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ENGL 1155:02 Fairy Tale Magic & Modern Literature

Breaking the Disney Spell Essay

Disney is a fairytale titan, a corporation that has arguably a monopoly on the entertainment industry. Their bread and butter are fairytales. It would be difficult to find someone who does not know a Disney movie, especially in America. However, Disney’s collateral damage to other culture’s tales is known far and wide and continue to be an issue for the company. There are some things Disney does right and some things it does wrong. In the case of Mulan (1998) the movie was a fantastic moneymaker and supposed to be an olive branch to China, but instead was a box office flop at the time. Moana (2016) however seems to be a win in the books of Disney as it was both popular and received little to no backlash for not respecting the Polynesian culture.

           Many factors will play into the reason Mulan (1998) failed miserably in China, where the original tale known as The Ballad of Mulan, which the screenplay is based off, originated. The original Ballad of Mulan follows the story of a girl named Mulan whose father is called up to go fight in the military. Mulan does not want her father to die in battle and disguises herself as a man and goes in her father’s place to serve successfully in the military. Afterward, Mulan refuses a reward and instead goes back to her family and resumes her role as a woman. In the 1998 film, there are many differences and problems with the film adaptation of the Ballad of Mulan. Despite the movie being about an originally Chinese tale, the movie made practically nothing in the Chinese theaters. This was in part due to the bureaucratic red tape surrounding the release of the movie in addition to rampant piracy of the movie, which was already released in other parts of the world. However, the film was met with criticism about the appearance of Mulan and the differences between the movie and the original. The American and Canadian market reaped nearly 120 million while the Chinese theaters pulled in $30,000 (BBC). According to the BBC, “The agency described the legendary heroine as "foreign-looking" in her Disney incarnation and said the heroine's mannerisms were too different from the Mulan of Chinese folklore for viewers to recognize.” (BBC). Another review of moviegoers said that the reason that people from China could not relate to her was that “’ She's too individualistic,’ says a 45-year-old theater ticket-taker who gives only her surname of Liu. ‘Americans don't know enough about Chinese culture.’” (Langfitt). Disney taking artistic liberty with classic fairy tales is not uncommon, however. Another example of a Disney film that Disney changed the film adaptation drastically is Puss in Boots (1922). Zipes mentions this instance specifically saying, “Although Puss as a cunning cat is crucial in this film, Disney focuses most of his attention on the young man who wants to succeed at all costs. In contrast to the traditional fairy tale, the hero is not a peasant, nor is he dumb.” (Zipes). In this instance he is correct. Disney when creating Mulan changed the tale drastically enough to make it marketable to a western audience, trampling the humble origins and cultural significance of the original to the Ballad of Mulan.

           In the casting department, Mulan fairs better than most of Disney’s movies. Especially considering earlier movies, Disney has received backlash for many of its pre-2000s movies. Excluding blatantly racist movies such as Song of the South, Disney has also received backlash for its animated Lion King. The Lion King is a movie set in Africa, with many African elements in it, such as the character names and underlying music containing Swahili. Despite being set in Africa and borrowing elements of African Fairy tales, the cast is almost exclusively not African. Most are not even African Americans. Mulan does not suffer as much from this, as Mulan herself and Chi Fu, as well as some other characters, are voiced by people of Asian heritage at least. However, Mushu the dragon featured as Mulan’s sidekick is played by Eddie Murphy, and Yao one of Mulan’s eventual friends in the military is voiced by Harvey Fierstein, along with Li Shan not being played by people of Asian descent and chosen by their popularity in American pop culture instead. Mulan is not all bad however and where Mulan was not primarily a feminist figure in the traditional Chinese patriarchal society, she became a symbol of feminism for future generations (myself included as I was born in 1998 and Mulan was integral to my childhood).

           Conversely, Moana is the opposite with extra care taken by Disney to respect and honor Polynesian Culture. Moana is not a direct derivative from any one fairy tale, it has ample roots in Polynesian Origin Myths and History. Disney took great care in making sure that the film accurately portrayed Polynesian culture. “…Lasseter was clear: the project would not go any further until Musker and Clements actually went to Polynesia, marking the beginning of a process that makes Moana one of Disney’s most culturally authentic endeavors yet.” (Robinson). One of the steps Disney took to make Moana an authentic experience was put together a panel of Pacific Islander advisory board names the Oceanic Story Trust (Herman). The plot of the movie follows Moana, a young girl who is coming of age and seeks to lead her people to prosperity. She feels a calling to the sea and to restore the land to its original glory travels to find the demigod Maui to restore the heart of the God Te Fiti. As far as the story goes, it doesn’t follow Polynesian Mythology extremely closely and instead derives many elements from it. Maui is a real character in Polynesian mythology and is hailed as a folk hero and trickster. Some of the lyrics of Maui’s song follow the mythology behind Maui as well. For example in the song “Your Welcome” Maui sings “Oh, also I lassoed the sun. You're welcome. To stretch your days and bring you fun.” This references one of the tales of Maui in which Maui uses some rope his Mother, Hina, provided him with. He studies the ways of the sun and climbs to the top of Haleakala and lassoed the sun. After convincing the sun to stay longer in the sky so that Maui’s mother and other Hawaiians could complete their work during the day (Skyline Hawaii: Legends of Demigod Maui). Te Fiti is not an actual god or entity in Polynesian Mythology but the imagery and similarity to the Goddess Pele, goddess of volcanoes, fire, lightning wind, and creator of the Hawaiian Islands are clear. In addition to these story elements, the animation and details in the movie are abundant. For example, the style and method of tattooing and the importance of tattoos are showcased in the movie. Historically, the importance of tattoos stems from the lack of writing in Polynesian Culture. Instead, Polynesian natives would use tattoos to indicate hierarchical status in society as well as sexual maturity (Gemori). In addition to the story consisting of many elements of Polynesian Culture and Mythology, the casting choices were very deliberate. All the main characters, except for Hei Hei, the chicken, are voiced by people of Polynesian heritage. The main character, Moana, is played by Auli’i Cravalho, who was born in Kohala, Hawaii, as well as Maui being played by Dwayne Johnson who has Polynesian Heritage. Auli’i, which means dainty or cute in Hawaiian, was 15 at the time and was unknown until Moana, due to the directors’ desire to cast a Hawaiian native and the age of the character. This is in stark contrast to the casting of Mulan and the casting of The Lion King which contained little to no representation of the culture they were portraying.

           Moana represents a decided change in Disney’s philosophy regarding the representation of minority cultures and foreign cultures. Are they making this change with the need to appeal to a larger audience to make more money? Or are they trying to bring other cultures and mythology to the screen in a more accurate way, providing much-needed representation to minorities? I do not know, and as long as they are doing it correctly, I do not care what their motivations are. I think that Zipes’ essay raises valid points about the entertainment monopoly that is Disney, and I think that very recently Disney has begun to try to make up for their past misdeeds. A good example of this is their movies available on Disney+. On Disney+ they had the opportunity to not show older Disney content that is blatantly racist and no longer Politically correct and instead ignore their past mistakes. Instead, they choose to add them to the service with a warning at the beginning explaining that the films are not politically correct. I believe this is a good sign that they are moving forward with societal change and instead of ignoring their past mistakes, they keep them as a reminder of what to avoid in their future films.

           Overall, I am against Zipes’ argument as of today, but agree that his points are valid, especially concerning older Disney movies. Disney movies of the not-so-distant past such as Mulan provide a good example of what Zipes is talking about and I agree that in those instances Disney was not doing justice to the original fairy tale. However, Disney seems to be offering more in the ways of representation and seems to care more for the tales they bring to the screen. Hopefully, we continue to see this trend continue and Disney will continue to respect the fairy tales it appropriates.

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