Walt Disney and the Propaganda Complex: Government Funded Animation and Hollywood Complicity During WWII

Amanda Cunningham
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

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Walt Disney and the propaganda complex:  
Government funded animation and Hollywood complicity during WWII  

Amanda Cunningham  
Hank Greenspun School of Journalism and Media Studies

Introduction

Walt Disney's work as an animator during World War II had a measurable impact on culture and in the development of government produced messages. It is important to examine this understudied area of Disney's life and his studio's efforts to produce wartime training and propaganda films during WWII. Government agencies, including the U.S. Treasury, contracted Disney to produce 32 animated shorts between 1941 and 1945 (Gabler, 2007).

Employing a semiotic approach of cinema, this study focuses on the cartoons The New Spirit (1942), Der Fuehrer's Face (1943) and Education for Death: The Making of the Nazi (1943). While American wartime animated propaganda was not limited to the Disney Studio, Disney's specific brand of propaganda with its optimism and nostalgia helped unite the U.S. during a time of war.

Figure 1. Poster advertisement of Der Fuehrer's Face depicts Donald Duck throwing a rotten tomato in Hitler's face.

Materials and methods

The many visual and textual meanings in these cartoons are ideal for a semiotic study. Semiotics is the study of signs and is useful in understanding and identifying the many signs depicting evil and danger or their opposites patriotism and safety shown in the animated cartoons looked at here. Signs are composed of a signifier (an image, text or sound) and a signified (the concept generated by the signifier).

This study will use semiotics in order to demonstrate that there is no such thing as a neutral viewing experience and that Disney's animated propaganda had a profound effect on audiences of this time.

The three cartoons viewed are very different in style and methods. The first cartoon, The New Spirit, is full of American Patrotism signifiers for the first four and a half minutes while the last part is purely Axis Power themed. The second cartoon, Der Fuehrer's Face, is in opposition to The New Spirit in that the Axis Power signifiers are up front and devoted the first seven minutes to this theme, saving the last minute for American Patrotism signifiers. The last cartoon, viewed and by far the most disturbing, is Education for Death: The Making of the Nazi. This is the only cartoon studied in which the entire ten minutes is Axis Power themed and any notion of America or its Allies are completely absent. Education for Death: The Making of the Nazi is also the only cartoon looked at that does not feature a beloved Disney character and is the only cartoons produced during this time that is extremely dark in nature.

When studying these cartoons it is easy to classify them all as blatant propaganda. But to look deeper at their signs and inherent meanings, gives a sense of awe, as nothing even remotely similar in nature would ever be acceptable by today's standards. It is hard to be completely objective when watching these cartoons, and even more difficult to imagine the state of mind an American audience during this tumultuous time would have more than 70 years ago.

Results

The New Spirit

Signifier

American flag
Evil, harm, enemy
Pride, safety, patriotism, good
Dark red sky
Dark evil sky

Signified

The magic kingdom: Walt Disney and the American way of life
Nazi
Tough, fiery, strong personality, beloved Disney character, American

two star shaped gravestone crosses

Main character Hans' blonde hair and blue eyes serves as a perfect example of what Hitler is described as in the cartoon, a “Kraut”, with his features being compared to Hans. These are signifiers for the first four and a half minutes and encourage viewers to think of Hitler as a simplistic idea. The New Spirit, which is full of American爱国主义 signifiers for the first four and a half minutes while the last part is purely Axis Power themed. The second cartoon, Der Fuehrer's Face, is in opposition to The New Spirit, in that the Axis Power signifiers are up front and devoted the first seven minutes to this theme, saving the last minute for American Patrotism signifiers. The last cartoon, viewed and by far the most disturbing, is Education for Death: The Making of the Nazi. This is the only cartoon studied in which the entire ten minutes is Axis Power themed and any notion of America or its Allies are completely absent. Education for Death: The Making of the Nazi is also the only cartoon looked at that does not feature a beloved Disney character and is the only cartoons produced during this time that is extremely dark in nature.

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Conclusions

The first cartoon viewed, The New Spirit, is full of American Patrotism signifiers for the first four and a half minutes while the last part is purely Axis Power themed. The second cartoon, Der Fuehrer's Face, is in opposition to The New Spirit in that the Axis Power signifiers are up front and devoted the first seven minutes to this theme, saving the last minute for American Patrotism signifiers. The last cartoon, viewed and by far the most disturbing, is Education for Death: The Making of the Nazi. This is the only cartoon studied in which the entire ten minutes is Axis Power themed and any notion of America or its Allies are completely absent. Education for Death: The Making of the Nazi is also the only cartoon looked at that does not feature a beloved Disney character and is the only cartoons produced during this time that is extremely dark in nature.

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Literature cited


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