Disney as ART

Animation Films and the Aesthetic Transformation of Cinema
from *Snow White* to *Encanto*

Room and time: Seminar Room 34.D2 (Attemsgasse 25, Top Floor), Wednesday, 3:15 - 4:45 p.m.
UniMeet link (in case we need to go online): https://unimeet.uni-graz.at/b/bra-xug-7uy-joc

Lecturer: Univ.-Prof. Dr. Stefan Brandt · **Email**: stefan.brandt@uni-graz.at
Office hours: Thursdays, 4-6 p.m. (https://moodle.uni-graz.at/course/view.php?id=24980)

Course number: 512.321 · **Course tutor**: Veronika Rom (veronika.rom@uni-graz.at)

Description: The name 'Disney' is commonly associated with the 'shallow' and 'popular' aspects of the American way of life. It stands for an idealistic – perhaps even escapist – approach to culture that accentuates traditional values and embellishes the romantic dimensions of human (and oftentimes animal) relationships. Since the 1990s, the term 'Disneyfication' has been used by scholars to describe the transformation of society into a giant spectacle, consisting of theme parks and superficial entertainment. However, the spectrum of Disney films (and productions associated with Disney) is much wider than many movie-goers suspect, incorporating animated cartoons (e.g., *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, 1937; *Fantasia*, 1940; *Dumbo*, 1941; *Ratatouille*, 2007; *Up*, 2009; *Frozen*, 2013; and *Raya and the Last Dragon*, 2021), sci-fi flicks (*Tron*, 1982), musicals (*Mary Poppins*, 1964), as well as documentaries (*The Living Desert*, 1951) and even avant-garde productions. The seminar is particularly interested in the aesthetic dimension of the Disney imagination, literally identifying 'Disney as Art,' as the course title implies. As an innovative filmmaker and creator, Walt Disney was influenced by the European art of the 'old masters', for example, symbolism and romanticism, which is visible in many of his animated films produced before his death in 1966. In a collaboration with the Spanish artist Salvador Dalí, a surrealistic short film was created, *Destino* (1945), which broke with the conventional cartoon style and remained unknown for a long time, premiering only sixty years later. Today there are many exciting Disney films that, in addition to commercial success, also offer artistic value and at the same time try to take up contemporary topics. The course thus takes a look at the avant-garde elements of pop culture classics from *Snow White* and *Fantasia* to *Soul* and the recently Oscar-decorated *Encanto*.

Teaching and Learning Method: This is an interactive course. Participation in group discussions as well as contributions to the discussion forums on the Moodle course site will be part of the final grade. Students will organize *expert sessions* for each meeting, using questions, games, illustrations, video clips, and group work as didactic tools.

Materials: All films will be made available in the Department's Film Library (Heinrichstr. 18 / 1st floor) and via YouTube. Key theoretical texts will be uploaded on Moodle.

Aims: The course will familiarize participants with the key features of Disney productions (composition, background, marketing, effect), paying special emphasis to the 'artfulness' and aesthetic significance of Disney's animation films.

Assessment:

> **A.)** *Regular attendance* (*no more than 2 absences!*), **active participation**, and at least **seven** substantiated entries in the **Moodle discussion forum (1/3)** (not including your own session);

> **B.)** *Expert Session, Handout,* and *Revised Presentation* (to be held in class and then uploaded onto the Moodle course site in a *revised*, *adapted*, and *extended form*) **(1/3)**;
> **Important: For the correct mode of citation, follow the style sheet on Moodle.**

> **C.)** *2-page research proposal* plus *12-15-page final paper* (5,000 – 6,000 words, including title page, table of contents, and bibliography). Please use templates on Moodle! **(1/3)**.

> *Note: You need to pass each section to pass the whole course.*

A.) REGULAR ATTENDANCE, CLASS, PARTICIPATION, AND MOODLE DISCUSSION FORUM

Regular attendance and *active participation* in class sessions are crucial to the success of the course. *Absences* must be explained in writing, preferably prior to class. No more than two absences are allowed. You are expected to be present in our meetings, not only having read the assigned material, but also prepared to fully engage with the material, ask questions, offer perceptive interpretations, and even argue for your way of reading the text at hand. Note: There might be *pop quizzes* (i.e., unannounced tests at the beginning of a session) to check whether you have read the materials.

You need to *post at least seven substantial entries* in the *Moodle discussion forum*. Make sure you are well informed *before* answering the three discussion questions: Read the required text. Conduct some *additional online research* according to your own research interests. When making an entry, refer to useful materials you found on the internet (clips, articles, etc.). Ideally, you will also *respond to other entries* already uploaded by other students.

B.) EXPERT SESSION, REVISED PRESENTATION, AND HANDOUT

As an expert, you will prepare *three short questions* for the discussion forum, focusing on composition, background, and effect in the main text (to be uploaded 6 days in advance), potentially together with links to *clips* or *images*. Show your discussion questions to me 1 week before your session (or send them to me via email)!

In class, you can start with some *essential information* on the topic (look at the keywords on the syllabus first), then pose questions to trigger a *lively discussion*. Choose *examples* related to the topic of the session that you can discuss in class (for example, in group work). Be *interactive*. Show images and clips, launch a game, pick up questions. Do not stick to your schedule *too much*!

Revise, adapt, and extend your PPT carefully after the session (answering all questions brought up in the expert session) and *upload it* together with a *handout* (3 pages) on Moodle *within one week after the session*!

C.) RESEARCH PROPOSAL AND FINAL PAPER

The *research proposal* (2 pages), containing a basic outline for your final paper, is due ==*Dec. 7, 2022*==. The form for the research proposal is available on Moodle. Fill it out and upload it together with an *editable Google docs version* of that same document in the 'upload section' for research proposals on Moodle. *Insert the link to the Google docs version in the comment function to your post on Moodle. (Do not put it somewhere in the document itself!)*

Important: *Consult the secondary texts on the Moodle website! (Search for your topic under the respective session.)*

The *final paper* (max. 15 pages, including title page, table of contents, and bibliography, 5,000 – 6,000 words) should be uploaded (together with an *editable Google Docs version*) in the respective forum on Moodle.

Important: *Insert the link to the Google docs version in the comment function to your post on Moodle. (Do not put it somewhere in the document itself!)*

The final paper should show your name and email address, the course title, the instructor's name, the date of submission, and the number of words. Primary and secondary sources need to be cited according to the Uni Graz guidelines for style and format. The *deadline* for submission of the final paper is ==*Monday, 13 February 2023*==. Keep in mind: A good paper is a finished paper. There is *no extension* of this deadline.

Important: *Cite all sources according to the Uni Graz guidelines (see style sheet on Moodle). (Do not use APA or other modes of citation.)*

Note: All required texts for this course are available on Moodle.

Syllabus

12 October   **Introduction: Disney and Art—Disney *as* Art**

Basic texts:
Paul Wells, "The Language of Animation" (2012).
Steven Watts, "Walt Disney: Art and Politics in the American Century" (1995).

Keywords: Animation Art; Disneyfication; Disney Studios; Walt Disney.

19 October   **Film Theory and Analysis – An Overview**

Main text (reading required):
Amy Villarejo, "The Language of Film" (2013)

Additional text (optional):
Michael Ryan and Melissa Lenos, *Introduction to Film Analysis* (2012).

Keywords: Camera Movement; Color; Framing; Lighting; *Mise en Scène*; Montage; Sound.

9 November   **The Beauty and the Shadow: German Expressionism and the Disney Princess**

Main example (viewing required):
***Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937)**

Additional texts (optional):
Penny Starfield, "Film and Art" (2006).
Tracey Mollet, "Walt Disney and the Birth of the American Fairy Tale" (2013).

Keywords: Alternative Families; Color; Disney Princess; Expressionism; Fairytale; Fantasy.

16 November   **A Dance with the Arts: Modernity, Animation, and Opera**

Main example (viewing required): *Fantasia* (1940)

Additional texts (optional):
Mark Clague, "Playing in 'Toon: Walt Disney's *Fantasia* (1940)
and the Imagineering of Classical Music" (2004).
Susan Willis, "*Fantasia*: Walt Disney's Los Angeles Suite" (1987).

Keywords: Classical Music; Education; Kitsch; Machine;
Metaphor; Modernity; Morale; Racism; Sorcery.

30 November   **Disney as High Art: Surrealism and Allegory in the Short Films**

Main example (viewing required):
***Destino* (1945/2003)**
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rMLVqQDeY58

Additional texts (optional):
Ron Barbagallo, "The *Destino* Animatic" (2018),
http://www.animationartconservation.com/destino,-
and-the-fate-of-assembling-artistic-truths.html
Keith L. Eggener, "'An Amusing Lack of Logic': Surrealism
and Popular Entertainment" (1993).

Keywords: Allegory; Chronos-Motif; Dalí; Dance-Metaphor;
Greek Mythology; Surrealism.

7 December   **Modernity, Crisis, and Alternative Families in Disney**

Main example (viewing required): *The Lion King* (1994)

Additional text (optional):
Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949/2004), esp. pp. 28–37.
Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin, on *The Lion King* (2004).

**DUE DATE
RESEARCH PROPOSAL**

Keywords: Adventure; Apotheosis; Classic Hero; Father Figure;
Hero's Journey; Ideology; Monomyth; Quest; Racism; Villainy.

14 December   **"'The Fairest One of All': Aesthetics and the Transformation of Beauty in Disney's Feature Films"**
Lecture by Lisa Buchegger, BBA, MA

   Main text (reading required):
   Elizabeth Bell, "Somatexts at the Disney Shop" (1995)

   Keywords: Beauty Ideals; Body Images; Heteronormativity; Three-Women-Model; Gender Transgression.

11 January   **Disney and Postmodernism**

   Main example (viewing required): *Ralph Breaks the Internet* **(2018)**
   Additional texts (optional):
   Max Dosser, "The False Dichotomy of 'Healthy' and 'Toxic' Masculinity in Ralph Breaks the Internet" (2022).
   Maria Guallar Comas, "Ralph Breaks the Internet: Dealing with Toxicity" (2021).

   Keywords: CGI; Deconstruction; Intertextuality; Irony; Masculinity; Postmodernism; Self-Referentiality; Toxicity.

18 January   **Disney and Philosophy**

   Main example (viewing required): *Soul* **(2020)**
   Additional texts (optional):
   Bertha A. Manninen, "Suffering and Soul-Making" (2016).
   A. Islam, "Semiotic Analysis of the Animation Film *Soul*" (2022).

   Keywords: Carpe Diem; Cubism; Death/Afterlife; Existentialism; Intertextuality; Joy; Purpose; Semiotics; Soul-Motif.

25 January   **Disney as Social Parable: Community, Trust, and War**

   Main example (viewing required): *Raya and the Last Dragon* **(2021)**
   Additional text (optional):
   S.K. Wardah and R.S. Kusuma, "Women's Representation in the Animated Disney Film *Raya and The Last Dragon*" (2021).

   Keywords: Community; Female Empowerment; Forgiving; Friendship; Reconciliation; Trust; War.

1 February   **The Disney Animated Musical**

   Main example (viewing required): *Encanto* **(2021)**
   Additional text (optional):
   Sydney Conroy, "Narrative Matters: *Encanto* and Intergenerational Trauma" (2022).

   Keywords: Counter-Imagination; Determination; Family; Humility; Inclusion; Intergenerational; Magic; Musical; Togetherness; Trauma.

DUE DATE FINAL PAPER: MONDAY, 13 FEBRUARY 2023