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Fear and loathing: Disney's secret weapon

By David Lister Culture and Media Editor

THE SECRET of Walt Disney's success is playing on children's fears of being alone, film critics claim today.

As the Disney studios prepare their latest release, Tarzan, for Britain, a leading Hollywood film magazine has re-examined the plots of classic Disney films to delve into the psychological tricks used by the world's leading animator.

In film after film, including Tarzan, the Disney corporation uses stories that have an orphan at the centre of the plot. Movies such as Bambi, The Lion King and Cinderella, be they classic fairy tales or original scripts, share the same formula.

In its current issue Premiere magazine claims: "From Snow White to Cinderella, Pocahontas to Peter Pan, parentless protagonists are more ubiquitous in Disney's animated cartoons than marketing tie-ins. With the new Tarzan, the family-friendly studio again displays its penchant for parricide."

The theory receives endorsement from the co-director of Tarzan, Chris Buck. He says: "There is some sort of universal connection with the orphan. Even if you're not physically orphaned by your parents, there are times in your life when you feel alone."

Making a psychological examination of Disney films, Premiere identifies Bambi as suffering from "fear of abandonment and wide-open spaces", Simba in The Lion King has "acute self-loathing, a Peter Pan complex", the Hunchback of Notre Dame has "chronic low self-esteem", while Tod, the fox cub in The Fox and the Hound, suffers from "separation anxiety".

A number of characters blame themselves for the death of a parent. Simba in The Lion King says: "It's because of me, it's my fault."

The movie therapist Bernie Wooder uses films, including Disney films, as part of his consultations with clients at his Harley Street practice in London. He said yesterday: "Disney is very much appealing to abandonment. There is no doubt that one of the big secrets of his success is addressing the issue and seeing that it all turns out right in the end.

"His films comfort and help children and adults through identifying with this sense of abandonment. It is often the case that you will feel vaguely discomfited, but you don't know why. But if you're watching a film and you can say 'yes that's what it is', it helps you to tackle the problem. That is why Disney's films can certainly be therapeutic."

Tarzan, which has already opened in America, is an adaptation of the Edgar Rice Burroughs novel and

features the voices of Tony Goldwyn, Glenn Close, Minnie Driver and Rosie O'Donnell. The songs are supplied by Phil Collins.

Heroes And Villains

The Lion King (1994): There was some debate over whether Mufasa, the noble king of beasts, was a Disneyesque version of President Clinton. Mufasa is killed by his brother. Mufasa's son, Simba, believes the death to be his fault and runs away from his responsibilities until the threat of world tyranny calls him back. OK, maybe there is a presidential comparison in there somewhere.

The Fox and The Hound (1981): Tod is another in a long line of orphaned cubs. He makes life for himself even more difficult by becoming over-friendly with a hound called Copper, who, inevitably, discovers that there is fun to be had chasing the orphan with his fellow hounds. "Copper would never track me down. He's my best friend," says Todd, who has not read the script thoroughly.

Bambi (1942): The first trauma in the lives of most moviegoers is the killing of Bambi's mother. The good guys are not meant to die in Disney films. But after his plaintive cry of "Mother? Mother?" life gets better for Bambi. He is adopted by the Prince of the Forest, with a heavy hint that this was his father all along, and soon finds a doe-eyed girlfriend.

Tarzan (1999): "Why don't I look like you?" asked the boy Tarzan as his new jungle relations give him the beginnings of an identity crisis. Tarzan is adopted by a loving gorilla with the voice of Glenn Close. What more could a boy want? As Premiere puts it: "He rescues Jane and soon must choose between two worlds and two loves. No presidential comparisons please."

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