

THE MYSTERY OF LIFE AND THE HEREAFTER: A SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST EVALUATION OF MORTALITY AND THE AFTERLIFE DEPICTED IN DISNEY ANIMATED FILMS

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Abstract

This concise overview critically assesses the impact of Disney's animated films on the themes of death, resurrection, and the afterlife, juxtaposing them with Seventh-day Adventist beliefs. The extensive repertoire of Disney films featuring death displays varying depictions of mortality and the deceased. Disney's pervasive influence on societal norms generates controversies due to its departure from Adventist teachings concerning mortality, justice, and the afterlife, potentially fostering misunderstandings. From a Seventh-day Adventist standpoint, these narratives amalgamate diverse ideologies, straying from biblical tenets and potentially contributing to deliberate or inadvertent spiritual deception. Prudence is advised when engaging with such media, emphasizing the necessity of anchoring oneself in biblical veracity and seeking divine guidance. Given the need for brevity, the article selectively explores specific to Disney's portrayal of mortality and the afterlife and Adventist theology.

Keywords: Disney, animated films, life, death, afterlife, conditional immortality, spiritualism

Introduction

The Walt Disney Company has been renowned for playing a prominent role in distributing animated films worldwide, for the past few decades. Due to their perceived child-centric nature, many of the films are introduced to children at an early age. The films usually feature conflict between good and evil. In the process of depicting the story, death is not a theme that the films shy away from. While the Company and its films are not free from criticism due to claims-making, it is vital that Seventh-day Adventists understand how they are to relate to the films produced.

The films are made primarily for entertainment. Nevertheless, the impact these animated films have on life and culture cannot be ignored. Even in the history of the Company, it is evident that animated films have the power to change the way society acts. For example, Disney participated in making films during World War II in contribution to the war effort.

Government propaganda films featuring Donald Duck as their mascot include examples such as *Donald Gets Drafted* and *Der Fuehrer's Face* (formerly titled *Donald in Nutziland*). *The New Spirit* also featured Donald Duck, effectively motivating Americans to

fulfill their tax obligations. Surprisingly, the House of Representatives was hesitant to approve the allocation of "\$80,000" for the Company, viewing cartoons as entertainment compared to investing in artillery, despite the films boosting morale (Magazine & Chase, 2022; Walt Disney Productions, 1984, 28-32).

Furthermore, even though animated films have affected the older members of society, children are the ones that are associated with the consumption of them. Annalee Ward states "The stories children are exposed to will form the standards for assessing the truth of other stories later in life (Ward, 2002, 5)." This suggests that while fiction and fantasy (which make up Disney films) might seem purely creative, they wield transgenerational effects on the world. Considering the impression animated films have, it is worthwhile to evaluate the philosophy and world view portrayed in Disney animated films.

Additionally, Disney has influenced Adventists. For instance, Advent Health became the official caregiver for Disney World in 2021 (Disney Parks, 2021). Furthermore, in May 2023, Advent Health inaugurated an emergency room with the support of the Company. Disney-themed art characterizes the décor and ambiance of the building (Dieppa, 2023). However, the conservative religio-political right has criticized Disney for the progressive nature of its products. The Baptist Boycott of 1996 was a major attempt by concerned Christians to censor what they considered disagreeable (Pinsky, 2004, 245-246; Robert A. MacDonald & Katie McDonald, 2014). In recent times, the political left coerced Disney to stand for LGBTQIA+ rights (Fox News, 2022), which lead parents to question their view of the Company.

Seventh-day Adventists, for decades, have been divided on how contemporary media should be related to. The real ethical concerns over the nature of modern media and of fiction. Some of these concerns unfortunately are in the realm of moral panic. Due to this, the historical stance of the church on modern media and their use has been called into question. It is stated that the church leaders have not engaged adequately with the subject (Ellis, 2021). Others have endeavored to rationally consider the stakes and employ film in the classroom to enhance the experience thus advocating for a cautious use of them (Reynaud, 2002, 2008). From the influence Disney has had over the world, it is easy to see that fiction and fantasy can be as powerful as real-life stories in a large group of people to the extent of transforming culture. Hence, fiction cannot be considered merely as harmless fun just because it is unreal.

Among the various facets of theology, Seventh-day Adventists have struggled to share their view of the state of the dead due to global cultural and religious practices in relation to the dead (Akpa et al., 2013; Bahadur, 2020; Davidson, 2020; Dumitrescu, 2020; Gayen, 2020; Kumar & Cincala, 2020; Mukuka, 2020; Rimarzik, 2020). Additionally, Adventist jargon like "death as a sleep," does not help the situation either (Paroschi, 2017). Given the impressions of existing traditional, cultural perceptions of death and the afterlife, their depiction in popular media ought to be considered.

It should be noted that Seventh-day Adventist theology affirms the concept of conditional immortality that aligns with annihilationism. Thus, it is believed that life, more

specifically, immortality is given on condition of obedience. Furthermore, humans die and cease to exist until the resurrection day. All those who reject God's grace will be eventually destroyed in hell. This is because death is understood to be the result and price of sin. All those who are granted eternal life are those who have yielded to the working of the Holy Spirit and are saved through the life and work of Jesus (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Ministerial Association, 2006, 395-397; 411-413). It is on this basis that Disney animated films are evaluated. Thus, the unique stance of Adventists on mortality and immortality necessitates that Disney animated films be evaluated to ascertain the value in relation to Seventh-day Adventism.

Death in Disney Animated Films

There has been considerable discussion in terms of the depiction of death in Disney films. Walt E. Disney is known for his preoccupation with death. Gary Laderman points out that Walt had traumatic experiences both as a child and as an adult (Laderman, 2000). He further points out that Walt did not shy away from featuring death in his productions. A short film called *The Skeleton Dance*, for example, featured a musical with dancing skeletons at a graveyard. In fact, the first feature film *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* contains a plot to cause them in character to be in a death-like state.

In terms of the depiction of death in Disney films, it is pointed out that there is a variety of coping mechanisms in relation to death that are depicted in film (Graham et al., 2019, 10, 24-25). The study also considered that there was a difference in the depiction of death with reference to antagonists and protagonists where irreversible death is usually associated with the antagonists while death to protagonists is considered as unfair and is usually paired with death reversal/resurrection. It has also been pointed out that the films can be divided based on various themes related to death such as: "(1) unrealistic moments, (2) managing EOL (End of Life), (3) intentions to kill, and (4) transformation and spiritual connection with a subtheme of character morality" (Tenzek & Nickels, 2019,17).

Methods

A literary evaluation of the subject is done in this article. It uses data present in the thesis entitled "Beyond Life: An Evaluation of the Depiction of Death, Resurrection, and the Afterlife in Selected Walt Disney Animated Films." For ease of communication, films produced by both Disney Animation Studios and Pixar Animation Studios are referred to as Disney Animated films due to Pixar being a subsidiary of The Walt Disney Company. The films are divided according to their setting, type of deaths and reasons for death reversal, and the philosophy about the afterlife according to the worlds created. It is also noted that for the sake of discussion, the term Adventist is used to describe Seventh-day Adventist and all the related terms.

Furthermore, the term *biblical* and its related terms are used to describe the Adventist

understanding of the Bible, thus highlighting the biblical foundation of Adventist theology. Due to the fictional nature of the worlds created within these films, the depictions of death naturally diverge from direct correspondences with real-world cultures. Nevertheless, they often bear enough resemblance to real-life philosophies of death and the afterlife to spark meaningful contemplation. The following tables are structured to facilitate such exploration:

Table 1 delineates the various cultures or settings depicted in the films, highlighting the diverse contexts in which these narratives unfold. This diversity offers insights into how different cultural backgrounds influence the portrayal of death. Table 2 focuses on the deaths of protagonists and major supporting characters, delving into the philosophical implications conveyed through their deaths, as well as any depictions of death reversal or afterlife experiences. This analysis sheds light on how these characters grapple with mortality and transcendence within their respective narratives. Table 3 examines the fate of villains within the films, providing a lens through which to understand the treatment of moral and existential themes in opposition to the protagonists. This exploration helps discern patterns in how villainous characters meet their end and the symbolic or narrative purposes their deaths serve.

Table 1

<i>Culture or Setting of the Films</i>	
Film	Culture/Setting
Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs	German
Pinocchio	Italian
Fantasia	Prehistoric Evolution/ Slavonic
Bambi	American
The Black Cauldron	European
Beauty and the Beast	French
The Lion King	African
Pocahontas	Native American/ British
The Hunchback of Notre Dame	French
Hercules	Greek Mythology
Mulan	Chinese
Tarzan	European/Ape
Fantasia 2000	American/Slavonic
Atlantis: The Lost Empire	Prehistoric Science fiction
Brother Bear	Prehistoric Inuit
Ratatouille	French
Tangled	German
Up	American
The Princess and the Frog	American

Frankenweenie	American
Frozen	Scandinavian

(table continues)

Table 1 (continued)

<i>Culture or Setting of the Films</i>	
Film	Culture/Setting
Big Hero 6	Japanese American
Moana	Polynesian
Coco	Mexican
Soul	American
Raya and the Last Dragon	South-East Asian
Turning Red	Chinese Canadian

Table 2

<i>Death, Reason for Death Reversal, and the Reason for the Afterlife / Philosophy</i>			
Film	Death	Death Reversal	Afterlife/Philosophy
Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs	Sleeping Death	Love's First Kiss/ Wish of the virtuous	N/A
Pinocchio	Drowning	Act of Bravery/ Wish Upon a Star	N/A
Fantasia	Natural	N/A	Dualism
Bambi	Gunshots	N/A	N/A
The Black Cauldron	Magical	The Witches	N/A
Beauty and the Beast	Knife Stab	Kiss of Love/ Beauty Within	N/A
The Lion King	Murder	N/A	Transmigration, Metempsychosis
Pocahontas	Gunshot, Natural	N/A	Animism
The Hunchback of Notre Dame	Murder	N/A	N/A

Hercules	Fate	Hercules's act of self-sacrifice	Dualism
Mulan	War casualty	N/A	Dualism
Tarzan	Predation, Gunshot	N/A	N/A
Fantasia 2000	Forest Fire	Spring Sprite	N/A
Atlantis: The Lost Empire	Natural	N/A	The Crystal/Animism
Brother Bear	Fall, Murder	N/A	Spiritism / Animism
Ratatouille	Natural	N/A	N/A
Tangled	Murder	Magical Hair	N/A

(table continues)

Table 2 (continued)

<i>Death, Reason for Death Reversal, and the Reason for the Afterlife / Philosophy</i>			
Film	Death	Death Reversal	Afterlife/Philosophy
Up	Stillbirth, Old age	N/A	N/A
The Princess and the Frog	Military death, Crushing	N/A	Transmigration
Frankenweenie	Accidents	Science-Galvanism	N/A
Frozen	Lost at sea, Frozen	Act of Love	N/A
Big Hero 6	Explosion, Sci-fi	programmed chip was reintegrated	N/A
Moana	Natural	N/A	Transmigration
Coco	All Types, Murder, Final Death	N/A	Land of the Dead
Soul	Accidental	Finding the purpose of life	Soul swap, Transmigration, Reincarnation

Raya and the Last Dragon	Supernatural, Murder	Learning to Forgive	N/A
Turning Red	Natural	N/A	Daoism/Anime Philosophy

Table 3

<i>Villains and Type/Cause of Death</i>		
Film	Name of the Villian	Type/ Cause of Death
Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs	Evil Queen	Falling off a cliff
Pinocchio	Stromboli, Honest John Gideon, and the Coachman	N/A
Fantasia	Chernabog	N/A
Bambi	Man	N/A
The Black Cauldron	The Horned King	The Black Cauldron
Beauty and the Beast	Gaston	Falling
The Lion King	Scar	Hyenas surrounded by fire
Pocahontas	Governor Ratcliffe	N/A
Hunchback of Notre Dame	Monseigneur Claude Frollo	Falling in fire
Mulan	Shan Yu	Firecrackers
Tarzan	Clayton	Falling off trees
Ratatouille	Chef Skinner, Anton Ego	N/A
Tangled	Mother Gothel	Falling off a tower while disintegrating
<i>(table continues)</i>		
<i>Villains and Type/Cause of Death</i>		
Film	Name of the Villian	Type/ Cause of Death
Up	Charles Muntz	Falling off a blimp
The Princess and the Frog	Doctor Facilier	Devoured by spirits
Frankenweenie	Monsters	Impaled by a flaming piece of wood

Frozen	Hans	N/A
Big Hero 6	Professor Callaghan	N/A
Moana	Te Kā	N/A
Coco	Ernesto de la Cruz	A falling bell
Soul	N/A	N/A
Raya and the Last Dragon	Namaari, Fang Faction	N/A
Turning Red	N/A	N/A

Evaluation of the Philosophy and Worldview of Disney Animated Films

The ideas conveyed in the films are divided by various philosophies and ideologies. The worlds that Disney creates are supernatural and magical. From the films, it can be ascertained that there is diversity in the depiction of death. Moreover, most of the deaths are associated with the supernatural. Due to limited space, it is noted that most of the films have been accessed via the Disney+ Hotstar subscription service.

Diverse Showcase of Death

Diversity in death concurs with reality in that it happens for various reasons and is caused by various factors. Death happens due to natural causes or is caused because of villainous intent. It is also something that many heroes opt for as the ultimate display of virtue. Villains on the other hand experience death as a means of cosmic judgment.

Supernatural Mortals and Immortals

The way power is distributed in Disney films poses certain issues. Supernatural beings include humans such as witches and wizards and other fantasy characters like fairies, spirits, and demons. In the films, the source of life is not the focus, but some beings are seen to possess power over life and death. Due to this, it can undermine the biblical emphasis of God as sovereign over life and death. From a biblical perspective, supernatural power is given to creatures as gifts for specific purposes. In terms of humans, it is the Holy Spirit that blesses the church with gifts for the purpose of strengthening it (1 Cor 14:12). The illustration of Jesus demonstrates that His extraordinary abilities were not wielded carelessly or for self-serving purposes. His use of power was not about displaying Himself but directing attention towards His Father. While films often distinguish between the ethical and unethical use of magic, highlighting virtuous and altruistic applications, the portrayal of magic could inadvertently encourage individuals to experiment with actual magic, potentially leading to biblically detestable practices.

Credit should be given to Disney films for their ability to conceptualize the perils of granting flawed beings supernatural abilities. This portrayal effectively underscores the wisdom of God in offering immortality contingent upon allegiance to Him. Consequently, it gives credence to the prerogative to always limit the power and actions of evil. Moreover, these films adeptly inform audiences about the potential existence of the supernatural in our reality.

Another aspect to consider is the employment of elemental magic in films like *Frozen* and *Raya and the Last Dragon* as well as the consideration of elemental spirits in *Pocahontas*.

The former two feature the manipulation of elements such as earth, wind, water, and fire. Thus, the magic used in films corresponds to the Chinese, Japanese as well as recent Western forms of witchcraft and the occult (Disney Music VEVO, 2020; Hennessy et al., 2020, 51, 55, 242, 271; Hurley & Shurer, 2021, 51; Julius, 2019, 10-11). In this way, the films are potential gateways into the occult.

Immortality of the Soul

The immortality of the soul as portrayed in the films can be divided into the following: Dualism and Trialism; Astral Realms and Astral Projection; Transmigration and body swapping; Shamanism and Divination; Necromancy and Realms of the Dead and the Living.

Dualism and Trialism. Both dualism and trialism are alluded to in Disney animated films. The reality of ancestral spirits or the ability of a soul to separate from the body, not just for comedic purposes but as a main plot and force of many films indicates that the worlds created by Disney have dualistic or trialistic foundation for its worlds.¹ Although dualism and trialism may be argued for, using the Bible, Adventist theology does not find merit in this view. It is understood that ancient Jewish teaching had a holistic view of humanity. Hence, there is no existence of a sentient soul or spirit separate from a body (Davidson, 2020, 4-5; General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Ministerial Association, 2006, 95).

Astral realms and Astral Projection. Astral projection and astral realms are featured by films such as *Soul* and *Turning Red*. Astral projection refers to “a person’s attempt to detach their soul or consciousness, known as the astral body, from their physical form to allow it to travel through the astral realm (between the divine and human planes)” (Hennessy et al., 2020, 304). In *Turning Red*, a significant connection between its storyline and Daoism is apparent. Specifically, the Red Moon Ritual depicted in the movie, allows Mei to access an astral plane. Notably, the filmmakers portray the ritual in a way that depicts a shaman directing the light of the red moon onto Mei’s forehead. During this ritual, the radiant light precisely targets the area conventionally linked with the third eye, leading her into an astral realm. Within this astral realm, Mei encounters her ancestor, Sun Yee. This portrayal suggests the existence of various realities and the idea of the soul’s independent existence. Consequently, it challenges the Genesis Creation narrative and the biblical holistic perspective on human nature. In the movie *Soul*, the astral plane serves as a space where individuals from various locations can gather and interact regularly. This concept is portrayed by integrating elements from eastern mysticism. The film depicts a lifestyle where practices like transcendental

¹Dualistic nature refers to the idea that the body and soul as two separate entities are merged in life and separated at death while trialistic nature refers to the idea that the body, soul and spirit comprise the separate entities that are merged in life and separated at death.

meditation and astral projection are viewed as normal, healthy, and even viable social activities. Additionally, the protagonist is advised to meditate and concentrate on his "crown chakra" to facilitate his reconnection with his physical body. Such concepts introduced in the movie might conflict with certain beliefs outlined in the Bible, potentially introducing concepts the viewers need to contend with.

Transmigration and Body-swapping. The theme of transmigration² is explored in various Disney films. *Soul* touches on this concept, while *The Lion King* suggests it through the "Circle of Life." In *Moana*, Grandma Tala transforms into a manta ray spirit, post-death. Body swapping or transformation occurs in *Brother Bear*, *The Princess and the Frog*, and *Soul*, portraying physical changes for personality growth and self-discovery. These narratives depict mystical ideologies and disciplinary actions of nature or ancestral spirits. However, they sidestep the issue of cosmic justice. The films challenge the biblical salvation paradigm and the significance of the role of the Holy Spirit in life. This leads to films that overlook the concept of human responsibility and accountability to God for the singular opportunity of one life to make essential moral decisions in the cosmic conflict, as depicted in the Bible.

Moreover, transmigration adherents perceive it as a path to divinity (Mana, 1941, 77). This notion conflates birth and death and promotes beliefs like reincarnation, undermining the Bible's promise of eschatological resurrection. Thus, Disney's portrayal of transmigration may seem appealing compared to the traditional Christian view of eternal punishment, potentially clouding the truth about death, resurrection, and the afterlife in the Bible. For instance, Quincy Howe, Jr. exemplifies an acceptance of reincarnation, attempting to reconcile it with biblical teachings. Nevertheless, disregarding the inherent challenges linked to concepts such as reincarnation, might cause even professed Christians to mistakenly believe that significant biblical characters supported this notion (Howe, Jr., 1974, 88), as is the case with Quincy Howe, Jr., even without the influence of Disney.

Consequently, when presented in a fantastical context by Disney, these ideas may possess higher potential to negatively influence the Christian faith. Yet, when understood critically, the themes in the films illuminate how real-world justice may be undervalued.

Shamanism and Divination. Shamanism is used to refer to "the spiritual practices of people in the steppe land of Central Asia and Serbia" but also used generally "to refer to wider spiritual and magical tribal traditions. A shaman is thought to have special powers to communicate with and influence good and evil spirits, in order to gain insight into past and future events" (Hennessy et al., 2020, 307). Shamanism is a recurring feature in many movies, featuring characters like Rafiki, Tanana, Kekata, and Mr. Gao, who portray shamans. These

²Reincarnation and metempsychosis originate from Eastern and Western belief systems, respectively. Both propose the migration of souls from one body to another, typically after death. However, they diverge in crucial ways. Reincarnation correlates with karma, highlighting the cycle of birth, life, death, and subsequent rebirth. Metempsychosis centers on the soul's development as it gathers wisdom from various life encounters. Transmigration, a broader term, encompasses these notions and can be employed in a more general or superficial context. Regrettably, because of their resemblances, these concepts are frequently confused or conflated.

shamans play significant roles in representing the cultures depicted in these films. However, the presentations often glorify their roles and powers. For instance, Mr. Gao openly identifies himself as a shaman and later performs the potent Red Moon Ritual with great emphasis. Such portrayals can validate and glorify the shamans' functions in society.

In earlier films, characters like Rafiki and Tanana are depicted as having the ability to summon spirits and communicate with them, influencing real-life events and altering the course of history. However, engaging in such practices in real life is considered risky as it may make individuals susceptible to the influence of Satan and his agents. Consequently, the Bible, specifically Deuteronomy 18, denounces these practices and urges adherence to purity by abstaining from them, as cautioned by God.

Necromancy. Multiple films display conversations with the dead. Although Disney is not original in this aspect, copying from the likes of Shakespeare, it is evident that key aspects of many plots rely on communication with the dead. For example, *The Lion King* features the protagonists communicating with his deceased father. In *The Princess and the Frog*, Doctor Facilier practices necromancy for his own personal gain. Although all depictions are not made equal, they are a point of concern. *Mulan* and *Moana* feature characters communicating with dead ancestors.

Sadly, these portrayals are risky in the real world due to the possibility of deception. Paul Volk, for example, recounts an encounter with a spirit masquerading as his deceased girlfriend after the funeral of three cheerleaders, including her. He vividly describes interacting with this entity, believing it to be his girlfriend, receiving comfort and reassurance. Later, upon returning to school, another cheerleader claims a similar visitation from the deceased, stating they were allowed by God to bid farewell due to their sudden deaths. However, Volk, upon studying the Bible at a later date, recognized this encounter as a demonic apparition (Little Light Studios, 2021). Such experiences, though surprising, align with Christian beliefs cautioning against spirits impersonating the deceased, emphasizing the importance of discernment, and understanding biblical truths to distinguish spiritual occurrences.

The Bible extensively cautions against the deceptive practices of evil spirits. King Saul's experience in 1 Samuel 28 serves as a prime illustration within scripture, urging people against attempting communication with the deceased. This account stands as a stark example, emphasizing the biblical dissuasion from seeking contact with departed souls due to the potential involvement of deceitful spirits, highlighting the risks associated with such actions (Kent, 2014). Moreover, there is a cautionary note about Satan's ability, along with his angels, to mimic humans, leading them astray through deception.

He has power to bring before men the appearance of their departed friends. The counterfeit is perfect; the familiar look, the words, the tone, are reproduced with marvelous distinctness. Many are comforted with the assurance that their loved ones are enjoying the bliss of heaven, and without suspicion of danger, they give ear "to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils." (White, 1911, 552).

Despite societal secularism and scientific advancements, psychics retain influence.

Psychologists note psychic guidance's potential in aiding grief, even if detached from truth. With declining interest in organized religion and a surge in personal spirituality, younger generations are susceptible to embracing ideas contrary to biblical teachings, as seen in Disney films (Stay Tuned, 2023, May 9; Stay Tuned, 2023, June 6).

Realms of the Dead and the Living. The afterlife portrayed in *Coco* and *Soul* introduces the concept of realms for the departed. The Land of the Dead in *Coco* suggests coexistence between the living and deceased in harmony, mirroring life on earth with a structured society influenced by individual legacies. However, it leads to a nihilistic existence, tied to remembrance. Forgotten souls face eternal misfortune, creating a hierarchy favoring the most remembered.

The Great Beyond (the realm where souls go after death) in *Soul* remains open to interpretation, leaving viewers to contemplate the soul's destination after death. Alternatively, the Great Before, consisting of premortal souls and deceased mentors, touches on death-related themes. This realm partially aligns with Mormon beliefs, proposing diverse pre-existing souls (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2019). These souls are assigned with certain inherent inclinations upon their creation. This challenges personal responsibility for evil. Furthermore, the conflicting philosophies of the mentors depicted point to relativism, challenging the notion of eschatological judgment. In the Great Before, souls vary in their personalities, and some acquire sinful inclinations before transitioning to Earth, suggesting a lack of responsibility for evil.

Adventists have disagreed with the concept of preexistence, and some of these arguments echo in Canright's discourse, which disputes the creation of souls in heaven (Canright, 1885, 52-53). Thus, it is understood that the concepts used to make the world of *Soul* do not agree with Adventist thought. It challenges the concept of a definitive eschatological judgment within the film's world. Thus, Disney's portrayal diverges from biblical doctrine, presenting death in ways conflicting with scripture's teachings on judgment (Heb 9:27).

Justice and the Afterlife. Most of the films arrive at a feel-good conclusion. This is due to the desire to portray the victory of good over evil and have marketable endings. Nevertheless, the films feature concepts of the afterlife in a way that supports sinful actions and lifestyles. In *Coco*, the Land of the Dead suffers from a similar inequality to the Land of the Living as the dead that are remembered the most are higher in the socio-economical hierarchy. In *Soul*, the pre-born souls of the great before are mentored by successful historical figures. The film also presents the idea that absolute truth is elusive, as mentors with differing philosophies influence pre-existing souls, leading to philosophical contradictions that promote relativism. In the film, it is suggested that mentors move on to the Great Beyond after their mentorship ends. This portrayal, shaped by inclusivity and a utilitarian ethic, hints at a narrative that avoids the concept of final judgment. This poses an issue because there is no ideological differentiation between the historical and philosophical figures featured. *Turning Red* also features an afterlife where the ancestor retains her sinful propensities. *Mulan* also shows the ancestors of Mulan as ghosts who retain their past characters. It is thus understood that there is no emphasis on the need for sanctification before death, supporting the idea that the afterlife is like the sinful, everyday life.

Characters that are made for film imitate everyday people. Due to this, faulty traits of character are excused, especially in protagonists, sometimes due to bad writing and others on purpose. This leads to unjust worlds that are governed by permissiveness. While it is true that there is a dichotomy of good and evil in the films, it only reflects human perceived realities, ignoring many vital aspects of reality the Bible teaches. Due to an imperfect paradigm of justice, protagonists get away with rebellion and are even incentivized to rebel. To excuse and even reward sinful actions, leads to a preference for a permissive, utilitarian ethic over true, biblical justice. For the Bible clearly teaches that all who do wickedly will be destroyed (Mal 4:1).

Veneration of Ancestors

The Lion King, *Pocahontas*, *Mulan*, *Brother Bear*, and more recently, *Coco* and *Turning Red* show the protagonists involved in veneration of their ancestors and seeking their guidance. Films also feature rituals for the veneration of dead ancestors. While it is true that the depiction of these practices is for the purpose of showcasing the culture that is represented, ancestors are also shown to exist separated from their bodies in some sort of a spirit form.

Nevertheless, the Bible unequivocally condemns ancestral veneration, emphasizing seeking God over consulting spirits or mediums, as He has amply instructed His people (Isa 8:19-20). It asserts Jesus Christ as the sole mediator between humanity and God (John 1:14; 1 Tim 2:5). Instances like the transfiguration (Matthew 17), where glorified humans are depicted, do not endorse ancestor worship. Jesus never endorsed such veneration while Moses and Elijah were not disembodied ancestors but had distinct encounters with God (Jude 9; 1 Kgs 2:11) where they were bodily taken to heaven. In addition, the worship of supernatural beings is discouraged; even an angel redirected worship toward God (Rev 22:9). This contrasts with Disney's depictions, undermining the Bible's teachings. The Bible stresses a direct relationship with God through Jesus, opposing reliance on spirits or intermediaries, thereby disapproving of ancestral veneration and worship of supernatural entities.

Spirits of Nature

The belief that nature consists of spirits that pertain to both animate and inanimate is present in many films. The portrayal concurs with animistic ideas of the world. *Pocahontas*, *Brother Bear*, and *Moana* employ animistic elements to build the world and move the story. Disney films often anthropomorphize animals and nature, blurring the line between humans and animals. This artistic choice blends magical realms and animism, reflecting Disney's support for environmentalism while potentially inspiring public advocacy for nature preservation. However, this anthropomorphic portrayal tends to depict human interaction with nature negatively and often features virtue signaling.

Films like *Pocahontas* illustrate nature as a realm with various spirits that deserve respect, often depicting modern humans as adversaries to nature due to ignorance of animistic philosophies. Gordon Doss divides the animistic worldview into three tiers: the Upper, Middle, and Lower Zones, emphasizing the manipulation of natural forces by humans or anthropomorphic characters in problem-solving, leaning on practices like

divination and mediation (Doss, 2015). Many films have worlds built around similar ideas rendering them animistic.

Furthermore, Disney's incorporation of animistic elements in films, such as totems and magical tools, aligns with animistic cultures while sidestepping associated issues with such. This portrayal risks confusing truth with error, potentially leading to spiritualism. Moreover, the Bible contrasts the formulaic world view of animism by affirming human stewardship of the earth while emphasizing the distinction between humans and nature. It also attributes malevolent, supernatural forces solely to Satan and rejects the idea of vengeful nature spirits, offering a distinct perspective from Disney's animistic environmentalism.

Absence of the Biblical God

Disney films tend to avoid featuring the biblical God. Nevertheless, they feature characters inspired by deities of mythologies and folklore. There is a culture of steering clear from endorsing any religion (Korkis, 2010, p. 68). The creators of *Frozen* attest to this (Lopez & Anderson, 2014). Nevertheless, due to the incorporation of world cultures, the Company eventually sidelines the biblical God. Thus, Disney uses the supernatural in their films without assenting to the biblical God, creating a metaverse that is pluralistic.

Adventist theology affirms the sovereignty of God over life and death (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Ministerial Association 2006, p. 388). Disney, by leaving God out of the picture in the film while featuring other mythological deities places the biblical God on the sidelines and hinders Him from being seen as sovereign over life and death. This has the potential to encourage alternative concepts of death and the afterlife that would be deemed unhealthy, according to Seventh-day Adventist theology.

Musical Ideologies and Philosophies of Death

Music plays a key role in most films, as they are musicals. It is an accepted fact that music has the power to wrest emotions dynamically and immerse the viewers in the films. Disney films do a respectable job of moving the story forward through song while capturing the emotions. Nevertheless, the films employ songs that communicate concepts of life and death that Seventh-day Adventists cannot agree with.

The first two films of Disney feature songs like "I'm Wishing" and "When You Wish Upon a Star." Both songs endorse a marketable version of fate and determinism. The first song, for example, supports the idea of wishes coming true by wishing in a wishing well. The second song is also about wishes coming true with fate in charge of granting wishes. The song even personifies fate as being kind, impartial, and the rewarder of the wishes of those with pure hearts. In *The Lion King*, "Circle of Life" deliberates about life that aligns with concepts that support transmigration. Pocahontas is not so subtle in its endorsement promoting an animistic take on nature in the song "Colors of the Wind." In *Brother Bear*, "Great Spirits" indicates that ancestors play a role in the affairs of the living as guides for future generations.

Disney, Eschatology, and the Great Controversy

Disney films illustrate the dichotomy between good and evil, with the consistent

triumph of good over evil. Some of the films like *Fantasia*, *The Lion King* and *Hunchback of Notre Dame* even have hell-like scenarios. This narrative framework mirrors the biblical meta-narrative, particularly the Great Controversy motif. This motif delineates the cosmic struggle between Christ and Satan, with the assured victory of good over evil. It posits that sin is the cause of death and that only through Christ can death be conquered. The narrative anticipates a series of eschatological events, culminating in the establishment of the kingdom of God. Regarding death, individuals who have placed their faith in Christ prior to their demise and have been vindicated in the investigative judgment are promised resurrection with new physical bodies at the second coming of Jesus. Those who are alive during His return will be transformed and will join the resurrected, to meet their Savior. Conversely, those not aligned with Christ will undergo a resurrection for judgment and subsequent execution. Following the annihilation of the wicked, the world will be recreated, and eternal peace will be restored with Christ as sovereign.

The Great Controversy motif is extensively elaborated in the work *The Great Controversy*. A notable event in the eschatological timeline is the widespread deception facilitated significantly through spiritualism, which by one definition is the belief in the ability to communicate with the dead. Spiritualism emerged in the 19th century and exerted a significant influence on 20th century American and British societies. An illustrative example of the appeal of spiritualism is found in the perspectives of Arthur Conan Doyle, who argued that spiritualism represented an ontological reality that could be reconciled with Christianity, Zoroastrianism, Islam, and Hinduism. (Doyle, 1926, 246). In America, Emma Hardinge shared her views early on. She believed that spiritualism fulfilled of Bible prophecy and the cause of the downfall of Babylon. One example of this is Emma Hardinge's quotation of texts from the book of Revelation. She used these texts to support the idea of spirits bringing light to the world (Hardinge, 1872, 18, 21). Furthermore, she saw the doctrine of annihilation as a "hopeless belief" and a "horrible doctrine" (Hardinge, 1872,18).

The depiction of immortal souls and practices associated with spirits in various forms within Disney narratives indirectly connects to the concept of soul immortality. Additionally, there is an indirect link between this depiction and the theory of evolution, which some argue serves as a gateway to spiritualism, particularly due to recent scientific and metaphysical developments (Donker, 2015, 237). Consequently, Disney's endorsement of Darwinian evolution poses serious issues for Adventists. In considering the reasons why Disney features spiritualism, Giselle Sarli Hasel recognizes the significance of examining Disney from a business perspective. She suggests that Disney is able to create stories involving spiritual themes because of public interest, implying that their storytelling aligns with popular preferences. She indicates that one of her colleagues stated that the use of spiritualism in Disney films is not primarily about conspiracies but simply that spiritualism is financially profitable(Hasel, 2018). Since, Disney does not follow a biblical Christian ethic, it amalgamates various philosophies and ideologies of death from all around the world, thus creating environments that are syncretistic.

When considering Disney's history of syncretism, implied pluralism, and support for evolution, it becomes apparent that the Company plays a significant role, whether

intentional or not, in disseminating spiritualism. This influence is woven into Disney's narratives, thus potentially shaping beliefs about soul immortality and other related concepts. But this is not something to be alarmed about as Adventists consider spiritualism to play a major role in deceiving the whole world before the coming of Christ (White, 1911, 588). Furthermore, Revelation considers deception and religio-political conflict to play a major role in the end.

In Revelation 13, it is suggested that the world will be drawn to and intrigued by certain powerful entities often referred to as *beasts*. These entities are interpreted as representing religio-political powers that will employ deception to influence and mislead the entire world. Additionally, Rev 16:14 describes a scenario where the forces of evil, represented as devils, will work to gather people together in opposition to God.

Hugo Cotro highlights in Revelation 13 a cautionary message about the dangers posed by religious practices existing outside the formal structures of the church. Moreover, he emphasizes the threat of syncretism, the blending of different beliefs or practices which were prevalent within the church at that time and is anticipated to reemerge as a characteristic of the church in the future (Cotro, 2016).

Considering that Disney is syncretistic in its use of culture in its media, it is not farfetched to state that its ideas and ideals have the potential of affecting members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Moreover, the captivating and theatrical essence of films, particularly Disney productions, can potentially draw individuals away from important life responsibilities. Ellen G. White, insightful about Satan's tactics, foresaw the perilous consequences of such distractions on the younger generation, hindering their spiritual growth and involvement in meaningful work. This diversion, facilitated by the allure of dramatic entertainment, can detract from essential aspects of spiritual development and purposeful labor. She comprehended the influence that sports and theater held over the impressionable minds of young individuals. Witnessing the distraction that these activities posed to the youth of her time, she issued a cautionary warning,

Satan's work is to lead men to ignore God, to so engross and absorb the mind that God will not be in their thoughts. The education they have received has been of a character to confuse the mind, and eclipse the true light. Satan does not wish the people to have a knowledge of God; and if he can set in operation games and theatrical performances that will so confuse the senses of the young that human beings will perish in darkness while light shines all about them, he is well pleased (White, 1900).

Therefore, it remains crucial to judiciously avoid distractions from life's fundamental elements and steadfastly prioritize Christ and His mission to the world. Simultaneously, maintaining an eager anticipation for His imminent return, His Parousia, is of paramount importance.

Conclusion

The Walt Disney Company, renowned for its global distribution of animated films, often introduced to children at a young age, show cases themes of good versus evil and the triumph of good. While depicting death in its stories, these films have. Yet, their influence

extends beyond entertainment, influencing culture and societal norms. However, controversies involving Disney's progressive products, such as the Baptist Boycott in 1996 and LGBTQIA+ rights have arisen.

Seventh-day Adventists divided on modern media's ethical implications, prompting reevaluation of the church's historical stance on media. With the transformative power of fiction and fantasy in shaping culture, fiction's influence is highlighted as more than mere entertainment. However, the depiction of death in Disney films sparks considerable discussion, showing various coping mechanisms and thematic divisions, creating varied perceptions on death within the movies.

In these films, deaths occur due to various circumstances and reasons, with villains often meeting frequent demises in contrast to heroes. The diversity of these depictions provides a platform for discussions about death, death reversal/resurrection, and the afterlife.

Disney animated films present diverse and supernatural deaths, portraying a power distribution that challenges biblical concepts. The depiction of immortality diverges from Adventist teachings as they explore dualism and transmigration while featuring mystical places like astral realms. Justice in the afterlife portrayals lack biblical grounding, veneration of ancestors and spirits contradict scriptural warnings. Musical themes often endorse fate and animism, differing from Adventist beliefs. The films' conflicts reflect aspects of the Great Controversy motif but blend cultural beliefs, sidestepping the biblical God. Death reversal lacks theological essence, and fire-associated destruction hints at hell. Overall, Disney's narratives, while engaging, often diverge from Adventist teachings on death, spirituality, and God.

Despite the seemingly innocent appearance of these stories, they carry mature undertones that are discernible. It is established that they amalgamate diverse philosophies and ideas, diverging from Seventh-day Adventist theology. As these beliefs are accepted by many in the real world as accurate or acceptable representations of reality, the films can inadvertently foster deception. Thus, from the standpoint of Seventh-day Adventist theology, The Walt Disney Company, whether intentionally or not, contributes to the spread of spiritualism, which is believed to deceive the world before Christ's return.

Hence, individuals interested in engaging with Disney films, or films in general, should approach them with utmost caution, anchoring themselves in the truth of God's word while seeking divine guidance and protection. This article acknowledges its limitations in not exploring in depth the ethics of fiction and fantasy, the history of media perception in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and the relationship between theology and film. While these topics are considered to some extent in the thesis on which this study is based, understanding films through the lenses of history, contemporary culture, and biblical teachings, can better equip Christians to effectively communicate the Gospel in today's post-Christian culture.

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