ABSTRACT: Scholars have argued that Disney films reflect a nostalgia for a white, colonial, male-oriented Christian past and an uncritical acceptance of overtly consumerist culture. This article examines these academic criticisms of Disney through the lens of Disney’s film trilogy *Pirates of the Caribbean*. The paper argues that Disney’s *Pirates* films destabilize traditional models of gender, politics and religion through the figure of Captain Jack Sparrow. Exploring Jack as a Trickster figure highlights dichotomies such as good and evil, life and death, male and female, human and divine, democracy and imperialism, and points to a broader trend within these Disney films to problematize accepted categories. As a result, the article suggests that Disney’s ideological “message” is much more nuanced in these films than academic critics give Disney credit for.

[1] *Pirates of the Caribbean* debuted as a “dark ride” at Disneyland in 1967; modeled on imagineer Marc Davis’ sketches, it was the last ride to be conceived and built while Walt Disney himself was alive, and opened to the public three months after his death. The ride consists of a series of vignettes, showing audio-animatronic pirates, both living and dead, indulging in various piratical pursuits. When the Walt Disney Company decided to make a film based on the popular ride, a number of screen and story-writers were consulted, with the final script being written by Terry Rossio and Ted Elliot. Rossio and Elliot are among the screenwriters for Disney’s hugely popular (and controversial) 1992 animated film Aladdin, as well as writers for rival film studio Dreamworks’ animated 2001 film Shrek, a film that pokes gentle fun at many fairytale conventions. The first *Pirates of the Caribbean* film, subtitled *The Curse of the Black Pearl* and directed by Gore Verbinski, debuted in 2003, and went on to gross over 650 million dollars worldwide. Following on the success of what was intended to be a stand-alone film, the studio financed two sequels with a unified story-arc, filmed simultaneously and released
sequentially in 2006 and 2007. Although some movie critics complained that the sequels were “too complex,” audiences apparently did not agree. The second *Pirates of the Caribbean* movie, *Dean Man’s Chest*, grossed over one billion dollars worldwide, and the combined gross earnings from all three films surpass 2.5 billion dollars, making the *Pirates of the Caribbean* trilogy Disney’s most lucrative set of films to date, and placing all three films among the top 50 highest-grossing films of all time.

[2] Although popularity and revenue are certainly not the only indicators that a cultural “text” such as *Pirates of the Caribbean* carries meaning (and are often in fact taken to mean the very opposite, that a given text has no meaning beyond a ‘lowest denominator’ kind of appeal), the financial success and popularity of cultural texts among audiences is one way to gauge how well the film speaks to the cultural values, self-perceptions, and ideological leanings of its audiences. “There has to be a reason,” as Religious Studies and Pop Culture scholar Bruce Forbes writes, ‘why great numbers of people choose to watch one television series [or film] and not another. The trick, of course, is to figure out what the reason is. In the process, we are essentially trying to learn about ourselves.”

Popular Culture scholars John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett suggest one reason for the popularity of certain films and television shows within American popular culture is that they espouse a uniquely American mythic vision, a secularized version of “Judaeo-Christian dramas of community redemption… combining elements of the selfless servant who impassively gives his life for others and the zealous crusader who destroys evil.” Such stories resonate with American audiences, they suggest, yet also evoke a “sinister presence” when translated from the big screen to American domestic and foreign policy.

In addition to presenting a black and white moral picture that elevates the United States
to paradisical status while equating evil only with outside forces, Lawrence and Jewett suggest that such pop cultural presentations of the American monomyth highlight paradoxes that strike at the heart of American democratic ideals. “Why,” they ask, “in an era of sexual liberation, do we still have heroes marked by sexual renunciation? And why, amid so many signs of secularization, do large audiences entertain so many fantasies of redemption by supernatural powers? And why, in a country trumpeting itself as the world’s supreme democratic model, do we so often relish depictions of impotent democratic institutions that can be rescued only by extralegal superheroes? […] And why do women and people of color, who have made significant strides in civil rights, continue to remain almost wholly subordinate in a mythscape where communities must almost always be rescued by physically powerful white men?”

[3] In their analysis of the American monomyth, Lawrence and Jewett suggest that Disney films epitomize the sexless, sanitized, morally-polarized, anti-democratic and violent ideals of the American monomyth. “With special effects photography, skillful stunts, and ingenious gadgets,” they write, “Disney could make the entire universe comply with his mythic vision… Every element of human experience must be transformed [in Disney films] to suit the requirements of the monomyth.” Cultural critic Henry Giroux furthers this criticism of Disney, writing… “Disney offers a fantasy world grounded in a promotional culture and bought at the expense of citizens’ sense of agency and resistance, as the past is purged of its subversive elements and translated into a nostalgic celebration of entrepreneurship and technological progress. Fantasy, as a Disney trademark, has no language for imagining public life and, as such, cannot be self-critical about its own relationship to it.”
What I would like to suggest in this paper is that Disney’s *Pirates of the Caribbean* film trilogy does indeed engage questions of public agency, democracy, commercialization and corporate power, race, gender, and religion in ways that problematize and destabilize the status quo. Of particular interest and relevance is the way in which the films engage religious themes and issues in this endeavor. The films do this, I suggest, largely through the destabilizing presence Captain Jack Sparrow, a trickster figure of mythic proportions whose presence elevates these films from typical American monomythic representations to something capable of problematizing contemporary American political and religious structures.

**The Immortal/immoral Captain Jack Sparrow**

Captain Jack Sparrow, portrayed with astonishingly original flare by actor Johnny Depp, is one of four main characters in the first *Pirates of the Caribbean* film, and comes to increasing prominence in the two subsequent *Pirates* films. In reference to Depp’s portrayal of Captain Jack Sparrow, screenwriter Terry Rossio remarks “he was exactly like we described but nothing like we anticipated,” and indeed Depp’s portrayal of this character is largely credited with making the films the iconic. The character of Captain Jack Sparrow is morally ambiguous, conceived by the screenwriters as a classic “trickster” figure with cinematic antecedents such as Bugs Bunny, Pepe LePew, and Groucho Marx. Layered onto this Warner Brothers-style comedic character is Johnny Depp’s own perception of Pirates as rock stars. “The sort of connection I made when first thinking about Captain Jack,” says Depp, “was the idea that pirates were the rock and roll stars of that era. Their myths or legends would arrive months before they would
ever make port, much like rock stars.” This insight lead Johnny Depp to model his portrayal of Captain Jack Sparrow on Keith Richards of Rolling Stones fame, creating an inebriated pirate with flailing arms and kohl-lined eyes that has challenged Errol Flynn’s Captain Blood for the throne of Hollywood’s premiere pirate lord.

[6] Although Rossio and Elliot contextualized their pirate captain within a cinematic tradition of comedic tricksters, Captain Jack Sparrow fits equally well within the tradition of mythic trickster figures. Mythic tricksters, according to poet and culture critic Lewis Hyde, are “boundary crossers,” transgressing the social, cultural and natural barriers that constrain human life. Religious Studies scholar William J. Hynes has identified six characteristics of mythic tricksters, including their 1) ambiguous and anomalous qualities, able to cross boundaries between good and evil, life and death, and so on; 2) their deceptive and trick-playing nature; 3) a role as bricoleur, a “tinker or fix-it person, noted for his ingenuity in transforming anything at hand in order to form a creative solution;” 4) an ability to shift shape, often to animal form; 5) a role as situation-inverter, whereby “what prevails is toppled, what is bottom becomes top, what is outside turns inside, what is inside turns outside, and on and on in an unending concatenation of contingency,” and 6) a semi-divine status, that situates them somewhere between gods and mankind, able to both transcend and undermine the boundaries between sacred and profane. Folklorist Barbara Babcock-Abrahams provides a more elaborate list of sixteen characteristics of mythic tricksters, many of which are subsumed within the broader categories above, but two of which warrant specific additional mention: tricksters reveal, she suggests, a two-fold or multiple nature, associated with “mirroring”; and express a breakdown of the distinction between reality and reflection.
Captain Jack Sparrow as Trickster.

[7] Captain Jack Sparrow is introduced as a boundary-crosser in *The Curse of the Black Pearl* from his opening sequence as he majestically sails an ignomious dingy into the harbour at Port Royal, stepping from sea to land as his ship sinks beneath the waves. His introductory sequence in *Dean Man’s Chest* reveals another kind of boundary-crossing, as he is tossed into the sea in a wooden coffin, and uses the leg bones of his coffin-mate to paddle his way back to his ship the Black Pearl. Margins and thresholds are the dwelling-places of tricksters, and Jack inhabits these spaces continuously throughout the films – beaches, docks, caves, prison cells, scaffolds, coffins – all become the stages upon which Captain Jack enacts his role. His deceptive nature is also established immediately upon his introduction, from his bribery of the harbor master to ensure his anonymity on the one hand while stealing the harbor master’s purse on the other, to his blatant misdirecting honesty to the Rosenkranz and Guildenstern-type guards in the following exchange:

Mullroy: What's your purpose in Port Royal, Mr. Smith?
Murtogg: Yeah, and no lies.
Jack Sparrow: Well, then, I confess, it is my intention to commandeer one of these ships, pick up a crew in Tortuga, raid, pillage, plunder and otherwise pilfer my weasely black guts out.
Murtogg: I said no lies.
Mullroy: I think he's telling the truth.
Murtogg: If he were telling the truth, he wouldn't have told us.
Jack Sparrow: Unless, of course, he knew you wouldn't believe the truth even if he told it to you.

[8] According to Terry Rossio and Ted Elliot, Jack Sparrow’s introductory sequence was written to tell you everything you needed to know about the character of Captain Jack, and indeed it does. He is outside the bounds of normal social conventions, and like the
mythic Trickster Iktomi, is “a liar that sometimes tricks by using the truth.” He is also very much a bricoleur, able to turn almost anything to his advantage. Rossio and Elliot describe him as “a guy who, no matter how bad things go, feels that somehow, the universe will come around to his point of view if he can just hang on long enough – utterly confident enough to just throw dust in everyone’s eyes and create havoc, and then figure he can just turn it to his own advantage.” This characteristic is epitomized in Jack’s escape from the enemy ship Endeavor in *At World’s End*, where he ties himself to a cannon, sets it alight, and uses the momentum of the blast to swing himself to freedom, while the cannon ball blasts both the miniature lead simulacrum of his enemy and the mast of his enemy’s ship to pieces. “Do you think he plans it all out,” one of the soldiers admiringly asks as Jack makes his escape, “or just makes it up as he goes along?” The ambiguity of Jack’s character is highlighted when this question receives no answer.

[9] Jack’s shape-shifting abilities are somewhat subtler than those of many mythic tricksters, but the argument can be made that they are present nonetheless. Jack’s name, “Sparrow” is an association with an animal form that symbolizes freedom. He has an undead doppelganger, a monkey not-so-coincidentally also named Jack. And his successor for the throne of Cannibal King in *Dean Man’s Chest* is a dog.

Counterbalancing these animal associations for Jack are more mundane type impersonations, including his reputed impersonation of a priest in the Church of England, an accusation that causes Jack to chuckle in remembered delight.

[10] Jack’s role as “situation inverter” is evident in almost every scene in which he appears: Jack turns enemies into allies, allies into enemies; he turns death into life, only to kill and create death once again. His lies morph into truth, which morph back into lies.
Perhaps the most explicit and literal example of this Trickster characteristic comes in the third Pirates film, *At World’s End*, when Jack and his “rescuers” attempt to cross from the land of the dead to the land of the living. Jack literally flips his ship upside down, inverting the expected order of things, and allowing the passage back to the mundane world. “Now up is down,” Jack tells his companions, in what could be the catch phrase of all mythic tricksters.

[11] Jack’s semi-divine status is implicit in the trickster archetype. According to Rossio and Elliot, they constructed the character of Captain Jack Sparrow in part as homage to legendary film director Serge Leone, whose films are framed within the cinematic conventions of Westerns, but with an added mythological dimension. As Rossio and Elliot state, “There’s the idea that some of the characters in the Serge Leone Westerns are basically gods. They are more than just mere mortals, and they walk amongst mortals and they get involved in their lives but for the most part, the issues of the gods belong to the gods and that idea is actually played out with Jack and Barbossa. They are actually the light and dark of the same trickster archetype.”

This ties in with the suggestion of folklorist Barbara Babcock-Abrahams, that “mirroring” is integral to Trickster figures. Barbossa, the villain of *The Curse of the Black Pearl*, is the mirror to Captain Jack Sparrow’s character. Jack might well have said of Barbossa what Barbossa later ironically says of another pirate lord, “He's a lot like meself, but absent me merciful nature and sense of fair play.”

[12] This mirroring element is played out more elaborately in Captain Jack Sparrow’s introductory scene in *At World’s End*, the third Pirates film. As Babcock-Abrahams argues, Tricksters break down the distinction between reality and reflection, “equally at
home in the world of reality and the world of imagination.” xxv In “At World’s End,”
Captain Jack Sparrow blurs the boundaries between real and imagined, self and
reflection, singular and plural in his opening scene, which finds the pirate Captain in his
own private hell, on a dead sea with a beached ship and only a plurality of selves for
company. Such a situation results, in Jack’s own words, in “a perpetual and virulent lack
of discipline,” where both cognitive and social conventions dissolve into madness and
where everything and nothing are simultaneously possible. Such betwixt and between
episodes in Trickster tales afford “an opportunity for realizing that an accepted pattern
has no necessity [and] may well provoke thought of real alternatives and prompt action
toward their realization.” xxvi In destabilizing our expectations of reality, fantasy,
possible, impossible, sanity, and madness, Captain Jack Sparrow opens the door for the
audience to question the status quo. The question now becomes, precisely what elements
of the contemporary status quo does Captain Jack Sparrow destabilize?
[13] Disney’s Pirates of the Caribbean films, it shall be argued, destabilize
representations of gender, colonialism, capitalism, democracy, race, and religion, and
contribute to a critique of contemporary American political, religious and economic
discourse. The films explicitly confront the constraints of gender stereotypes, the
incompatibility of corporate power with political democracy, and the need to abandon
anthropomorphized and politicized modes of religion.

The Captain and the Corset – gender in Pirates of the Caribbean

[14] From the opening sequence of the first Pirates film, gender is used to highlight the
constraints and limitations of social structures. The protagonist of the film, Elizabeth
Swann, is immediately and irrevocably associated with piracy, resulting in the unexpected gendering of piracy as feminine. From her introduction as a child singing “A Pirate’s Life for Me” to her act of piracy moments later as she steals her future husband’s pirate medallion, Elizabeth becomes the lens through which the audience views both piracy (conceived as liberating) and the forces of social convention (conceived as masculine). When we meet the adult Elizabeth, we juxtapose that image of the child yearning to meet a pirate with the young woman struggling to breathe while being bound in a corset. Later confronted by an unwanted offer of marriage, Elizabeth falls from a cliff, unable to breathe under the constraints of patriarchal gender expectations.

According to screenwriters Rossio and Elliot, “it was really fun to get away with such an obvious symbol of propriety [and] social constraint… its about as blatant as you can get, but it actually works.”xxxvii A reluctantly heroic Jack Sparrow drags her from the bottom of the sea and cuts the corset away from her, simultaneously slashing through the fabric and the social restrictions that govern women’s lives. From this point forward, Elizabeth’s own sense of agency propels the films, charting her journey from pirate captive to pirate King.

[15] While it is clear that the Pirates of the Caribbean franchise does not dispense with gender conventions, the films do play with them in ways that invite the audience to do the same. Disney critic Henry Giroux argues Disney heroines are always “ultimately subordinate to males and define their power and desire almost exclusively in terms of dominant male narratives,” and it is true that Elizabeth lives up to some of Disney’s stereotypical qualities: like most Disney princesses, Elizabeth Swann has a deceased mother, a foolish and ineffectual father, and dreams of her wedding day with impassioned
Unlike more conventional Disney heroines, however, Elizabeth is not passively waiting for her prince to come, nor is she defined in terms of a male narrative. Told persistently by the various men in her life to “wait here,” Elizabeth rejects a passive role and embraces her inner pirate. In doing so, she models some of the worst of negative stereotypes of women to be found in Hollywood cinema, while empowering those stereotypes with positive value. “You think because she is a woman we would not suspect her of treachery?” asks one pirate in “At World’s End?” “Well, when you put it that way,” is Captain Barbossa’s response, evoking a sexist stereotype that women are not to be trusted.

When Elizabeth divests herself of enough weapons to make the most ardent monomythic male hero proud, we realize that indeed she is NOT to be trusted – not because of patriarchal biases against women within the American mythscape, not because she has simply become “one of the boys,” as Henry Giroux might argue, but because she has her own sense of agency, and has broken free of societal framing of women as either “good girls” or “wicked women.” When Will Turner, her fiancé, later asks “if you make your choices alone, how can I trust you?” Elizabeth answers, “you can’t.” She stands outside the box, unbound by social convention and gender expectations: she is, as Jack admiringly calls her as she betrays him to his death, a pirate.

**Corporate Power and Political Democracy – Never Shall We Die**

[16] Religion, politics and economics are inseparable in Disney’s *Pirates* films, just as they are in contemporary American public discourse. Although Disney critic Henry Giroux argues that Disney films have no mechanism by which to engage questions of public agency, and Lawrence and Jewett suggest that Disney films undermine American
democratic ideals, Disney confronts both of these issues directly in *At World’s End*. The
opening frames of the film feature a noose, the flag of the East India Trading Company,
and the chains binding the feet of a seemingly endless stream of ragged men, women and
children as they shuffle past immaculately clad white male soldiers to be hanged – a
snapshot of oppression by socio-politico-economic elites. This framing is reinforced as
an officer reads a proclamation, stating: “By decree, according to martial law, the
following statutes are temporarily amended: right to assembly, suspended. Right to
habeus corpus, suspended. Right to legal counsel, suspended. Right to verdict by a jury
of peers, suspended.” The proclamation of each civil and legal right suspended is
punctuated by the deaths of another batch victims – male, female, black, white, young,
old, adult, child. Their corpses are tossed onto wagons, their shoes first removed and
tossed onto a mountain of used clothes, presumably waiting to be sold. The suspension
of civil rights, the mistreatment of prisoners, the juxtaposed images of gender, class and
race immediately situate this film within a political arena. The man responsible for this
hellish scenario – Lord Cutler Beckett – represents both the East India Trading Company
and “His Majesty the King,” forming a seamless critique of corporate and political
bedfellows. “No doubt you've discovered that loyalty is no longer the currency of the
realm, as your father believes,” Beckett tells Elizabeth, for example. “Then what is?” she
asks. He responds, “I’m afraid currency is the currency of the realm.”

Greed – for money, and for power – shapes military and political action, leading to the suspension of
the rule of law and the corruption of military and political power structures.

[17] In counter to this aggression, Disney’s *Pirates of the Caribbean* trilogy offers is an
international coalition of Pirates, bound by Law and committed to a kind of radically
individualistic democratic process. The leaders of the Pirate coalition – the Brethren Court - include members from Turkey, Portugal, France, China, Singapore, Africa, England, India, Spain, and the Caribbean. The Pirates have banded together to prevent their eradication by the Lord Cutler Beckett’s military/economic/political machine. In a comedic yet heartfelt portrayal of democracy, the Pirates punch, stab, wrestle and shoot their way to consensus. “This is madness,” Elizabeth proclaims. “This is politics,” Captain Jack Sparrow responds. The political infighting comes to an end with a democratic vote, following the political process laid down in ‘The Pirate’s Code.’ At the very suggestion that the Code might not be followed, silence reigns, and the man proposing to ignore the Code is shot. The Code, it appears, is inviolable, even in the most desperate of political, military or economic circumstances. “The Code,” Jack’s father Captain Teague tells us, “is the Law.” Although pirates throughout the three films have tried to argue that the Code is “more what you call "guidelines" than actual rules,” this is ultimately not the case. Suspension of the Code is simply never warranted.

[18] At World’s End taps into a number of political themes prevalent in American popular culture. Suspicion of government is one such theme, where governmental forces are juxtaposed to individual liberty. As Political Science scholars Terry Christensen and Peter J. Haas note, “the cinematic portrait of politics and politicians is almost invariably negative. Politicians are often the villains in movies. They are frequently corrupt, greedy, self-serving and ruthlessly ambitious.” Suspicion of big business is another, where economic greed and lust for political power go hand in hand, and are contrasted in the PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN trilogy with a Piratical version of the American dream: a Pirate’s life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness (frequently found in a bottle of
Other themes, however, cut across the grain of American economic and political suspicion, most tellingly the emergence of a kind of model U.N. among pirates to counter the corporate greed and political power-mongering of Lord Cutler Beckett in *At World’s End.*

[19] Adopting Henry Giroux’s insistence that in order to decode Disney semiotics one must contextualize their films in the social and political milieu within which they were written, I suggest the presence of these themes situates the *Pirates of the Caribbean* trilogy directly within issues arising out of post-9/11 politics in the United States, including the unilateral decision on the part of the United States to invade Iraq, despite U.N. disapproval, the perception of “Blood for Oil” political motivations on the part of the Bush administration, the suspension of Constitutional and civil rights in Guantanamo Bay, and the subsequent undermining of American legitimacy on the global stage. xxxv

Although the *Pirates of the Caribbean* trilogy does not question the foundational symbols of American political process (Democracy, the Constitution and the Rule of Law), it does serve as a vehicle, as Folklorist Barbara Babcock-Abrahams suggests, for highlighting an instance when the real departed from the ideal. Far from being incapable of depicting personal and political agency and the effectiveness of the democratic process, the *Pirates of the Caribbean* trilogy speaks volumes on these cherished American ideals.

**Bound in her bones: the anthropomorphizing of the divine**

[20] In addition to gender and politics, one of the most central and intriguing themes within the *Pirates of the Caribbean* films is the theme of religion. xxxvi Although largely just a plot device in *The Curse of the Black Pearl*, providing a supernatural explanation
for undead pirates and cursed Aztec gold, religion comes to increasing prominence in the films *Dean Man’s Chest* and *At World’s End*. According to Religious Studies scholar Donald E. Fadner, Disney’s portrayal of religion in its recent animated films situates the film studio “both as a critic of religion in some of its current guises and as a proponent of an alternative religious vision for our time,” and this observation holds true for the *Pirates of the Caribbean* trilogy. Religion is introduced in *Dean Man’s Chest* through the character of Tia Dalma, a black “Obeah” woman with the power to foretell the future and bring the dead to life. Learning of Captain Jack Sparrow’s death, she orchestrates a rescue mission to free him from “Davy Jones’ Locker,” (“a place of punishment, the worst fate a man can bring upon himself,” she tells us) and in so doing, sets in motion the events that free herself from the limitations of anthropomorphized religion. Tia Dalma, we come to learn, is a goddess, the divine trapped in human form. The revelation of Tia Dalma’s divinity is foreshadowed in the opening scene of *At World’s End* when a small child condemned to death sings the following verse: “The King and his men stole the Queen from her bed, and bound her in her bones. The seas be ours, and by the powers, where we will we roam.” As the story unfolds, we learn that the sea goddess Calypso was “bound in her bones” or trapped in human form, limiting her power and constraining her nature. This act was done by “the [Pirate] King and his men,” with the complicity of Calypso’s lover, a patriarchal attempt to control nature, the divine, and women in one polyvalent symbol. As Calypso says, “same story, different versions, all of them are true!” The film’s response to this betrayal is articulated by the Pirate Lord Sao Feng: “One such as you should never be less than what you are,” he tells
Elizabeth, mistaking her for the goddess. This message rings true for both the film’s representation of women, and for the film’s representation of religion.

[22] The theme of anthropomorphism and the insufficiency of this model for understanding the divine runs throughout *Dean Man’s Chest* and *At World’s End*. In *Dean Man’s Chest*, Jack is mistaken for a god by the Pelecosta natives, who plan to “release him from his fleshy prison” by killing him. Not surprisingly, Jack resists this fate, acting as an inverse mirror to Tia Dalma in *At World’s End* who eagerly seeks her release. Just as Jack is a man trapped in the illusion of godhood so is Calypso a goddess trapped in the illusion of humanity. Both are victims of the human propensity to anthropomorphize the divine.

[23] The corruption of religion to suit secular political and economic purposes is another theme that runs throughout the *Pirates of the Caribbean* trilogy. The primary villain of the second and third *Pirates* films, Lord Cutler Beckett, coerces the supernatural Captain of the Flying Dutchman to do his political bidding, using religion to destroy those who oppose his political and economic agendas. This use of religion for political purposes is cynical, for Beckett tells Davy Jones “the immaterial has become immaterial;” religion is simply the tool by which political and economic conquest is facilitated, and the destruction of civil rights justified. The film’s response to this conflation of religion and politics is to put forward an alternate model for religious understanding, one that in many ways reflects a reaffirmation of American political ideology in its support for the separation of Church and State. Religion, the *Pirates of the Caribbean* films tells us, in its truest form is immanent in nature and otherworldly in focus, and should not be used to violate human rights, nor to coerce obedience to political hegemonies - a shot across the
bow, to use a nautical metaphor, of religiously motivated political policies during the Bush administration.

**Conclusion**

[24] Like Captain Jack Sparrow and mythic tricksters, the *Pirates of the Caribbean* films invert and destabilize accepted norms of American political, religious, social and economic life. Pirates are heroes, big business is the enemy, women are independent, God is black, and a woman. Also like mythic Trickster tales, however, the *Pirates of the Caribbean* films ultimately reinforce certain cherished ideals: democracy works, the Constitution is inviolable, marriage is the foundation of the family, God exists. Trickster tales by their nature shake up accepted norms, and open the door to re-evaluation of the status quo. They can also shine a light on instances where the real departs from the ideal, and perhaps point the way to an alternate means of manifesting those ideals in the real world. As such, they are both inherently radical and inherently conservative, embodying the ambiguous nature of Trickster himself. Through the character of Captain Jack Sparrow, the *Pirates of the Caribbean* films invite viewers to participate in the negotiation of ideals central to contemporary American society, and offer their own heady brew of feminism, non-anthropomorphism, globalism and anti-Imperialism for audiences to partake of: as Captain Jack might say, “drink up, me hearties, yo ho!”

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1 Variations on this ride also appear in other Disney theme parks, including the Magic Kingdom at Walt Disney world, Disneyland Paris, and Tokyo Disneyland.

2 Two additional writers, Stuart Beattie and Jay Wolpert, are given story credit on the film. According to Stuart Beattie, he had “shopped” a *Pirates of the Caribbean* script to various studios for ten years prior to Disney’s decision to “green light” the production. It is unclear what elements from his original script were retained. Jay Wolpert’s contributions are also unclear. Story credit is granted to a writer by the Screen Writers
Guild when some of their ideas make it into a finished film, but not enough of their ideas
and/or dialogue is reflected to be granted script writing credit.

iii The writers undertook the task of creating a film inspired by the Disneyland ride,
embedding several of the ride’s vignettes into the film, but the characters and storyline of
the film are original.


v Rossio and Elliot, audio commentary, Dead Man’s Chest.

vi See http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=piratesofthecaribbean2.htm and
http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=piratesofthecaribbean3.htm and


ix Lawrence and Jewett, 360.

x Lawrence and Jewett, 7-8.

xi Lawrence and Jewett, 192.

xii Henry A. Giroux. The Mouse that Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence.

xiii Terry Rossio and Ted Elliot, audio commentary, Curse of the Black Pearl. See also
“An Interview with Ted Elliott and Terry Rossio, writers of Pirates of the Caribbean,”
UltimateDisney.com http://www.ultimatedisney.com/pirates-tedandterry-interview.html

xiv Rossio and Elliot, audio commentary, Curse of the Black Pearl.


xvii William J. Hynes & William G. Doty. Mythical Trickster Figures. Tuscaloosa,

xviii Babcock-Abrahams 159-160.

xix Jack’s ship, the Black Pearl, symbolizes freedom to Jack. There are interesting
allusions here to the Christian Parable of the Pearl of Great Price - having found his
“Pearl,” Jack will give up anything to keep it.

xx Rossio and Elliot, audio commentary, Curse of the Black Pearl.

xxi Richard Erdoes and Alfonso Ortiz, American Indian Trickster Tales New York:

xxii Rossio and Elliot, audio commentary, Curse of the Black Pearl.

xxiii As one of the screenwriters states "I think I was in into an animal phase when I wrote
this, her being Elizabeth Swan because she’s graceful like a Swan, Sparrow because he
needs to be free, and fly like a birth, that’s who he is.” Audio commentary, Curse of the
Black Pearl.

xxiv Rossio and Elliot, audio commentary, Curse of the Black Pearl.
When she condemns Captain Jack Sparrow to death with a kiss, she resonates with the Judas narrative, yet Jack Sparrow, the one character who is consistently free of social constraint, admiringly calls her a “pirate” – the highest praise he is able to give.

In his discussion of Disney’s film Mulan, Giroux suggests that Mulan’s embracing of “a masculine view of war” cancels out and rupturing of traditional gender roles – “she simply becomes one of the boys.” One might presume that his response to Elizabeth in Pirates of the Caribbean would be similar. This, however, presupposes a gendered view of war, that women “naturally” oppose war, and men “naturally” embrace it – an essentialist view Giroux himself would be first to reject should it appear in a Disney film.

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According to foreign policy scholars Robert Tucker and David C. Henderson, in their analysis of American foreign policy following 9/11, political legitimacy is judged on two key criteria: “first, that action issues from rightful authority, that is, from the political institution authorized to take it; and second, that it does not violate a legal or moral norm.” The United States, they judge, violated both. Although this critical perspective of American foreign policy was starting to emerge in academic contexts shortly following 9/11, mainstream media sources did not begin to push this critical perspective until much later – violation of civil rights at Guantanamo Bay, for example, did not reach popular awareness until a Supreme Court decision in 2006 granting basic human rights to Guantanamo Bay detainees under the Geneva Convention, making Pirates of the Caribbean a timely criticism of American foreign policy.

Disney’s portrayal of religion frequently encounters condemnation from Religious Studies scholars. Paul Flesher, for example, writes: “Whenever I see Disney films depict religion, the religion professor in me cringes. Every religion professor I know shudders when the topic of Disney’s portrayal of religion comes up.”
Interestingly, Mary E. Miller argues that the “Jolly Roger” pirate symbol of skull and crossed bones is based on archeological symbols associated with the pre-Columbian Aztec goddess Jaina - an interesting bit of historical backstory to the *Pirates of the Caribbean* films. Mary E. Miller, “Rethinking Jaina: Goddesses, Skirts and the Jolly Roger,” Record of the Art Museum, Princeton University, 64(2005):63-70.