

Scholar explores the human side of animation

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Eric Scott Jenkins.

(Phys.org) —A new essay takes a new look at the staying power of animated Disney films, as well as examines the long-held criticism that the films promote consumerism. The article by Eric Scott Jenkins, a University of Cincinnati assistant professor of communication, is published in the current issue of the prestigious journal, *Critical Inquiry*.

Jenkins' paper takes a new view of animation in relation to the book, "Camera Lucida," by French literary theorist and philosopher Roland Barthes. Barthes' book, published in 1980, is known as both an exploration of photography, as well as a eulogy to the author's late mother. Barthes describes a punctum – a sting or piercing – as related to photography and how it can trigger emotions in the viewer. Barthes came to the discovery after coming across a childhood photo of his mother following her death, and how it affected him.

Jenkins paper, titled "Another Punctum: Animation, Affect and Ideology," contends that this so-called

sting described by Barthes can be applied to media other than photography as evidenced by the early 20th century cultural response to animation. Furthermore, Jenkins suggests that the punctum effect from animation sparked the fears and desires surrounding consumerism, highlighting animated Disney productions as a prime example.

"When people talk about Disney animation, they may describe it as magical or wonderful, and I don't think that has so much to do with the fact that there's a lot of magic portrayed in it, or the fact that we know these things aren't real," Jenkins explains. "We perceive or feel them to be alive anyway, which is why someone can cry over Snow White or Bambi, and laugh over Mickey, even though we know on a rational level that these characters are not real or alive.

"Focusing on effect – and how it moves us – allows us to understand why Disney has this staying power and, therefore, this ideological force," says Jenkins. "Consumerism takes hold only because it moved us in the first place. If they were trying to push products and it didn't move us, they'd be among a long line of people that promoted consumerism."

Jenkins adds that it's a common criticism that Disney productions teach children how to be consumers, not citizens. "In my opinion, that criticism misses the point about why a child might be attracted to Disney features and why they're so popular," says Jenkins. "There are Disney productions that criticize consumerism, but they still sell toys."

Jenkins says even moral lessons are secondary to the attraction of animation. "We don't watch Wall-E just because it's against consumerism. Instead, there's something powerful about the love story between the two robots that moves us and tickles us, and that's the more powerful draw."

Jenkins adds that Barthe's concept of the punctum relating to life or death is only described in relation to static photography. "He stated that film does not seem to have that punctum because cinema seems alive," says Jenkins.

In Jenkins article, he adds that the punctum related to animation not only applies to people emitting an emotion (laughter or tears) in watching animated film, but also to how other people are shocked or repulsed at how someone can react in such a way to a cartoon.

More information:

criticalinquiry.uchicago.edu/info/

Provided by University of Cincinnati

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