

“Power, Prejudice, Predators, and Pets: Race and Representation in Animated Animal Films”

Questions concerning race, culture, and power often take center stage in discourses surrounding contemporary animated film, a medium in which the very form invites a consideration of who is represented and how. From choices of voice actors to animation styles that stereotype minority individuals, animated film notoriously engages problematic paradigms not only in terms of story elements, but also in terms of filmic choices themselves, positioning it as a medium with unique concerns related to representation in the socio-political climate of contemporary America. Yet even when filmmakers attempt to confront ideas of prejudice, include minority characters or voice-actors, or work to consider culture and class, they often miss the mark, and despite seeming efforts to engage positive messages related to race, class, and culture, they instead only create newly problematic power dynamics.

My presentation investigates these dynamics in a subset of films wherein issues of representation are especially concerning: animated children’s films featuring predominantly animal characters. I first examine the preponderance of films that use animal characters to represent racial tensions and cultural clash, using Disney’s *Zootopia* (2016) and DreamWorks *How to Train Your Dragon* (2010) to suggest that this trend may not only reflect a discomfort with human characters of color, but also leads to problematically ambiguous messages about institutions of power that often act as the basis for prejudice and racial tensions. I then explore such film elements as voice-acting and animation style to argue that these aspects of form routinely perpetuate troubling depictions of race, class, and power in films like *The Secret Life of Pets* (2016). By considering these aspects of the medium of film alongside cultural, political, and ideological discourses related to race, I interrogate the challenges and complexities of intertwining animated bodies and cultural representation.