Pinocchio: Italian vs. American Approaches to a Complex Morality Tale

Ottorino Cappelli (October 28, 2007)

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Special effects whiz Carlo Rambaldi hopes to rival the Disney classic by following Roberto Benigni's controversial approach, bringing out the darker aspects of Carlo Collodi's world-famous tale. What reception will he get in the U.S.? Americans love Disney's "American" Pinocchio and despised Benigni's "Italian" version...

The Italian newswire ANSA reports that 82-year-old visual effects master Carlo Rambaldi, who won two Oscars (Alien, 1979; E.T., 1982), is set on outdoing Walt Disney's 1940 masterpiece Pinocchio, based upon a tale by the 19th Century Italian novelist Carlo Collodi.

"It's always been a bee in my bonnet and now I hope I can finally get something done," he declared.

Interestingly, Rambaldi adds that he admires Roberto Benigni's Pinocchio (2002), a movie praised in Italy but widely scorned in the U.S.

Many Italian critics believe that Oscar winner Benigni (1998 Best Actor for La vita è bella-Life is Beautiful) successfully brought out the darker aspects of Collodi's 1883 complex morality tale. According to this interpretation, Americans would not appreciate Benigni's version because the Pinocchio they grew up with was the simplified, lightened story created by Disney right before World War II.

"Roberto was unfairly panned by the American critics, who didn't understand what he was trying to do. We Italians loved it," said Rambaldi. He will try to follow Benigni's approach, but hopes to get a more generous reception in the U.S.

This seems a good subject to surf the Net for. Is there an "American" Pinocchio and an "Italian" Pinocchio? Is the Collodi-Benigni(-Rambaldi) approach different from Disney's? What does the internet have to say?

To be fair, when Pinocchio was released as the second full-length Disney cartoon movie (after Snow White, 1937), critics did find it "dark". Let's start by looking at the Time magazine archives, recently made available for free on the internet. On February 26, 1940, while praising the picture as a work of art, Time wrote:

The peeping eyes in the night scenes in Snow White were scary [...] but in Pinocchio the plunging, charging whale, Monstro, is terrifying.

Nor are there any characters in Snow White to compare with J. Worthington Foulfellow, the actor-fox, who sells Pinocchio to the puppet show, or his shabby, screwloose, unscrupulous companion, Giddy, the cat. [These] are savage adult satire. They are even out of place in a children's picture.

According to some, however, in Disney's Pinocchio the moral battle between darkness and light, good and evil, is less complex and problematic than in Collodi's original novel. It is an American simplification of a more elaborate Old World approach.

Robin Allan (University of Exeter, UK) wrote about this in his Walt Disney and Europe [3]. He notes that Disney's film and Collodi's book did share a dark vision of a frightening world as their "central bleakness". This notwithstanding, Collodi's story had been softened and simplified in subsequent versions, some of which circulated in the U.S. in the 1930s. Disney followed these bowdlerized versions more than the original.

Rebecca West (University of Chicago) summarizes Allen's argument as follows: while Collodi's puppet has "a seemingly natural attraction to transgressive and delinquent behavior", Disney modified the sadism and violence of the original tale "in order to bring to the screen a lovable, cuddly Pinocchio."

Incidentally, professor West points to yet another aspect of Disney's "ultimately unsuccessful Americanization" of this Old World tale – one that she finds "most disturbing":

in Disney's film … the greedy puppetmaster Stromboli is quite obviously portrayed as a Jewish gypsy, in spite of his stereotypically broad Italian accent.

[On the contrary,] Collodi's puppetmaster Mangiafuoco "seems a fearful man but deep down he isn't bad," nor does he have any sort of marked ethnic or racial identity.

In short, Disney's Pinocchio is an "odd blend of its European origin and American elements". And black-and-white morality, to come back to our original point, is one of its most "American", and less "European" elements.

It was, after all, 1940: the U.S. were oiling a propaganda machine that would ultimately help to destroy "evil" in Europe – a machine to which Disney himself would give a tremendous contribution during World War II. Carlo Collodi, on the other hand, was a Florentine journalist who had served as a volunteer with the Tuscan army during Italy's Risorgimento. His Pinocchio might be a work of "homiletic Victorian values," as Robin Allan says, but it belonged to a deeply different world.

It is curious to note that even the most vitriolic American critics of Roberto Benigni's Pinocchio concede that the Italian actor caught Collodi's spirit better than Disney. Film critic Phil Villarreal, for example, considers Benigni's work a "monstrosity" and "a failure on all levels". But he adds:

If there's any redeeming quality, it's that the script sticks close to the Carlo Collodi novel. This story isn't as kid-friendly as the Disney animated classic. This time, Pinocchio isn't so receptive to the advice of his cricket pal – the puppet attempts to bash the insect with a mallet. Multiple arrests and a prison sentence are also in store for the wily puppet. Woodcutter Gepetto [sic!], also shows the touch of a dark side. He speaks of ringing Pinocchio's neck when he's disobedient.

Perhaps it's not just black-and-white morality that makes the American and Italian versions of

Pinocchio so different. It’s also a matter of different perceptions of the underworld in which children and adolescents live: a dark and frightening world that the American media persistently depict in happy, bright colors.

Measured against this ampler background, Rambaldi’s intention to follow Benigni’s “Italian” approach rather than Disney’s “American” one, promises to give new, controversial life to Collodi’s complex, and immortal fairy-tale.

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