

his friends find that the journey itself brings the happiness and community they seek. The travellers, in turn, transform New York, allowing all children — regardless of race, class, or gender—to come to the peach, free from the charges of exploiters or the restraints of proprietors.

The populist message, however, brings mixed blessings. Sometimes it crafts interesting foes, such as James's exploitative aunts, or a harpoon-spitting mechanical shark, which pollutes the sea and threatens to suck everything into its consuming jaws. On the other hand, the emphasis on New York creates the film's duller moments, probably because the journey is more enjoyable than reminders of its destination. The clichéd praise of New York withers beside the sharp, cliché-cutting lines of characters like Miss Spider, whose deadpan one-liner, "my life hangs by a thread every day," will make even an adult laugh. Similarly, the three-dimensional effects of stop-motion animation and the striking color of the sea journey make the long-awaited city lights a disappointment. Enjoying the grasshopper's violin solo, played against a full moon, any viewer can enjoy the journey itself, without ever wondering "When will we get to New York?"

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### 101 Dalmatians (1996)

**101 Dalmatians.** Directed by Stephen Herek; written and produced by John Hughes Disney Enterprises/ Walt Disney Pictures/ Buena Vista.

Disney's animated version of Dodie Smith's book was a commercial success upon its original release in 1961, and subsequently has been a favourite with younger viewers since its release several years ago for the home video market. Clearly the corporate aim with this new live-action version is to cash in on the property yet again (the intertextual reference to Disney's earlier *Snow White*, when Cruella gazes at her reflection and asks, "Mirror, mirror, on the wall ..." is hardly unintentional). The only changes to the narrative in this newer version are superficial, or demanded by the differences between live-action and animation. So instead of composing songs, Roger now designs video games (watch for product tie-in coming soon!). Given its solid endorsement of traditional values in the manner of its predecessor, the new *101 Dalmatians* has been one of the biggest Hollywood family films of this recent Christmas season.

The story is rather simple, and has all the ingredients — love interest, broadly defined villains, cuddly animals, and adventure — to appeal to all children. The film's depiction of London invokes the nostalgic appeal of *Mary Poppins* even as it nods to the contemporary. The comforting notion of interspecies communication and cooperation, demonstrated when various barnyard animals assist the dogs in their escape, suggests a harmonious and beneficent nature that is sure to assuage any young child's anxiety about the possible absurdity of the universe.

Certainly the spotted quadrupeds are the star attraction. They perform well and do all the nifty tricks we expect of them. Viewers both young and old are

likely not to notice that there are perhaps only two or three shots showing more than twenty dogs at a time (how many of these are actual as opposed to virtual it is hard to say).

Of the human performers, Glenn Close is the star. Appropriately, she chews up the screen, playing the villainess Cruella de Vil with a broad campiness that admirably incarnates the cartoon character, combined with touches of the madness of Alex in *Fatal Attraction* and Norma Desmond in *Sunset Boulevard*. About the others, the best one can say is that Joan Plowright manages to lend dignity to the stereotyped role of Nanny, and that Mark Williams and Hugh Laurie combine just the right touch of Dickensian menace and *Home Alone*-physical farce to Cruella's henchman, Horace and Jasper (or is it Homer and Jethro?). Unfortunately, however, neither Jeff Daniels, who receives star billing, nor Joely Richardson can do anything with the bland characters of Roger and Anita. The standard disclaimer concluding all Hollywood movies — that any resemblance to actual persons living or dead is purely coincidental — would certainly seem to apply in this case.

Yet this is a direct result of the film's ideological thrust. We can all approve of its updated consciousness of animal rights, but its treatment of birthing and gender is regressive and embarrassing. Roger and Anita fall in love immediately when they meet in the park. Both are dunked in the park fountain by their dogs and so return to Roger's flat to dry their clothes; declaring their new-found love, they kiss, their drying clothes catching fire on the fireplace screen. Immediately we cut to the wedding ceremony, humans and canines alike arranged symmetrically in the frame. This mating ritual is so politically correct that even the classic Hollywood synecdoche of cigarette smoking is missing. It is no coincidence that the movie was directed by Stephen Herek, whose previous credit was the similarly heartwarming *Mr. Holland's Opus*. Imagine this same scenario directed by, say, Adrian Lyne or Paul Verhoeven. Even Spielberg would have given these characters some sense of passion, however adolescent.

Shortly thereafter, baby puppies are born, followed by the revelation that Anita is pregnant (could these people possibly have had ... sex?). During the birth of the puppies — and so, we are to presume, during the human birth to follow as well — the males (Roger and Pongo) patiently wait while women attend Perdita's labour behind closed doors. This vision sets the progress of gender relations back considerably. Many critics have noted the emphasis on traditional gender construction in recent Disney movies (*The Little Mermaid*; *Pocahontas*), and *101 Dalmatians* is no exception. The human/canine analogy throughout is a particularly clear instance of Roland Barthes' notion that one of the primary textual operations of bourgeois cultural myth is the representation of culture as nature.

But most viewers are likely neither to notice nor care about this aspect of the movie. Audiences seem to come away satisfied, and *101* merchandising ties are already available in toy stores, McDonald's, even at the candy counter in the cinema where the movie is showing. At this point, it is only a Scrooge who could exclaim "Out, out, damn spot!"

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