WHERE DREAMS COME TRUE

Walt Disney and American Cultural Identity

Room and time: Seminar Room (Attemsasse 25, Top Floor), Wednesday, 3:15 - 4:45 p.m.
First session: October 11, 2017  Course number: 512.313
Lecturer: Univ.-Prof. Dr. Stefan Brandt  Office hours: Thursdays, 4-6 p.m.  Email: stefan.brandt@uni-graz.at

Description: The name ‘Disney’ is commonly employed to identify 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 embodies 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. The spectrum of Disney films (and productions associated with or financed by Disney) is much wider than many movie-goers suspect; it includes animated cartoons (e.g., Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, 1937; Fantasia, 1940; Mulan, 1998; Ratatouille, 2007; Up, 2009; Frozen, 2013; and Inside Out, 2015), sci-fi flicks (Tron, 1982), musicals (Mary Poppins, 1964), as well as documentaries (The Living Desert, 1951) and even avant-garde films (The Straight Story, 1999). While looking at some crucial Disney productions, we will also examine archetypal characters such as Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck with regard to their development on screen/television, discuss crucial topics in Disney movies (e.g., race, class, gender, and nation) as well as scrutinize the phenomenon of ‘Disneyland.’

Teaching and Learning Method: This is an interactive course. Participation in group discussions as well as contributions to the discussion forum on the Moodle course site will be part of the final grade. Each meeting will be held by ‘experts’ who organize the session by means of questions, games, illustrations, video clips, and group work. The most relevant facts will be conveyed in a short information block (or, alternatively, a fact file). Experts upload their questions 6 days in advance!

Materials: All printed texts will be made available on Moodle. Please watch the films online or in our Media Archive!

Aims: The course will familiarize participants with the key features (composition, background, effect) of Disney productions.

Assessment: A.) regular attendance (no more than two absences!) and active in-class participation, as well as nine entries in the discussion forum (1/3); B.) presentation as part of an expert session plus 3-page handout and online questions (1/3); C.) research proposal (2 pages) and final paper (10 pages) (1/3). You need to pass each section to pass the course.

Deadline for Final Papers (including declaration of honesty): Thursday, February 15, 2018. There is no (!) extension of this deadline. Please indicate on a post-it attached to your final paper if you would like to get detailed feedback!

Syllabus

11 October  Where Dreams Come True – The World of Disney
Basic text:

18 October  The Empire of the Mouse? ‘Mickey’ as the All-American Hero
Main examples (viewing required):
  Steamboat Willie (1928) & The Sorcerer’s Apprentice (from: Fantasia, 1940).
Additional text (optional):
Keywords: All-American, Anthropomorphism, Earlier Talkies, Highbrow, Laughter, Mickey, Transformation.

25 October  The Birth of the American Fairytales
Main example (viewing required):
  Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937).
Additional text (optional):
Keywords: Animated Feature, Color, Fairytale, Fantasy, Sleeping Beauty, Snow White.

8 November  Modernity, Crisis, and Alternative Families in Disney
Main example (viewing required):
  Dumbo (1941)
Additional text (optional):
Keywords: Alice in Wonderland (1951), Bullying, Dumbo, Family, Lilo & Stitch, Outsiders, Ratatouille, Up.
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<th>Main Example (viewing required)</th>
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