

2021-05 Media and its hidden theology

Reflect with me for a moment on the Disney classic 101 Dalmatians. In the story, Pongo and Perdita (the dogs) are seeking to protect their puppies from the villain Cruella de Vil who wants to make Dalmatian puppies into a fur coat. On first watch the film is funny, as the 2 thieves bumble their way through the scheme being outwitted by the dogs at every turn. It is also suspenseful as the villain seeks to kill anything standing in her way as she drives her giant 1920 Alvis Speed drophead coupe in the animated film or the 1977 Panther in the remake of 1996. But hidden under the surface of such a 'kids' film is a theology of sorts. The theology is that of animal rights. It is Cruella, a thinly veiled name meant to cue the viewer that only the cruel person is the one, who, seeks to wear a fur coat. Similar animal rights messages were being spread in Bambi (1942) where hunters were held out as vicious people. Free Willy (1993), Chicken Run (2000) and a host of other films all sought to indoctrinate people via cute stories to ideas about the 'horrors' of zoos, commercial farming, hunting, rodeos, and any number of other causes which a select few producers and directors wanted to push.

This is not a rant about animal rights per se. Rather this is a call to critical reflection for what we engage with our eyes, ears and mind. Every form of media – from the songs that are played on the radio and sung in the shower or in the car, to the books we read, to the movies we watch and the news we consume – is filled with and informed by a theology that is often hidden or obscured by the catchiness of the media. For instance, the popular kids film Frozen (2013) is a marvelous film with some great theology if you watch the whole film through and take its entire message in, but the part of the film that most kids latch onto is smack dab in the middle where Elsa, the main character, flees and embraces “who she is” and sings a song that is catchy about not caring anymore. The song exalts a self-focused, I don't care anymore attitude and it is actually the low point of the movie, not the high point to indoctrinate into kids. But the musical style actually tricks kids into internalizing a message that is destructive and not constructive. The theology of self-actualization at any cost became what most kids remember and sing, not the theology of sacrifice as Anna lays her life down for her sister Elsa.

It is not until we recognize that everything we consume is seeking to spread a message. Only then can we begin to critically reflect upon the messages being sent to us and to bring those messages into conformity to Christ and the gospel. Some of those messages will need to be rejected, some critically appraised, others received. But unless you know the enemy is posturing, you are not likely to be looking for the traps that are being laid. It is when we realize that the message, as well as the form matter, for much theologizing, propagandizing and indoctrination can be done without ever sending someone to a lecture. Media is a powerful force that can shape an entire generation, if one doesn't know he or she is being shaped and influenced.

So, what should we do? Develop a posture of skepticism. Take every song and analyze the lyrics – what is it that is being sung and communicated? Take every film and ask – what message did the director want me to walk away with? How did salvation happen? What attitudes or actions were being held out and extolled? What things were being criticized? Talk

about these things with your friends, your spouse and your kids or grandkids. They will open up a host of wonderful opportunities to sharpen your faith and counter the false theologies of the age.