

Ego, discourse and power: the Lion King through the eyes of Metz, Foucault and Bettelheim

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Abstract: The present article aims at introducing a semiotic analysis of Disney's feature-length animated movie *The Lion King*. This analysis will be carried out on the basis of different theoretical approaches provided by Semiotics, which will simultaneously make apparent the contributions of this discipline in the pursuance for meaning. In order to so, I will be using Bruno Bettelheim's interpretation of fairy-tales, Foucault's considerations on discourse and power, and the peculiar approach of Christian Metz to film analysis to support my empirical analysis. Moreover, I will focus my interpretation on the narrative, that is, on the plot of the animated movie, leaving out of my analysis more technical considerations about the production of the piece.

Keywords: semiotics, psychoanalysis, fairy-tales, discourse, power, cinema, politics, myths.

Introduction

The reason why I gather some of the products of three brilliant minds like Bruno Bettelheim, Christian Metz and Michel Foucault in this article is because they all provide concepts that might be useful for a semiotic interpretation of the 1994 American animated epic musical movie released by Walt Disney Pictures and produced by Walt Disney Feature Animation, *The Lion King*. Furthermore, the concepts and ideas proposed by Metz, Foucault and Bettelheim can be interconnected providing a solid theoretical framework that can be used as a foundation for this interpretation.

Research

Bruno Bettelheim [1] argued for the importance of fairy tales in child development and established a correspondence between the fairy-tale world and the experience and thinking of children. For Bettelheim, the fairy tale's structure is adapted to the thinking process of children, that is, the content of fairy tales is related to children's developmental stages and crises, and thus, a proper fairy-tale analysis should include a psychoanalytical reading.

In the later stages of his career, Christian Metz [2] also attempted to interpret films through the lens of psychoanalysis. Both Bettelheim and Metz used Freud's concepts to do so, although Metz preferred Lacan's revision of Freud's theories.

The Lion King is mainly a children's tale and therefore it has the main characteristics of a fairy-tale. However, it is also a film that has become a generational landmark, so it seems inevitable to observe it under the light of Metz's ideas.

The ideas and concepts presented by Michel Foucault will also be very useful for this article, as he was primarily concerned with the concept of discourse, the relationship between power and knowledge and how they are exploited as a form of social control exercised by institutions of societies (Hall, 1997) [3].

Due to space constraints, this article will focus exclusively on the events and characters that I consider paramount for this analysis. Therefore, an obvious way to start is to analyse Simba, *The Lion King*'s hero and main character. To this regard, I should start by pointing out the importance that Bettelheim gives to the universality and centrality of the Oedipus complex in childhood development.

Although Bettelheim proposes the application of Freud's concepts to fairy tales (Bettelheim, 1977) [4], in order to do so, it is required a common social structure based on a common definition of roles. Bettelheim argued that in the typical nuclear family setting, every member has a well-defined

role and functions. While the father should be the protector of the children against the vicissitudes of the real world, the mother should provide and nurture the children (Bettelheim, 1977) [5].

The Oedipus complex is a Freudian theory that observes the myth of King Oedipus as a perfect depiction of infantile sexuality and neurosis. According to this theory, the complex takes place during the phallic stage of psychological development in the child, a stage where his love/sexual object is his mother. Due to this fact, the child becomes jealous of his father and unconsciously desires to get rid of him. The child is then faced with the anxiety of the retaliation of paternal love for having sexual attractions to his mother. This is what Freud refers to as castration anxiety. This castration anxiety leads to a latency period in the sexual development of the child, a period that can only terminate when the child finds a new sexual object.

It is undeniable that *The Lion King* has some features that can be associated with these psychoanalytical concepts. In fact, one could easily contend that *The Lion King* is a narrative about rising above the Oedipus complex.

The opening shot of *The Lion King* shows the animals of the Pride Lands gathering to watch the presentation and vow to the newly born and future king Simba. The importance of this first scene is that it sets the tone not only for the film but for this interpretation as well. In fact, this shot represents not only Simba's introduction as the future king but also the presentation of the 'Circle of Life' to the spectator. Even the song of Sir Elton John adds value to the depiction, with its lyrics being also dedicated to the 'Circle of Life'.

The first connotation between the Oedipus complex and *The Lion King* can be observed when Mufasa shows the Pride Lands to Simba, telling the cub that everything the light touches will one day be his, or to put it in Oedipal terms, telling the cub that he will one day replace his father and take over all that he possesses, including his mother.

In addition to this, when asked by Simba about the presence of the 'shadowy place', Mufasa warns the cub that the place is beyond the kingdom borders, and that Simba must never go there. By doing this, Mufasa appears to imply the existence of consequences for breaking this prohibition, like the renunciation to the power I have mentioned in the previous paragraph. At this point, the parallel between castration anxiety in the Oedipus complex and Mufasa's imposition/threat is much easier to make.

This 'shadowy place' beyond the borders of the kingdom, is also used in *The Lion King's* narrative to put under the spotlight Simba's superego. The concept of the psychological structure comprising of the Id, Ego and Superego is another of Bettelheim predilections when analysing fairy tales.

The Id is the most basic feature of personality, it is what we are born with. The Id demands instant gratification and originates instinctual drives, functioning under the orientation of the pleasure principle.

The ego acts as a kind of bridge between the irrational id and the external world. The ego helps to deal with reality, trying to meet the needs, drives and impulses of the id but also considering societal expectations. When these needs, drives and impulses are not met, the Ego has defence mechanisms such as repression and sublimation to redirect these urges.

The Superego is the last component to be formed in our psyche and it is based on morals, societal rules or judgements about right or wrong. The Superego gives the psyche an ego-ideal that guides the ego on how it should act, enabling self-evaluation and criticism and also being responsible for the regret felt when the ego fails to meet its expectations.

Simba and Nala's incursion into the 'shadowy place' represents perfectly the development stage of Simba's psyche, where the Superego has still not been formed. Again, the lyrics in Simba's musical act to divert Zazu and go to the elephant graveyard with Nala, suggest precisely this interpretation, as Simba sings that he 'just can't wait to be king' and that he is 'brushing up on looking down'. The narcissism in Simba's character becomes apparent at this point of the narrative.

Simba's action of 'bravery' can also be associated with the Oedipal complex, in the sense that it unconsciously intends to show how Simba is worthy of his mother love. This sentiment is only frustrated by the fact that Simba and Nala end up being rescued by the father and King Mufasa.

The narrative continues with Mufasa taking Simba for a talk. At this moment, an emblematic scene

takes place, with Simba stepping into his father paw print and realising the actual difference of sizes. Simba seems to internally realise about Mufasa's real stature, while simultaneously acknowledging his own insignificance, thus starting his path to overcome the Oedipus complex.

The king starts by showing his disappointment with Simba's behaviour but goes on to explain that the great kings of the past look down on them from the stars, and so will he one day. This represents the aforementioned threat of castration, which this time is completely internalised by Simba. Moreover, the fact that Mufasa's authority is displaced to the stars, makes it eternal. In other words, the death of Mufasa would turn him into Simba's superego and ego-ideal.

In consequence of Mufasa's death and boosted by an ill-intended Scar, Simba leaves Pride Lands feeling guilty for his father's death. Simba is eventually found to die in the desert and ends up spending the rest of his childhood with the inseparable duo Timon and Pumbaa.

The period spent by Simba enjoying life with Simon and Pumbaa is definitely both a break in the dynamic of the 'circle of life' and the representation of the latency period of the Oedipus complex. This period originates in the subject's unconscious feelings of guilt for having his mother as a sexual object. Following the same logic, Simba's return to the Pride Lands and the 'circle of life' represents the resolution of the Oedipus complex. The moment in which Simba and Nala reunite represents the termination of the latency period but we inevitably observe the Oedipal underlying message of their love.

The moment Nala throws Simba down and 'kisses' him, is clearly the moment they fall in love, and yet once again the music makes it perfectly obvious with Sir Elton John's song 'Can you feel the love tonight' playing. This alludes to the scene where Simba is bathed by his mother and we see that his desire for his mother is redirected to Nala, as she reproduces his mother's affection.

It is during this latency period that Simba gives in to the famous 'Hakuna Matata' lifestyle, thus living freely without regrets or concerns, never self-questioning or worrying about anything. It is as if Simba's superego is going through a deep dreamless slumber. However, everything changes when Rafiki awakes the Superego by telling Simba that Mufasa lives in him.

At this point we can see the turning point in Simba's personality, finally consolidating his Superego by recognising his father's higher authority. The scene is very well depicted, taking place in a pond, with Rafiki showing Simba's own reflection and telling that his father lives in him. This is the moment of realisation of the superego, which corresponds to, as I contended in previous lines, the mental projection of Mufasa.

The acknowledgement of Mufasa in Simba's superego is confirmed even more by Mufasa's appearance in the night sky, with the old king saying that he expects more from Simba and urging him to take back his place in the circle of life. We can now see how Simba's ego-ideal bombs the ego with demands and hence an overwhelming feeling of guilt for his recent behaviour takes over, driving Simba to take action.

Another point worth mentioning in this psychoanalytical interpretation of *The Lion King* is the displacement of Simba's need for aggression onto the character of Scar. In fact, Scar is presented as the character Simba could have become, a case of unresolved Oedipus complex, decisive to Scar's traits of narcissism, delusions of grandeur and even some gay mannerisms. Another consequence of Scar's failure to take part in the 'circle of life' is the devastation that it originates in the Pride Lands, which appears to highlight how important is to overcome this challenge.

Scar is, therefore, the perfect escape for Simba's own unconscious feelings of hatred towards his father Mufasa. Thus, it is only logical to contend that the death of Scar ends up being paramount to the resolution of Simba's Oedipus complex.

The final and most fundamental conclusion that arises from this psychoanalytical interpretation of *The Lion King* is that the Oedipal connotation underlies the majority of the plot of this narrative. Following the same precepts, it can also be said that the narrative clearly establishes a connection between the resolution of Simba's Oedipus complex and the return to the 'circle of life' in the Pride Lands.

The final scene of the film is a brilliant representation of this idea, with a faithful repetition of the opening scene, this time with Simba and Nala's newborn being presented to the crowd of animals

below Pride Rock. It is the closure of a cycle, the confirmation that Simba has finally overcome his internal conflict and took his rightful place in the 'circle of life'.

As we can now see, the use of psychoanalytical concepts to interpret *The Lion King* helps to shed some light in the deeper layers of meaning of this narrative, as it seems to convey a message about the importance of overcoming the Oedipus complex, a message that should unconsciously arrive at its spectators. As the movie has as main audience children, many of them will be going through identical internal conflicts and unconsciously identify with the film.

In fact, this idea of several layers of meaning brings up another useful concept that can be connoted with this film, this being Metz's idea of cinema as an institution, consisting of different machines that support it (Metz, 1982) [6].

It is my opinion that Hollywood is the machine of dreams of Cinema as an institution. The 'happy-end' formula perfectly suits the interest of the main structures of power, perfectly aligned with its interests. To this regard, Disney has a long tradition of including in its pictures deep layers of meaning always perfectly in tune with the main beliefs of the period.

Therefore, it is legit to correlate the above mentioned with the features of the ideological forces in charge of the United States (US) government during the context of the inception, production and release of *The Lion King*.

At the time of the production and release of *The Lion King*, Neoconservatism was the latest big thing in US politics. One of the main features of this new political ideology was the creation and use of myths and narratives to help to push a political agenda. The argument I make here is that Metz's Institution of Cinema and its machines became part of what Foucault called of the discourse of the structure of power. In other words, Neoconservatism made use of the institution of Cinema and its machinery to imprint its world-view, its main ideas. But let us try to find in the narrative of *The Lion King* elements that might support or disregard this claim of mine.

From this perspective, one of the central ideas of *The Lion King's* narrative is that the breaking of the 'Circle of life' has serious consequences. These consequences are catastrophic, thus the respect with this natural cycle is presented as an imperative without which chaos takes over.

Another feature that I find interesting is *The Lion King's* cult of personality. Just like in the theories of Bettelheim and Freud, the idea of personality and its construction is central in the narrative. However, when looking closer, one finds features that seem to point to the idea of preservation of the natural order, of the status quo. Moreover, there is an unhealthy obsession with leadership, as shown by the intricate sequences depicting the 'Circle of Life', where all the animals of the kingdom gather to watch the newborn heir to the kingship, and finally bow and show submission to their superior.

The king, which represents the right kind of personality, is depicted as fundamental to the balance of the natural order and is even placed in an ethereal plane, as part of the stars and the night sky. This can also be seen when the wrong king takes over, leading the savannah to disaster. This can also be considered a critique of the inclusion of certain groups in the natural order, this being represented by the formerly banned hyenas' return to Pride Lands when Scar takes over the throne.

The physical depiction of Scar is also important, as it contrasts with how great Mufasa and the next in line Simba are. Scar appears to the spectator as skinny, ill looking, with a physical scar, gay mannerisms and a darker mane, while Mufasa and the heir Simba appear as strong, beautiful Lions with the right personality.

To sum up this interpretation of *The Lion King*, and using the ideas and concepts provided by Metz and Foucault, we can argue that *The Lion King* has a clear political message: respect for the natural order, for the status quo, and the cult of personality. It is as if *The Lion King* became part of the Neoconservative discourse, benefiting from the traditional support of the institution of cinema and its machinery. Furthermore, Disney appears to have in common with Neoconservatism the feature of managing to be so widespread in terms of core message and appearance that ends emptying its essence.

Also, if one decides to approach Disney's productions in a paradigmatic way, the conclusion about the premeditation would be overwhelming, for historically Disney has been many times associated

with propagandistic pieces which often contain misrepresentations.

Albeit superficially giving an image of tolerance and inclusion, after a closer look to *The Lion King*, one can clearly find an underlying message that praises a natural order, its balance and traditional values. This apparent opposition was embraced and accommodated by Neoconservatism, and according to the interpretation of *The Lion King* I have given, so has Disney, the most emblematic representative of the Cinema institution in the US.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be summarized that there is a clear connotation of the film's narrative with the psychoanalytical concept of Oedipus Complex previously used by Bruno Bettelheim in his fairy-tales' readings. The common features of the narrative of *The Lion King* with that of the Freudian concept are overwhelming, making me believe that this approach should be taken in consideration, especially when interpreting narratives destined to children.

Furthermore, the main ideas of Metz and Foucault also bring up features that might be disregarded at a first glance, such as the necessary relationships between the narratives and the structures of power that govern its production. In the specific scenario of *The Lion King*, I believe one can relate the ideology behind the main structure of power at the time, with the coded message in the narrative. Metz and Foucault's concepts of the different types of machinery and discourse proved themselves to be a stout foundation of an interpretation that led me to the conclusion that *The Lion King* is a clear example of how to properly encode a more subtle message in a film.

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