contrary strains that Walt combined. He was something of a libertarian liberal. By that I mean Walt was very suspicious of money. We just heard that. He didn't like it very much. Saw it as a means to an end.

**Harriet Burns:** Yes.

**Neal Gabler:** Never sought to accumulate it. He hated authority. And if you read those movies, the subtext of almost all his movies is very anti-authority. He loves rebelling. He loves Rob Roy, Robin Hood, Davy Crockett. Davy Crockett is always challenging authority. Walt hates authority. He likes his own authority, but he doesn't like anybody else's. He doesn't want anybody challenging his.

**Richard Schickel:** His relationship with bankers would be an excellent example.

**Neal Gabler:** Yes. He hated bankers and he had a very difficult relationship –

**Alice Davis:** Except his brother.

**Neal Gabler:** Well, even with his brother. Walt is very disdainful of Roy Disney. If you read the notes, Roy facilitates everything. Most of you know that Roy was the Chief Financial Officer; Walt was the Chief Executive Officer, essentially. Roy got the money. And when I say Roy got the money, that's exactly what the relationship was: "I have an idea, you get the money."

**Gabler**



**Alice Davis:** Right.

**Neal Gabler:** And if Roy ever said, "Well, I can't get the" – "No, no, your job is to get the money. Your job is not to tell me that you can't get the money." Walt Disney could not exist without Roy Disney.

**Blaine Gibson:** No.

*Walt is very disdainful of Roy Disney. If you read the notes, Roy facilitates everything... Roy got the money. And when I say Roy got the money, that's exactly what the relationship was: "I have an idea, you get the money."*

**Neal Gabler:** There was just no way they could exist without one another, frankly.



*There was a love between them. Roy in many ways was more like Walt's father because there was quite an age difference... And the scene when Walt died, Roy was standing at the foot of the bed still rubbing Walt's feet because they were always cold.*

Davis



Walt and Roy O. Disney

**Alice Davis:** And Roy wouldn't have been what he was without Walt.

**Neal Gabler:** I think Roy understood that.

**Alice Davis:** There was a love between them. Roy in many ways was more like Walt's father because there was quite an age difference.

**Blaine Gibson:** Yes.

**Neal Gabler:** Eight years difference.

**Alice Davis:** And the scene when Walt died, Roy was standing at the foot of the bed still rubbing Walt's feet because they were always cold.

**Neal Gabler:** Yes.

**Alice Davis:** He was against Disney World, but he killed himself putting Disney World in because that's what Walt wanted.

**Neal Gabler:** Roy always saw himself as the protector. But, again, as to Walt's values, he never attended a Board of Director's meeting, or seldom. He just hated them. There is a really weird libertarian streak in him.

You look at some of those films, as Douglas Brode does in his book, and look at a movie that's as bathetic as *Pollyanna* is. There is no film that wallows in

bathos more than that movie does. Yet step back from it for a moment and what is Pollyanna challenging in the movie? The minister is a hypocrite. Walt Disney taking on religion. And by the way, Walt Disney had no interest in religion, never attended church, dropped his kids off, but never entered a church after he was a little kid. Never talked about religion and had no interest in it.

**Blaine Gibson:** Right.

*He told us, "My name  
will be like Kleenex...  
When you say Disney-  
land, it won't mean Walt  
Disney, it will mean  
Disneyland."*

**Burns**



**Neal Gabler:** In fact, he hated piety and he would talk about that. He never talked about religion, but he hated people who were pious. He had a phrase, "cardboard patriots." He would always talk about, "That guy is a cardboard patriot." You can imagine what he might feel about the Republican Party today.

You have to look at him. The traditional categories don't really fit, although Walt often tried to fit himself into those categories because it was profitable for him to do so. It was profitable for Walt to be Walt Disney. By that I mean, and I'm sure you've heard this before, that Walt Disney said, "I'm not Walt Disney."

**Harriet Burns:** He told us, "My name will be like Kleenex." Like they use Kleenex for tissue. And he said, "When you say Disneyland, it won't mean Walt Disney, it will mean Disneyland, just a place."

**Neal Gabler:** Exactly. I'm not Walt Disney. Disney is a brand.

**Harriet Burns:** Right.



Sculpture by Gibson



**Neal Gabler:** What's that line he said to Marty Sklar: "Walt Disney doesn't smoke, but I smoke. Walt Disney doesn't drink, but I drink." So he was very aware of the distance between himself as a human being and himself as Kleenex.

**Harriet Burns:** Yes.

**Martin Kaplan:** One of the things that rarely happens for any of us is to get an opportunity to truly experience firsthand something about American culture that means something to us personally. To have access to it through other people who devoted their lives to either doing it or learning about it, and I have the sense that this has been a very special time together. I would just like everyone to please join me in thanking all of these people.