

Hunchback of Notre Dame

Kristofer Peterson
Whitman College

1996 was a devastating year for Francophiles worldwide, as they witnessed the Eiffel Tower take second place to Disneyland Paris as the most visited tourist attraction in France. Mickey Mouse's invasion of the 'Isle de France' has finally triumphed; as the French have reached out and embraced the "otherness" of the Magic Kingdom in their own backyard.

Apparently, not even French Cultural purists can keep the universal influence of Disney at bay; a global appeal that transcends individual cultures and peoples. One might even suggest that Disney has taken on high French culture as target of playful ridicule; from the animated hit "Beauty and the Beast" to a theme park at Paris' edge. The most recent addition to the Disney lexicon follows this "French Connect." In the transformation of Victor Hugo's Classic text "The Hunchback of Notre Dame" to an animated feature; Disney rhetorically constructs a category of "otherness;" as the filmmakers persuade the audience to embrace "other."

Analyzing "Otherness" is an emerging; post-modern rhetorical approach. Thomas Nakayama defines the category of the "other" as he develops a method of critiquing "otherness" in popular culture. In the essay "Show/Down Time," as published in the June 1994 edition of Critical Studies in Mass Communication, Nakayama examines representations of "race," class and gender and in popular culture an analysis of the martial arts film, "Showdown in Little Tokyo."

Modern criticism remains largely entrenched in exploring identity politics through critiquing specific aspects of what Nakayama classifies as the "usual critical trinity of gender, class and race."

As a post-modern alternative; otherness moves beyond the usual trinity of identity criticism and examines the critical tensions at the intersections of social relations.

┆ E First, "otherness" is a coalitional alternative that "is neither simplistic nor monolithic." Instead, analyzing "otherness" offer a lucid approach to critiquing difference as depicted in popular culture.

┆ E Second, "Otherness" represents a post-modern approach to reading a text that what escapes what Derrida's terms "phallogocentrism;" or simply a departure from the hegemonic forces of Western rationality.

┆ E Third, reading "otherness" moves beyond a binary reading of a text ?with one vantage from the margins and the other from the center?reaching a post-modern approach that allows for heterogeneous approach.

Nakayama writes that "As others in a social structure that reinforces marginality, we are often required to read popular culture in ways distinct from the codes of dominant society."

Using Nakayama's conception of otherness, I will examine how Disney develops and constructs the 'Other' in the film "The Hunchback of Notre Dame" ? ultimately persuading the audience to reach out and unconditionally embrace "Otherness." Through a process of identification with the "other;" the filmmakers put the audience at the margins, giving a critical perspective to the viewers.

The film opens high above the streets of Paris, as the camera draws closer to the cityscape below as the audience settles behind a group of children gathered around a puppeteer's wagon. As the performer begins his story, the camera draws into the unfolding story; putting the audience in the vantage of the Parisian children.

Here the audience becomes the children as the puppet show begins. Through this process of placing the audience in the innocent and trusting vantage of children; the filmmakers persuade us to place of our faith in the narrator. We are introduced to Clopin, the film's puppeteer and busker, who dynamically conveys the story to the audience. Clopin is also a representative of the "otherness;" yet his identity as a gypsy is masked until the end of the film. As the filmmakers place the audience into the perspective of children, Clopin as narrator becomes our trusted friend, who metaphorically takes us by the hand through the film.

Clopin tells of Gypsy refugees arriving in the City of Paris. As the puppeteer's wagon fades into a dark animated scene; the narration becomes inseparable from the story. Here the filmmakers emphasize that the story that unfolds occur not before the audience direct guise; but as mediated through the storyteller's narrative Clopin tells of the evil governor Frollo, a symbol of corrupt authority who strives to rid Paris of what he describes as "Gypsy" vermin. He represents dominant society; symbolic of the matrix of oppression that burdens the "other."

The story begins with Frollo chasing a Gypsy woman that he discovers sneaking into the city. As a gypsy mother pounds on the door of the Cathedral of Notre Dame yelling "sanctuary," Frollo strikes and kills her. The archdeacon, arriving too late to save the Gypsy woman, stops Frollo from throwing the orphaned infant in a nearby well.

At the moment that the archdeacon yells "Stop!" The frame quickly cuts to the puppeteer's wagon, and we hear the voice of Clopin, not the archdeacon, cry out! This reminds the audience that we are in the trusted hands of our narrator and affirms that story is being told to us.

As the scene continues, as the archdeacon scorns Frollo for the blood on his hands. To repent, the spiritual leader tells Frollo that he must take responsibility for the care and well-being of the infant Gypsy. Enraged, Frollo holds the child in his hands and, noting his physical difference, names the child "Quasimodo;" meaning half-formed.

Though heading the archdeacon's warning out of religious fear, he banishes the child to the bell tower of the cathedral. Here the filmmakers depict a critical moment of the construction of "otherness" by the symbolic head of the leviathan of dominant society. By naming Quasimodo, Frollo constructs a sense of other at the most fundamental category of self. By physically separating Quasimodo from society, Frollo creates a tangible "otherness" in relation to French society. Both society and self remain foreign to the young Quasimodo. And as he begins to mature, Frollo teaches about the wicked world and gypsy vermin; hence engaging in a project of constructing layer upon layer of otherness in relation to dominant society and a true sense of self.

Quasimodo's desire to escape and connect with the "otherness" of the world outside culminates in "The Festival of Fools;" the grand musical scene requisite of all good Disney films. Through a series of hap-hazard events, Quasimodo is thrust unto a platform in the center of a riotous Parisian crowd. His physical deformities become the subject of ridicule, as the Parisian revelers and Frollo's guards begin to attack him.

At this climatic point, a gypsy performer intervenes and stops the attack. Here the audience is introduced to Esmeralda; the dynamic leader of the gypsy people as symbol of the oppressed. She stops the attack, frees Quasimodo and scorns the riotous crowd and the governor, Frollo, for allowing this torture to occur. She continues to denounce Frollo for the persecution that he subjects her people to.

Here the filmmakers identify the class of "other;" a collective that the audience will witness resist and counter the forces of tyrannical authority. Here also begins the process of identification with the "other" as symbolized by Quasimodo; and Esmeralda; representative of "otherness" as class.

Introspectively, Quasimodo and Esmeralda began a process of coming to know one another. When Quasimodo first learns that Esmeralda is a Gypsy he reacts with scorn and mistrust; reiterating the rhetoric of hate and alienation that Frollo had used to teach him about the world outside his safe-haven and prison of Notre Dame. But ultimately, it is Esmeralda who helps Quasimodo come to discover the truth; that he too is a Gypsy and that Frollo had viciously slain his mother. This process of coming to know the self as "other" re-enforces the project of persuading the audience to identify with "otherness".

The series of revelations of "Otherness" in relation to self occurs at the end of the film. As the gypsies band together to resist and overthrow Frollo; Clopin, our trusted narrator, emerges as a leader of the gypsee people and is revealed to audience as the "other." Here the unconditionally trusted and loyal friend of the audience becomes the subject of scorn and alienation; to the extent that audience has placed childlike trust in the hands of the narrator; we have also placed our truth and faith in "otherness;" helping to break down the barriers of perceived difference.

As the victorious Quasimoto and Esmeralda stand on the steps of the cathedral of Notre Dame; a young person emerges from the crowd and embraces Quasimoto. We recognize this child to be one of the children gathered around Clopin's wagon as the story began. Here the audience is moved from their seats and metaphorically embraces the "other." Through this process of identification with and embracement of "otherness;" Disney purports a universal rhetoric of acceptance.

In my critique, I have demonstrated how a post-modern, rhetoric conception of "Otherness" may be applied to an analysis of a universal text. I have demonstrated how Nakayama's model may be applied to such a text and, most importantly, have demonstrated how this approach may be expanded to examine the process of identification in a universal viewership; regardless of identity or conception of personal "otherness."

My analysis helps to explain the universal appeal of Disney's rhetoric; in a diverse and ever-changing world conflicts between dominant society and the "other" will continue to emerge. Disney offers a powerful argument of universal acceptance of difference that plays to a multitude of peoples and cultures. Through a method of subtle yet powerful argument of embracing the other; Disney transforms the animated feature from passive entertainment to powerful, influential persuasion.

[Top Page](#)