Religion and DISNEY

Not Just Another Mickey Mouse Course

Religious Studies 3812

Dr. Jennifer Porter
Course Requirements

• 8 Written assignments based on assigned readings  20%

• Alternative assignments (max of 2) - fan video (see example)

• 1 Major Research Paper or Website Project  40%

• 1 Final Take-home Exam  40%
• Religion and Pop Culture, Religion and Film, Animation
• Disney - the man, the corporation, animation innovations
• No holds barred I - culture critics take aim at Disney - race, gender, colonialism, religion
• No holds barred II - folklorists and animation theorists take aim at Disney
• No holds barred III - Christian fundamentalists take aim at Disney
Topics, continued: Religious dimensions of Disney films

The Lion King
Topics, continued: Religious dimensions of Disney films

Pocahontas
Topics, continued: Religious dimensions of Disney films

*The Hunchback of Notre Dame*
Topics, continued: Religious dimensions of Disney films

Mulan
Topics, continued: Religious dimensions of Disney films

*Mary Poppins*

*Bedknobs and Broomsticks*

*Three Lives of Thomasina*
Topics, continued: Religious dimensions of Disney films

Bambi
Brother Bear
Topics, continued: Disney Fandom as Religion
The study of Religion, Film and/or pop culture

- Functionalist definitions of religion (vis a vis Emile Durkheim’s model - what function does religion serve?) applied to film/pop culture.
  - Reinforces social norms?
  - Minimizes dissent?
  - Sacralizes the community (makes the community sacred) by projecting/embodying society’s self understanding?
Functionalist definitions of Religion, Film/pop culture

- Example: sacralization of “work” and “home” in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*
Formal definitions of religion

- Religion = myths, rituals, symbols, moral codes, community of believers - Film/pop culture also?
  - Myth = sacred story, a story that communicates meaningful truth (often in symbolic form) to the community
  - Rituals - activities conducted that communicate religious meaning - Attending theatre/theme park = religious ritual?
  - Moral Codes - defining “good” and “evil” - (and sin, salvation, redemption, truth, etc.) - does film and/or pop culture do this?
  - Community of believers - fans? Audiences?
Formal definitions of religion/film/pop culture

• Example: the nature of evil in *The Princess and the Frog*
Religion contains a certain “substance” - “essential” elements - film reveals these elements also?

- Transcendence - possibility of, and path to, the “other” world-transcendence made manifest?
- Relationship with higher power, however defined
- Path for living a “good” life made evident.
- What does it means to be human (and inhuman?)

Substantive definitions of religion/film/pop culture
Substantive definitions of Religion

- Example: path to fulfillment/being fully human in *The Princess and the Frog*
Film selection

• According to film & religion scholar Melanie Wright, scholars rarely address why they have chosen the films that they study - personal preference governs all?

• Why Disney?
  - Can fit functional, formal, and substantive definitions of religion/film
  - Unified (in a qualified way) body of work
  - Global in influence
  - Familiar to virtually all in North American context
  - Open to multiple interpretations
  - Subject to religious controversy
  - Personal preference
Popular film

- Scholarly analysis of religion and film largely focuses on “art”-type films
  - Analysis often draws on marxist or psychoanalytic models for analysis

- Study of popular film largely dismissed - why?
  - If its popular, it must be empty of meaning?
  - If its popular, the audience must be mindless consumers?
  - If its popular, it must be corporate, and therefore made only to “make money” - potential for ideological element dismissed?
Corporate Disney and the “mindless” consumer?

- Example: two fan interpretations of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*
Animated Film

- Animation largely dismissed as “childish”
- Suggestion that animated film carries meaning, that audiences engage critically with that meaning, rarely credited as possible.
- But - animation = ultimate in mise-en-scene (staging the scene) - no detail is accidental, because each detail must be drawn and redrawn
- Analysis of animated film for meaning therefore very warranted
One model for determining “religious” nature of film

- William Telford:
  - A film that is appropriate for study in the context of religion/film/pop culture should have one or more of the following elements:

1. Make use of religious themes/motifs/symbols in their title (but what might “religious” themes/symbols etc be?)
2. Have plots that draw upon religion (broadly defined to include the supernatural and the occult.)
3. Are set in the context of religious communities.
4. Use religion for character definition.
5. Deal directly or indirectly with religious characters (i.e. Buddha, Jesus, angels, demons), texts (bible, Koran, etc.) or locations (heaven, hell, spirit world, etc.)
6. Use religious ideas to explore the experiences and transformation or conversion of characters.
7. Address religious themes and concerns, including ethical issues.

- Which of these, if any, apply to Disney films?
“God help the Outcasts”

- The Hunchback of Notre Dame is the most obvious Disney fit for Telford’s model - but is the “Disney message” confined to Hunchback?
- What is the “message” of this song?
- What elements add to the “message” of this scene - lighting, backgrounds, juxtaposition of elements, characters, lyrics…?
- Does the fan video represent a response in keeping with the sentiment, staging, intent, musical theme, etc. of the song? - Is the fan “accurately” reading Disney’s ideological message?
How to determine religious dimensions of film?

- Melanie Wright proposes that analysis of religion, film and pop culture must take into account 4 areas:
  1. Narrative - defined as story, characters, plot, etc.
  2. Style - the aesthetic and audio-visual dimensions of the film - mise-en-scene, cinematography, editing and sound.
  3. Cultural and Religious context - the cultural framework within which the film (or pop culture artifact) was produced, and within which it is consumed
  4. Reception - how has the film/pop culture artifact been interpreted by (various) audiences, including scholarly, religious, government, fan, etc. communities?

- We will try to approach the topic of Disney and religion keeping all 4 categories in mind.