

TRTR6002: RELIGION IN FILM

Animation

If fantasy film enables the audience to take an imaginative journey, then its primary danger is that audiences will not wish to return to their real lives. This reveals the danger of the imagination where fancy and fantasy become overly prominent. It is possible that animated films enable this journey to occur more effectively primarily because it is not possible to believe that what occurs on screen is real.

In animation, film takes a slightly different 'vocabulary of expression' (Paul Wells). In all its forms film is able to accomplish things ordinarily beyond the limits of real existence. Indeed, it is likely that this is part of their appeal. Yet the ordinary laws of cause and effect seem to be completely suspended in animation. Consider the violence of *Tom and Jerry* or *The Road Runner*, yet no-one fully expires: the protagonists emerge from every incident unscathed and able to continue their respective campaigns. The whole thing is satirized in the 'Itchy and Scratchy' cartoons on *The Simpsons*.

Often animated films are able to present satirical comments on contemporary culture. At its best, and sharpest, this is precisely what *The Simpsons* does, though it is possible also to read the cynical and somewhat vulgar *South Park* in this way too.

Mark Pinsky has discerned a particular, pseudo-religious message underlying some of these animated films. *The Simpsons* has a very clear religious element: the family attends church and God even makes an appearance. But there is no Jesus, and the message appears to be 'be good to one another'. His analysis of the Disney cartoons comes to the conclusion that they tend to promote a morality based on 'western, Judeo-Christian faith and principle' which is worked out as 'good is always rewarded; evil is always punished. Faith is an essential element – faith in yourself and, even more, faith in something *greater* than yourself, some higher power. Optimism and hard work complete the basic canon'. But this is morality, not theology, and more recent Disney films have been accused of spreading 'black magic, witchcraft, sorcery' (Perucci Ferraiuolo).

If animated film is anything more than entertainment, then it is important to recognize that cartoons reflect ourselves, our relationships, hopes and aspirations, virtues and vices. These films, like others, give expression to contemporary existential issues and often demonstrate means of resolving them.

This says little about the genre itself. Perhaps it is in the way in which animation can 'liberate' the debate about 'realism' in the cinema which offers a clue to its meaning and theological significance. It is because the form is sufficiently removed from real life that it enables an imaginative journey which, when inspired by the paradigmatic imagination (Garrett Green) enables a theological discussion to take place.