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Anna Hepting

Film Review

MOANA 2

(David G. Derrick Jr. / Jason Hand / Dana Ledoux Miller, US 2024)

MOANA 2 (David G. Derrick Jr. / Jason Hand / Dana Ledoux Miller, US 2024) is the sequel to the highly successful Disney Animation Studio film MOANA (Ron Clements / Jon Musker, US 2016). In the original film, Moana, the young daughter of a chief of a coastal village in ancient Polynesia, attempts to save her home island of Motonui with the help of the demigod Maui. During the adventure the protagonist steps into her own role as a tribal chief whilst following new and dangerous paths beyond her home island and its familiar surroundings. The mission succeeds, and she is given the title “Wayfinder”. Her new task is not only to take care of her island but also to find further civilization, for only then will the population be able to survive in the long term.

This is where the sequel comes in. Moana has been searching for other inhabited islands in the ocean for three years. She has not found any people, but she did come across a shard of clay engraved with a constellation of stars and an island called Motofitu. Together with her crew of three and Maui, she sails to the area where Motofitu is located. They manage to find a way to the sunken island, which is guarded by sea monsters and a huge storm, but Maui loses his powers, and Moana dies in the attempt to break the curse of Motofitu. With a mourning song Maui summons Moana’s ancestors, who breathe new life into her and restore Maui’s powers so that he can raise the island. People from other islands immediately come to Motofitu and a new era is ushered in.

The commercial success of the sequel has been close to that of the original movie, which is not a given for Disney sequels. Both movies place great emphasis on Polynesian culture, with that research then supplemented by



Fig. 1: Nalo confronts Matangi. Film still, MOANA 2 (David G. Derrick Jr. / Jason Hand / Dana Ledoux Miller, US 2024), 01:28:12.

new ideas. In this review, I focus on two aspects: the fictional world of gods and demigods, and the connection to the ancestors.

As the viewer will likely already know from MOANA, the fictional world is governed by deities connected to nature. In the first movie the goddess Te Fiti is depicted as a life-giving island whose heart was stolen by the demigod Maui. As a result, she becomes a destructive fury, which causes the crops on the islands to die. Moana turns for help to Maui, who has superhuman powers like shapeshifting and pulling islands out of the sea with his hook. He also introduces Moana to a space beyond the known world where strange creatures are located, which can be accessed via portals, like the Realm of Monsters.

MOANA 2 introduces the god Nalo. Nalo controls the weather – he is based on the Polynesian weather god Tawhirimatea¹ – and hates humanity, which is why he cursed Motofitu and wants to end humanity. In a demonstration of his power, Nalo sends monsters and creates a huge thunderstorm to protect Motofitu. He also manages to deprive Maui of his powers by hitting him with a bolt of lightning. Not until the end, in a mid-credit scene, is Nalo shown for the first time, depicted on a stone throne in purple clouds (fig. 1). The rage of the god evidently continues, a hint that there may be a third movie about Moana.

1 Keane 2022.



Fig. 2: The giant clam that leads to the portal of the gods. Film still, MOANA 2 (David G. Derrick Jr. / Jason Hand / Dana Ledoux Miller, US 2024), 00:35:12.



Fig. 3: The portal of the gods. Film still, MOANA 2 (David G. Derrick Jr. / Jason Hand / Dana Ledoux Miller, US 2024), 00:51:11.

Another supernatural figure introduced in the sequel is Matangi. She defends the portal to Motofitu, which is located in a giant clam (fig. 2) populated with monsters, bat-like creatures, and mudskippers. Shattered ships and bones cover the ground, evidence that many people before Moana have failed in their attempt to gain access to the portal. Matangi helps Moana and leads her to the portal of the gods, made of engraved stones that depict the god Nalo and his powers (fig. 3). The portal resembles a huge mouth covered in purple dust and can only be opened with a spell. It is distinct



Fig. 4: The depiction of the tribe's last Wayfinder as a giant whale shark. Film still, MOANA 2 (David G. Derrick Jr. / Jason Hand / Dana Ledoux Miller, US 2024), 00:14:25.

from the human world not only on account of its location but also because of its material and color: stone is not common for buildings in Moana's village, and the color purple is not found on her island. These differences underline the spatial separation of the human and divine worlds.

To Maui's surprise, Moana is able to open the portal, which immediately absorbs the whole crew and carries them through a purple and glittering stream. When they return to the surface they are facing Motufitu and the dangers that lurk in the waters around it. As the use of the color purple makes evident, this area is ruled by Nalo, so it is even more astonishing that a human can break the curse by touching the island. Even though there is a loophole in Nalo's curse, Moana falls victim to his anger and dies. Only the connection to her ancestors can save her.

The importance of ties to ancestors is indicated in the first movie and expanded upon in the sequel. Moana's deceased grandmother played a significant role in Moana's finding her true self and in her decision to find Maui, and now, in the sequel, she continues to guide her granddaughter and help her with difficult decisions. In both movies recurring visions of the last known Wayfinder emphasize Moana's extraordinary connection to the ancestors. During a ritual in front of the assembled island community, Moana and her father drink from the bowl of the ancestors with immediate result: the last known Wayfinder appears and tells her where she should sail to.



Fig. 5: The ancestors bring Moana back to life. Film still, MOANA 2 (David G. Derrick Jr. / Jason Hand / Dana Ledoux Miller, US 2024), 01:17:00.

The last-known Wayfinder is portrayed as a glowing whale shark (fig. 4) that transforms into the Wayfinder. The depiction of ancestors as sea creatures was introduced in the first movie, when Moana's grandmother appeared to her as a manta ray. Her appearance seems to corroborate the bonding power of water, which can connect not only islands and people but also the living and the dead. This connection has immense consequences for Moana when she is struck by Nalo's lightning and lies lifeless on the seabed. The demigod Maui, now without powers, mourns her at the bottom of the sea and sings a song that causes the ancestors to appear gradually, led by her grandmother. They turn from water creatures to semi-transparent and luminous humans. Together, arranged in a spiral, they bring her back to life (fig. 5). And she is given new attributes: a tattoo and a paddle with inscriptions. Precisely how her rebirth has changed her is not clearly stated, but only implied by her grandmother and Maui. A director's interview has confirmed, however, that Moana is now a demigoddess.²

MOANA 2 thus creates a dual idea of religion. The film suggests that nature is ruled by deities who possess various powers and to whose will humans are subject. This stands alongside the experience of humans, for whom the afterlife and this world are not strictly separated. The living can contact the deceased, who can in turn aid the living; this interaction is so

2 Gomez 2024.

powerful it can break divine conditions. The connecting element is water, which makes transcendent encounters possible, as is evident from the ritual undertaken by the community leaders and the depiction of the deceased as water beings – to emphasize the transcendental character cinematically, these figures are transparent and luminous and are able to transform back into their human form.

To depict religion, the filmmakers of MOANA 2 draw on Polynesian mythology and well-known religious narratives. Echoes of the American Dream are also present here, for Moana, who has been chosen, must work hard to bring about change for the better. The film suggests that religion dictates certain situations, but humans can change these circumstances. Humans can become divine in acting according to values and norms that strive for the greater good.

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