

Misfits in Capitalism:
Conformity and Exploitation In *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*

An Ideological Analysis

By Tom Stroh

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Professor Rick Pieto

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The production of a mass media text does not occur in a bubble. Social, economic, political and cultural realities have a profound influence on media content and the meanings conveyed. Stuart Hall states that “meaning is a social production, a practice. The world has to be made to mean” (355). Since the mass media is produced in a capitalist system and ultimately controlled by society’s upper class, messages of the dominant ideology are embedded in the product. Even the most seemingly innocent texts, such as children’s holiday programming, can espouse the language of the ruling class. Videocraft’s animated 1964 production of *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* is rife with dominant ideological meaning. It is a story of conformity and exploitation in a capitalist utopia. Individuality is paradoxically condemned and encouraged. That is, it is discouraged when it threatens society and encouraged only when it is conducive to the status quo.

The main setting of the story, the North Pole, is a capitalist utopia that revolves around a factory setting. The narrator, a jovial singing snowman, affectionately refers to the Pole as “Christmas Town...[where] the number one citizens are the Clauses.” Santa Claus is the patriarch of Christmas Town; he represents the dominant ideology of the land. His main concern is the production and distribution of toys for children on Christmas Eve. The two main sources of labor capital are the elves and flying reindeer. Elves are expected to happily produce toys while the reindeer are used for pulling Santa’s sleigh on Christmas Eve.

A central theme in *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* concerns the idea of the “misfit.” As within any capitalist production system, conformity is required for the

individuals to work efficiently as a group. Anyone who does not fit into the system is labeled a misfit and is consequently alienated from the group. For example, Rudolph, the title character, is different because he possesses a nose that glows bright red. When Santa discovers the red nose he warns that Rudolph will never make the sleigh team (this being the highest honor a reindeer can achieve). In order for Rudolph to function in society, he must wear a disguise that blocks out his offending non-conformity. Rudolph complains to his father about the discomfort of his disguise, to which he replies, "There are more important things than comfort. Santa [i.e. society] cannot object to you now." This closely parallels cultural ideologies of beauty and conformity. People tend to sacrifice comfort for something that elevates their social status. In a later incident a disguised Rudolph proves that he can fly higher, faster, and farther than any of the other young bucks. Yet in the process of proving his skill he loses his disguise and reveals his glowing nose. The other reindeer and Santa Claus, deeply troubled by Rudolph's secret, alienate him from the group. Santa Claus reprimands Rudolph's father stating, "You should be ashamed of yourself... what a pity, he had such a nice take-off too." This illustrates the point that Rudolph's deformity outweighs his flying ability.

Completely rejected from those around him Rudolph joins forces with Herbie, a misfit elf who would rather be a dentist than make toys. The two decide that there is nothing left to do but set out into the wilderness on their own. They decide to leave the system that rejects them and search for "fame and fortune." Interestingly, although they are outside the capitalist system of Christmas Town, they still retain the dominant ideological ideals of upward mobility.

Shortly after they embark on their journey, Rudolph and Herbie find that the world outside of Christmas Town is treacherous and unforgiving. They face hardship and despair in the form of the Abominable Snow Monster (A.K.A. Bumble) and bad weather. They also come across the “Island of Misfit Toys,” a sanctuary in the wilderness where defective toys live out their unwanted lives. The narrator states that “the outside world is up to its ears in danger.” This statement exemplifies the dominant ideology’s fear of the world outside its sphere of influence. They eventually meet up with a precious metal prospector, Yukon Cornelius. He embodies the capitalistic virtue of rugged individualism. He is able to manipulate nature to his own ends and use a situation’s quirks to his advantage. For example, he fashions a makeshift boat out of an iceberg to allude capture. He also uses his wit to defeat the Snow Monster by ordering Herbie to remove the monster’s only weapon, his teeth. The experience with the capitalistic Cornelius leads Rudolph and Herbie back to Christmas Town. Here the text implies that the “misfits” cannot function outside the bounds of the system and are better off in it – even if it represses them.

Upon returning to Christmas Town the misfits find ways to exploit their quirks and render them acceptable. In the wilderness, Herbie proved his worth by emasculating the Snow Monster. He is thus allowed to open his own dental practice in town. Rudolph’s nose turns out to be a virtue on the foggy Christmas Eve; he uses it to light the way for Santa’s sleigh, thus saving Christmas from cancellation. Even the Snow Monster, freshly civilized by Yukon Cornelius, can place stars atop the Christmas trees (an act everyone else needs a stepladder for). Pleased by the new found utilities of the

once alienated characters, the townspeople realize they were hard on them. The narrator intones, “Maybe misfits have a place too.” Santa even agrees to find homes for the misfit toys. The very individualities that hindered these characters now contribute to their upward mobility. Rudolph goes down in history for saving the capitalistic consumer holiday of Christmas.

As a text, *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* contains characters that are quirky and unique. On the surface it is a children’s tale of tolerance and it seems to glorify the underdog. However, the individual is only lauded when the dominant cultural forces can exploit his distinctiveness. Antonio Gramsci’s theory of hegemony, and the complicated struggle between oppressor and oppressed, can be used to explain this phenomenon. Herbie’s dentistry is an act of rebellion against the system that constrains him. Yet if he is allowed to practice dentistry within the system, and the system benefits from his skill, he is satiating his own rebellious desire while serving the hegemonic forces. With minor modifications, a similar postulation could be made regarding Rudolph’s shiny red nose. John Fiske claims that “[h]egemony... posits a constant contradiction between ideology and the social experience of the subordinate that makes this interface into an inevitable site of ideological struggle” (quoted in Chandler). Rudolph’s nose and Herbie’s dentistry are thus appropriated and normalized.

Ideologies are not always purposely placed into a text. The dominant ideology is part of everyday discourse; it exists in the collective mind without question. It is common sense, what Roland Barthes refers to as mythology. *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* was created as a children’s tale of benign misfits who were eventually

welcomed into the system. What constitutes as the dominant ideology involves the motivation of the story, the values that are applied and so forth. Ideological study of children's programming is revealing because it illustrates how the young are socialized into society. The children who watch this program and others like it will take the ideology as common sense while a more critical reading reveals deeper meaning.

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