

Julian Stringer looks at some compulsory seasonal cheer

Happy Families

Christmas just wouldn't be Christmas without the promise of a new Disney film. The talk of last year was *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*, this year the studio is putting out *Oliver And Company*, its 27th full-length animated feature.

These seasonal events are significant because they're as traditional and familiar as plum pudding. Somehow, we're most aware of Disney at this time of year, the name itself seeming to become synonymous with the very leanings of populist sentiment. Disney habitually signifies the reinstatement of family and community values, and it is during the Christmas period that these ideologies are most actively reworked in the media and in everyday life.

Recently, we've seen the publicity over the share issue for Disney's latest community venture, its theme park on the outskirts of Paris, 'Euro-Disneyland'. In the face of yet another testament to the Disney corporation's public visibility, it's hard not to admire the resilient way in which the name has survived. Seemingly, anything can be made Disneyesque, with a little application.

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Certainly, Disney films bear the imprint. The enduring appeal of *Snow White*, *Pinocchio*, *Dumbo* and all the rest, is evidence that Disney for 50 years seems to have pitched its ideology of family entertainment just right. Unfortunately though, the magic kingdom is a pretty exclusive place when it comes down to representation: only children and parents exist there, so things don't usually happen to people who aren't in families. And those families are organised along some delicate lines: they have to repress a lot in order to function harmoniously.

Many Disney films are, in fact, nothing more or less than straight Oedipal stories. The most striking is probably

Bambi. The whole colourful event is a peg on which to hang an apology for the continuation of male power. The hook to grab the audience is little Thumper: we're encouraged to share his ironic and knowledgeable viewpoint, and so acquiesce in the elimination of Bambi's mother and oversee Bambi's safe passage to the role of father. Moral and social dilemmas in Disney all tend to revolve around the process of fitting in to your family.

Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart really threw salt in the apple pie when they suggested (in their book on Disney comics, *How To Read Donald Duck*) that there are irreconcilable tensions and conflicts in those happy families, just as the facade of the ordered and friendly Disney studio broke down while its employees held a long and bitter strike against poor working conditions there in the 1940s. Dorfman and Mattelart went on to find the whole Disney aesthetic to be built on principles of sexism, racism and imperialism. They accused Disney of strategic exploitation in the name of capitalist relations. Luckily, Walt wasn't around to read that one.

What those critics refused to take on board was the question of pleasure. Disney texts may express the most insidious and reactionary of ideas; very often we know their characteristic sentimentality to be the refusal of divergent attitudes and beliefs. Yet there is something appealing about them nevertheless. Successive generations have lapped the films up, investing time and money in pleasures recognised as comfortable and familiar.

The most familiar thing about a Disney film is its concern for narrative. The story is everything. Across the studio's output (not just the animated features with which the name is most closely linked, but also live-action, instructional and semi-documentary films) is a constant reiteration of the mechanics of classic tale-telling. In the most famous stories, the meaning of each and every thread of action is accounted

for according to the rules of linearity; ambiguity is played down. We're meant to put faith in the 'happy ending', the moment when, as in *Lady And The Tramp*, all problems are suddenly made disappear with the welcome appearance of a new family (three little ladies the spitting image of mother, one little tramp to carry on his father's good work).

The secure re-establishment of heterosexual normality coincides with the safe arrival home, the integration of the individual in society, the turning of one season into another - anything, so long as it gives a feeling of natural continuity. Disney plugs into the most mythical of American narratives, making them its own.

You know when a Disney narrative is myth-making. A giveaway is to be found on the soundtrack - the presence of one of those truly awful voice-overs. The voice has a clear-toned, well-scrubbed larynx and it's as white as it is male. The authoritative tone of that voice works to place the viewer, it guides us by the hand, urges us how to think and feel. In such a way, a Disney film constructs all spectators as children, confident that things will work out in the end. Anything seems to be explicable by the ins and outs of cause and effect.

The setting for such narratives is, ideally, within an enclosed boundary, where codes of action and thought can be safely asserted and contained. Disney films are the best example in the American cinema of the small-town ethic, the homespun philosophy stating that anything not to be found on your own doorstep is instantly suspicious. In the small town, a white picket fence surrounds every family home (or a leafy forest surrounds the woods' inhabitants) and the misfits all live down *that* end of the street. It is a place small enough to imbue with folk wisdom, large enough to compare favourably with the pretensions of the big city.

The classic town inhabitant is the resourceful small-fry, the fundamentally good and

sweet character whose simplicity is a source of humour. What we seem to find funny in Disney may be a visual gag, a comic situation or a clever routine, but often it's the rudimentary details of characterisation.

The fictional characters who belong in Disney's own star system are the ones who get to sing, be colourful and give simple delight. They may first be encountered on the screen, but they actually end up leading multi-media, hideously over-determined lives. The promotion and repetition of their faces across all media helps to maximise a feeling about Disney; a generalised, internationalised sense that everything is fun and laughter.

This may be the cross-cultural image but it often grates against the evidence of Disney narratives. Some films exhibit most forcefully the flip-side of Disney's joviality, namely its violence. Take the notorious *Victory Through Air Power* for instance. Released in 1943, it was Disney's supreme contribution to the war effort. It doesn't use star characters, neither is it a film that leaves you in stitches. Passed over with visible embarrassment today, it was an attempt to utilise animation in the espousal of the perceived necessities and joys of long-range strategic bombing. From any angle, it is one of the most depressing films ever made, looking for all the world like propaganda for the apocalypse.

Victory Through Air Power may not be as well-known as *Fantasia* or *101 Dalmations*, but it's still as Disney as a mickey-mouse watch. All the films attempt, in different ways and with differing emphases, to secure the continuation of what Disney defines as 'normal' and 'natural'. At times of crisis, when the values of family, community and nation are threatened by an outside enemy, such attempts take on an almost paranoid intensity. However, it's in the everyday, domestic setting that Disney is most at home. At such relaxed moments, Disney's world seems the embodiment of peace and security.