

Ryan Rosu

A Christmas Miracle? Thank the Library

My research journey was a thrilling yet demanding endeavor, made possible by the invaluable resources provided by Miami's library. It all began in Andy Rice's "Film Theory" course. Midway through the semester, our class was tasked with developing individual research projects to serve as our final assignment. Approaching Prof. Rice with two ideas, I presented a rather tired project investigating the nature of truth in Errol Morris's documentaries, and a second, more unconventional project analyzing *Bad Santa's* deconstruction of the Christmas movie genre. Prof. Rice advised me to pursue the latter option, as he could feel my passion for the topic.

Immediately, I delved into the library's databases, starting with the "Media, Journalism, and Film" section in order to begin my investigation. Despite my usual success with the Film and Television Literature Index, I reached a dead end. While I found some sources discussing *It's A Wonderful Life* and Hallmark movies, there was nothing that amounted to a true genre study. This was perplexing to me because I had previously investigated an obscure female-lead western called *Gunslinger*, and there was an abundance of sources on the western genre. I then turned to JSTOR, which quickly turned into another dead end. Although it was able to locate a number of film reviews published in magazines like *Variety* about *Bad Santa*, scholarly discourse on Christmas movies as a genre was notably absent. It was also apparent that my beloved Terry Zwigoff directed film was yet to receive any academic attention..

At this point, I realized that I had stumbled upon the opportunity to explore uncharted territory. Despite their presence as an annual ritual, Christmas movies lacked any serious scholarly examination. This seemed like a major oversight. My research question was now clear: what defines a Christmas movie, and what ideological underpinnings shape this genre?

With the library's catalog search function, I located two pertinent books in Miami's archives on the topic of Christmas movies: *Christmas at the Movies: Images of Christmas in American, British, and European Cinema* edited by Mark Connelly, and *Christmas, Ideology and Popular Culture* edited by Sheila Whiteley. These obscure collections contained a wealth of essays on the subject of Christmas and Christmas movies. If Miami did not have these books in the library, my research would have been futile. Armed with the information I found in these texts, I crafted a video essay elucidating the parallels among radically different Christmas movies, from *It's A Wonderful Life* to *Elf* and the Arnold Schwarzenegger-lead *Jingle All the Way*.

However, my research journey did not end there. Even after completing the course, the realization that this study was groundbreaking impelled me to dive deeper. I applied to the Undergraduate Summer Scholars program, with Prof. Rice as my advisor, and upon approval, I eagerly resumed my investigation. This time, I broadened my search of the library's databases beyond standard academic publications. I was able to locate sources on the phenomenology of *cinepanettone*, a Christmas movie phenomenon in Italy, working class Christmas traditions, and information about Christmas movie viewership in American households. Pairing this with the

two books I was able to check out for the summer, I now had a firm background upon which to base my argument.

Simultaneously, I began watching a myriad of Christmas movies in order to establish clear patterns in the genre. I sought films that challenged the norms of the genre, questioning an ideology that I quickly realized was conservative and lacking in diversity. After watching a few dozen films, I located three examples of movies — *Happiest Season* (DuVall, 2020), *Holiday Heart* (Townshend, 2000), and *Black Nativity* (Lemmons, 2013) — that both fell within the framework of Christmas movies that I was developing while challenging the regressive elements of its ideology.

With my focus set, I started the writing process. I turned to the library's copy of *Hollywood Genres* by Thomas Schatz as a guide to my genre analysis. In the first section, I argued for the existence of a coherent Christmas movie genre. I was careful to note the difference between what constitutes a movie set at Christmas from a true Christmas movie. I then argued that Christmas movies fall into three primary narrative categories: "Christmas Carols," "Santa Claus," and "Home for the Holidays." Using my library research to supplement my own analysis, I then articulated the underlying ideology of the Christmas movie. In particular, I focused on the portrayals of race, gender and sexuality, and class within the Christmas movie genre.

In the latter part of my paper, I critically assessed my three examples of alternative Christmas movies. For each, I provided a synopsis and then isolated the various ways in which these films counter the standard ideology of the Christmas movie genre. In particular, they make use of epiphany to unsettle the status quo, reimagining the holiday celebration in a way that privileges diversity rather than excluding it.

When I reflect on my research process, I feel a great deal of excitement and gratitude. At the same time, it was also one of the most difficult tasks I have ever completed; this also renders it the most fulfilling. I owe a debt of gratitude to the Miami library, as without its resources and extensive archive, this work would have been impossible.